

Context: II Cor. 7: 5-12

Text: II Cor. 7: 9

## The Other Side of Forgiveness

There is a story told of a famous Japanese artist who started out on a very unusual trip around the world. He set out to find all of the pictures of his early years and replace them with better paintings.

As an amateur artist he hurriedly painted a lot of pictures of which he was afterwards ashamed. They were hurried, crude, careless, inartistic, and incomplete. They were painted for food, lodging, or cash. In his later years he was determined to put a worthwhile picture in the place of every inferior one, no matter how much time and effort it took.

This illustration is not unlike the gospel story of Zacchaeus. (Luke 19: 1-10) Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and rich as well. In other words, he had a master's degree in cheating. When Jesus saw him up in the sycamore tree, He called to him to come down so that Jesus could stay at his house. This really astounded the crowds to see Jesus honor this cheat. They murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

The result of this encounter with Jesus was even more astounding. Zacchaeus told Jesus that he would give half of his goods to the poor and said that he would restore fourfold to anyone he had defrauded.

**The front side of forgiveness** is repentance. A Sunday School teacher once asked her class what the word repentance meant. A little boy put up his hand and said, "It is being sorry for your sins." A little girl also raised her hand and said, "Please, it is being sorry enough to quit." Repentance is not only being sorry, but sorry enough to do something about it.

So much of our faith loudly proclaims forgiveness, but a lot of what we talk of forgiveness is a cheap forgiveness. It is a glossing over sin be it our own or someone else. It is often words followed not by a changed life but another opportunity to sin.

There is a story that was shared on the e-mail about a lady who, as a child, had a terrible temper that caused her to say and do very unkind things. After one particular hurtful episode with a playmate, her father told her she had to drive a nail into the gatepost for every thoughtless, mean thing she did. Each time she was kind or did a good deed, she could take out one nail.

After many months the nails were numerous on the gatepost. Every time she passed she was reminded of the reasons for so many nails. After awhile she saw it as a challenge to get them pulled out. At last, she finally got down to one nail left. As she pulled it out, she danced around and exclaimed to her dad, "See, Daddy, the nails are all gone."

Her father gazed intently at the gatepost and thoughtfully replied, "Yes, the nails are gone - but the scars remain." Sin will always leave scars, and so will a forgiveness that doesn't go past words.

Biblical repentance not only recognition and sorrow for sin. **The backside of forgiveness** is doing something appropriate to that recognition. It is one thing to be sorrowful and ask God's forgiveness for lying or being hurtful to someone. It is quite another thing to go to the person or persons you wronged and ask their forgiveness and stop the hurtful behavior. It is one thing to acknowledge that you beat your wife or child. It is quite another to stop it and act lovingly. It is one thing to ask God forgiveness for drunkenness, drug use, or fraud. It is quite another to own up to it and do something about it.

I read a devotional last week by a Christian businessman who had a number of experiences of not being paid by other Christian businessmen for goods received. He describes one incident this way: *"In 1992, another Christian business owner stiffed my business, closed his company, sold his house, and moved out of town. Six years later, in December of 1998, I received an unexpected letter from him that said, 'Please find enclosed a portion of some money I've owed you for some time. I've been going down a list of sorts and making things right. I cannot pay all at once. What I am willing to do is forward you a series of checks. I also need to say I am sorry. I truly did not intend the whole thing to occur at the outset. I only magnified the problem by allowing myself to become overwhelmed and avoid the situation. It's probably a deception of the worst kind because one deceives not only himself but also the other parties involved. Again, I am truly and humbly sorry.'"* That is Zacchaeus type repentance that leads to a forgiveness that costs us something.

There was so much wrongdoing and sin in the Church at Corinth that Paul wrote them a letter that confronted what they were doing, everything from idolatry to cult prostitution to divisiveness. You name it, they did it. In our Scripture lesson this morning Paul says, *"As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter."*

Repentance literally comes from the Greek word metanoia. You have all heard the word metamorphosis, which is also a Greek derivative. Meta means change, morphos means body. Thus, metamorphosis means a change of bodily form, like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. Metanoia is also a Greek derivative. Meta means change, noia

means mind. Repentance literally means a definite change of mind. It is a genuine change of mind that produces changed behavior and a changed life. God wants us to be a forgiven people, but forgiven based on genuine repentance. It cost God the cross to forgive us. It costs us acknowledgement and action that does more than just leave nail holes in the fence post.

It is said that Leonardo da Vinci had a violent quarrel with a fellow painter just before he began to paint "The Last Supper." He was so enraged and bitter that he decided to paint Judas with the face of that fellow painter and hand down his scorn of that painter for generations to follow. Judas was one of the first faces he finished and everyone could easily see the face of that other painter with whom he quarreled. However, when Leonardo went to paint the face of Christ he could make no progress and became extremely frustrated.

At last, he came to the conclusion that the source of his frustration and inability was the fact he painted the face of Judas with the face of his enemy. After coming to this realization he painted out the face of Judas and then began anew to paint the face of Jesus. This time he had great success.

We cannot at one and the same time paint the features of Christ into our lives, and paint another face with the colors of sin, enmity, and hatred. It doesn't matter whether it is directed at self or another.

Repentance and forgiveness are not meant to leave the nail holes of guilt and hurt as open sores forever scarring our life. It is meant to motivate us to do something that is positive, honorable, and courageous. It will cost us something - pride, money, self-deception, selfishness, bitterness, pain, misery, depression, desire for revenge, or whatever it is we won't let go of to change our behavior.

Catherine Marshall defined forgiveness in a way that has always stuck with me. This is especially true for victims of child abuse, spouse abuse, sexual abuse, cruelty, abandonment or whatever the damage that left terrible scars on beautiful lives. Forgiveness is not forgetting, it is not rationalizing, and it is not minimizing the sin or its effect. She said forgiveness is letting the judgment of another go back to God where it belongs and who can and will judge justly. That judgment may, hopefully, allow the Spirit of God to work true repentance in the perpetrator's life.

It is said of the double aspect of true repentance. It looks upon things past with a weeping eye, and upon the future with a watchful eye.

This week I challenge each of us to ask God's Holy Spirit to show us just one sin in our life that will lead to a repentance that takes action. It may be something with a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, a supervisor, a subordinate, or maybe yourself. And, like the Japanese artist, we may just need to replace some paintings here and there.