

INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth message in a series called "Refresh! What to do when life crashes." Most of us have lives in constant need of repair. It reminds of me of the airline industry. As you can imagine, when jets fly as much as they do for the major airlines, there are often maintenance issues. After every flight, the pilot fills out a "squawk sheet," listing anything that isn't working properly on that particular jet. Most of the issues are minor but the maintenance engineers have to address the problem and write in the same log book that the issue has been resolved. Sometimes there's a humorous banter between the pilots and the service personnel. For instance, the following are some actual statements from Qantas Airlines maintenance logs. (As you chuckle at these remember Qantas has never had an accident.) P stands for Pilot and S stands for Service manager):

1. P: Left inside main tire almost needs replacement
S: Almost replaced left inside main tire

2. P: Flight OK, except auto-land was very rough
S: Auto-land not installed on this aircraft

3. P: Dead bugs on windshield
S: Live bugs on backorder

4. P: Number 3 engine missing
S: Engine found on right wing after brief search

5. P: Aircraft handles funny
S: Aircraft warned to straighten up, fly right, and be serious

6. P: Target radar hums
S: Reprogrammed target radar with lyrics

7. P: Noise coming from under instrument panel. Sounds like a midget pounding on something with a hammer.
S: Took hammer away from midget

I'm teaching this series on personal refreshment, because most of us have areas of our lives that aren't always functioning properly either! Thankfully, we have access to the One who created us and knows more about us than we know ourselves. His name is Jesus, and in Matthew 5, He used the word "blessed" nine times to let us know HOW we can experience God's best for us. Remember, these beatitudes are like steps on a ladder, they must be practiced in the same sequence in which Jesus gave them. Let's read them together, but before we do, let's rehearse our REFRESH memory verse from Acts 3:19, "Repent, then and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19) Now, let's read Jesus' words in Matthew 5:1-6 and let me refresh your memory about each step we've talked about.

Matthew 5:1-6. "Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [That statement was the basis for our first refreshing step: Realize that I'm not God] Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. [From that we learned step 2: Earnestly believe that God exists and that I matter to Him] Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. [Based on that we arrive at step 3: Fully submit my life and will to Christ's control] Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. [Last week we discovered step 4: Receive God's righteousness as a gift of grace] Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."

That's the beatitude we're focusing on in this message. The fifth step in the refreshing process is: Extend forgiveness to those who have hurt me. When we take this step, we'll adopt the refreshing attitude that says: "I'll show mercy because I need mercy!"

The first four beatitudes are all inwardly directed. When we realize our moral poverty, it causes us to mourn, which then causes us to surrender control of our lives to God and produces a craving hunger for God's righteousness. This beatitude is a turning point, because mercy speaks of how we deal with other people. According to the dictionary, mercy is "Forbearance to inflict harm under circumstances of provocation, when one has the power to inflict it; compassionate treatment of an offender or adversary." The idea of mercy is absolutely worthless unless it is practiced. In the same way the Bible says, "Faith without works is dead," we could say, "Compassion without the outward display of mercy is dead." Forgiveness is the personal application of mercy, so let's address three important questions about forgiveness:

I. WHY SHOULD I FORGIVE?

Of course, the easy answer to that question is, "because God tells me to." But there are a couple of personal reasons WHY it's best to show mercy to others.

1. Because God has forgiven me

The Bible says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) When I understand just how much God has forgiven me, it makes it easier to forgive others. I will never have to forgive anyone as much as God has forgiven me.

Think about all the sins you've ever committed, or will ever commit. Jesus took our sins to the cross and then prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Only when you accept God's full forgiveness will you be able to forgive others. People who feel unforgiven have a hard time forgiving others.

2. Because resentment will ruin me

Holding a grudge or nursing resentment toward other people will damage your life more than you can imagine. Resentment is unhealthy. "Some men stay healthy till the day they die...others

have no happiness at all; they live and die with bitter hearts." (Job 21:23) Resentment and bitterness are like a slow acting poison. Unforgiveness is like an invisible cancer that will ruin you. As Dr. S. I. McMillan wrote, "You don't get ulcers from what you eat, but from what's eating you." We've all known people who were eaten up with resentment and bitterness. The most unhappy, unhealthy people I know are those who are carrying a grudge.

You've probably seen the bumper sticker saying, "I don't get mad; I get even." Revenge makes for a great plot in a play or movie. All the way from Hamlet to the Godfather to the Steven Seagal movies; where a wronged party extracts revenge, we are fascinated. There's something about getting even that satisfies a sense of justice in us. But God has a better way, and it's called mercy and forgiveness.

Don Henley wrote a song called "The Heart of the Matter" and the last chorus says, "I've been tryin' to get down to the heart of the matter / Because the flesh will get weak / and the ashes will scatter (meaning that we're going to die) / So I'm thinking about forgiveness, forgiveness / even if, even if you don't love me anymore." He's right about one thing. Forgiveness IS the heart of the matter and God loves you enough to forgive you.

We must understand forgiveness in two directions. First, we must be willing to seek forgiveness from others, and then we must extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us. So let's answer:

II. HOW DO I SEEK FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS?

Before you can fully appreciate God's forgiveness and even forgive others, I believe you must be willing to seek forgiveness from those you have offended. The Bible says you're really not ready to worship God until you have settled accounts with those you have wronged. Jesus said,

"If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24) In this case, a person is in church getting ready for the offering. That person suddenly remembers there is someone they have offended, and this person has something "against them." The proper response is to go to that person immediately and seek reconciliation. In other words, you can't be right with God until you've done everything you can to be right with others. Here's how to do that:

1. List the people I've hurt with whom I haven't made amends

This doesn't have to be an exhaustive list of everyone you've ever hurt in your life. It's a list of people to whom you haven't approached about forgiving you. Can't think of anybody? I thought you'd say that. So maybe you can start your list by answering the follow questions: Is there anyone I... (1) owe a debt to that I haven't repaid? (2) have broken a promise to? (3) have over-controlled? a spouse? kid? Family member? (4) am over possessive of? (5) am hypercritical of? (6) have verbally abused? (7) have physically abused? (8) haven't appreciated or shown attention to? (9) forgotten an anniversary or birthday? (10) have been unfaithful to? (11) have lied to? (12) made fun of? You get the idea. Make your list and then:

2. Humbly ask them to forgive me for a specific offense

Our English word "forgive" comes from the Anglo-Saxon phrase, "ask someone for to give us pardon." Asking for forgiveness is tough. Don't go to that person trying to justify *why* you did what you did. Don't make excuses and don't try to put part of the blame on them. Just humbly apologize and ask them to forgive you. There are seven words that can rock your world and change your life. They are: I WAS WRONG. WILL YOU FORGIVE ME?

Also, if possible you should make restitution. Years ago, I came to place in my life where I first made this list and began to deal with what I had done. I remember when I was in the 8th Grade at Floral City School, I had stolen some money from my school. Our student council operated a student store, and my job was to take a box around with paper, pencils, pen and supplies to all the classrooms. Students would purchase these items. There was no accounting system, so many days I would slip a quarter or fifty cents into my pocket. I justified it by thinking I deserved to be paid for my work. I don't remember how much money I took, probably about twenty dollars over the space of six months. Years later when I was in college, I was making my list; I remembered what I had done. I wrote a letter to the principal of the school confessing what I had done and I enclosed a check for \$50 to make restitution. Only when I did that could I feel I had made amends for my sin.

3. Rest in obedience even if the person refuses to offer forgiveness

That person may or may not forgive you, but you can rest in the fact that you have done your part. The Bible says, "If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18). That's not always possible because some people will refuse to forgive you. When you seek forgiveness, your goal should be reconciliation with that person. But both parties have to agree to be reconciled in order for that to happen. You may hesitate to ask forgiveness from someone because you're thinking, "he/she will NEVER forgive me." That's their problem, not yours. Do what God asks of you and you can rest in that obedience. Finally, let's answer the question:

III. HOW DO I FORGIVE OTHERS?

Forgiveness is both a decision and an ongoing process. It begins when you decide you will forgive others. There are three stages of forgiveness you need to follow. Understanding these three phases will prevent you from getting stuck in the process of forgiveness.

1. Reveal my pain

After making your first list of people you have hurt, and asking them to forgive you, then make a second list. Write down the names of people who have hurt you and what they did. You won't ever get over your pain until you admit you were hurt by someone. For some reason, we prefer to sweep our pain under the rug and deny it. We repress it—ignore it—and pretend it never happened, but that doesn't work. We like to say, "That's all in my past, it really doesn't matter." Yes it does matter. I've heard people say, "I really want to close the door on my past." They want to come to place of closure, but as someone has said, "There is no closure without

disclosure."

Last fall, firefighters in Bonita Springs, Florida were called to a house, because neighbors complained of an odor. When the firemen entered the house, they discovered the residents who lived there hadn't disposed of their garbage for several years. Every room was stacked full of foul-smelling garbage. Who would want to live in a house full of garbage? In the same way, you may have emotional garbage in your life that hasn't been disposed of properly. You need to take out trash and be honest about your pain.

Go ahead and make your list. It may be a teacher who insulted you; a bully who embarrassed you; a parent who told you you'd never amount to anything; a business partner who mistreated you; a person who was unfaithful to you. Write it down and reveal your pain.

2. Release my desire to hurt those who hurt me

Simon Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22) The actual number Jesus used wasn't 490, but a phrase that meant "seventy folded into itself." Perhaps a better translation would be seventy squared, or even seventy to the seventh power. But the idea wasn't to keep count, but to convey the idea of "unlimited forgiveness."

The Bible word "forgive" is *aphiemi*, which means "to send away; to release." It's a picture of you holding a person by the throat when you have a reason and the means to punish them for what they did to you. But instead of choking them, you release them. That's mercy in action.

But we seldom have the means or opportunity to grab someone by the throat, so what we continue to hang onto is a desire to hurt them. We have a strangle-hold on resentment and a desire to hurt that person that hurt us. Forgiveness is letting go of that harmful urge.

How do you release someone who has hurt you? You forgive them. You don't do it for their sake; you do it for your sake. You don't forgive them because they ask you to forgive them; you do it because God has forgiven you. They may not every ask you to forgive them, but you can forgive them anyway.

How do you know when you've truly forgiven someone? When you can think about them and it doesn't hurt anymore. People often say, "Forgive and forget." But outside of brain damage or senility, you CAN'T forget—but you can still forgive. You will never forget that messy divorce but you can get rid of the pain from it by forgiving the offender.

People always want to ask, "What if someone committed a crime against me? Should I just let them go free? Should I refuse to press charges?" If a crime has been committed then you should report it and allow the legal system to bring that person to justice. Romans 13 makes it clear the government is God's agent for justice and punishment. You can personally release your desire to hurt them, and allow our legal system to be as it says in Romans 13:5, "God's servant [agent] to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." And even if the legal system doesn't get them now, you

can be certain God will do a perfect job of settling the score for eternity. The Bible says in Romans 12:19, "'It is mine to avenge; I will repay.' says the Lord."

In forgiving someone from your past it's not always possible, and not always advisable for you to go to them personally without making the situation more painful. For instance, maybe your parents hurt you, but to go to them and tell them 30 years later would devastate them. Maybe people from your past have moved away, or have died. How do you release them?

You can use what I call the "empty chair" technique. Just take an empty chair and sit across from it and imagine that the person who hurt you is in that chair. Then say, "I need to say some things to you. Here's how you hurt me." Then just come clean and reveal your pain. Then you can say, "You hurt me, but I want you to know I forgive you because God has forgiven me and I don't want to carry this pain anymore—so I release you. I release the desire I have to hurt you. I forgive you."

3. Replace my pain with God's peace

You CAN experience personal refreshment when you show mercy to others. This refreshment can come in the form of inner peace. The Bible promises, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7)

Look at these three stages again. Reveal your pain; release your desire to hurt them; and replace your pain. When I was in the third grade there was a high school boy in our neighborhood who molested me. For years, I just repressed that memory as if it never happened. But there was a time several years ago; when I finally admitted he hurt me. Now I could have gone looking for him to punish him, but his family moved away, so I was clueless about where he was. So I used the empty chair technique. I pictured him sitting across from me and I said, "You hurt me. That was such a stupid, evil thing for you to do. But I forgive you, because God has forgiven me." I didn't forgive him for his sake; I did it for my sake. When I did that, I experienced a sense of healing and peace and came from God.

Resentment and a desire for revenge is our natural reaction to those who hurt us. But mercy and forgiveness is God's supernatural way to deal with those who have hurt us.

CONCLUSION

October 2, 2006 dawned as a cool crisp autumn morning in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Only one angry, disturbed man knew it would be a day of tragedy. Carl Roberts, a milkman, finished his early morning run then left a rambling suicide note at his home. In this note, Roberts wrote he was "angry at life" and "angry at God." He was seething with bitter resentment over the premature death of his infant daughter nine years earlier. On that terrible morning, his consuming bitterness drove him to enter a one-room Amish school and line up ten female students and start shooting. Five of the girls eventually died and then he turned the gun on himself.

That tragic episode of school violence filled headlines, but what happened after that got more attention from the media than the act of violence itself. The members of the Amish community responded in a way that shocked most Americans—they chose to “forgive” Mr. Roberts. The Amish community demonstrated love to the Robert’s widow by taking food to her house and attending Robert’s funeral. They even collected money to help pay for his funeral. These acts of extreme mercy and radical forgiveness are so contrary to the knee-jerk reaction of anger and bitterness most Americans couldn’t understand WHY these people could forgive him. Can there be a better example of the contrast between the violent resentment carried in heart of Carl Roberts and the loving forgiveness offered by the Amish?

Many editorials even criticized the Amish for their forgiveness of the shooter. But the reason they forgave him is because they take the words of Jesus literally when He said if we don’t forgive men’s sins against us, our Heavenly Father won’t forgive our sins.

When asked why they forgave Carl Roberts Amish member Sam Stoltzfus said, “If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven. We all want to go to heaven, so we need to forgive. Why not forgive? We forgot forgiveness on our way to modern life.” Amish mid-wife Rita Rhodes who was present at the births of the two of the slain girls summarized their motive with these words, “We really want the world to know that we have forgiven the shooter for his brutal action...If you have Jesus in your heart and He has forgiven you, how can you not forgive other people?”

That’s the kind of radical forgiveness God offers us. In many ways, we killed the innocent Lamb of God because it was our sin Jesus bore on the cross. So, we can’t ignore that question, “If God has forgiven you, how can you NOT forgive other people?”

Think about that person or persons who hurt you. Let go of your resentment. Release your grudge. Extend forgiveness to them. As Jesus said, “Blessed; happy; fortunate are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.” Mercy me! Mercy you! I will extend forgiveness to those who have hurt me because I need God’s mercy!

OUTLINE

Realize that I'm not God

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Fully surrender my life and will to Christ's control

Receive God's righteousness as a gift of grace

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes