



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 4

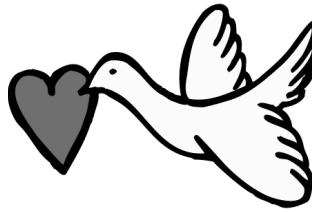
| Scripture reading: Luke 23:32–43

God's Love and Judgment

Pondering the role forgiveness plays in a renewed life of peace, we turn to the theme of love with which we ended last week. The way of love, God's way, offers us a third alternative to our reactive habits of fight and flight when we are injured or offended by others. This path is embodied for us in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In him we see clearly how God chooses to relate to us when we offend against the divine heart, violating the communion of love God intended for us in creation. Breaking the communion of love with God and one another is the fundamental human sin in need of healing and reconciliation. Divine forgiveness is critical to restoring this relationship.

How, then, are we to square God's forgiveness and God's judgment? The Bible is full of pictures of divine judgment, both past and promised. While Jesus warns us about the hypocrisy of judging others when we ourselves stand under judgment, he never suggests that judgment is inappropriate for God. Indeed, the Scriptures are clear that only God, in whom there is no shadow of unrighteousness, has the right to judge and condemn human sin. How do we reconcile divine judgment with divine love?

With Jesus on the cross, we see how God chooses to hold the tension between these polarities. The cross itself is a dreadful judgment against humanity. It stands as witness to our brutality against innocent human beings, our will to destroy truth-tellers in order to preserve our illusions of power, control, and "rightness." The choice of the crowds to crucify a controversial spiritual teacher reflects a reality we see played out repeatedly in human history: pushing God's truth to the margins of human



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consciousness in favor of the self-congratulatory mindset, "me, mine, and my kind."

The Holy One does not deny justice in response to our sin; nor does the All Merciful force us to pay a price beyond our means, since we are incapable by ourselves of restoring the damage we cause. God neither obliterates us in divine retribution (fight), nor retreats into sentimental acceptance of our faults without consequences (flight). Instead God's justice and love are fused into a single response and a singular invitation. As the Word made flesh, Jesus takes divine judgment into his own body on our behalf. He re-presents our humanity before God, receiving divine justice for sin; *and* he re-presents God to us, offering divine forgiveness for sin. God-in-Christ is willing to pay this price; a just love costs dearly. Jesus Christ is the embodied paradox of divine love and justice, revealing God's grace as a form of judgment and offering God's judgment in the form of grace. Judgment without mercy is brutal; mercy without judgment is anemic. God holds the balance in a love beyond comprehension, incarnate in Christ.

The singular invitation for us is to join God's project of redemption, to participate in this quality of divine love as long as sin endures. For there is something that endures more surely than sin: love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"

(1 Cor. 13:7). Nothing but love is finally capable of bearing or enduring all things. This is the great hope and promise of our faith—that God’s love will outlast every form of opposition, that the forces of darkness within and beyond us will finally relent and recognize that “Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11).

How do we learn to live inside this quality of love, this holy hope and patient persistence? Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal famously said, “Christ is in agony till the end of the world.” When we consider that what we do to “the least” of our brothers or sisters we do to Christ (Matt. 25:40) and observe what we as human beings actually do to one another generation upon generation, we must recognize that God’s redemption is a work in progress as well as a gift given for all time. It is “already but not yet,” to borrow the phrase often used to describe our situation between Christ’s first and second coming. How do we participate in God’s ongoing redemption of a world awash in self-absorption?

The Spirit of Repentance

As we have already seen, our first task is to seek to extricate ourselves from that self-absorption. The first order of business is not to forgive others, but to receive the forgiveness God offers us in the agonizingly outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. Exploring self-examination and our need for confession has moved us in this direction. Looking hard at our human impulse to judge, and acknowledging our need to attend to our own faults, has taken us a step further. We have yet to explore the deeper spirit of repentance, one of the key practices of Lent.

The word used most consistently for repentance in the New Testament is *metanoia*. It is a combination of two Greek words, *meta*, which means “beyond” and *nous* or “mind.” Repentance means adopting a new “mind-set,” going beyond our ordinary ways of thinking, perceiving, and responding to life. Our ordinary mind-set is shaped by our little ego kingdoms and typically takes one of two forms: we proudly trust in our own mental or physical powers to meet life, thinking of ourselves as “self-made” people who can figure out our own problems and do things right by sheer inventiveness and grit. Or we fearfully distrust that we have any real good in us, despairing of personal power to meet life’s challenges and indulging in self-pity. But the inflated self and the

deflated self are merely two sides of the same coin: ego. In the realm of ego, each personal universe revolves endlessly around an inadequate picture of selfhood.

The purpose of repentance is to transcend our limited view of reality. The word *metanoia* suggests that opening up to God’s much larger and more generous view of reality requires us, at some level, to go “out of our minds”—at least as they now operate! Our self-absorbed mind-set is intent on finding those things all people yearn for: security, affirmation, recognition, love, and meaning. But the blinders of ego-need have us looking for these things in all the wrong places: material possessions, status, honors, insider knowledge, and gratification of physical appetites, to name the most obvious. The sad truth we discover only with time is that none of these sources of presumed security or fulfillment have the ability to satisfy our hearts.

Repentance, then, involves turning ourselves in a new direction—away from ego and toward God. Disillusionment with our self-made efforts to find life’s satisfaction is a wonderful prompt. The beginning of repentance is putting ourselves in God’s hands, acknowledging that we need what only our Creator can give. Slowly we begin to see that God has already given us an identity far more precious than what the world promises. Spiritually speaking, we are children of the Most High, beloved sons and daughters, brothers and sisters equally made in the image of God. Each of us is a unique constellation of personhood, designed to reflect the divine likeness in our own way. What could be more astonishingly wonderful?

Repentance brings us to genuine sorrow over all the effort and energy of our lives wasted in grasping for illusory things, all the time dissipated in failing to seek God’s ready help, guidance, and love. True repentance carries this wondering sadness along with a powerful desire to change, knowing that in reality we can only open ourselves to *being changed* by a power beyond our own. We groan inwardly with the psalmist: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10). Without authentic sorrow and desire to be “clothed and in [our] right mind,” (Mark 5:15) acts of contrition are but external shows. These same principles shape our repentance when we seek restored relationship with one another.



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Seeking Forgiveness from Others

When, through self-examination, we become honest about our weaknesses, about our pride and fear, about our part in the sordid affairs of the human family, we can begin to notice the people in our lives we have misjudged and mistreated. We start to see faces: those we have made no effort to understand, those we have ignored or avoided, those we have been jealous of, those to whom we have not kept our promises, those we have criticized or belittled. Most of our ways of wounding each other are emotional. We withhold acceptance, affirmation, personal warmth; we exclude and reject; we betray trust and gossip behind backs; we make snide comments, dish out criticism, and harp on weaknesses; we even shame publicly and play games of emotional blackmail, threatening to expose another's secrets in order to gain what we want. Sometimes we hurt each other without meaning to, simply by being inattentive or self-absorbed.

As we become convinced that we need to seek forgiveness from those we have injured, oppressed, or offended, the same principles apply that are central to restoring our relationship with God. Our sorrow for what we have done or failed to do must be real. Our desire to see someone in a new way and respond with a more generous spirit must also be genuine.

If it is possible to go directly to the person we have injured, the potential for reconciliation is greatest. If direct contact is not feasible, a letter can be a fine way to reach out. In situations where we cannot bring ourselves to make contact directly, we can ask a mutual friend or third party to make an overture on our behalf. When the offended person responds with receptivity, we should not delay our follow-up contact. Even when the first overture is less than enthusiastically received, it is up

to us to take initiative to try again. Strong resolve and persistence helps the offended party to see that we are serious in seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

This brings us to the matter of apology. It can feel remarkably hard to apologize to someone, even for a relatively minor offense. To apologize requires an admission of being wrong. This is humbling, but if our apology is genuine we will need to prepare ourselves to accept a certain level of embarrassment with ourselves and before the other person. Inevitably we feel a certain loss of power and control when we humble ourselves this way. Indeed, the self-humbling is part of what makes an apology effective.

According to Carl Schneider, a mediation specialist, there are three essential components in a good apology:¹

1. *Acknowledging a particular offense* and being willing to take responsibility for it. This involves admitting that real injury was done, a relationship damaged in some way—in dignity, respect, or trust. It also involves saying “I did this.”
2. *Showing a visible feeling of regret or shame.* This means it is clear to the offended party that the offender is personally affected by what she or he did and is troubled by it: “I am sorry for what I did, and regret the suffering I caused.”
3. *Being vulnerable to the offended party.* This means offering no defense of oneself, standing exposed and vulnerable to the response of the offended person. An apology is offered with no guarantee of acceptance; forgiveness may be begged for and refused.

The power of apology lies in “the exchange of shame and power between the offender and the offended.”² A role reversal takes place: whereas in the original injury the offender had power and the offended felt shame, in apology the offender feels shame and the offended assumes power. An apology is thus a ritual of moral rebalancing.

What makes for a bad apology?

1. Not fully acknowledging the injury done or not taking direct responsibility: “If some of what I said was disrespectful.” “Mistakes were made.” “I’m sorry if you felt hurt by what I did.” This last tactic subtly places blame back on the offended and implies that

he or she had some level of unjustified temerity to feel hurt by what you did—that the problem is less what you did than how the other person reacted.

2. Not expressing sorrow or shame, a lapse unfortunately illustrated in President Clinton’s now classic nonapology for the Lewinsky affair. Body language and tone of voice can also betray lack of authentic feelings of remorse. If it appears we are more sorry for getting caught than for what we did and how it affected others, then the apology falls flat.
3. Defending ourselves: any form of self-justification erases the effectiveness of an apology. The more excuses we build into an “apology,” the more apparent it becomes that we have basically exonerated ourselves already. A good apology is brief, to the point, and heartfelt, with no explanations or rationalizations.

Receiving Forgiveness

We make ourselves vulnerable with others in seeking forgiveness, never knowing whether our sincerest efforts will be met with mercy. If we do not receive forgiveness, we need to wait patiently in hope, praying that an opening will come in God’s time. If the offended person does offer forgiveness, we should receive it humbly and gratefully, with an inward commitment not to fall into such injurious behavior again. To ask for and then receive forgiveness is a healing balm, usually for both parties. It is a heavy emotional burden lifted from us that we need not carry again.

When we seek forgiveness from God with genuine repentance, we can rest assured by faith that forgiveness is granted. We need not feel anxious or uncertain about God’s response, as we might with other persons. This is the good news! The only response we can make to this ever-available but very costly grace is to receive it with trusting gratitude and to commit ourselves with every ounce of our intention to avoid this fault in the future with the help of the Spirit.

Yet receiving divine forgiveness is not always as simple or straightforward as it might seem. We sometimes “take back our sin” to fondle or replay it. If we have learned to depend on destructive behavior for a sense of identity, even a negative identity, it will be hard to let go. At other times we can’t quite believe God would forgive certain sins or truly love us unconditionally. Like Groucho Marx proclaiming, “I don’t care to belong to any club that will accept me as a member” we basically say, “I wouldn’t believe in a God who could love me as I am or forgive me after what I’ve done.” Then we are holding up higher standards than God’s for our forgiveness, a rather arrogant posture for all its apparent “humility.” When we find we have not truly forgiven ourselves for an injury we caused, we can be sure we have not yet fully received the forgiveness God extends. The blockage is on our side, not God’s.

We can only give what we have already received. If we wish to participate in the generous outpouring of God’s love and forgiveness for a wounded world, we need to receive it fully and know from experience both its grace and cost. Divine love—the way beyond fight or flight—stands its ground. It has nothing to prove and nothing to hide. It may be accepted or rejected but will not on either account lose its character: it endures. When we take God’s love into our hearts, we have firm ground on which to stand when it comes our turn to forgive others—our subject for next week.

About the Writer

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

Endnotes

1. See Carl D. Schneider, “What It Means to Be Sorry: The Power of Apology in Mediation,” *Mediation Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2000).
2. Aaron Lazare, “Go Ahead, Say You’re Sorry.” *Psychology Today*, January/February 1995, 42. Cited in Schneider, “What It Means to Be Sorry.”