

# “The Difficulty of Forgiveness”

a sermon by

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Text: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’”(Mark 2:9)?

Amidst all the tumult of our world this past week the one news story that seemed to capture the imagination of this country more than any other was the story of a hunting accident that occurred in South Texas, which involved the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney, and a Texas attorney, Harry Whittington. At the end of the day, in spite of all the accusations of cover-ups and failures to report the accident, in spite of all the jokes on late night television, it seemed to come down to a sad and unfortunate event. A man was accidentally shot in a hunting mishap. Both the Vice President and the attorney acknowledged that they wished they had acted in a different manner. Both acknowledged a mistake. Both apologized. Both sought the other’s forgiveness.

## I.

We live in a society that accepts forgiveness as a way of life. Most of us have adopted a “live and let live” policy. We are quick to forgive and quick to seek forgiveness. Will Willimon,

who for a number of years was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, once told of the time his car was in the garage with a transmission problem. The mechanic told him it would be ready the next day. When Willimon went to pick it up the next day, it was not ready. "Mr. Williston," the mechanic explained, "the problem with your transmission is bigger than we thought. I know I told you that it would absolutely, positively, be ready by today, but it isn't." "Not ready," puzzled Willimon, "Well, I guess I will have to make do for another couple of days." "No problem," said the mechanic.

"No problem," thought Willimon. "It may not be a problem for you, but is a problem for me. You told me my car would be ready and now it is not."

## II.

The Bible, however, nowhere regards forgiveness as either simple or the expression of a general disposition. Nowhere is that more evident than in the passage from which we read today. Mark's gospel tells us that early in his ministry Jesus was in a house in Capernaum. While he was speaking, a paralyzed man was brought to him. The man's friends had made a hole in the roof and lowered the paralyzed man on the cot to the room where Jesus was teaching. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." As so often happens in Mark's gospel, a disputation saying is inserted into the miracle. In this case the scribes object to Jesus' word of forgiveness. They called him a blasphemer. Jesus replied by asking the question: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'take up your pallet and walk'?"

At first that sounds strange from Jesus. We would have thought it would have been easy for him to forgive sin. He said so many wonderful things about forgiveness. He exhibited in such a magnificent way in his own life. He made it forever memorable on the cross. One might think that forgiveness flowed from him in a spontaneous manner. But forgiveness is never easy and that is something all of us need to remember.

So which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "your sins are forgiven", or to say "take up your pallet and walk"?

## III.

In the first place it is difficult to forgive sin because it forces each one of us to come to grips with the failures in our own lives. Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, understands human sinfulness in terms of the finite nature of human existence. We long to be perfect, but we are not. We want to guarantee the future, but we cannot be sure what the future holds. We see failure in our best efforts as well as our worst. The worst aspect of our "finiteness" is that we know that one day we will die. Because we know we are finite, argues Niebuhr, we seek to secure ourselves by "pride." We seek the power of wealth, knowledge, and power to convince ourselves that we are not vulnerable. But we are vulnerable and our vulnerability makes us anxious. That is the root of our problem. At some basic level we know we

have failed. We have not done the good that we should have done and we have done the evil that we do not wish to do.

Four hundred years ago Martin Luther was tormented with the question of how a sinful person could stand in the presence of a righteous God. Using all the means that the medieval church provided, he sought to guarantee for himself a place in heaven. He became a monk, he confessed his sins, and he went on holy pilgrimages. But he could never do enough. It was only when Luther studied the Scriptures, and particularly the

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Psalms, Galatians, and Romans that he discovered God's grace for him. "The just," Luther read, "shall live by grace." Those words not only changed Luther's life, they changed the course of Western Civilization. Out of this discover came the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.

Today, not many people live with the fear of hell. Not many people feel particularly guilty before a just and almighty God. But all around me I talk to people who feel very guilty. They are worried because they don't feel good about their marriages. They are worried about their children. Many people feel that they have not been as successful in their professional lives as they wished they had been. Even in the church there is a great deal of guilt. We know that in spite of all our best efforts we have failed to be the people of God that God intends.

IV.

In the second place, it is difficult to forgive sin, if we love people. Now, at first this might seem strange. After all, if we love people, it would appear that we would be quick to forgive sin.

But sin takes a terrible toil on human life. When you love someone deeply and you see that person being hurt, it is hard to forgive. And sin always does hurt other people. We talk today about "victimless" crimes, but there are very few things we do that do not effect others.

One of the most powerful stories in the Old Testament is the story of Joseph and his brothers. They were jealous of Joseph, so one day they dropped him into a pit, hauled him out again, and sold him to some Midianite traders, who took him to Egypt. They took the beautiful coat that Joseph's father had given him, dipped it in the blood of an animal and took the coat back to their father, telling Jacob that his son Joseph was dead. Now, suppose these brothers had grown conscious stricken, remorseful, and unable to stand their guilt any longer, and they had gone back to their father, Jacob, and told him what they had done, confessing their sin and begging for his pardon. Can you not feel the first question that would have been uttered from Jacob's mouth? "Where is Joseph? Where is my son? You ask me to forgive you but your sin is not simply between you and me. Where is Joseph? How can I forgive until I know what has happened to my son Joseph?"

When you love people, it is hard to forgive sin.

That was certainly true of Jesus. He was particularly hard on the Scribes and Pharisees. “Beware of the Scribes,” he said, “they devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayers.” Jesus’ mother was a widow. Maybe he had seen her taken advantage of. Throughout his ministry he seemed to have a particular affection for widows. “They that devour widows’ houses”—that made it hard to forgive.

Let us be sure about one thing. Forgiveness is a miracle. No one ever understood this better than Jesus. No one ever took it more seriously than did he. He saw what sin did to people, but he taught forgiveness. Moreover, he practiced forgiveness. There was no human wreck beyond the reach of his benediction. He reached out to a woman taken in adultery, to a tax collector who had defrauded many people, to the blind, the lame, and the lepers. On the cross he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

There is a merciful side to God, but we should not take it lightly. “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’?”

## V.

Then, in the third place, forgiveness is difficult because it demands such a terrible price. One of the most difficult things that any of us will ever have to do is to ask someone we love to forgive us. This is particularly true between husbands and wives. To commit a wrong against another person, to be alienated from that person, to be ashamed of you and then by free forgiveness to be restored to a relationship—that is one of the most humbling experiences a person can endure. For you see, there is only one thing that forgiveness can do—one thing only. It does not take away the fact of sin. It cannot take away the memory of sin. Nor can forgiveness take away the consequences of sin.

But forgiveness can do one thing and is something very great. It can take a broken relationship and it can heal that brokenness. It is the only thing that can do that.

That is why the Christian church has always associated forgiveness with the cross of Christ. Through the years there have been a number of theories about the atonement, i.e. the death of Christ. Some saw it as a sacrifice. Some understood it as a ransom. Some have seen it as moral victory. But behind every theory about the atonement is the realization that the death of Christ was costly. It was not easy even for God to forgive.

Therefore, when the gospel has invited people to forgiveness, it has never invited them to a lighthearted place where sin is condoned. It has called them to the cross. It cost God what it costs everyone who has to forgive: love putting itself in our place, bearing on its innocence the burden of our guilt. For whenever there is forgiveness, someone must pay the cost.

Everything that we have said this morning has been leading to this critical and final matter: no one’s sin is ever done with until it has come through this process of forgiveness. Either your sin has been forgiven or else it is still in you as sin. I think this is about as solemn a fact of human life as exists.

Any minister who takes preaching seriously cannot help but look out over a congregation like this, Sunday after Sunday, without some knowledge of the great pain and suffering that lies beneath all our respectable exteriors.

But there is nothing more troubling than an unforgiven sin. There must be many here this morning. Go down to that secret place. Unlock that hidden door. Take out whatever it is that is troubling you and for your own sake, give it up.

There is only one way. It is the way of the cross—penitence, confession, restitution, and pardon.

Amen!