

FORGIVENESS:
Will That Be One Goat Or Two?
Message 1
Date: Jan. 9, 11
Scripture: Romans 3:21-26

INTRO: Our subject is the forgiveness, the sending away of sin. It is a very, very important subject. When I did the series on wine and the Bible, I did not realize how deeply the view that alcoholic drinks are acceptable by Almighty God was. The Evangelical Church was, I found, literally steeped in this view. However, of late I have been challenged a number of times on my view that forgiveness is conditional. That caused me to research this subject more thoroughly, in order to make sure the view I held was Scriptural. I believe it is, and yet once more I found a church steeped in a view that I believe is not biblical.

With regard to the title, "Forgiveness: Will That Be One Goat Or Two?", I will not explain that until about the third or fourth message. But let me say basically, the picture behind it is from the OT, and the purpose of it is to ask this question: Is forgiveness conditional or is it unconditional? I will explain all of that as we go along but those are the major issues involved.

So before I go further, let me clarify that I am familiar with Evangelical theology in general and am in agreement with by far the largest and most important subjects in Evangelical theology. However, it has been my most sincere effort to dig out of the Scriptures the truths God put there, and the main method I have used is called biblical exegesis. I have sought to lay bias aside, as difficult as that is, and have sought to stay objectively with truth. Anyone who knows what this is all about knows how extremely difficult that is. I believe in all honesty that the Church by and large has been misled in this subject of forgiveness, into a view that has, to some extent, helped lead us into the seeker friendly method of evangelism. From that method it is possible to be led into every kind of theological heresy. That is a very serious charge, I know, but I believe it is so.

I have asked in many places and in many teaching situations this question: Do you think the Church of Jesus Christ is getting better and stronger, or weaker and shallower? And the answer is always the same. People think we are going

down. But nobody is willing to face these questions: Where have we gone wrong? Why are we going down? I spoke with a man who was disgruntled with the church and the loud music that was coming in and how little say older people had in the church. He was an older man as well. I said to him, "And guess who brought this generation in." Many my age and older are complaining about where the younger generation is going, but we must remember that we brought them in. It is not the younger generation that failed as much as the older. Yet we think we are innocent, but I believe we are guilty, and this subject is one of those in which, I believe, we have failed.

Furthermore, the subject of forgiveness is important because our only hope of ever being with the Lord lies in the subject of forgiveness. The term 'to forgive' became a necessity in the human language after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. Sin caused a separation to occur in man's relationship to God. This separation of relationship between God and any person, if there is no reconciliation, will cause God to cast him or her into hell for all eternity. Nothing is more serious than that. And, in order for God and man to be reconciled, sin must justly be dealt with and in Scripture we find how God did this. It is an incredible subject and we will be looking at the important parts of that as related to the subject of forgiveness.

It is no secret to us that from the beginning of the creation of man, the devil has made every effort to distort truth and mislead man. Sometimes he denies truth. Sometimes he distorts truth. Sometimes he twists the truth, but always he is a liar. For man, this distortion of truth started by Satan's denial of truth in the Garden of Eden when he told man he would not surely die if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We will be looking at the two major views of forgiveness. I have reduced those two to this title: Forgiveness: Will that be one goat or two? The difference is that of two views which we could call conditional forgiveness and unconditional forgiveness. True theology is often clouded or distorted by a slight twisting of the truth. Once our focus is no longer sharp, we are in danger of being led off the path of truth. I believe that through many well meaning Christians, our view of who God is has been clouded through a slight twisting of the Scriptures on this doctrine of forgiveness.

Furthermore, this misrepresentation of God's truth has led us to a certain mindset that has brought about in many a distorted view of God. God's grace and love are clouded by this view of unconditional forgiveness. From this clouded view we operate in unhealthy ways with our children and all unbeknown to us, we are helping them down the path to rebellion. We are so loving and kind and forgiving that their sense of justice is distorted and in the end it breeds rebellion. And all the while, we, as well meaning Christians have unintentionally misrepresented the true view of God and the Bible. When unconditional love is stressed out of proportion and unconditional forgiveness is practiced, children never gain a healthy fear of God. I think it is safe to say that in the Church in general, we have lost a healthy fear of God. We have brought Him down, exalted ourselves, and He has become our buddy. If you want to know how far down our view of God has gone, you might read the book the Shack, which depicts the god of a large section of the so called church today. And if you are at all biblical, it will make you vomit. I believe it may well be that the practice of such beliefs as we are talking about in the church have helped lead us toward the seeker friendly approach of doing church, and from there it is but a short step into complete error, such as the emerging church and on.

I want to show you just how far astray we have gone. In an article in the Wall Street Journal, dated December 15, 1997, Dennis Prager, a Jewish writer wrote an article titled, 'The Sin of Forgiveness'. I want to read some of that article for you. He writes, "The bodies of the three teenage girls murdered by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky, were not yet cold before the students of the Christian prayer group that was shot at announced, "We forgive you, Mike," referring to Michael Carneal, 14, the murderer.

"This immediate and automatic forgiveness is not surprising. Over the past generation, the idea that a central message of Christianity is to forgive everyone who commits evil against anyone, no matter how great and cruel and whether or not the evildoer repents, has been adopted by much of Christendom.

"The number of examples is almost as large as the number of heinous crimes. But one other recent example stands out. In

August, the pastor at a Martha's Vineyard church service attended by the vacationing President Clinton announced that it was the duty of all Christians to forgive Timothy McVeigh, the murderer of 168 Americans. 'I invite you to look at a picture of Timothy McVeigh and then forgive him,' the Rev. John Miller said in his sermon. 'I have, and I ask you to do so.'

"The pastor acknowledged: "Considering what he did, that may be a formidable task. But it is the one that we as Christians are asked to do."

"Though I am a Jew, I believe that a vibrant Christianity is essential if America's moral decline is to be reversed and that despite theological differences, there is indeed a Judeo-Christian value system that has served as the bedrock of American civilization. For these reasons I am appalled and frightened by this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness.

"This doctrine undermines the moral foundations of American civilization because it advances the amoral notion that no matter how much you hurt other people, millions of your fellow citizens will immediately forgive you. This doctrine destroys Christianity's central moral tenets about forgiveness - that forgiveness, even by God, is contingent on the sinner repenting, and that it can only be given to the sinner by the one against whom he sinned.

"These tenets are unambiguously affirmed in Luke 17:3-4: 'And if your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if seven times of the day he sins against you, and seven times of the day turns to you saying, I repent, you shall forgive him.'" End quote.

And now let me ask you a question. While the Christians were busy forgiving this mass murderer, what was the attitude of this man who had just killed 168 people? One article says, "The killer's message to the families of his victims was detached, clinical. 'Death and loss are an integral part of life everywhere...'" What is he saying? Don't worry about it. Every body dies. Then he said, "These people in Oklahoma City that lost loved ones, I'm sorry. But you know what? You have to accept it and move on." Then talking to the families directly he said, "You're not the first grandparent to lose a granddaughter or a grandson.

I'll use the phrase – and it sounds cold, but I'm sorry, I'm going to use it, because it's the truth – *get over it.*”

And how does American Christianity respond to Timothy McVeigh? “We forgive you Timothy McVeigh!” And I ask you, how far from true Christianity can we get? And yet the Church endorses this unconditional forgiveness.

So, the difference between these two views of forgiveness, though it may seem slight at the start, if they are let go, have very far reaching and negative consequences. It behooves us then to understand this subject from the Bible. I expect that there will be numerous people here who do not agree with me on this. I ask two things of you. First, if in the end you do not agree with me, I will still accept you as a Christian. Will you do the same for me? Second, will you say to the Lord now, before we begin, “Lord, I will listen with an open mind, though I will be very careful to check what is taught with what Your Word says. If I am wrong, I want to be corrected. Please, dear Lord, correct me. If I am right, give me the discernment to see through this and grant me the courage to stand for what I believe is true. I want one thing, and that is the truth.”

Now, before we get into this subject, let me reduce the problem of our subject to its bare basics. The disagreement on forgiveness, whether it is conditional or unconditional affects only man's forgiveness of his fellow man. All truly Biblical teachers will tell you that to be forgiven by God, man MUST first repent. If we do not believe that, we are heretics in the true sense of the word. We then are what is called ‘Universalists’, the doctrine that all will be saved. If no repentance is necessary, all will be saved. I need not tell you that is extreme error.

But when it comes to man forgiving man, then the majority of evangelicalism says, forgiveness can and needs to be extended, though there is no repentance. Let me quote McClintock and Strong with regard to that. Here is what they say, “It is a mistaken idea that in the matter of forgiveness we are strictly to imitate God the Father, and not forgive those who trespass against us until they repent and ask our pardon.”

But, before we look at man's forgiveness of man, let us consider God's forgiveness of man.

I. THE DIVINE PROBLEM

A. God's Dilemma

It is important then that we begin our look at this subject of forgiveness from God's perspective. What are the ramifications of man's sin, and how can God justly deal with it? You see, there is a sense in which God was in a dilemma after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden. God loved man even after man had sinned. About that there can be no question. John 3:16 makes that abundantly clear. On the other hand, when man sins, it causes a break in man's fellowship with God. Sin, no matter how small, is such a horrible crime against Almighty God that it separates man from God. And in order for man to be restored to God, that sin that separates man from God must be fully taken care of. The attribute in God that has been violated is His holiness. And His attribute of justice requires that the sin be fully taken care of before restoration can take place. When sin takes place, God's character, which cannot be compromised, requires that that sin meet its just punishment.

Now I have explained to you numerous times how horrible sin is. Let me just share that illustration briefly. If somebody should intentionally burn our house down while we are away, all of us could be satisfied if enough money was given to us. If the house was worth \$100,000.00 and we are given one million, every one of us would be satisfied. But if they burn that house while our family is in it, and our family members are burned along with the house, now no amount of money will ever satisfy. That is a picture of how bad sin is before God. It is for this reason that only the death of the sinner brings satisfaction to God. Let us let that sink into our pacifistic Mennonite hearts.

Now for these messages, remember this word, 'satisfaction'. It is crucial in this doctrine of forgiveness. In the Bible it is called *propitiation*. It occurred in our Scripture reading in Romans 1:21-26 earlier. From this passage we can also learn that, though sin may be overlooked for a time, in the end every sin MUST meet its just punishment! God must remain just in justifying. And if the sinner is not

justified, he must go to hell. And furthermore, because no amount of punishment will ever pay for sin, therefore that punishment must go on forever. Sin is a crime against Almighty God. This offense is the cause of the wrath of God which hangs over the sinner. God loves the sinner, but sin separates the sinner from God and puts man at enmity with God. John MacArthur says, "God does not forgive by simply looking the other way when we sin. The Bible repeatedly stresses that God will punish every sin. Galatians 6:7, for example, gives us this solemn warning: 'do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.' In Exodus 23:7 God says, 'I will not acquit the guilty.' Nahum 1:3 is unequivocal: 'The LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.' In the gospel message itself, 'God's wrath is revealed ...against all ungodliness and unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18). Scripture describes the relationship between God and the sinner as enmity (Rom. 5:10; 8:7). God hates sin, and therefore all who sin have made themselves God's enemies. 'God is angry with the wicked every day' (Psalm 7:11). He hates those who do iniquity (Psalm 5:5" (JM pg. 12).

So MacArthur has said that God does not forgive by simply looking the other way when we sin. The fact is God cannot forgive by simply looking the other way. If He did He would cease to be God. He would have ceased to be either holy or just. Sin must be dealt with.

It must be understood, however, that sin can be overlooked for a time, if the reasons are legitimate. Justice allows that. It is called 'overlooking' or 'forbearance' in the Bible. Let me show you this from the Bible. Go to Acts 17 (read 17:29-31). Even today, God overlooks sin. That does not mean He is looking the other way. It means He allows man to remain alive without immediately meeting out judgment to him, giving him time to come to repentance. But He has set a day when judgment will come and by Jesus, He will judge the world in righteousness. You see, though sin may be overlooked for a time, ultimately it must be fully dealt with.

B. God's Plan

And so, God, because of His great love for man, resolved to seek to restore man to His favor. But to be restored to His favor, man's sin must be dealt with. God's anger against sin must be 'propitiated' or satisfied, and God and man must be reconciled through a just payment for sin and repentance and forgiveness. John MacArthur, in his book on forgiveness, says, "Reconciliation to God presupposes complete forgiveness" (15). Before reconciliation can take place, forgiveness must take place. No options. And before forgiveness can take place from God, repentance MUST have happened. There can be no question about that.

Now the problem of reconciliation between God and man is twofold; God's anger must be propitiated and man must meet God's requirements for forgiveness. John MacArthur says, "...the greatest impediment to our salvation is not even our hostility against God. It is His wrath against us" (17). Later he says, "The wrath of God against sin therefore poses the biggest obstacle of all to any sinner's forgiveness" (19). Well, we know how God's anger against sin was propitiated. He allowed wicked, sinful man to nail His only Son to the cross of Calvary, and there God poured out His wrath on His only Son, His innocent Son. God turned away from His only Son in His most dire moments, and darkness blanketed the earth until His wrath was completely poured out on the One who had taken the cup of man's sin in the Garden of Gethsemane. God Almighty had paid the price for man's sin in His only Son. The sin of all humanity was paid for by Jesus Christ.

But, God has two conditions man must meet before that forgiveness goes into effect. These two things are the only two requirements from man for salvation and neither one is meritorious. Neither one earns anything. These two are repentance and faith. There is no salvation, there is no forgiveness of sin apart from repentance and faith.

Now let me explain why God requires repentance and faith. First, both repentance and faith are change agents. Apart from either of these, people do not change. When God sent His only Son into the world, it

was for one major purpose. It was not mainly to save man from hell. That is a man centered Gospel. It was to save man from SIN! I want you to see this in Matthew 1. The angel is here informing Joseph why Mary, his betrothed wife is with child, and the angel tells Joseph that Mary will have a Son. Then he tells Joseph what to call this son (read 20-21).

The reason Joseph and Mary were to call their Son Jesus, meaning 'Savior' was because He would save His people, not from hell, but from their sins. Anybody saved from their sins will not go to hell. That is a by-product, not the main purpose. And how does He save His people from their sins? By repentance and faith! There is no other way.

As there are two things man must do to be saved, so there are two important doctrines on how God deals with man's sin through the death of Christ. The first is justification. Since Jesus took man's place in death, His death on man's behalf may now be appropriated by man through repentance and faith.

Let me show you those two briefly. When John the baptist, the forerunner of Jesus began to preach, his whole message can be reduced to one word. We find this in Matthew 3:1-2 (read). Then Jesus began to preach and His whole message can be reduced to this word 'repent' (Matt. 4:17). If you study that subject you will find it one of the important ingredients to salvation throughout the NT.

The second thing man must do is believe. So Mark 1:14-15 says, "Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Now the very first thing that takes place after repentance and faith is justification. To be justified is to be declared righteous. It is not to be made righteous. It is to be declared righteous on the basis of our sins having been transferred to Christ and His righteousness transferred to us. We are positionally righteous.

But that is only the beginning. After justification, God begins to sanctify us. He begins to remake us from the inside out. He begins to deal with our wicked, deceitful hearts. He begins to make us 'actually' righteous; righteous in practice, not just in position. This is a painful and life-long task. And in it all, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This is continual repentance. There is no forgiveness with God without repentance.

There is a present teaching that says once you become a Christian, all sins; past, present and future are forgiven. So, of course, no matter how you live, you will go to heaven. Heresy is a strong word, and it fits that teaching. On the other hand, if we confess our sins, God is always ready to forgive. That is such a sweet truth I can probably hardly give you such anything better. And praise God, that is true!

CONCL: Well, this morning we have basically introduced the subject of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the taking away of sin which brings about a restoration of a broken relationship. We will define it in greater detail later. It is my view that in today's North American Christianity we have slid off the path and gone to seed on this doctrine. So, when a man murders almost 200 people, and while he is still in his murderous rage, preachers are calling for forgiveness and people put out signs saying, "We forgive you Timothy McVeigh!" And though those Christians may have good intentions, they have just promoted sin!

Are we to forgive? Yes! Should we be a forgiving people? Yes! Should we forgive unilaterally and unconditionally? Maybe I should say, CAN we forgive unilaterally or unconditionally? Then we are capable of something greater than God Almighty Himself! God's justice demands that the right price be paid and that repentance first take place. Oh God, help us get a hold of solid biblical truth.