

Series: Finding Freedom in Forgiveness
Part V: How We Forgive
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Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?" "To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said. But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it. – Genesis 33:1-11, NIV

Today we are continuing in our series on forgiveness. Based on the emails I have received and the comments after worship, many of us are thinking hard about this and we are choosing to forgive others. So, I want to commend you -- not only for listening, but for having the courage to find the freedom that can come through forgiveness.

Today is also Scout Sunday, so I thought I would see if I could find anything about forgiveness and Scouting. One website talked about the qualities of a Boy Scout, known as the "Boy Scout Law." They are listed on the cover of the scouting insert. Under the description of what it means to be "kind" I found these words:

Kindness should be first practiced by a Scout in his own home. It can be a difficult challenge to show kindness to those in your family. Whether it be irritating siblings or misunderstanding parents, making constant efforts to be kind to those people with whom you have a conflict is hard work. Each of us is bound to fail some times, especially when we are in such close quarters for such a large part of our time. At those times of failing to be kind, kindness can still make a comeback through sincere apologies and forgiveness. (From www.boyscouttrail.com)

Good words that speak not only of forgiveness, but of how much it is needed, especially in our families – where we live in "close quarters" with one another. So today, in preparation for answering

the question, “How do we forgive?” I want to talk about two struggling families – one that needed forgiveness but never found it, and one that found forgiveness and the freedom that followed.

The first story comes from a play by Arthur Miller called *All My Sons*. Last weekend, I watched it three times because my daughter had one of the lead roles in her school’s production of the play. I had not seen or read it before, but I happened to look over a synopsis of the play just before the first performance, and I realized this was a serious, tragic play – not your normal high school musical.

The story is about Joe Keller and his family. It all takes place over one day. It is 1946, just after World War II has ended. Joe owns a factory that produced cylinder heads for the engines of P-40 fighter planes. During the war, some cracked cylinder heads came out of his plant. And as a result, twenty-one pilots died when their planes crashed. Joe was arrested and tried in court for this, but eventually found not guilty. However, his business partner was found guilty and ended up in prison. Joe and his family appear to have weathered the storm.

He and his wife Kate had two sons – the oldest, Larry, died in the war; while the youngest, Chris, now works in the plant. Chris believes that his father was not guilty as the courts found. But over time, it comes out that Joe knew about the cracked cylinder heads, but told his partner to ship them anyway. Chris finds out and is furious with his father. At one point, he takes off in anger. His mother tries to convince Joe what he must do for Chris to come back. Here is part of the dialogue that takes place:

Mother: I think if you sit him down and you – explain yourself. I mean you ought to make it clear to him that you did a terrible thing . . . I mean if he saw that you realize what you did. You see? . . . I mean if you told him that you want to pay for what you did.

Keller: How can I pay?

Mother: Tell him – you are willing to go to prison.

Keller: I’m willing to --?

Mother: You wouldn’t go, he wouldn’t ask you to go. But if you told him you wanted to, if he could feel that you wanted to pay, maybe he would forgive you.

Keller: He would forgive me! For what?

Mother: Joe, you know what I mean.

Keller: I don’t know what you mean! You wanted money so I made money. What must I be forgiven? You wanted money, didn’t you?

Mother: I didn’t want it that way.

Keller: I didn’t want it that way, either! What difference is it what you want? I spoiled the both of you. I should’ve put him out when he was ten like I was put out, and make him earn his keep. Then he’d know how to make a buck in this world. Forgiven! I could live on a quarter a day myself, but I got a family so I –

Mother: Joe, Joe . . . It don’t excuse it that you did it for family.

Keller: It’s got to excuse it!

Mother: There’s something bigger than family to him.

Keller: There’s nothing bigger.

The story is about a family struggling *without* forgiveness. And it ends tragically with no future and very little hope.

The other story is also about a family who is struggling. It also has two brothers – Jacob and Esau -- who are twins. When Esau was born first, Jacob came out grabbing his heel – which is what his name “Jacob” means – “heel grabber.” Jacob is a schemer throughout life. When his father Isaac was dying, the tradition in that culture was for the father to bless the sons -- with the oldest getting the greater blessing and inheritance. But Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, come up with a plan to deceive the almost blind Isaac into giving the better blessing to the younger Jacob. When Esau finds out about this, he is furious and vows to kill Jacob. So Jacob heads off to another land for fifteen years. There he creates a family and does very well for himself. But then the time comes for him to head back home, and Jacob knows he will have to face his brother Esau – the same Esau who has vowed to kill him.

That’s where our passage that we read earlier begins. Jacob “the schemer” has a plan -- divide his family and all of his livestock in two so that if Esau tries to kill them, he will only get half. Or, maybe he is hoping to bribe Esau with this livestock so that he won’t fulfill his promise to kill Jacob. By the time the two meet, Esau has come with four hundred of his men – usually a sign that you were prepared for battle. Jacob is terrified. But the night before they meet, Jacob has a wrestling match with a person he comes to realize is God – and it seems to change him. So by the time he meets Esau and his four hundred men, all of the livestock he offers are meant to be a gift. When he sees Esau, Jacob bows seven times. Esau had every reason to tell his men to kill them all, but Esau – the one who had been wronged – takes off running to Jacob. He threw his arms around Jacob’s neck, hugged and kissed him, and they both end up crying together. You have to believe that something has happened in Esau that allowed him to forgive Jacob. Esau was just glad to be back with his brother. It is a picture of forgiveness and reconciliation. The artwork on the cover of the bulletin shows how one person thinks that reunion might have looked. Two families. Two difficult situations filled with hurt. One has no forgiveness and it ends tragically. The other finds forgiveness and a future.

I don’t know if we could look at Jacob and Esau as a model today for *how we forgive*, but many of us may feel a lot like Joe Keller in that play. We are not sure how to forgive, or what the steps might be. In recent weeks I have read a lot about forgiveness in a number of books. There were good things in each one, but also some ideas that I am not sure I agreed with. But today I want to share with you what I believe are the steps to forgiveness – in other words, how we forgive.

Lewis Smedes, whom we have mentioned often in this series, suggests that the first step is to *try to see the humanity of the person who has wronged us*. (From *The Art of Forgiving*: 6) Sometimes this is nearly impossible to do, especially if the wrong has been very severe. We tend to see the person who wronged us only in terms of what they did to us. But I want to invite us to begin by trying to see that person as someone created by God, in the image of God – even someone for whom Christ died. It may be very hard to do, but it can help us move through our need to forgive.

In the play, *All My Sons*, I didn’t really have much compassion for Joe Keller until I heard the lines I read earlier when he talks about being kicked out of his home at age ten to fend for himself. At that point, in spite of what he had done, I felt sorry for the hard life he might have lived growing up. It did not excuse what he did, but I began to have some compassion for him.

The next step in forgiveness is that *we need to name the actual wrong and the person who wronged us*. As we said earlier, we forgive serious actions that someone did to us. We need to be very clear with ourselves who did what. For example, Esau could have said, “I am choosing to forgive my brother because he stole my blessing.”

Next, *we choose to say to ourselves and to God that we forgive this person for what he or she did to us*. In a sense it is a kind of prayer to God in which we actually forgive the person. Now, should we tell the person face to face that we have done this? Let me hold off on answering that one until a little later, but we will come back to it because it is a good question.

The next step is that *we choose to give up the right to get even*. In other words, we are saying that we will no longer seek vengeance against this person. It means that after we forgive, we are not going to keep bringing it back up. Now there is a difference between *vengeance* and *justice* – though the line is not always that clear. Smedes puts it this way:

Vengeance is our own pleasure of seeing someone who hurt us getting it back and then some. Justice, on the other hand, is secured when someone pays a fair penalty for wronging another even if the injured person takes no pleasure in the transaction. Vengeance is personal satisfaction. Justice is moral accounting. Forgiveness surrenders the right to vengeance, it never surrenders the claim of justice. (From *The Art of Forgiving*: 7)

In other words we may forgive someone, but if they have broken the law, they may still have to serve their sentence. Justice tries to balance accounts, but vengeance never does.

The next step in forgiveness is that *we then “let it go” and put it in God’s hands*. In other words, we have done our part, and now the rest is up to God who alone is the final judge of all of us. It is how we begin to move on with our lives.

The final step, which may or may not take place, is that *we seek out reconciliation -- if appropriate*. As we have said in previous weeks, sometimes reconciliation may not be possible. The person who wronged us is no longer around. Or, the person who wronged us may not *think* they have done anything wrong. Or, they may *know* they did something wrong, but will never come to terms with it. Or, that person is a dangerous person, and trying to reconcile might put us or those we love in some danger of being hurt again. Sometimes we simply have to forgive the person *within ourselves* through God’s grace, and then move on in life. But other times, we can and should seek to reconcile with someone. It always takes two to reconcile, but only one to forgive.

But, what if *we* have wronged someone – how do we find forgiveness? Well, the pattern is about the same as when we forgive someone else: We need to acknowledge what we have done to whom. We can then go to the person and tell them what we did that was wrong. We can say we are sorry, and that we will do our best never to let it happen again. We can ask for their forgiveness. And we can ask if there is anything we can do to make it right – and if it is in our power and is the right thing – we can do it. And through God’s grace, we can find forgiveness. But, it is not easy to do. How often do we hear anyone these days say, “I’m sorry” without any qualifications whatsoever? Yet, it is the way to freedom -- especially if we have wronged someone else.

Now, I mentioned earlier the question of whether we should tell someone we have forgiven them – especially if they have no clue they have done something wrong. Lewis Smedes suggests that this is hard to do well. (144) Most folks may get kind of defensive if out of the blue we tell them that we have forgiven them for something they did to us. Some will take it well and say they are sorry, (if indeed they did something wrong) but others may not. It is something we have to play by ear and be sensitive in doing. And it may or may not achieve the goal we have in mind.

Those are the basic steps to forgiveness, though I am aware that others may have different ways of doing it. *The important thing is that we seek and offer forgiveness when we know there is a problem.* Without forgiveness, we can end up with a spiritual cancer eating away at our souls, and in addition to being the one who was wronged, we keep ourselves imprisoned by our refusal to forgive. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Bishop Desmond Tutu has written one of the best books on how all of this can work out in real life called *No Future Without Forgiveness*. It is set in South Africa when apartheid was the issue – a time when awful things were done for many years all because of race, power and fear. But when those in power were finally overthrown, there was a concern that it would just become a time of vengeance for all the wrongs that had been done over the years. How could they move forward when so many had been killed, tortured and imprisoned? Would “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” lead to justice, or simply a country in which everyone was eventually blind and toothless?

In his book Tutu quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, “Unless we learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] we will die together as fools.” In one sense, it is about learning to get along with the great family of humankind. It is something we each have to start doing better right now. It is how we find the freedom we are all looking for. Bishop Tutu summed it up by saying this: “It is ultimately in our best interest that we become forgiving, repented, reconciling, and reconciled people, because without forgiveness, without reconciliation, we have no future.” (165)

When I was watching the Arthur Miller play for the third time, knowing the tragic end that was coming, I wanted to jump up on stage and say, “Wait a minute! I am a Presbyterian pastor. And there’s another pastor sitting next to me in the audience. Let’s stop and talk about all of this. There is a way out of this. There’s *forgiveness*. We can help!” Now, of course I did not do that, and it would have been very embarrassing to my daughter if her Dad had done that. And yes, I know it was *only* a “play” -- but the struggle I saw on stage was something that I see in families all of the time. It felt *very* real! So, this day I want to invite each one of us to think of how we might practice forgiveness in our lives, and discover the freedom God desires for all of us.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.