

Faith Mennonite Church  
Seek Peace & Pursue It  
July 1, 2012  
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## PLAIN TALK ON FORGIVING

*Matthew 18:15-22*

*“For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.  
St. Matthew 18.20*

Jesus had an amazing way of putting his finger on the essentials of life.<sup>1</sup> Because of his enormous significance in our spiritual lives, we sometimes forget that he had a degree of comprehension and intuition about daily life that was absolutely breath-taking. Read the Gospels and you see that he repeatedly talked not just about the “niceties” of life, but the real “necessities” of life. He seemed to know that some things are decisive. You can’t live fully or completely without them. And one of those essentials, one of those decisive necessities, was forgiveness. Jesus believed in forgiveness and forgiving. There are between forty and fifty references in the Gospels to forgiveness and forgiving. Even allowing for repetition and duplication, forgiveness was clearly crucial to him. Some of the greatest stories in the Gospels are stories of forgiveness and forgiving, the story of the “*woman of the city*” who came to him at the house of Simon the Pharisee, the story of Zacchaeus, and maybe most compelling of all, the story of Peter and Peter’s denial when “*the Lord turned and looked at Peter,*” forgiving Peter on the spot. Some of the greatest lines in the Gospels are statements of forgiveness, “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace*” and “*forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,*” and “*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.*” Forgiveness and forgiving were the real things to Jesus.

According to St. Matthew, sometime during his ministry in Galilee, Jesus spoke very directly and very intentionally to his disciples about forgiveness and forgiving. And the gist of what he said was as simple and straight-forward as it gets. He told his disciples to forgive. St. Matthew reports that he gave them a step-by-step plan on exactly to do it. He even said that he would go with them, in spirit, to help them do it. You can’t any clearer than that. You are to forgive. Period. And when Peter asked how much to forgive and how often people are to be forgiven, Jesus told him, point-blank, Always. Peter asked, “*How often shall I forgive? As many as seven times?*” Jesus replied, “*I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.*” Always. No exceptions. No exemptions. No exclusions. “*I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.*” Jesus told his disciples to always forgive. Always.

What prompted Jesus to say that? What did he know about life and about living, about the real world and the spiritual world, that prompted him to tell Peter and all the others to always forgive?

Jesus knew that people need forgiveness. In some cases, forgiveness is the only thing that can give people a release from the past and a new lease on the future. Forgiveness doesn’t condone or cancel out things that people have done. But forgiveness relieves the sting and bitterness and shame. It restores a person’s dignity and worth and well-being. People need that. People deserve that. Can you imagine what would have happened if Jesus hadn’t forgiven people, hadn’t extended forgiveness to them and their lives? Can you imagine what it would have done if he hadn’t forgiven the woman caught in adultery or woman he forgave at Simon’s house? Can you imagine the needless shame and needless pain he could have caused Zacchaeus or Peter? He knew how much they all needed forgiveness. Also, Jesus knew that people need to forgive. Forgiving, in a way that isn’t true of everything else, can elevate people and empower people’s lives. Jesus believed that the finest hours in a person’s life are hours of forgiving. Think of Jesus himself. The great hours of his life were hours when he reached out and forgave Peter when he denied him and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ferris, *Selected Sermons*, page 173.

crowd when they crucified him. Early in Christian history a powerful legend began to circulate among the churches. The tradition goes that after he betrayed Jesus, Judas committed suicide in order that he might meet Jesus in Hades, the land of the dead, and beg forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> The legend suggests that Jesus forgave Judas. Even in death, Jesus was at his finest, forgiving Judas. Jesus knew that people needed forgiveness. And Jesus also knew that people needed to forgive too. “*I do not say seven times, but seventy times seven.*”

Now comes the hard part. But it is also the important part. What’s the secret? What enables people to forgive? Jesus gave the disciples some suggestions. But there other practical things we can all do.

1 *Forgiving people create a spirit of forgiveness.* That’s where it begins, by simply have a mind and will to be forgiving. About fifteen years ago, a group of all the old Civil Rights saints, John Lewis and Coretta Scott King and Rosa Parks and Andrew Young and all the rest, gathered to commemorate the march on Selma, Alabama. As they gathered together, probably somewhere in Alabama, an old man entered the room where they met. He was tired and worn-out and beaten-down by his own struggles. And he was dying. It was George Wallace, the former Governor of Alabama and the utter personification of segregation and race prejudice. He came to that gathering in a spirit of repentance. He asked forgiveness of the people whom he had resisted so bitterly. And in an amazing article in *The New York Times*, Rev. Lowery said, “We could not, would not, deny him an act of repentance. We serve a God who makes the crooked places straight, makes the desert bloom, and makes the lion lie down with the lamb.”<sup>3</sup> They had a spirit of forgiveness. And forgiving followed as a matter of course. If you want to forgive, create a forgiving spirit. Devote yourself to the devout life.

2 Also, and this takes us deeper, *forgiving people concentrate on prayers of forgiveness.* They pray to forgive. And they pray for people whom they need to forgive. Some of you may know the “Big Book.” More accurately, it is titled simply “*Alcoholics Anonymous.*” It was written largely by Bill Wilson, *Bill W*, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. And it is one of the most amazing books ever written. It tells how these “hopeless alcoholics” recovered from illness and few new lives. In one of the personal stories of recovery, near the end of the book, a woman explained that forgiving people whom she resented was crucial to her recovery. So she prayed for them. But she took it one further. She prayed that people would receive from God the very things she most wanted in life. If she wanted peace, she prayed for peace of mind; if she wanted encouragement, she prayed that they would be encouraged. Gradually, resentments and estrangements ended. She forgave them all through prayer. If you want to forgive, concentrate on forgiving prayers. “*Pray constantly.*”

3 And finally, and this takes us even deeper, *forgiving people cultivate a life of forgiveness.* They quietly and quite simply let go of things they need to forgive by doing things that enable them to forgive. They channel their hurt into something helpful. All week, we have been thinking about those young children who have been struck down by violence in Minneapolis. I received a message from one of the ministers who works as a chaplain for the Minneapolis Police Department. She wrote that toll has been immense. The need for reconcilers and reconciliation is even greater than we could conceive of. And there are people who do exactly that. They find ways to forgive. There are people like Judy and Dennis Shepherd whose son, Matthew Shepherd, was killed in a hate-crime in Wyoming. They forgave their son’s killer by starting the Matthew Shepherd Foundation to promote tolerance and acceptance of all people. There people like Linda Longino whose daughter, Tyesha Edwards, was killed as she sat at the family dinner table doing her homework. She forgave her daughter’s killers by starting the Tyesha Edwards Peace Project that addresses gang violence. The point is obvious. If you want to forgive, cultivate a life of forgiveness. Let go of hurts and losses, and put grace in its place.

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, *The Master’s Men*, page 78.

<sup>3</sup> From the “*New York Times*”

Some people may be saying to themselves right now, “I can’t do it. I don’t have what it takes. I’m not Jesus and don’t pretend to be. I can’t begin to forgive, much less *always* forgive.” Let me be blunt. You are mistaken if you think that. Anyone can forgive anything. And that isn’t some pious platitude. If feel you can’t forgive, if you genuinely believe you aren’t up to it, we have a meal that is our source of hope and peace and forgiveness. Come to the table and receive it. And go back to the Gospels. Go back to the story from the *Gospel of St. Matthew*. Remember the pivotal line is that great declarative statement of Jesus, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*” He is with you when you forgive. He is always with you. Go in peace. And go to bring hope and peace and forgiveness to those who trespass against you. Always.