

Rediscovery in 2010 Part 5

We are continuing our series on Rediscovery this morning and it happens to be Valentine's Day, or as we know it at our house, Sarah's birthday. Let me take all of you romance lovers back in time. It's December 1970 and movie goers are about to see one of the great tear-jerkers of all time. You might recognize the theme song, it won the Oscar for best music, original score. The movie was *Love Story* with Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal and the tag line that everyone remembers from the movie was "Love means never having to say you're sorry."

Love means never having to say you're sorry. I doubt it. In fact, I'm certain of it. Likely love means being quick to say "I'm sorry, I was wrong, please forgive me." That willingness to admit our mistakes and our willingness to seek forgiveness can play a powerful role in maintaining a happy marriage. It can play a powerful role in maintaining any healthy relationship or friendship. Wounds will come, hopefully not intentionally in relationships, but asking forgiveness and granting forgiveness can make all the difference. This morning, as part of our series, I want to talk to you about **Rediscovering the power of forgiveness.**

I know when I bring up the subject, there are some that cringe. "Oh no, now I'm going to be made to feel guilty because I can't forgive someone, but you don't understand what they did to me and my family..." You're right. I don't know the depths of the pain, however, I do know something about the pain that comes as a result of refusing to forgive. Unforgiveness can lead to bitterness, hatred, anger and those things lead to health problems and spiritual problems and emotional problems and just in general make life miserable. Don't turn me off just yet and let's look at this subject for a few moments and see if we can rediscover the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is unnatural. Let's face it, it ain't natural to forgive people for hurting you. You don't automatically want to forgive someone, you want to automatically return an eye for an eye, or even better, return an eye and then another eye and maybe an ear as well, just to teach them a lesson. We don't want to hand out forgiveness, we want to meet out justice. Let's be honest. We want revenge. We want to get even, that's what it's about. It's the basis of every good Steven Segal movie isn't it? Injustice. Cruelty. We try to be nice. We try to forgive, to turn the other cheek, but

then we realize that forgiveness just isn't going to work and now we have to kick them in the head and blow something up.

Forgiveness is not a natural thing. It makes headlines. It's why the media made such a big thing out of the forgiveness shown to the family of Charles Carl Roberts IV. He was the gunman who killed five little girls in a one-room Amish schoolhouse in 2006 and then killed himself. By 9:00 that night, Amish neighbors had already been to the shooters home to offer forgiveness to his wife and her children. "The hurt is very great," one person said, "But they don't balance the hurt with hate." The world can't understand because it seems unnatural but that's the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness can be difficult. Philip Yancey wrote about forgiveness in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* He said it was an unnatural act and achingly difficult. Quoting from Elizabeth O'Connor, Yancey wrote, "Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be."

Yancey pointed out the obvious difficulty with forgiveness when he wrote, "**Behind every act of forgiveness lies a wound of betrayal, and the pain of being betrayed does not easily fade away.**" ...**Philip Yancey** That's what makes it so difficult isn't it? The pain that lies behind it.

I understand, forgiveness is difficult. It isn't natural. It doesn't come easily. Maybe that's because at its heart, at the core we recognize that **Forgiveness is undeserved**. For all of us. Like grace and mercy, no one can really earn forgiveness. Do we forgive only those who really deserve it? Who makes that call? Who decides who deserves forgiveness? If we are being truly forgiven then it indicates we have been guilty of something. We deserve justice. We were wrong. We don't deserve to be forgiven, we deserve to be punished. If you are the cause of my pain, then no, you don't deserve forgiveness. But all of us have been the source of someone's pain as well and we are so grateful for everyone that has shown kindness to us and forgiven us. Forgiveness is undeserved, but that applies to all of us. We've been forgiven even though we were guilty!

Forgiveness is unnatural, difficult, undeserved, but get this, **Forgiveness is essential!** Forgiveness is at the heart of our faith. We must be forgiven and we must

forgive. It is essential. Why? Why must we forgive? Turn with me to Matthew 6:9. This is the model prayer that Jesus prayed when teaching his disciples how to pray. Listen to what he says in his prayer and to the verse following the prayer. **“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors...For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Matthew 6:12, 14-15.**

If we don't forgive others, we will not be forgiven. It is like a cycle of forgiveness. It is as though forgiveness is like a stream flowing through this conduit of mercy but if we refuse to forgive, we are blocking off the flow of forgiveness from the heart of God to our hearts, and from our hearts to the hearts of those to whom we should show forgiveness. Our withholding forgiveness from someone may in fact affect their ability to receive God's forgiveness. Forgiving others is essential to our being forgiven. Forgiving others is essential to our being able to receive and accept forgiveness.

Why do we need to forgive others? Besides the fact that we will be forgiven if we forgive others, **Forgiveness releases me from the grip of vengeance.** Refusing to forgive those who have wronged us or wounded us keeps us bound by their actions. It's not that we are holding them in the grip of our vengeance, actually we are being held as a prisoner by our own desire for vengeance. We can't be free to move ahead with our life if we are still focused on seeking revenge on someone. It means we are trying to take the place of God, judging their actions, their motives and intentions and then passing judgment and carrying out the sentence. The problem is, we aren't God! We too are sinners under judgment, facing the execution of our sentence, desperately needing forgiveness. “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, I will repay.”

Understand, forgiveness does not excuse what someone has done. If it was a criminal act, there is still justice to be served. Consequences are often still borne by the perpetrator. Someone wounded you and betrayed you. Your act of forgiveness is not saying “Oh, it doesn't matter that you hurt me.” Forgiveness doesn't necessarily lessen the reality of the wound or its severity. Rather, forgiveness says, “I will put this person and the wound I received from them in the hands of the Lord. I choose to forgive them and release them from my vengeance so that God can deal with both of us according to

his justice and mercy.”

Forgiveness releases others from my wrath. The Scripture says, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” We desperately need mercy and in order to receive it, we must show it toward others. Forgiving and releasing others from my wrath, takes me out from under wrath as well. Forgiving others shows them a glimpse of the nature of the Father.

We must forgive. But we’ve already said it is difficult, it is unnatural, so what do we do? We discover that, to put it in really plain terms, **Forgiveness is a God thing.** We acknowledge that apart from him we likely cannot do it and gratefully we see that he has initiated forgiveness. We discover that it starts with him. Unmerited, unearned grace and mercy and forgiveness has been extended to us from our holy, righteous, just and merciful God.

Forgiveness as an aspect or element of faith is uniquely Christian. Brit Hume got in trouble for pointing that out to Tiger Woods and we talked about it a few weeks ago. Judaism doesn’t really account for forgiveness - instead it is an eye for an eye. Though Islam refers to Allah the merciful, mercy and forgiveness is not really an aspect of their faith. You won’t find it in Buddhism or Hinduism either. Forgiveness is a Christian concept and it flows out of the very nature of our God.

When God declared his name and nature to us in Exodus 34, you will remember he called himself **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” Exodus 34:6-7.** It is God’s nature to forgive us of our wickedness, rebellion and sin. Forgiveness is part of his very nature and character and name. 1 John 1 says, **“If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9.** It is his nature to forgive. It is his will and his desire to forgive us.

But that’s not all. It was at the heart of Jesus’ instruction to us as well. He told us to forgive those who have wronged us and been our enemy. **“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:44-45.**

When we forgive and love our enemies and those who have persecuted and

wronged us, we are reflecting the character and nature of our Heavenly Father. Forgiveness is a God thing and when we forgive, we are looking and sounding and acting like our Father! We are participating in a God-like thing when we forgive others.

Although it is only the Christian faith that really offers forgiveness and grace, **The longing for forgiveness is a universal thing.** Everyone longs for forgiveness. We dream of it. Hope for it. Pray for it. Absolution, to be forgiven, the chance to start over, to start fresh.

Philip Yancey recalled an Ernest Hemingway short story in which a Spanish father and son had been estranged for a long time over some perhaps long forgotten argument or issue. The father decides he wants to find his son and to be reconciled. The son had run away to Madrid and the father had no idea how to find him in such a large city. Yancey tells the story, "Now remorseful, the father takes out this ad in the *El Liberal* newspaper: 'PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA'. Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the square he finds eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers."

The need and desire for forgiveness is universal. And the power at work that changes lives is the redemptive nature of forgiveness. If forgiveness is received, it brings with it redemption, it reclaims you and pulls you out of the quagmire of sin and bitterness and self-pity and victimization. If forgiveness is resisted, if you refuse to accept someone's forgiveness, including God's forgiveness, if you decide forgiveness must be too good to be true and you choose instead to live under condemnation and guilt and bitterness, then there is no redemption. You remain in a state of unforgiveness and ungrace. You are lost.

Our Heavenly Father has something better for us. He has called us to himself and extends his forgiveness to us. But forgiveness must be realized, recognized and received. Max Lucado wrote, "**You will never forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven you.**"... **Max Lucado**

Perhaps there in lies the problem with our ability to forgive. Perhaps too many of us can't believe or refuse to believe that God has already forgiven us. Is that possible after all we've done? Is his forgiveness too good to be true? Where is the catch? What must I do to be forgiven by God? Have I repented enough, groveled enough,

given up enough? How do I convince God to forgive me? Listen to me: You don't have to convince God to forgive you. It starts with believing that he desires to forgive you and then you accept his forgiveness. Actually, it starts earlier than that.

I'm going to make a statement that may trouble some of you and I want you to be careful and listen to what I'm saying. I think forgiveness might start earlier than our believing and accepting. I think **Forgiveness precedes repentance**. We've already established that it is in God's very nature and name and character to forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin. Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Forgiveness has been extended. It has been secured for all of us and offered. Forgiveness has been secured for and is available to the whole world! That's how the bible can extend such a grand offer that "whosoever will may come" and be saved.

There is nothing left for God to do to forgive us or save us. It was done, finished, completed at Calvary. What remains is for us to believe it, to acknowledge and repent of our sins and accept and receive this incredible offer of forgiveness through the atoning death of Jesus Christ our Savior.

There are a couple of slippery slopes on either side of this truth. One is to assume that since God has already forgiven us through the death of Christ on Calvary, then all of us are going to heaven and there is nothing left for us to do. We have slipped into the error of universalism. The other is that we make forgiveness something that we must earn. Have we groveled enough and beaten ourselves up enough before God to convince him we are honest and sincere and he will then choose to hold out the scepter, forgive us and grant us entrance to his kingdom. As I said before, have we convinced God to forgive us?

The truth is God has forgiven you and is waiting on you to accept that forgiveness as you repent and turn and be reconciled to God. Let me quickly illustrate this truth in Jesus' great parable of the prodigal son. Most of you are familiar with the story found in Luke 15. Two sons, the younger asked his father for his share of the estate. In the middle eastern culture that would be insulting to ask of a father. It was essentially saying, "I wish you would drop dead, but since you might not, I can't wait on you to die so I want my share now." The father, again in their culture, probably could

have killed the son and no one would have objected. Instead, he gave him more than his share and let him go on his way.

The boy squandered everything and finally hired out to a citizen of a foreign country to feed the hogs, a despicable job for a Jew. He eventually came to his senses and decided to go home. He practiced his repentance, his apology, his speech all the way there. **“Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”** That was what he planned to say, but look what happened.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The son said to his father exactly what he had planned to say and you know what? The father said, “Let me think about it. You know, you’ve really hurt me.” He said, “I need to know for sure if you are really sorry and repentant or are you just hungry so you’re going to have to sleep out in the barn and work like a farm hand for a few weeks to prove yourself.” “I’m going to need you to grovel a little lower and longer before I let you back into my good graces.”

Nope, none of that. In fact, he didn’t say anything to the son. Instead, he spoke to the servants. **“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”**

The Father forgave him. My question is when? When did he forgive the son? Was it when the son made his confession? No, I think it was before that. He ran to his son and threw his arms around him and hugged him and kissed him before the boy said a word. I think he had forgiven him before he got there. That’s why he saw him while he was still a long way off, because he had forgiven him and he was watching and waiting for him to come home. In fact, I think he forgave him when he asked for his half of the inheritance and left home. He already forgave him because that was his son and it was in his heart as the father to forgive. But just because it was the Father’s nature to forgive doesn’t mean the son knew it, or received it or accepted it or was changed by it. He could have remained in that pig-pen for the rest of his life and died right there and

would never have known that his father had forgiven him and he could have come home any time.

To repent is to turn around and go a new direction. The father forgave him before he ever got there, but the son had to turn around and go a new direction to ever receive and experience the forgiveness and the salvation and blessings that forgiveness affords.

You have been forgiven. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself on the cross at Calvary. Your sins have been forgiven. But in order for you to know that, in order for you to experience that cleansing and deliverance from sin, in order for you to receive the salvation and the blessings that his forgiveness affords, you have to come home to him. You have to turn from your sin and come home to Jesus and you can run right into his loving arms. He isn't waiting to reject you, to trick you, to punish you. He is waiting to tell you that your sins have been forgiven if you will believe upon him and in his mercy and grace.

You don't have to live in the pig pen like the prodigal son any longer. You don't have to live under the weight of unforgiveness and vengeance and wrath. You can be forgiven. You have been forgiven. Come and be reconciled to God. You see, regardless of how you look at it, forgiveness must be realized, recognized and received. Are you ready to be forgiven because the heavenly father stands ready, watching and waiting, just like the prodigal's father was. He is ready to run to you and gather you up in his loving, saving arms. The choice is yours. You can miss out on the blessings of forgiveness or you can receive his forgiveness, his favor and his grace.

There is life changing forgiveness waiting for you. Believe it. Realize it. Receive it.