

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Easter
Sunday, April 26, 2026
Scripture: John 21: 1-15
Sermon: Never Too Late To Forgive

There were two people that had a relationship for years and they were discussing a difficult issue in which they both had two different opinions. There was a disagreement between them. One left quickly feeling hurt at what the other person said. The other person ran and caught up with the hurt and angry person and said “I want to apologize for what I said to you. Please forgive me.” The other person said it was too late. I can’t forgive you.”

We are called to forgive, and it’s something some of us struggle with. If you were to close your eyes, you would see on your eyelids the image of somebody that perhaps you have held grudges against, bitterness against, for a number of years. It’s not uncommon.

There is a study by a group called The Fetzer Institute, and they did a survey of love and forgiveness. In this survey they published, they said, “Fifty-eight percent of Americans agree that there are instances where people should never be forgiven.” There’s just certain crimes that people commit and they shouldn’t be forgiven for them—ever.

Then, there was a study by The Barna Research Group, they looked at churches and Christian values. They stated, “One in four practicing Christians struggle to forgive someone.” They polled a thousand people, and they wrote that 23 percent have a person in their life who they just can’t forgive. They say, “I can’t do it! Can’t forgive that person. I’ve tried, but I can’t get over it.” The head researcher of that little study from the Barna Research Group wrote this: “Forgiveness is essential to Christianity. It’s what distinguishes it from any other religious faith. If Christians struggle to extend forgiveness, not only do their relationships suffer, but the church’s witness is marred.” Here’s what you need to know: In God’s curriculum, forgiveness is not an elective, it’s a required course.

In the New Testament, if you're familiar with the teachings of Jesus, you have noticed that Jesus Himself brings up the topic of forgiveness several times. It's throughout the teachings during His earthly ministry. Here's a few examples, the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Implied in that is forgiveness. Then, He taught His disciples in the Lord's Prayer, "And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors." When Jesus was asked the most important commandment in the law, He also made a statement that implied forgiveness when He said, "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." And, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Implied in that statement also is that we extend forgiveness. On another occasion, Jesus said to His followers, ". . . bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you." Then, here in Matthew 18: 21-22, "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.'"

Obviously then forgiveness was a big deal to Jesus Christ because He teaches a lot about it and because He taught His disciples to pray a prayer to be able to forgive others.

Now, why is it so important? Why is it such a big deal? Because not only, as the researcher pointed out, does forgiveness set us apart from other belief systems, but if you do not find a way to deal with your past, you are not going to be able to move forward in your future. It's hard to move forward when you don't make a right choice about your past. You cannot change the past, it's happened. It's over. But you can choose to forgive, and thus be unencumbered with the bitterness that comes with unforgiveness.

First of all, forgiveness is hard because it involves confronting painful emotions. If you're going to forgive a person, you will come to grips with the emotions that you felt, or still feel, when you were hurt—maybe a betrayal, maybe you were abused, maybe you were lied to, but you are dealing again with those emotions that you would like to put to rest.

The second reason forgiveness is difficult is because when you forgive a person, it feels like you're letting go of your right to see justice done.

Here's another reason it's hard to forgive people because when we forgive somebody, we are risking getting hurt all over again, and it's hard. So, what people often do is they decide, "I'm going to toughen my heart. I'm going to live with such a rough, tough exterior that I'm not going to get too close to people and let them hurt me." Is that a good decision? Is that a good way to live? It's not.

Author C.S. Lewis wrote a book called, The Four Loves, this is what he writes in the book, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it up carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell." It's a powerful statement. We can't hide our heart away.

Back to the conversation with Peter about forgiveness. Peter comes up to Jesus and says, "Okay, so you talked about forgiving my brother. What's the limit of forgiveness? Give me a number, here, Jesus, that I can walk away with." Does forgiveness have a limit? If somebody does something once, we can understand that. But if he does it again? And then, again? And then, again? Peter says, "So, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

What Jesus really meant was, "Stop counting." If you're forgiving a person this many times, you have stopped counting. You keep on forgiving. First Corinthians 13 says, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." You're not keeping count. God forgives us, we should forgive others.

When Jesus hung on the cross, do you remember what His first words were? "Father, forgive them." "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." I don't know that you and I would be saying, "Father, forgive them." We might be saying, "Father, get even with them." But His first statement was, "Father, forgive them." Why would that be His first statement? Because that's our greatest need. Forgiveness is our greatest

need because we are in a relationship with people. So Jesus led with the statement, "Father, forgive them." Forgiveness is divine. Forgiveness is difficult but forgiveness is necessary.

Forgiveness received, should translate into forgiveness granted because I've been forgiven, lavishly forgiven, an unpayable debt, therefore, having received and enjoyed the forgiveness, I would be a forgiving individual. To refuse to forgive is hypocritical.

Dwight L. Moody once said: "The one sin that is keeping revival from coming to the church, more lost people from being saved, and more of the blessings of God from coming upon His people, is the sin of an unforgiving spirit.

Not every church has a great number of people attending it, and not every church has gigantic budgets. But there is one thing that ought to be in abundance in every church, and that is the spirit of forgiveness.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said: "Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven, and then let us linger there to learn how to forgive." There's only one way to become a forgiving person, and that is to become a forgiven person. There is only one way to become a forgiven person, and that is to go to the cross of Christ.

Seven disciples were together doing something that they were very accustomed to doing. Have they gone back to their fishing business instead of embarking on their gospel mission? If they were, they certainly were not successful at all because they caught nothing all night.

As day breaks, Jesus appeared on the shore and the disciples did not recognize Him. He called out to them and asked, "Children, do you have any fish?" Why did Jesus ask them this question? Does He not know they have not caught anything?

No, I believe the Lord asks the question to reveal to them their need.

It was only after He had confronted them with their situation, that He gave them a command to cast their net on the right side of the boat and they did as they were instructed. In so doing they caught so many fish, 153 to be exact, we know because John recorded it. They were not able to haul it into the boat, but they had to drag the net full of fish to shore. At this moment, John said to Peter, "It is the Lord" and Peter, as impulsive as ever,

jumped right into the water and swam to shore while the others dragged the fish to shore in the boat.

It does not matter why it was the right side, it does not matter that John was specific in saying they caught 153 fish. What matters is they realized that the one giving them the command is none other than the Lord. At that moment it probably reminded them once again of the confidence they had when they were following Jesus. It must have given them the assurance that they can continue to have the confidence if they continue to obey and follow Jesus. In obeying the command, they were able to experience the blessings. Perhaps it also reminded them of the evangelistic responsibility that the Lord has given them.

We must not miss out on this little portion of scripture for it speaks volumes of how the Lord cares for those who are His own. Sitting there by the fire is the victorious King of kings. What was he doing? Waiting for His exhausted disciples who have been toiling all night. Waiting to invite them to come and have breakfast with Him. Waiting to serve them breakfast.

The disciple Peter denied the Lord three times. As we look at John 21:15-18, we will witness for ourselves how our Lord Jesus not only forgives Peter and restored him but also commissioned him. Prior to his denial of Jesus, Peter was a man full of self-confidence, but he ended up a broken man. After denying Jesus for the third time, Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Now let us observe how the Lord forgives him and restores Peter. Jesus teaches Peter a lesson in humility, a lesson in obedience, and a lesson in forgiveness. Look what Jesus says to Peter after each of the three times Peter declares his love for Jesus. In verse 15, after Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” Then in verse 16, after Peter again declares his love for Jesus, Jesus tells him, “Tend my sheep.” Then yet again, in verse 17, after Peter declares his love a third time, Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.” So each time, Jesus tells Peter to prove his love by actually doing something—specifically by caring for the “sheep” of Jesus, which is simply a reference to Christians and perhaps people who are on their way to becoming Christians. Jesus is calling Peter to a leadership position in the church. That was a key part of what obedience and forgiveness would look like for Peter. So the point

Jesus is making is that if Peter truly loves him, that love will show itself in obedience.

The mercies and forgiveness of the Lord are new every morning. I think every one of us can testify to the fact that, at some point in our lives, or maybe you're going through it even now, where you felt defeated, discouraged, and perhaps hopelessly despondent: "I have sinned beyond God's forgiving me". "It is too late for me". "I have blown it big time, and it's too late for me. Too late to restore that broken relationship". Or, "It's too late to seek forgiveness". Or, "It's too late to give forgiveness". "It's too late to be mightily used by God to make a difference in the world". "It's too late to accomplish great and mighty things for God. It's just too late for me".

You know, one of the greatest examples in the scripture is the fact that two people who equally sinned, and they sinned around the same time, within three days of each other, and their sins are equal in the sight of God. One was restored and mightily used by God, and the other took his own life. The difference? One believed that it's never too late with God, and it's never too late for him to be forgiven and restored and used by God. The other wept bitterly, but then he went out and took his own life. And I'm talking, of course, about Peter and Judas Iscariot. They both equally denied Jesus. They both equally betrayed their Friend and Savior Jesus. They both equally sinned against God, and yet Judas's sin led him to say, "It is too late for me". And yet, his sin was not greater than that of Peter when he denied his Lord. But the difference was, Judas believed that, "It's too late," and therefore, he took his own life.

Peter believed in the power of God's forgiveness and grace and mighty power to restore him and use him. God specializes in using the repentant sinner.

In fact, the greatest defense for the gospel that we can give to the world is "It is never too late to be forgiven and restored."