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## Sermon

### ***The Logic of Forgiveness***

**Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Cor 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9**

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A number of weeks ago a parishioner posed a question to me that challenged me to think again about what I believe about forgiveness. The question was not about God's forgiveness of us but the logic of the command to forgive others. Again note that the question was not "Should I forgive?" That was taken for granted. Rather the question was, "Given that God requires repentance before He forgives us, how can God then require of us that we forgive others even up to 70 times 7 with no mention of repentance at all?"

As usual when any question like this comes up the answer is going to once again show the greatness of God's mercy and the depth of His commitment to us. It will lead us once again to see the wonder and majesty of the God with whom we have to do. Ultimately it will lead us to worship. One great Saint is quoted as saying that the song of Heaven, the anthem that will resound to all eternity will be, "What Hath God wrought!?" Or to put that in more modern parlance, "What has God done!?"

So then let us begin with the answer to that most awe inspiring of questions.

Human sin created a problem for the Creator of the Universe. Sin has consequences. In this case it was separation from God. I don't mind if you take Genesis 3 as a literal reporting or as a story designed to tell how the human race came to be as it is. What is required of us is that we believe that there was a time when Humankind were without any sin at all and lived in an unbroken relationship with the living God; all the gifts and goodness that we so long for and those we enjoy now were available to us. All worked in perfect harmony because of our relationship with the creator God. That is how we were designed. That was God's intention from the beginning.

Through an act of pure uncaused rebellion a new kind of creature sinned itself into existence. The new creature retained all of its original faculties; but now because the relationship that held all those faculties in the correct order was broken, all was in disarray. Appetites that are good in themselves when placed under God's guiding now demanded fulfilment apart from Him. Hunger became not a glad restoration of the energy of the body but a clamour for more than the body requires simply because it felt good to eat. The need for intimacy of relationship that would have put the needs of the other first (because the other was putting their needs first) now became a battle to meet my own needs because I could not trust you to look after me. The human person promised freedom apart from God instead found bondage as each tried to integrate the conflicting faculties within. Where there had been total trust of both God and our fellow creatures, now there was suspicion. Each one stands alone, when God had designed us for Himself and for each other.

How does God overcome this rebellion? His answer was to come and show us what a real human being looked like and behaved. Jesus was a human being just like us with the exception that He lived a life in unbroken relationship with His heavenly Father. He told us that he only did "...what I see the Father doing". (John 6: 19) The works that He did were signs designed to point us to the reality of whom He was and what human beings whom God can trust can also do.

But there was more. In a mystery too deep for us to fathom there was a need to remove the penalty that Sin had incurred. "On the day you eat of it you will surely die" was the warning that was given to our first parents. They ate and death entered the human race.

To overcome that penalty an innocent human had to willingly give themselves to die for the sake of the creatures who had sinned themselves into existence. C S Lewis puts it like this, "The Witch only knew the Deep Magic; there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge only goes to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Stone Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards." ("The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe." Chapter 15)

Now will you notice that all of this was done without any reference to us at all? No call to repentance, no demand for change, no requirement at all from us. Forgiveness made possible and freely and fully offered to us without lifting a finger. Without any exertion of our will, without anything at all from us the price is paid and the door to a relationship with God is thrown wide open for all who will come. The initiative is from God. Unless God had acted our position was hopeless. This is what is meant by the love of God as the word "love" is used in scripture.

Now comes the challenge for us. Can we return to the Creator Father with our rebellion intact? It is obvious the answer is "No". Unless we are willing to cease our rebellion, lay down our arms and cast ourselves on the mercy of God how is it possible to enter that relationship? He has done all that is needed to make the way back open. It is now up to us to change our fundamental principle of living which is self-centeredness, and turn to a life which places God first in ALL things. We are to do the OPPOSITE of what we did before and live for God and for others. If we do not, all of God's work is wasted on us.

So please note: the self-giving of Jesus comes first. Forgiveness is freely offered BEFORE repentance is even needed.

Now let's go back to my questioner: "Given that God requires repentance before He forgives us, how can God then require of us that we forgive others even up to 70 times 7 with no mention of repentance at all?"

What I have tried to show is that there is a flaw in the first part of the question. Forgiveness is freely offered before repentance.

Repentance is for OUR benefit not for God's. Without repentance heaven would be full of rebels. Repentance then is not so much an action as the only condition in which it is possible to enter a relationship with God. It is not some arbitrary requirement thought up by God. It is the very essence of what it means to return. Let me illustrate: If one suffers a heart attack and survives, the Dr will instruct you that there need to be certain changes in your lifestyle and habits to avoid another one. The way back to health is to obey those instructions and change what needs to be changed. The Dr is not being awkward or mean to you. He/she is only telling you the conditions that need to be fulfilled for you to remain healthy. Repentance is required for the freely given medical treatment to have any lasting effects.

So when we obey the instruction to forgive others **whether or not they repent** we are simply being asked to follow in our Masters footsteps.

Note the corollary: There is no sense in trusting someone who has not repented. We cannot have the same level of relationship as before if there is no change in the other person. We had a man come to our house once that we knew was probably not trustworthy. He took the benefits congregational members offered and ate at table with us. He responded by stealing my credit card from my wallet and trying to use it. Grace was offered. He spurned that grace and denied himself a relationship with a congregation who would do nothing but love

him. Contrast that with another person who was the bane of our lives particularly for Lorraine. She continually repented of the hurts she caused and over the years of costly loving by a number of congregations has grown noticeably.

So the order of things; the logic if you will is;

Forgiveness is FROM God TO me.

God acts first to provide the way back. His death has taken our guilt away. Forgiveness is made possible and is full and free.

Repentance is FROM ME towards GOD. It is the means by which I appropriate the free gift of God.

We forgive others in the same way. It goes FROM ME towards the other person. Repentance comes FROM THEM towards me and unless it happens there can be no restored trust and the relationship cannot be the same as before. Yet we continue to forgive.

I want to finish with two things of vital importance. (Neither of which were a concern to my questioner. These matters had been settled long ago.)

1. Please remember we are commanded to forgive. Remember the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." It is the only part of the Lord's Prayer on which Jesus comments. "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins." Matthew 6:14-15. The Jesus makes it even harder later on. In Matthew 18: 35 He makes it plain that this forgiveness must come "from the heart".  
**WHY?** Because He is in the process of changing you to be like Him. To be the human being that He meant you to be.
2. It takes time sometimes to forgive in this way. So be gentle while persistent with yourself. The story of taking ten years for forgiveness to come "From the Heart".