**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Chs. 1-8**

***FORGIVENESS:***

***THE GIFT FOR GIVING***

D

o you forgive easily? Among nations and political parties, even within families, friends and associates we have hurts to heal, differences to resolve, time-bombs to disarm.

The dictionary says “forgive” means “to stop being angry about or resenting someone or some behavior; to pardon somebody for a mistake, a misunderstanding, wrongdoing; to cancel an obligation.”

Would you like to be an automatic forgiver? Even a semi-automatic!

My mom may have *forgiven* my abusive father, but she never *forgot*

…. so did she *really* forgive? Or is “forgetting” a separate “art?” ‘Til her death at 87 she replayed her hurts in nearly every lengthy conversation we had. And I too struggle to release past wrongs.

Without disclosing more than you’d want to here, let me ask you:

1. “Who do you wish would ask you for your forgiveness?“
2. “Whose forgiveness do you need to ask for?”

Freedom To Forgive

In his red-hot book, THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE, Rick Warren says “life is meant to be shared.” The word he uses to describe this is “fellowship” -- a friendly association, a companionship where people operate from common values, “experiencing life together.”

Warren says this requires “unselfish loving, honest sharing, practical serving, sacrificial giving, sympathetic comforting” and all the other relationship counsel found in the New Testament.

But is this possible? Warren charts this suggested path toward experiencing that kind of life that God desires for us:

(1) “**In real fellowship people experience authenticity.** … People wear masks, keep their guard up, and act as if everything is rosy ... It is only as we become open about our lives that we experience real fellowship.” Why aren’t we more open?

(2) “**In real fellowship people experience mutuality.** Mutuality is the art of giving and receiving…depending on each other … building reciprocal relationships, sharing responsibilities, and helping each other.”

(3) “**In real fellowship people experience sympathy.** Sympathy is not giving advice or quick, cosmetic help; sympathy is entering in, sharing the pain of others.”

(4) “**In real fellowship people experience mercy.** Fellowship is a place of grace where mistakes aren’t rubbed in but rubbed out.”

“We all need mercy, because we all stumble and fall and require help getting back on track. We need to offer mercy to each other and be willing to receive it from each other.”

“You can’t have fellowship without forgiveness. God warns, ‘*Never hold grudges* (Colossians 3:13)’ because bitterness and resentment always destroy fellowship. Because we’re imperfect, sinful people, we inevitably hurt each other when we’re together for a long enough time. … it takes massive amounts of mercy and grace to create and maintain fellowship.” **Let’s get Paul’s perspective in Ephesians 4:22-32 (p. 871.)**

#### Forgiveness Starts Here

Nailed to the cross, beaten, speared and jeered, Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing* (Luke 23:34).” Just think … before God forgave your sins and mine, Jesus forgave His killers! That’s your basic “leading by example!”

“God’s mercy to us is the motivation for showing mercy to others. **Remember,** **you‘ll never be asked to forgive someone else more than God has already forgiven you.** Whenever you’ve been hurt, you have a choice: ‘Will I use my energy and emotions for *retaliation* or for *resolution*?’

“Many are reluctant to show mercy because they don’t understand the difference between trust and forgiveness. *Forgiveness* is letting go of the *past*. *Trust* has to do with *future* behavior.

“Forgiveness must be *immediate*, whether or not a person asks for it. Trust must be *rebuilt* over time. If someone hurts you repeatedly, (Christ’s followers are) commanded by God to forgive instantly, but you’re not expected to continue allowing him or her to hurt you. They must prove that they’ve changed over time. The best place to restore trust is within the supportive context of a small group that offers encouragement and accountability.”

**Here’s Paul’s take on the “forget” component of “forgive ‘n’ forget” as we read Philippians 3:13b-16 (p. 874).**

Those who hurt others deserve justice, don’t they! But instead of being self-appointed justice dispensers, we can dish out mercy, grace and forgiveness – because we too deserved *God’s justice*, but instead He offers us *His unconditional love*.

*Before* the cross, animal sacrifices had to be offered to God for sins to be *temporarily* forgiven. *After* the cross, where Jesus offered Himself as the perfect, once-for-all Sacrifice, God the Father then justly, *permanently*, forgave the sins of all mankind.

##### **Litmus Testing Paul’s Forgiveness Formula**

Many go through life believing that God’s out to get ‘em, but based on what we’ve been seeing together in the first half of Romans, God’s really out to save us from ourselves, not Him!

To DISCOVER, COMPREHEND and APPLY God’s approach to forgiveness, let’s touch down on the key verses of Romans chs. 1-8.

**Romans 1. Let’s read 1:18-25 and 1:32 (p. 836).**

**Romans 2. Let’s read 2:12-16 (p. 837).**

**Romans 3. Let’s read 3:21-24 (p. 838).**

**Romans 4. Let’s read 4:2-5 and 4:18-25 (p. 838).**

**Romans 5. Let’s read 5:1-11 and 5:19-21 (p. 839).**

**Romans 6. Let’s read 6:15-18 and 6:22-23 (p. 840).**

**Romans 7. Let’s read 7:21-25 (p. 841).**

**Romans 8. Let’s read 8:1-9, 8:28-29 and 8:31-39 (p. 841).**

What conclusions(s) can we draw from Romans re forgiveness?

##### **Do Ya Wanna Be A Ten Millionaire?**

My late mentor Ray Stedman claimed that forgiving is the only way to crack the resentment barrier that separates us from each other. We love to *be* forgiven, but, hoo boy, *asking* for forgiveness stinks.

Peter apparently was dealing with a fellow follower of Christ, perhaps his own brother Andrew, who’d offended him. **Let’s join Jesus and his disciples, reading Matthew 18:21-35 (p. 732).**

Peter assumes he’s being overly generous in offering to forgive “his brother” seven times since the rabbis insisted you had to forgive someone no more than three times. They even taught that God did this, based on a misconstrual of the prophet Amos’ book (Amos 1:3).

Highlighting the real question -- "Why forgive at *all*?” -- our Lord replies, tongue in cheek, "Peter, you should forgive 490 times?" In this story Jesus depicts you and me as the servant who’s been forgiven a debt amounting today to ten million dollars. It was a debt he could never pay, no matter how long or hard he worked. Yet, seeing his plight, the king (God) forgave him.

Knowing that God’s entrance requirement to have a permanent, loving relationship with Him is sinless perfection, we all fall woefully short. No human effort could ever attain it.

Extending to us His gracious, unearned favor, God introduces His tables-turning good news which is that Jesus’ sacrificial death paid your staggering debt, resulting in God’s saying to you, **“Thanks to my Son,** **you are forever, totally forgiven!”** In that word from Him, you and I are invited to stand in His holy presence as cleansed, blameless, as righteous as Jesus (Ephesians 1:4, 2:8-9)!

Jesus gives Peter two reasons why Christians must forgive:

(1) Anything less is hypocritical, for we’ve already been forgiven.

**Let’s read Colossians 3:12-14 (p. 877).**

Stedman says the telltale clue that we’re spewing out justice not mercy is that we act and speak harshly, even to loved ones. We demand more from others than ourselves, launching an escalating spiral of retaliation, not resolution.

(2) Next, Jesus tells Peter we must forgive because of the torment which an unforgiving spirit inflicts upon us. When we fail to exercise our freedom to forgive, we self-inflict misery, allowing a “root of bitterness” to sprout and take hold in us (Hebrews 12:15).

By cashing in some of the grace God has given us, we can stop saying to others, "Look how you’re hurting me," and start saying, "What can I do to relieve your hurt?" As Stedman puts it, “Can we not forgive twenty dollars' worth of injury when we’ve been forgiven ten million ourselves? That is *always* our situation.”

###### Caution: Entering A Grudge-Free Zone

What’s it like when someone spurns your request for forgiveness? That’s how God feels after sending His Son to die in your place as the only acceptable Sacrifice for your sin. Twenty centuries ago God gave you and me the most priceless, personal Christmas gift He could give.

It cost Him the anguish of sending His Son to earth to suffer a brutal death for you and me. That loving act purchased your total, unconditional forgiveness, erasing the eternal penalty for *all* your sins *forever*, clearing the way for God to credit your account with the very righteousness of Christ! The only authentic way to truly celebrate Christmas is to receive His gift to you ….. by faith.

To do that, just whisper now to God, “Father, You’ve forgiven me of all my sin for all time. In light of that, I can do no less than accept Your lavish love. I do that right now, and I invite You to reside in my life and to begin shaping me into the person You designed me to be. For this I’ll thank You throughout all eternity. In the name of my Savior Jesus Christ I ask this. Amen.”

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