

Life: Extravagant forgiveness

April 25, 2015

• *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for May 10 focuses on Acts 9:26-28; 11:21-26.

My pastor preached on forgiveness recently. Everyone received a blank piece of paper and a nail. At the end of his sermon, he asked us to write on the paper a few words about a circumstance in which we found it difficult to forgive. Then he asked us to nail these notes onto two wooden crosses on either side of the pulpit. Scores of people made their way down the aisles, walking up front to pick up hammers and nail their unforgiving feelings to the crosses.

What astonished me most about this symbolic act was the sound of the hammer hitting the nails. The large sanctuary was filled with the clanging of the hammers hitting the metal nails, forcing them into the wood. The sound reverberating throughout the room was an auditory reminder of Christ's death on the cross.

I read about the crucifixion often. I hear preachers talk about it a lot. Although I have heard the sound of nails being driven into wood, hearing these particular nails being pounded into a cross was an emotional experience. It filled me with a new sense of gratitude for God's life-saving forgiveness of my failures. At the same time, the sound filled me with sadness to think of how often we fail to practice forgiveness.

We hold grudges against people we think have wronged us, nurturing the hope that if we hurt that person enough with our attitude or actions toward them, the hurt they have caused us will heal. In truth, only forgiveness provides the healing we need.

Extravagant forgiveness

Once Peter asked Jesus how much he should forgive someone who sinned against him. Peter thought he was being generous by offering to forgive someone for the same offense up to seven times. Jesus responded, however, with hyperbole so Peter would understand forgiveness cannot be limited: "I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times" (v. 21). Then, Jesus told a parable to illustrate his point. A servant owes a king "10,000 bags of gold" (v. 24). Because the servant cannot pay back this immense debt, the king orders the servant and his entire family sold as slaves. Falling on his knees, the servant convinces the king to be patient with him and give him time to pay back the debt.

Knowing paying back such a large debt is impossible for the servant, the king cancels it. The servant now owes him nothing. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded (v. 28). A debt of 100 silver coins is much smaller than 10,000 bags of gold. Yet the servant forgiven of the larger amount would not forgive another person who owed him a smaller amount.

With this parable, Jesus foreshadowed his own death on the cross, an act by which he provided us complete forgiveness for a debt impossible to repay. He also taught his followers to practice extravagant forgiveness with others.

Forgiveness is not an option

Think about the person who has hurt you the most. Can you say you have been hurt more than Jesus was as soldiers nailed his hands and feet to the cross? Do you still harbor bitterness against that person who wronged you? Do you punish him by avoiding him, gossiping about him or delighting in his misfortune? If you do, you have not forgiven that person. He may have sinned against you, but you now are sinning against him.

Jesus gives a harsh description for those of us who withhold forgiveness from others—wicked. A true follower of Christ cannot live a life of freedom if he or she refrains from forgiving a person for a hurtful or sinful act. We will be imprisoned by the bitterness of our unforgiving spirits. By clinging to an unforgiving attitude, a person is saying his or her desire for personal retribution is more precious than following the way of Jesus.

Further, Jesus warns, “If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15). This means a forgiving attitude is evidence of our salvation. When we forgive others, not only is our relationship with them healed, but also our relationship with the Father is deepened. Who do you need to forgive today?