

Reverend Derek White – November 22, 2020

SERMON: CAN I FORGIVE? PART III

Matthew 5:43-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon Series Recap:

This week is Part 3 of the series on “Can I Forgive”.

Part One – Was on what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not.

- Forgiveness is Not Forgetting.
- Forgiveness is Not Reconciliation
- Forgiveness is Not Redemption
- Forgiveness is Not Faking it.

Forgiveness is not allowing what others do to stand in the way of what God calls us to do.

Part Two – Was on “forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors”.

- We are called to pay grace forward.
- Grace is the currency of the kingdom of heaven.
- Jesus taught we should not withhold forgiveness.

God provides the means by which we are able to pardon others.

Part Three – How forgiveness sets us apart.

INTRODUCTION:

Several years ago, I took a bus full of High School students in the Youth Group on a ski trip. Every student was required to sign a covenant of expectations agreeing on what the rules were for the trip. While on the trip we some of the rules were broken. And as the Youth Minister I had to make the difficult decision of what the

consequence would be for the rule breakers. I decided not to allow these students go on the summer mission trip as a consequence of breaking the rules. The parents were mad, the youth group committee in the church questioned the call, and the Senior Pastor had to have a sit-down meeting with me. I got a lot of push back because of the decision. There was a fear these families would leave the church.

The following week, all the youth and the parents came to church for a special meeting. I was put on the spot to give an answer why I wouldn't reverse the decision. My answer was, "we are ambassadors of Christ". What we say and do as a church group is a reflection of Christ. The purpose of the covenant required to go on special trips is to ensure we honor God as a group. Any type of group can go on a ski trip, but the world holds church groups to the standards of being Christ-like. We are not like other groups, as Christians we represent Christ in the world. At that point, the students who broke the rules stood up and apologized. Every parent was shocked that these students who broke the rules publically took responsibility for it. It was such a beautiful moment. I got to keep my job as the youth minister and the youth group tripled in size.

I share this story to make the point, **the Church is not like every other group.** What we say and what we do reflects Christ.

PART ONE: What does it mean to be set apart?

One of the things they teach those who serve in the military is that when you wear the uniform you represent your country. If you cause trouble while in uniform overseas, the blame gets assigned to your country. That uniform means you are an ambassador of your country. The world judges your country by that uniform. It is why order and discipline are so important in the military.

In a similar way, when I put on this robe and stole, I know the professional standards of what it means to be a minister. The robe and stole are like a uniform, they represent something. When I am not wearing them, I might speak my mind more freely on certain topics. I am not going to talk politics from the pulpit. There are plenty of places and settings I could talk about that subject. The pulpit is for teaching about God and important matters of faith. It is for a specific purpose and I choose to keep the sacredness of the pulpit for that purpose. It is not a soap box.

The church is not a building, but church buildings are not like other buildings. They are designed to be set apart in the landscape of towns and cities. From the outside it is very clear what the purpose of the building is. The big steeple with the

bells is a symbol that communicates something. I cannot tell you how many people I have meet so far who felt called by God and have shown up on the door steps of this church. They see the steeple and they don't need Google maps to find their way to the church.

PART ONE: C.S. Lewis, what sets Christianity apart.

In part one of this sermon series I began with C.S. Lewis stating what made Christianity different than all other religions is that “only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.” What makes Christianity unique to all other religions is grace.

In today's passage, read from Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus tells his disciples that we should have love for one another that is extraordinarily different than what everybody else does.

This passage is one of my favorite passages of scripture. A lot of the troops I work with ask me about this passage of scripture in regard to praying for our enemies. My usually response is, I pray for our enemies to make mistakes so obvious it makes our jobs easier. It is easier to love them when they make less work for us.

The truth is there is so much more to what this passage actually means. My casual response makes those I work with in the military laugh. Those who formed the laws under the Geneva Convention were operating with this theology of loving our enemies. The stories of how French and German soldiers during the great war would hear the church bells and come out of the trenches to celebrate Christmas Day together reflects how they understood this passage of Jesus. The story of the soldiers sharing a cup of coffee together on Christmas day from opposite sides of the battlefield is what radical love and grace can look like. Or the stories of wars ending and those who fought on opposite sides one day being able to become friends. I would like to think this country has fully healed from the Civil War, but generations later we see there is still division. There are inspirational and incredible examples of grace and forgiveness that help us to see what Jesus meant when he said, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. If God can forgive us of our sins, we can forgive one another.

PART TWO: Life is more than loving those who love you.

Jesus taught that the way we forgive each other and the way we love each other has to be more than what everybody already does naturally. If we only love the people who love us, there is nothing rewarding in that.

I'll tell you why going to church is so important. If you wanted to be really healthy and feel really good, you would go to a gym and exercise. You probably have a nutritionist that would help you plan a good diet. And I am not going to lie that the best tasting food is often the food that is not the healthiest. Healthy food can taste good, but I love a good cheeseburger with bacon. If I wanted to be really healthy I would do the hard thing and follow a diet. If I wanted to stay strong and be in good shape I would go to the gym and do a challenging workout. What I got from going to the gym would probably be better for me than what I would get from working out at home. What I get from cooking a healthy meal at home is probably better than what I would get from eating out at restaurants. If I did the things that require the extra effort I get a better outcome. I might live a longer, healthier, and happier life if I make more of an effort to do things I find hard to do. Being faithful as a Christian doing the hard stuff is just as rewarding as being a fit person who does the challenging workouts. Christians who go the extra mile find the same kind of reward as the runner who goes the extra mile.

Let me put it this way, if your doctor tells you to take a medication every day to feel less pain would you do it? If your pastor tells you to forgive others every day so you would feel less pain, would you take my expert opinion on the matter? Jesus has proven it is an effective treatment for the soul.

CONCLUSION: Can I Forgive?

This is week three on forgiveness. We are going into Thanksgiving. With everything going on in the world at the present moment, I think this week is a good time to let the past be the past and just enjoy life in the moment. It is hard to think how many of us are going to survive this pandemic. The pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving after the majority of them died from sickness in the first few months they were here on Cape Cod. The ones who were still alive after that first horrible year felt called to give God thanks that they were still alive.

What I am saying is life is too short and too precious to be consumed by things that can be forgiven. Offer grace as we have received grace. Even if we haven't been loved by others, choose to love others as God loves them. There is the hymn that goes, "they will know we are Christians by our love". Be ambassadors of Christ and love the world forgiving one another as Christ has taught us to forgive each other. Be joyful for the blessing of life itself. Hold on to that which is good. Whatever would hold us back from living the life God desires for us, leave it in the past so we can fully live the abundant life of grace now. Amen.