

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Forgiveness: Midway Spirituality”**  
*a series on 2 Corinthians.*  
**2 Corinthians 2:1-11**  
**July 31, 2016**

Everyone knew what he had done. There was no avoiding it, really. Once it came to light it was everywhere, spreading like a wildfire in California this time of year. There was no spinning it, no hiding it. The truth was just out there.

They couldn't believe it, either. It wasn't the kind of thing they ever thought would happen in their church. They trusted one another. They liked to get along. They didn't come to this little church in Corinth for this kind of thing.

And so, as you can imagine, there were all kinds of reactions. Some folks were just so angry they wanted to blast it publically in 140 Greek characters.

Some folks were just so hurt, so deeply wounded they cried.

Some took it personally.

Some were shocked.

Some were sad... just so very sad.

Of course there were those in that little isolated church struggling in the midst of the Roman Empire that kept thinking about the kind of PR they were going to get... the damage it would do to their church for years to come... what it would do to the reputation they had worked so hard to develop in their community.

Other folks were worried about their relationship with the Apostle Paul... their first pastor. Things had been rocky before now, but he might disown them after this incident. What would Paul do? What would he say?

Of course there was no way of knowing that for months... And there was no way to get his advice either... at least not initially.

So, what should they do? What should they say?

It was hard to think clearly about any of that with the emotions so raw, the pain so present, the betrayal so real by this person in the church.

So, they decided to have a church meeting. They were going to have to figure this out one way or another. And the one thing they did know... talking together, out in the open, was sure better than gossiping in groups and letting this fester.

Of course everyone came to the church meeting... even folks they hadn't seen in over a year. (Seems like those folks always like to jump into controversy, doesn't it?)

Some people at the meeting told the story they remember hearing about Jesus and the adulterous woman.<sup>1</sup> **“Let him who hasn’t sinned throw the first stone.”** They said.

Other folks reminded them of Jesus’ parable of the wicked servant... the servant who thought his Master was a long ways away... and took advantage of other servants, and took advantage of the Master’s goodness.

When the Master returned unexpectedly  
and the servant was caught red-handed,  
the Master cut him up and threw him out with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>2</sup> **“Throw him out!”** they demanded.

On and on they went... not sure what to do. But a decision had to be made. And so they took a vote. Majority rules. Obviously the Corinthians were Baptist.

On one side was the “forgive and forget.”

On the other side, “cast him out.”

And the “cast him out” won.

Who knows, maybe they were right to do so. Sometimes that’s exactly what must be done in a church... or in any relationship.

When you have a cancer, you don’t just ask it to behave nicely. You do surgery. You cut it out. You remove it from your body no matter how painful the surgery is... and a healthy church knows that sometimes, in the painful moments, you have to do just that.

But a healthy church also knows that’s not all there is to be done. Surgery is just the beginning, most of the time. Then there’s the really hard work of spiritual rehab. And at the center of that work, is forgiveness.

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That’s what Paul is telling his beloved church today. **“This punishment is enough. Now... you should forgive and console him. I urge you: reaffirm your love for him.”** (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

Easier said than done, Paul.

Of course, it’s something we learned to do as kids. Parents pound it into their kids over and over again.

**“Say you’re sorry.”**

“But I didn’t...”

**“Yes you did. Say you’re sorry.”**

and mumbling or with eyes rolling, you force out what can hardly qualify as an apology. You’ve been there too!

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24:45-51

We pound forgiveness into our kids at home and at school, and if we're lucky they pick up on some of it, so by the time they are adults, at least they know it's what they're supposed to do, right?

But **“midway down the road of life's journey”** forgiveness starts to get a bit complicated. It's not so simple as it once seemed, is it? Maybe we're better at letting the little things go... but now we're faced with some of the dark complexities of life and relationships...

What was hard as child... can seem impossible as adults.

Midway on life's journey, you're likely to be faced with things where forgiveness becomes a whole lot harder to imagine...

and a you're whole lot less sure what it should look like... or even if it's possible.

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[Examples]

For more than a year now, Jill's been feeling insecure. Every time she moves in closer, Jack pushes her away. **“Stop being so clinging,”** he says.

So, she tries... but the insecurities keep coming, like waves over their marriage. **“I just need space,”** he tells her. **“What's wrong with you?”**

And again, she tries. She starts to wonder **“What is wrong with me? Why am I so needy?”** She tries to be different.

“You're too controlling,” Jack says. So she tries not to nag about when he'll get home. She tries to hold take care of the kids so he wont be so stressed. She tries not to feel so lonely, so needy. She knows the more she tells him how she feels, the more he pushes her away.

And then Jill sees it. Jack is in the shower and his phone buzzes. She doesn't mean to snoop, but she picks up the phone and opens it. There it is. As plain as day.

He's been having an affair...

and making her feel like the crazy one.

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Dave has always been selfish... but especially so when someone else got the limelight. His brother Paul can remember all the times Dave acted out when they were growing up. The worst times were always on someone else's birthday.

Well, this was going to be the biggest day in Paul's life. He's 32 and getting married to the love of his life. He'd asked Dave to be a groomsman, but he never expected this. It was the night of the rehearsal. Dave showed up drunk. Not only did he embarrass himself, he went into a cussing rampage right there, in front of Paul's soon to be in-laws.

Paul was so angry, so hurt by his brother. He had to throw his brother out of his own wedding celebration. The rage just festered... and wouldn't go away.

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**“Don’t worry,”** Macy kept telling him. **“Everything will be fine.”** Mark wanted to believe her, but things weren't fine. First it was just \$1,000 she blew in the slots. Mark couldn't believe it. He was so angry. They had a huge fight over it.

Macy promised it wouldn't happen again.

Six months later, it was \$15 grand: their daughter's college fund. And it's gone... Mark found himself lost in a swirl of hurt, anger, and fear.

How could he ever trust her?

What would they do?

How could she do that and not just to him, but to their daughter?

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She was only 18 when he pushed himself onto her. She froze up in fear. Her voice was caught in her throat. She didn't say a word. No, “Stop” but certainly no “Yes.”

After it was over, she cried herself to sleep for weeks, but never told a soul. Was it her fault?

It took 20 years before she could name the truth, before she could finally believe that what he did was rape. 38 years old, and now she's angry.

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Midway upon life's journey.... forgiveness isn't so straightforward anymore. The wounds are usually deeper. Sometimes our hurt simply won't allow us to forgive.

It feels too much like we're saying that what happened was somehow OK, no big deal, water under the bridge.

And yet, 2 Corinthians, this guide in Midway spirituality, tells us once again: to forgive... and not only to forgive but find your way to loving that person.

If that's ever going to be possible, then we have to name very clearly what forgiveness is and what it is not:

Forgiveness is not:

- Pretending that things are other than they are.
- It is not ignoring the truth, but has to include exposing the truth – no matter how awful or gut wrenching the truth is.

Forgiveness... is not even forgetfulness...

**Bishop Desmond Tutu** wrote a book reflecting on his experience in the South African Truth And Reconciliation Commission. This was, of course, the great effort to

heal South Africa after generations of white supremacy and oppression on the black population. The Reconciliation Commission was effort to move the country forward after such pain, and hurt.

In it he says that people aren't required to forget in order to forgive. No, he says, **"It's important to remember, so that we should not let such atrocities happen again."**<sup>3</sup>

Forgiveness is not forgetfulness, but it is a willingness to imagine a seemingly unimaginable future.

I love the way the French theologian, Christian Duquoc describes it. ***Forgiveness is "an invitation to the imagination." It is not "forgetfulness of the past" ; rather it is "the risk of a future other than the one imposed by the past or by memory."***<sup>4</sup> (repeat) ...or the betrayal, or the hurt, or the scars you carry.

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That's no easy task.

What is always true in Midway Spirituality, is that forgiveness is hard... seemingly impossible. In fact, chances are, you won't be able to do it. You won't be able to forgive by sheer willpower. The only way you'll get there is by God's grace.

Sometimes that takes hours and hours of prayer... years even, of asking God to help you forgive... to heal the bitterness... to help you begin to see that person as God sees them: broken and beautiful, deeply flawed but somehow still deeply loved.

**"Forgive and console him,"** Paul writes. Even, **"reaffirm your love for him."** It's a seemingly impossible order.  
But our God is in the business of the impossible.

No, you won't get there on your own, but by God's grace, one day forgiveness just might come and surprise you.

CS Lewis once wrote in his journal: **"Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might."**<sup>5</sup>

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I don't know what hurts, what wounds you are carrying around.  
I don't know what bitterness that might be growing in your marriage,  
or what anger plagues you from your past,  
I don't know the betrayal you've experienced, or the fears that you've had to live with.

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<sup>3</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, quoted in Minor, *2 Corinthians*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Duquoc, quoted in L. Jones "Forgiveness", *Practicing our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C Bass, 140.

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Bass, 146.

But here's what I do know: In the midst of great suffering, Jesus hung on a cross and said, **"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

You and I have been forgiven... and when we open ourselves up to this deep love of God, we too can find a way to imagine a future not dictated by the past.

We too can find a way love again.

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Most of you will remember the terrible war in the 90's between the Bosnians, Serbs and Croats. It's what brought the surge of Bosnian refugees to St. Louis. These groups were fighting one another in a bloody ethnic and religious war. Blood flowed like rivers on all sides. Homes burned. Innocent people massacred.

A Franciscan monk from Bosnia, Ivo Markovic, found himself caught in the whirlwind of that tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Muslim Bosnians had massacred 21 men from the small village where Markovic grew up – all of them feeble senior citizens, innocent of any crimes... the youngest of whom, was his 71 year old father.

Well 3 years after the massacre, Father Markovic decided to go back and visit his home village. Occupying the house in which his brother used to live was a fierce Muslim woman. In fact, he was warned not to go there. She carried a rifle to protect her new home. Father Markovic... went anyway.

As he approach the home, she was waiting for him, cigarette in her mouth, rifle cocked. **"Go away. Or I'll shoot you,"** she barked.

**"No... you won't shoot me"** he said in his gentle but firm voice. **"You won't shoot me, you'll make a cup of coffee for me."**

She stared at him. He stared back. He waited... and slowly she put the rifle down. She went into the kitchen and found the last little bit of coffee grounds she had. She mixed in some already used grounds in order to make enough coffee for 2 cups. And these two deadly enemies, shared in the ancient ritual of hospitality: drinking coffee together.

She began to tell him of the deep loneliness she's felt these last few years, of the home she'd lost, of the son who never returned from the war.

A month later, Father Markovic returned for another visit, and that's when she told him, **"I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned home."**

I don't know if they ever talked about forgiveness... if any mutual apologies were offered or not. But I do know that together, they began to imagine a new future, a future

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<sup>6</sup> From Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a culture stripped of Grace*, 190-191.

not defined by the events of the past. And in the process, something deep within them was healed.

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Dayspring, may we be not only the community of the forgiven.  
May we be a place cultivating that sacred imagination.  
May we be people asking God to help us imagine a future not defined by the hurts of our past.  
May we come to know the blessedness of forgiving others, as God has forgiven us.

Amen.

Reflection:

*For Christians, forgiving, like giving in general, always takes place in a triangle, involving the wrongdoer, the wronged person, and God. Take God away, and the foundations of forgiveness become unsteady and may even crumble.*

~ Mirosalv Volf