

## Breaking the Cycle

[Text - Luke 6:27-38]

Pastor Dave Shackle  
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Jesus' teaching that we "Love our enemies" is fairly well known; and it's also fairly often ignored! After all, the natural and normal reaction is to *hate* ones enemies and to wish them harm. Yet Jesus says "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you...Forgive, and you will be forgiven." This morning, I'd like us to think about ways in which you and I might overcome those natural and negative reactions that are evoked by those who wrong us; so that we can do our best to break the cycle of hatred, retribution and violence. It's one thing to intellectually understand that hating the people who hurt us, or seeking to do them harm, can in fact harm *us* and perpetuate the conflict. Finding the strength to take the higher road, however, is an altogether different thing. According to Jesus, the entryway to that higher road, is found through *forgiveness*. Until we can truly forgive those who we see as our enemies, the chances of us loving those people are essentially non-existent.

Forgiving those who have wronged us can be a huge obstacle to overcome. Oftentimes we refuse to forgive, because the offender hasn't even *sought* forgiveness, or demonstrated any kind of remorse. Therefore we feel that he or she simply doesn't deserve our forgiveness. If they're going to act as if they've done nothing wrong, then forgiving them can feel like we're excusing or even condoning their bad behavior. So perhaps one small step in getting past that hurdle, is to try to develop a degree of understanding for the offender. Even though there is no justification for what he or she has done, we may find compassion for a person who is so spiritually broken or emotionally dead that he or she can't even comprehend the wrongness of his or her actions.

Martin Luther King Jr., who certainly knew the pain of unjust actions taken against him personally, and against his race as a whole, said that "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude." King, like Jesus, reminds us that forgiveness is an intentional decision on the part of the party who has been wronged. Waiting until we *feel* like forgiving, or until we receive a request for forgiveness from the offending party, may find us waiting our entire lives! So as people who strive to follow the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, it's up to us to initiate the process. When we suffer a wrong, we can choose to either forgive, or we can remain trapped in the bondage of bitterness, anger, and hatred.

And here's another thing for us to consider. Even those Jesus and Martin Luther King preached and exemplified forgiveness and peace, they were far from *passive*. Much of their lifework was dedicated to actively resisting wrong-doing, oppression and violence. And even though Jesus didn't resist those who arrested him and led him to his death, it's important to remember that it was his deliberate decision to follow that path.

For Jesus, teaching and preaching *about* forgiveness isn't enough. He recognizes the tremendous importance of taking that concept of forgiveness beyond theory and putting it into practice. He forgives his friends who doubted and deserted him; he even forgives his enemies - those whose own brokenness and fear resulted in them taking his life. Jesus was able to forgive them in that most horrendous situation, because, for Jesus, forgiveness wasn't just a theory - it was a genuine way of life.

The reason Jesus could practice forgiveness even in the face of incredibly unjust suffering and death, is because he had patiently practiced forgiveness whenever and wherever the opportunity

arose. Today, you and I are challenged to do the same. For when can find the path to forgiving others, it not only benefits us; it may potentially transform the life of the person we are forgiving. Forgiving others not only sets us free, it also contributes to something this world truly needs - an end to the cycle of anger, bitterness and hatred, and a pathway toward peace and reconciliation..

Today, as in Jesus' day, it' extremely important that you and I do something in response to the bigotry and oppression, inequality and injustice that is becoming more prevalent and publically acceptable. Because if we try to bury the frustration, and anger that we feel about the injustices that we witness - or that we experience - we run the risk that those emotions will eat-away at us, and probably seep-out in unhealthy and inappropriate ways. The best remedy for preventing this is that you and I follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ:

The one who passionately stands-up for the poor and the oppressed, the outcast and the "outsider";

The one who holds people accountable for their actions, yet also holds forgiveness and love for them in his heart;

The one who trusts that the Holy One is ultimately in charge - giving him the strength and courage to forgive and love all people; even those who misunderstand him, malign him, and do him great harm.

"For if you only love those who love you, what credit is that for you? But love your enemies! Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High!"