



DEALING WITH THE BAD CALLS
Matthew 18:21-35

Our lesson today reveals that which creates and sustains the Christian community is forgiveness. Relationships are so important that every effort at restoration is pursued. Forgiveness is to be taken seriously.¹ It is at the very heart of everything we say and do. It is found in all parts of our worship and community life. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In the Apostles' Creed we declare, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Every hymn we sing today will have the element of forgiveness in it - God's forgiveness of us – and our forgiveness of others.

Last week I talked about how God's work includes our neighbors. This week we are invited to share in God's work of forgiving. Yes, we are always trying to reduce God's work to something exclusive and private – but God won't permit it.²

About a month ago, Armando, a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers was denied a perfect game by the bad call of the first base umpire. A day later Jim Joyce, the umpire, admitted it was a bad call. He apologizes with tears to the pitcher the next day. The pitcher did not dwell on the bad call – he shared "everybody makes mistakes." During the recent World Cup of Soccer the American team was denied a game-winning goal by the bad call of an official. Everybody agreed it was a bad call. However, the United States team knew there was another game to play. They had to move on – let it go. Bad calls are a part of life. We either make bad calls – or receive a bad call. Ever since the Garden of Eden we have made bad calls and choices. We have ruined God's good creation.

In my thirty plus years of ministry you see the difference in how people respond to the bad calls of life. Some have a witness so winsome that it is worthy to follow and emulate. In others you can still see the scars of bitterness and betrayal. They can't move beyond the tendency to hold onto it. It brings emotional stress. The resentment tears them and others up. They have allowed themselves to be injured twice. Unlike the pitcher and soccer team players, they quit – resign – give up on the church and faith.

Most rabbinic traditions in Jesus' day said, we should forgive three times.³ On the fourth offense – God would not forgive and humans should not either. A dear colleague of mine shared "most of us are 'Jewish' in our understanding and practice of

forgiveness. Truth of the matter is that most of us are less than 'Jewish.' Don't forgive – get even."⁴

As we open our scripture lesson, Peter shares his heart with the Lord. "Lord, how many times must I forgive?" Here, Peter is asking for a statistical count – and just like last Sunday – Jesus gives him a story. Peter soon learns that bookkeeping and mathematics must give way to a greater and more excellent way.

In Jesus Christ we have a great high priest who experienced all the bad calls of life – but yet moved to the drumbeat of a different drummer – The drumbeat of love. Jesus knew the pain of betrayal of a trusted disciple – and the cowardice of the other eleven. He knew the mockery of a trial – false charges and accusations. Crowds and pollsters turned against him. His own people and family rejected him. He was misunderstood. While dying – the humiliating death of crucifixion – he forgave those who participated in killing him. It was forgiveness on a cosmic scale. Instead of revenge – he offered the gift of reconciliation. My mentor Eugene Peterson reminds us "That if forgiveness is ever removed from the church's mission and ministry – then the devil has won and is in control of our lives." Eugene even goes further and shares as important as justice is to our lives – our safety and sanity – forgiveness is the last word.⁵ I agree 100%.

In last week's Lancaster Sunday News "Lifestyle section" there was a fascinating story about the various vaccines that had been developed through the years and the great healing they have given to the human family. I am grateful for them. In my lifetime I have received the vaccines and shots for polio, small pox, DPT, tetanus shots and booster, and the flue vaccine. However, I believe Jesus Christ is the Great Physician, the Master Healer, and his gift of salvation and forgiveness brings the greatest healing to the human soul and spirit. I am even more grateful for them.

The distinguished teacher of preachers, Dr. Thomas G. Long shared this story at a seminar I attended: **"I was standing one day at the circulation desk of the library at the seminary where I teach when a friend of mine, a professional pastoral counselor, approached carrying a bulky stack of books. Watching him struggle under his load, I asked him what he was doing, teasing him a bit in the process, 'What's a pastoral counselor doing with all those heavy books?'**

Undeterred, he quickly answered, 'I'm doing some research on forgiveness.' He shoved the books across the desk toward the librarian and dusted off his hands.

I was surprised and puzzled. 'Research on forgiveness?' I asked. 'What are you trying to find out?'

He thought for a moment, then replied, 'I guess I'm trying to find out if forgiveness really exists or not. You know, I see so little evidence of it in my world.'"⁶

Yes, Peter knew his own heart. He knew the culture in which he lived. Jesus was calling him to be counter-cultural to all the racial hatred and prejudices that surrounded him. There were those Samaritans we talked about last week – not to mention the Gentiles and the Roman government. It would take a big heart – a heart set free to love like that. It is hard to forgive when we spend countless hours justifying the reasons for our child-like behavior. We cry out, “It was a bad call.” However, you can’t let that define your life. How about all the good calls you received?

I have always loved the writings of C. S. Lewis. In his diary he shared how – in prayer one morning – he finally forgave someone for a bad call – 30 years after it happened. It was like a miracle. Why had he waited 30 years to do it? Think of all the joy and freedom he had forfeited along the way. Perhaps there is someone here today who needs to let go of a bad call or decision.

Dr. Charles Stanley considers unforgiveness one of the greatest land mines in the path of a believer. He shares of a very painful experience in his own life. His father died when he was quite young. His mother – believing he needed a father – remarried. The man turned out to be very abusive to her and him. “My stepfather never had a positive word to say to me or to my mother. It was a bad call. We did not deserve to be treated that way.” He soon realized that it would be very difficult for him to continue in ministry without dealing with ‘my bitterness towards my stepfather.’ He could not risk any longer stepping away from God’s will about this matter. Dr. Stanley shared how he could not address God as father because of this painful past experience. He knew from helping others that an unforgiving spirit would lead to feelings of depression, fear, and guilt. So he made a conscious decision to forgive his stepfather and to move on with life. It was the necessary step to emotional healing and recovery.⁷

In that spirit I want to share three insights for your consideration on how to overcome the bad calls of life.

FIRST, TO FORGIVE WE MUST FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST.

Let me tell you an incident of how this biblical truth became reality for a young man. On February 9, 1960, a tragedy hit the Adolph Coors family of Colorado. Adolph Coors III was kidnapped and held for ransom. Seven months later, his body was found on a remote hillside. He had been shot to death.

Adolph Coors IV was fifteen years old at the time. He said that he not only lost his father, but his best friend as well. For years, young Coors hated the man, Joseph Corbett, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of his father.

Then in 1975 Adolph Coors became a Christian. He divested himself of his brewery interests, developed a financial consulting business, and gave a lot of his time and money in helping various Christian groups. At one of those gatherings, he was asked the dreaded question: “Have you forgiven that man who murdered your father?”

Coors realized that he had not, and so, some weeks later, he drove down to the Canon City Penitentiary to visit Corbett who was in maximum security. Corbett refused to see him. Coors left Corbett a Bible inscribed with the following message:

“I came down to see you today. I’m very disappointed that I cannot. As a Christian, I have been commanded by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to ask for your forgiveness. I forgave you for the sins you have committed against our family, and I now ask you to forgive me for the hatred I have had in my heart for you.” That is one example of forgiveness for Dr. Long’s friend.

SECOND FORGIVENESS IS NEVER EASY – BUT IT IS ALWAYS THE WILL OF GOD.

In 1998 Mary and I went to England on the Wesleyan Heritage Tour sponsored by Educational Opportunities. I was asked to give the daily devotional at the Cathedral Church in Coventry. On November, 1940, St. Michael’s Church (Coventry Cathedral) was destroyed by Nazi aircraft. For a city to lose its cathedral was, in a sense, for it to lose its soul. The morning after its destruction the decision was made to rebuild the cathedral. A stone mason observed how two of the charred medieval roof timbers had fallen across each other. He tied them in the shape of the cross. The charred cross became famous. It was displayed at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City. The word **“Father, forgive them”** were placed under the cross. Instead of the fires of hatred burning in their bones – the people of Coventry began a ministry of reconciliation to the people of Germany. Like the tongues of fire that came upon God’s people at Pentecost – pilgrimages of peace take place to this day because of their witness in a bad call upon their city. Well, that is another needed example of forgiveness for Dr. Long’s friend. They knew they had to get on with their lives. Sometimes in family discussions or church meetings we ask ‘Why are we still dealing with this?’ ‘How many times must we go through this?’ Until we get our hearts right with the Lord – we might always deal with it. There is a greater and more excellent way.

THIRDLY, GOD’S FORGIVENESS OF US IS CONTINGENT ON OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS.

The Bible is not contradicting itself or advocating a works righteousness scheme. We must forgive in order to be forgiven. There is a good reason for this. The love of God cannot enter an unforgiving heart. If we don’t allow God’s forgiveness to first enter us – we can’t pass on what we haven’t yet received. However, once we genuinely experience it, we can do nothing else but forgive. Being unforgiving has the effect of locking the door of the heart from the inside. Since our God never forces His way in or kicks down the door – we must first open it from the inside. As God’s forgiveness flows in – it can flow out.

My favorite way of illustrating this point is that of the tomato plant and the bucket. When you planted your garden in the spring – most of you planted some tomato plants. If you water them, weed them, and they get plenty of sunshine – you will have delicious

tomatoes. However, if you put a bucket over them and leave it there – they will die. The problem isn't the sun – it is still shining – the problem is the bucket over the plant. Far too many church folks are spiritually wilting and fading because the bucket of unforgiveness is over their lives. God's love and grace cannot nurture it and grow it. Charles Stanley knew it – Mr. Coors knew it – and the people of Coventry, England knew it. Now you know why the Holy Spirit made sure this parable made it into the pages of sacred scripture. Like all parables, it awaits your response.

Dr. Long's friend was looking for examples of forgiveness, those who overcame the 'bad calls' of life. Can I give him your name?

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
July 11, 2010 – preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

¹ Fred B. Craddock, [et. al], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR A,”** Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, 1992, first edition, page 441.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, March 9th devotional.

³ Ibid, **Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR A,** page 441.

⁴ Thomas Lane Butts, **“An Encouraging Word,”** column, July 1, 2010.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, **TELL IT SLANT**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, page 247.

⁶ This story was told by Dr. Long when he gave a Lenten preaching seminar to the Francis Asbury District Ministerium held at First United Methodist Church – Schuylkill Haven. At that time, he taught at Princeton Theological Seminary. He now teaches at the Candler School of Theology, at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁷ Charles F. Stanley, **LANDMINES IN THE PATH OF THE BELIEVER**, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2007, pages 125-126. Dr. Stanley has also shared this insight on his television program, **“In Touch Ministries.”**