



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 6

| Scripture: Luke 7:36–47

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

The story of Gary and Wayne from last week raises some interesting questions about the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. Is it possible to be reconciled to someone without forgiveness? Does forgiveness lead naturally to reconciliation? Are we still obliged by Christian principle to forgive if no reconciliation seems possible?

The conversation between Gary and Wayne did not contain the language of forgiveness directly. It was rich with the language of apology in the best sense: Wayne took full responsibility for what he did to Gary, did not try to justify or rationalize his violent act, and apologized with sincere feeling several times for the suffering and loss it had caused Gary and his family over many years. In turn, Gary treated Wayne respectfully, accepted his apology with gratitude, and acknowledged that Wayne had also sustained great loss from his act, namely, freedom and opportunity.

In this ritual of heartfelt apology offered and received, the balance of shame and power was reversed (from attacker having power and victim having shame, to attacker having shame and victim having power). The moral order of their human relationship was symbolically rebalanced, opening the door to reconciliation. Such rebalancing is one expression of justice. In the case of Gary and Wayne, the process allowed them to achieve reconciliation. These two men, who had no previous relationship except through the chance of random crime, came to a sufficient understanding of each other that they chose to share publicly with others their experience of mediation and the healing it brought to each of their lives.



In Luke's Gospel, Jesus forgives those who torture and kill him unjustly, and clearly does so before any of his accusers or executioners give evidence of repentance.

More ordinary instances of reconciliation without apparent forgiveness can often be found in family life. My mother-in-law grew up in a dysfunctional family and was estranged from her younger sister for decades. Late in life, circumstances brought the two sisters together again and they had a very pleasant visit. My mother-in-law said simply that they never talked about the past. Their restored connection lasted until her sister's death at a ripe old age. What happened here? I suspect the two sisters were weary of old family feuds and, conscious of the fragility of life, wanted nothing more than to know one another as sisters again. They had no desire to rehash the past and perhaps feared that raising old issues would bring back bad feelings. No acknowledgments or apologies were part of this reconciliation, only a mutual desire to start the relationship anew.

I believe that forgiveness is implied wherever genuine reconciliation occurs. It may not be spoken, but the inner attitude allowing for reconciliation involves a certain letting go of the past, at least releasing how one has chosen to perceive and relate to the other person in the past. We might say that a forgiving heart is a necessary part of any true reconciliation.

Forgiveness does not, however, always lead to reconciliation. We are complex creatures, full of illusions and inward resistance to what could bring new life. Just as an offended person may not accept the offender's apology, an offender may not take in the forgiveness given by the offended. Suppose Wayne had offered his apology and Gary had responded with a direct statement of forgiveness; but Wayne, acutely uncomfortable with such forgiveness, had retreated into a shell of shame. Until Wayne can forgive himself and accept Gary's gift, no real reconciliation can occur between them.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are two steps along a continuum. Reconciliation is the larger goal, reflecting the great divine aim for our relationships with others and with God. But it is not always possible for us to achieve reconciliation with others in this life. The offender may be dead, in a coma, living in an undisclosed location, or never even positively identified as the perpetrator. Sometimes the culprit does not think anything needs to be forgiven: "That's your problem not mine." "I'm sorry if you felt that what I did was a problem, but I don't see it that way."

When reconciliation seems impossible, we are left with a choice about whether or not to move forward with forgiveness on our side. Forgiving can be, and often is, a one-way street. But to accept our full freedom to forgive unilaterally may mean navigating around the obstacle of our felt need for the other's repentance and our cherished ideas of justice and fair play.

Repentance and Forgiveness

Many people believe that forgiveness is not possible without repentance, and that to offer it before repentance is a travesty of just, accountable relationships. This is the classic Jewish posture on forgiveness, and we see it reflected in many biblical texts from both Hebrew and Christian sources. The early legal codes of Israel are clear about how to handle sins such as lying, robbery, and fraud: first, guilt for specific sins must be acknowledged by the person responsible; then restitution of equal value plus one fifth (presumably a "punitive damage") must be paid to the person sinned against; and, finally, a guilt offering (unblemished animal) must be given to the priest to make atonement before God for sin (see Lev. 6:1-7 and Num. 5:5-7). Then, and only then, is forgiveness granted. Confession and restitution are concrete signs of repentance.

The sequence of sin, repentance, and forgiveness is our cultural norm. We relate to the basic pattern in Psalm 51, where the psalmist confesses his sin, acknowledges his transgression, and begs God to create in him a clean heart and restore him to the joy of salvation. The sacrifice here is not an animal but "a broken and contrite heart." We understand Jesus' words in Luke 17:3-4: "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." At least this makes more sense to us than Jesus' response to Peter's question about how often to forgive, where "seventy-seven times" or "seven times seventy" comes with no mention of repentance at all!

Making repentance a prerequisite to forgiveness satisfies our innate sense of justice. If as Christians we cannot retaliate or satisfy our thirst for vengeance, at least we can require repentance. The reason heartfelt apology works effectively to set the stage for reconciliation is that it expresses contrition and repentance. It can go a long way toward restoring the moral harmony that has been damaged by an offense. Adding some kind of restitution to visible signals of shame and audible words of repentance is likely to soften our hearts further toward reconciliation. Repentance and restitution show that we are holding one another accountable for our actions and that there are tangible and painful consequences for breaking the laws that govern our life together. Both common sense and stable social order support this understanding.

The only problem with our conventional ideas about justice is the larger witness of Jesus' life and death. Luke 17:3-4 notwithstanding, Jesus in the main does not seem to make repentance a prerequisite for God's forgiveness. In healing the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), he directly connects his healing to forgiveness of sins. Yet it is given not in response to any apparent contrition or repentance on the part of the paralytic, but in response to the *faith* of those who brought him. Jesus calls Levi, identified as a sinner (tax collector), to become one of his disciples without first confessing or repenting (Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27-28). While forgiveness is not explicit in the call to discipleship, divine grace is clearly extended. And in one of the most intriguing stories in the Gospels, Jesus essentially tells us how he himself understands the relationship between forgiveness and repentance. This story, told in Luke 7:36-50, deserves a closer look.



“Retributive justice” is the norm in societies shaped by Western civilization. Our legal systems depend on an understanding of justice as punishment for the offender.

Jesus is eating dinner at the home of a Pharisee when a woman, known about town as “a sinner” (for women this generally meant prostitution), enters the house with an alabaster jar of ointment. She stands behind Jesus weeping, her tears bathing his feet, which she wipes dry with her hair; she kisses his feet and anoints them with ointment. The disgusted host, Simon, questions in his heart how Jesus could be a prophet if he doesn’t even recognize what sort of woman this is. Jesus, reading his heart, tells a little story about two debtors and a generous creditor who cancels both debts. The story bears some parallels to the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:23–35, but in this case, the difference between the debts is only ten-fold. The point Jesus elicits from Simon is that the one forgiven the greater debt (five hundred denarii) will love the generous creditor more than the one whose canceled debt was only fifty denarii. Jesus then asks Simon to look at this woman, to see her for who she is. He points out that she has been engaged in acts of hospitality and signs of repentance since she entered. The key to the story lies in this statement: “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love” (v. 47).

I agree with Gregory Jones’s interpretation of this passage in his theologically rich book, *Embodying Forgiveness*.¹ It is not because the woman has shown repentance with tears that Jesus forgives her sins; rather, she shows repentance with tears because she has *already known* forgiveness and thus has great love for Jesus. It is her faith in his gift of pardon that saves her (v. 50).

Finally, we have the witness of the cross itself. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus forgives those who torture and kill him unjustly and clearly does so before any of his accusers or executioners give evidence of repentance. Indeed, the reason he gives for asking his heavenly Father to forgive them is that they don’t understand what they are doing. They do not know to seek forgiveness, because they don’t fully understand themselves and certainly don’t under-

stand Jesus. Christ’s words of forgiveness, from the place of his greatest physical agony and spiritual anguish, are the basis of a Christian understanding of God’s unconditional love. The theme is picked up in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person. . . . But God proves [God’s] love for us in that *while we still were sinners* Christ died for us” (5:7–8, italics mine). It is the unbelievable generosity of divine love shown in Jesus’ sacrifice that reveals to us God’s love without prior conditions. Such love by its very nature calls forth from us a response of gratitude, repentance, and love. As Paul puts it earlier in the epistle, “. . . do you despise the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that *God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*” (2:4, italics mine)

From these central texts we see that repentance is indeed necessary to forgiveness *but not in the order we had assumed*. It is not that unless we repent, God will refuse to forgive; but, rather, it is that as we absorb the magnitude of God’s undeserved gift of forgiveness, we can only respond with heartfelt repentance and gratitude. God’s appeal to our defended, fearful egos is the appeal of love. “This is how the gospel, the good news, eventually delivers us from an unforgiving spirit. It doesn’t work by admonishing us. . . . It works by overwhelming us with love.”²

Is this not what we find in the parable of the Prodigal Son? God is represented in the figure of the father, who throws dignity to the wind and rushes out to meet his returning son. Filled with compassion, he embraces and kisses his son *before* the son’s repentance speech begins and interrupts this speech, calling for a robe and ring as symbols of full restoration of his son’s place of dignity in the family. The only fitting response of the son to this generous welcome will be a life of humble gratitude, loving service, and willingness to forgive others their foolish and destructive choices.

Are we also hearing echoes of the Dakota Sioux tribe story from our first week’s session? The Sioux murderer was not asked to repent as a condition of the tribe’s acceptance. By their costly and generous act of embracing this man as their own kin, he will surely— out of a mix of pure shame and deep gratitude— repent and live a very different kind of life among them. Surely it is the power of moral and spiritual persuasion that transforms and renews human life as God intends it to be.

Rethinking the Nature of Justice

When we reverse the conventional relationship between repentance and forgiveness—instead of repentance yielding forgiveness, forgiveness yields repentance—what does it do to our understanding of justice? It may seem that justice as we have traditionally understood it has no place in this new arrangement. Yet there are two basic understandings of justice to consider as we grapple with this important question: “retributive justice” and “restorative justice.” The retributive justice is by far the better known.

Retributive justice is the norm in societies shaped by Western civilization. Our legal systems depend on an understanding of justice as punishment for the offender. The way to balance the scales of justice according to this norm is to impose penalties against the guilty—punishments from community service to prison to execution. It is sometimes called “the penal system,” reflecting the assumption that penalties are the proper way to achieve justice and give the victims satisfaction. Our sense of “fairness” tends to be satisfied to a certain extent by this form of justice. People should have to “pay” for their transgressions, and this involves suffering the loss of freedom if not life.

“Restorative justice” is more often the norm among tribal peoples of the world. The value of community, and desire to restore an offender to a sense of kinship with community, results in a very different approach to justice. For example, in New Zealand among the Maori, four elements of Aboriginal society inform their approach to modern-day teenage crime: (1) the form of accountability required for these young people is to be found by consensus involving the whole community; (2) the desired outcome is reconciliation rather than isolation and punishment of the offender; (3) the focus is less on blaming one individual than exploring the wider causes of wrongdoing; (4) concern for restoring harmony in the community is greater than concern for breach of the law.³

In general, indigenous societies see misbehavior as a distortion of communal harmony, calling for good teaching and healing. In some cases this might involve revealing publicly the offense within the offender’s community. For the offender, this means the humiliation of facing daily those who know him or her best. However, the purpose is not to humiliate the *person* but the negative *behavior*. The community affirms the worth and value of the person, encouraging reform, but shames the misbehavior. In other cases it might mean removing offenders from a stagnant, TV-centered environment and placing them in a certain kind of isolation (not incarceration) where they have no choice but to reflect inwardly. The purpose here is to teach individuals their weakness alone and their dependence on the good of the whole community, in which they too have responsibility to uphold the peace. Mediation and community councils are the primary means of practicing such restorative justice.

What, finally, is the purpose of justice? Is punishment the goal, or restoration of a fully human life? God exercises judgment in the service of salvation, grants mercy in hopes of reclaiming us from the sad spectacle of our sin and its consequences. God has designs for a future radiant with renewal, harmony, and peace. That is what the cross of Christ opens to all humanity if we will accept it. What about us? To forgive is to say yes to God’s future, creating a path into that hope. May we find freedom to do so gladly!

About the Writer

Marjorie Thompson is an author, teacher, pastor, and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation.

Endnotes

1. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 160–62.
2. L. William Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 115.
3. See Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1996), 19.