

From time to time we hear remarkable stories of forgiveness. Who can forget the Amish following the shooting at Nickel Mines? As a matter of fact we're going to hear one remarkable story in just a few minutes. Every time we hear these stories it challenges us to consider if we could ever forgive the way the people in the story forgive.

This morning I want to focus our attention on ourselves as we talk about forgiveness. So often when we think about forgiveness we are focused on the other person and whether they deserve to be forgiven. But as we will hear in this story today; forgiveness is for me.

I think our hang-up on the topic of forgiveness is spoken to by John Ortberg in the following statement he made in a recent sermon on forgiveness: "To forgive does not mean forget, condone, excuse, tolerate, or overlook; it means to choose the way of love over the way of hate."

How do you react to that statement? Let's get a few responses. Just your gut reaction here no judgment, nothing is right or wrong here, just your reaction to John's statement.

Thanks for your comments.

Now let me set up this video that first appeared on the CBS Evening News back in June. This is the story of Mary Johnson whose son was murdered by Oshea Israel. It is a story of forgiveness that encompasses much more than can be covered in a three minute news piece. I recently heard Mary and Oshea share more in depth comments of that personal journey that each of them have, and here is the important part- continue to take, through this process of forgiveness and reconciliation. So understand that this is not an overnight miracle but a long process that led to their being at this point.

As you listen I want you to pay particular attention to Mary when she describes unforgiveness like a cancer and that forgiveness, in her words, is for me. Let's roll that clip.

Video <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/06/07/eveningnews/main20069849.shtml>

Did you catch Mary's description of unforgiveness? "Unforgiveness is like a cancer that will eat you from the inside out. It's not about that other person, me forgiving him does not diminish what he's done. Yes, he murdered my son - but the forgiveness is for me. It's for me."

Look back at that first sentence for a moment: 'Unforgiveness will eat you from the inside out.' If you know anyone who lives with unforgiveness you know that it torments you day and night. Unforgiveness is like a cancer because it moves silently through your life. But that cancer of unforgiveness also exposes itself in a variety of ways in our life. Unforgiveness destroys us personally, stealing our peace, robbing our sleep; it

ruins relationships (and not just with the person whom we perceive to have wronged us); and unforgiveness often comes out as bitterness, anger and selfishness.

Mary Johnson realized what the unforgiveness in her heart was doing to her life. (And you know sometimes we are the only victim of our unforgiveness because the other person has no idea what they have done.) For Mary, she realized that she needed to experience forgiveness for herself before she could focus on forgiving Oshea, her son's killer.

To hear Mary and Oshea tell their story more fully you realize that theirs is a story about two people each needing to find forgiveness and realizing that forgiveness begins inside; forgiveness is not about forgetting, condoning, excusing or overlooking a trespass- forgiveness is about what happens in me. Forgiveness is for me.

I mentioned last week that as we journey through this series that our goal each week is to close the gap between what we believe and how we live. What we as Christians believe (at the very least, what we hear) is that we should forgive. We believe that God forgave us and as such we should forgive others. After all we believe that to 'love others' means that we love our enemies. We know that Mary is the example of what should be...BUT ...I could never forgive like that.

I believe in forgiveness, but... if you knew what they said...what they did...how they hurt me...what they stole from me... I believe I should forgive...BUT...

...the gap between what I believe and how I live is so wide...

If you knew what my brother, sister, father, mother did to me you would understand why I believe in forgiveness, but to live forgiveness is a major hurdle.

Families often struggle with issues related to forgiveness. And what is true today was true in Jesus time. As a matter of fact it was Peter who came to Jesus with a question about forgiving his brother that prompted Jesus parable of the unmerciful servant.

You see Peter came to Jesus with the rabbinical understanding of that day that you should forgive someone 3 times. But wanting to make himself look like the bigger man in this family conflict Peter extended his willingness to forgive his brother to seven times!

Peter is a lot like you and me! We can forgive small offenses. We may even forgive someone multiple times for their trespasses against us; but at some point we have to draw a line in the sand. After all, what is it that most of us are seeking when we are victimized by someone? We are seeking justice. We are expecting a wrong to be righted and the other person to pay, literally or figuratively, for what they have done to us.

So Jesus begins his reply to Peter with a fictional king who is settling accounts with his servants. The king is seeking justice. The king wants to settle accounts with those who owe him something. Everyone is treated justly.

Then Jesus introduces a servant that must have been able to spend like the US Congress. He had amassed a debt greater than the GDP of all of Palestine at the time. There was no way he could settle his debt with the king so instead of seeking justice, the servant sought mercy.

And if we look at verse 27 we see that the King 'took pity on him.' The king extended to the servant mercy and grace. If we go back to that statement from John Ortberg we could say that the King chose to take the way of love. And in taking the way of love the king chose mercy and grace over justice.

Justice is what a child wants when his brother or sister gets more than he got. Justice is always what seems fair for me. But justice also means that everyone is treated according to the same standard. And maybe for Peter when he asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother Andrew he wanted justice.

I'm glad that we don't always get justice, but instead we get grace and mercy. Grace and mercy isn't what we deserve; but it is what we freely receive from another.

Of course, the parable is the story of how God relates to us. The Law demands justice; but God through Jesus offers us mercy and grace. God chose the way of love because God knew that we could never meet our obligations under the law. The debt of sin was so great that we could never do enough to repay God for his love and kindness. So while the Law demanded justice, God extended grace and mercy.

Forgiveness is what the servant received. Forgiveness is what you and I receive when we fall upon our knees before God and seek mercy and grace through Jesus.

But here is the problem. We have a hard time experiencing grace and mercy because we are stuck on justice.

Back to the parable. The servant is free! His debt is forgiven and now he doesn't have to work to repay his master. He should be celebrating, but Jesus says he walks down the street and find a fellow servant who owes him \$20. Seeking justice, the servant demands to be repaid his \$20.

This servant has a gap problem. He has experienced forgiveness, he has benefitted from grace and mercy; he believes he is forgiven, but he is unable to close the gap between what he believes and how he lives.

Is that where you are? You've experienced God's forgiveness; you've benefited from God's grace and mercy; you believe you are forgiven, but there is a gap between what you believe and how you live.

About this time I imagine that some of you are saying, "I know I have a gap; how do I close it?"

I think our parable today and the story of Mary and Oshea speaks volumes about the first step in closing the gap. I need to experience forgiveness. Forgiveness is for me.

I need to learn to experience my own forgiveness before I can forgive others.

Once we believe that we are forgiven by God and live as those who are forgiven; then it is up to us to choose the way of love.

Go back again to what Mary said: 'Me forgiving does not diminish what he's done.' Oshea still murdered her son. He committed a violent crime that took a life, which destroyed a family. As John Ortberg said, 'To forgive does not mean forget, condone, excuse, tolerate, or overlook; it means to choose the way of love over the way of hate.'

How Mary learned to close the gap between what she believed and how she lived came in choosing the way of love over the way of hate. And we see very clearly in the parable what happens if we choose the way of hate- we are imprisoned.

But when we choose the way of love; hard as it is- and depending on the offense it may take a long time- choosing the way of love is possible if we first receive forgiveness.

We could spend weeks talking about the way of love but I just want to ask you to consider one step. That one step is to begin doing what Jesus commands, pray for your enemies. (Matt 5:43-44; Luke 6:28)

I'm not asking you to pray anything more than a simple prayer like, "God, I pray you work in his/her life." That was the simple prayer that Craig Groshel, the author of the book, *Christian Atheist*, learned to pray for the man who had sexually abused his sister. As Craig says it wasn't easy and it took months before it became truly sincere. But he knew he had to close the gap between what he believed and how he lived.

But here is what Craig learned. Our prayers are much more for ourselves than they are for the offender. My prayers for others may or may not change them. But my prayers change me.

My prayers change me. Forgiveness is for me.

Christian Atheist

I Believe in God, But Won't Forgive

How did the response of the Amish following the Nickel Mine Amish shooting impress you?

John Ortberg made the following statement about forgiveness. What is your response to this statement?

"To forgive does not mean forget, condone, excuse, tolerate, or overlook; it means to choose the way of love over the way of hate."

Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel

What are your reactions to the video?

"Unforgiveness is like a cancer that will eat you from the inside out. It's not about that other person, me forgiving him does not diminish what he's done. Yes, he murdered my son - but the forgiveness is for me. It's for me."

Do you know anyone who is consumed by unforgiveness?

Who do you struggle to forgive?

The Unmerciful Servant Matthew 18:21-35

What does it mean to you to choose the way of love?

What does 'justice' mean to you?

How is grace and mercy different than justice?

Experiencing Forgiveness

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Expressing Forgiveness

Matthew 5:44 Pray for your enemy.

"God, I pray you work in his/her life."

My prayers for others may or may not change them. But my prayers change me. Craig Groeshel, *The Christian Atheist*

Follow up

Here is a list of scriptures on forgiveness. Read the passage and reflect on how choosing the way of love is found in this passage.

Matthew 5:43-44

Matthew 6:43-47

Matthew 6:9-15

Matthew 7:1-2

Luke 23:34

Ephesians 4:31-32

Colossians 3:13

Hebrews 12:14-15

1 John 1:9

Next Week: I Believe in God, But... What's Mine is Mine

1 Timothy 6:17-19

Closing prayer

1 John 1:9

Help me to experience the forgiveness that is for me, so that I may express forgiveness to others. Amen.