

SERMON - 9/28/08

THE F-WORD: “Should We Forgive & Forget?”

2 Samuel 12:1-10 & Psalm 51

If you were asked whether you consider yourself a forgiving person, how might you respond? [video clip of the on-the-street interview re: forgiveness]

For the last 3 weeks we’ve been looking at the difficult issue of FORGIVENESS... otherwise known as “The F-Word!”

- We’ve looked at what it is (and isn’t)...
- Why we forgive... (Because God has forgiven us!)
- And how to forgive the hard stuff...

Today, we turn our attentions to the question of forgiving & forgetting... that’s what everyone says, right? “You just have to forgive and forget!”

- Let me just say from the start here today... the phrase “forgive & forget” isn’t found anywhere in the Bible! Anywhere!!!
 - William Shakespeare said it in *King Lear*... and so did Robert Browning in his poem, *Dedication to La Saisiaz*.
 - And God says, on numerous occasions, that He will not remember our sins...
 - But nowhere in all of Scripture are we, as humans, instructed to “forgive and forget.”
- I think one of the reasons people have such a hard time with forgiveness, is that they have a misunderstanding of what forgiveness really is.
 - We looked at this a little in week one... but today, when talking about forgiving & forgetting, it’s especially important for us to remember what true forgiveness is!
 - And once again, two authors have been especially helpful in framing my thoughts on this subject: Lewis B. Smedes (*The Art of Forgiving*) and R.T. Kendall (*Total Forgiveness & How To Forgive Ourselves Totally*).

It’s been said before, but it bears repeating... that forgiveness is something that happens **inside** the person who does the forgiving!

- Forgiving is about healing... and just about all the time, the one who needs healing is the one who has been hurt.
 - How do we need to be healed?
 - In our minds & hearts!!
 - And it doesn't necessarily need to be communicated to the one we are forgiving, either.
- Forgiving someone of something, however, has nothing to do with tolerating...
 - Some things are intolerable in and of themselves... no matter how many other people may put up with them...
 - Things like abuse, infidelity, lying, forcing oneself upon another, racism, etc.
 - Intolerable things ARE forgivable...
 - But just because we may forgive an intolerable act, doesn't mean it's now tolerable... or that we're planning on putting up with it!
 - Forgiving is not about "letting someone get away with something"...
 - It's not about staying with people who are hurting us...
 - NOTE: When people ask how often they should forgive someone, Smedes says that what they usually want to know is how much abuse they need to put up with... they're not really asking about forgiving. They're asking about tolerating.
 - We have to set limits on abuse, that's for sure...
 - But there should be no limits on forgiving!

There's an amazing series of stories in the book of 2 Kings about the great King David .

- David is the **only** person in the Bible who's described as a "man after God's own heart."
 - The author of I & II Samuel give us rare insight into not only the actions of a man of God, but the inner thoughts & feelings, too!
 - This particular story begins at a time when kings usually went out to battle with their armies... but this time, David stayed home.
 - He was lounging on the roof of his royal palace, when he looked out across the city & saw a beautiful woman bathing on her rooftop (evidently, a common practice).
 - David, who had several wives at that time, and many concubines, found out who she was (the wife of one of his soldiers!)... sent for her... and slept with her.

- Before long, Bathsheba (for that was her name) sent word to the King that she was pregnant with his child.
- As you can imagine, this didn't look good in the "PR Dept.," so David called Uriah the Hittite (Bathsheba's husband) home from the war... in an attempt to get him to sleep with his wife, and hopefully think the pregnancy was his own!
 - It didn't work.
 - It turns out Uriah was a man with a conscience, and didn't feel comfortable enjoying "the comforts of home," while the rest of his buddies were out fighting a battle.
 - David couldn't even get Uriah drunk enough to forcibly send him home to his wife...
 - So instead, he was sent back to the battlefield, with secret instructions to be put into the fiercest part of the war without backup.
 - Bathsheba received word a few days later that her beloved husband was dead.
 - Thus, David added murder to his secret sin of adultery.
 - And none was the wiser, as Bathsheba came to the palace & became another one of David's official wives.
 - But God does not tolerate sin... even from "a man after his own heart." And 2 Kings 12 tells us, "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD..."
- Two years passed, & God sent the prophet Nathan to the King... who told David a story:
 - A story about two men... one rich, the other not... who both owned sheep.
 - Well, the poor man really only owned ONE sheep... and he treated that one sheep like it was his own child.
 - One day the rich man had a visitor come, but instead of cooking one of his own sheep for the welcome feast... it was the poor man's one-and-only sheep on the table that night served with mint jelly!
 - (v.5) *"Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man (in the story). He said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'"*
 - Which was exactly the reaction Nathan was hoping for from David... and he informed the King that the story was about him!
- Forgiving is NOT tolerating... even in the eyes of God.

- And David repented right then and there... in fact, the beautiful Psalm 51 was birthed out of David's repentance...
- *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new & right spirit within me."* (Psalm 51:1-3, 10)
- And God forgave David... but God still held David accountable for his sin!
- Nathan told David that two big repercussions would take place: 1) his own family would now be filled with violence, 2) the child born to him & Bathsheba would not survive...
- And sure enough, from that moment on, David had problem after problem with his grown children... including rape, murder, exile, rebellion & death.
- It was tragic, really... and God did not cause those actions, but rather pointed David to the fact that HIS OWN actions had created an environment that allowed for those kinds of actions from his children to take place.
- When we forgive... we are not tolerating sinful behavior. \

Forgiveness is also not necessarily about REUNION...

- When a person close to us wrongs us... s/he throws up 2 obstacles:
 - One is the obstacle of our being violated (which produces anger & resentment in us).
 - When we truly forgive someone in our hearts, this obstacle is removed... and we no longer feel bitterness about them.
 - But there remains a second obstacle... and only the person who wronged us can remove this.
 - That's the obstacle of reunion... which needs repentance, and possibly restitution.
- Smedes points out that there's a big difference between repentance & reunion:
 - It takes 1 person to forgive... but two people for reunion!
 - Forgiving happens inside the wounded person... reunion happens in a relationship between people...
 - We can forgive a person who never says they're sorry... but we cannot be reunited unless that one repents & is truly sorry.

- We can forgive even if we do not trust the person who wronged us once, not to wrong us again... whereas, reunion can happen only if we trust they'll not harm us again!
- Forgiving has no strings attached. None! While reunion may have several strings... and that's a good thing!
- It is possible, by the grace & power of God, to forgive **ANY HURT** that has been done to us... but some things may never be the same again... and reunion may not be possible.
- Forgiving doesn't obligate us to go back to a relationship...
 - **Sometimes reunion is impossible**... the person we forgive may not at all be interested in getting back together...
 - Or s/he may be unable to come back... s/he may have married again... moved away... or died & gone to heaven!
 - Forgiving happens regardless of the circumstances... for reunion, the circumstances have to be right.
 - **Sometimes reunion would be harmful**... this is especially the case in instances of abuse & other crimes...
 - Being forgiven does not qualify a person to be a friend, husband or partner...
 - And if their actions do not qualify them for a relationship, it may very well be better to walk away and heal ourselves alone!
 - **Sometimes reunion may be such a threat that it prevents a wounded person from forgiving...**
 - The church has, unfortunately, been the culprit here... with many wives, whose husbands have abused them, well-intended people have said, "Just forgive! And take him back! For the sake of the marriage!"
 - No one should be forced to take someone back – especially when that someone has not demonstrated that they can change their actions.
 - Remember, when we forgive someone, we remove ONE of the obstacles to reunion... the bitterness in our hearts is gone (praise God!)...
 - Whether we heal the relationship depends pretty much on the forgiven person... and how s/he responds to us.
 - Forgiving is no substitute for common sense, my friends.
- Finally, true forgiveness requires patience...

- Remember what we said last week: forgiveness is a lifetime commitment!
- For some of the deep wounds, we may have to literally forgive someone anew every day... if we want to keep the bitterness & resentment out of our lives... and get to the healing that God can provide!
- Let's not be in a rush to forgive too quickly... sometimes we use a quick forgiveness to avoid dealing with our pain... or to gain some advantage over the people we forgive...
- Forgiveness & healing takes time... don't rush it.
- Even after you forgive, you may still feel a little angry at the person who hurt you... that's normal!
- Anger is not an enemy to forgiveness... anger is a natural response & a clear sign that we're in touch with the reality of the situation.
- What we have to be careful of, however, is HATRED.
- Anger may keep bad things from happening to us again... hatred, on the other hand, wishes bad things to happen to the other person!
- Anger can be a positive power that pushes us toward justice... while hatred is a negative force that pushes us towards vengeance (and remember, contrary to popular opinion, vengeance never satisfies!).
- We don't necessarily have to "like" someone whom we've forgiven!

We began today by asking the question: Do we have to forgive & forget?

- Human nature tells us that it may be literally impossible... and definitely unrealistic... to expect us to be able to forgive and forget.
 - In the 1994 Academy Award-winning movie "The Lion King," the story is told about young lion prince, Simba, who is tricked into thinking that he was responsible for his father's death.
 - In shame, this guilt-ridden cub flees the kingdom... and grows up in exile, avoiding any & all responsibilities.
 - In the scene we're about to watch, a now-grown Simba has just seen a vision about his father... here the baboon-priest, Rafiki, talks to him about his past.
 - Let's watch...

- It's unrealistic to expect us to forget the past... meaningful events in our lives, whether positive or negative, are hard to forget!
 - Love doesn't erase our memories...
 - Even when the past hurts... it can actually be a demonstration of greater grace when we are fully aware of what occurred... and we still choose to forgive!
- Maybe we should delete the phrase "forgive & forget" from our vocabulary... and instead, replace it with "forgive & remember!"
 - But not quite in the same way that former President John F. Kennedy meant it, when he said, "Forgive your enemies, but remember their names!"
 - When we truly forgive, we create a new way to remember... we can change the memory of our past into a hope for our future!
 - **We remember the good parts of a bad past...** we build memorials, monuments & museums to painful memories (like the Holocaust Museum, the Vietnam Memorial, etc.)... for 3 reasons:
 - 1) to keep alive our memories of the good people who suffered them...
 - 2) to revive our gratitude that we were delivered from them...
 - 3) to renew our resolve that we shall not let such horror afflict the human family again!
 - We can do the same with our wounded past...
 - **We remember the past with TRUTH...**
 - The truth of not only what happened to us... but of how we might have contributed to our pain because of choices we made.
 - **We remember with a new respect for ourselves...**
 - Smedes says that victims often twist the wrong that someone else did TO THEM... into believing that there's actually something wrong WITH THEM.
 - This is not helpful.
 - We are more than the sum of what has happened to us!
 - Especially when we take into consideration the fact that we all are children of God, made in God's image!
 - **We also remember with sadness...**

- When we are wounded once... wounded & wronged... we carry a scar that stays even when the wound is healed.
- The great Christian author Henri Nouwen wrote a classic book called *The Wounded Healer* that talks about this very point! All of us have been wounded... but as Christians, we believe that not only those wounds can be healed by God... but that our wounds can even be a source of healing for others!
- **Finally, we remember without illusions...**
- Illusions are fantasies of what cannot be. Hope is a faith in what CAN be!
- With God, all things are possible... but that doesn't mean that all things are probable!
- Hope is based on a faith that lasting trust & reconciliation may indeed be possible with the people who have hurt us... but not inevitable...
- And so we remember without illusions of what the future might hold.

As Rafiki said, the past can hurt! But will we run from our past or learn from it?

- As followers of Jesus, we can look to our Savior as our guide...
 - Even while he was hanging on the cross... close to death... Jesus prayed that God would forgive the sins of a sinful world.
 - And when he rose from the dead, three days later... he bore on his body the scars of that crucifixion!
 - The Bible specifically mentions the scars on Jesus' hands... and feet... and in his side... still visible to all... reminders of his painful past.
 - But now, when seen in light of the victory of the resurrection, they bring new meaning!
- The scars of our own wounded pasts may always be with us, my friends...
 - But they can be taken up into God's larger purposes of new life & transformed into signs of promise...
 - If we are willing to allow God to fill our wounds with the resurrecting love of Jesus!
 - No, it's not about forgiving & forgetting at all... but forgiving & remembering, by the grace of God!
 - Praise be to Jesus for this amazing truth! AMEN.