

Luke 17:1-4 9/22/13 (Red Letters #2) **LETTERS OF FORGIVENESS**

God has a BIG eraser. I just love what Mr. Luke had to say to the kids today. God has a big eraser. Big enough to wipe out every one of your sins and mine – and leave not a trace of the ugly black letters behind. And His ability to do that never wears out. Why not? Is it because our sins aren't that big a deal to God? He doesn't really care about right and wrong, good and evil? Absolutely not. The truth is exactly the opposite. In our Red Letters this morning, He says:

Slide: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2 It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.” (Luke 17:1-2 NIV)

That sounds to me that Jesus cares a lot about sin and things and people that cause people to sin. The fact is that He cared so much that He came into this world to do something about it.

Folks, so much of this is really beyond our ability to understand, but at some point within the eternal existence of the Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God, in communion with Himself, made a decision – a decision to create time and space and matter, stars and moons and planets, and on one particular planet, plants and animals and as the crowning jewel of His creation: human beings. Intelligent beings on whom He could bestow His love and who could love Him and each other, freely with a full heart, not as pets, not as robots... people. But God, being God (all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present), knew what happen. He knew that man would blow His chance at a perfect world and a perfect existence. He knew that man would misuse His freedom and choose to rebel against God, against what was good and right, and at that point, something would have to be done about it. And that something – to a God who is perfectly just, could not be to pretend it didn't happen, to overlook evil and sin and injustice. What was wrong had to be made right.

And at that point in the decision-making process, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, One with the Father and the Holy Spirit, said, “Here am I.” In other red letters He said:

Slide: 38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:38-40 NIV)

The will of God the Father, and the will of God the Son was very simple, and incredibly complex... God so loved the world and you in it that He couldn't bear to bring on us the punishment that we deserve for our wrongdoing, so He punished His own Son for what we have done so that His justice would be satisfied and He could forgive us for everything we've done wrong and failed to do right. God the father did not overlook sin. He looked right at it and took deadly aim at it when He piled it all up on Jesus Christ on the cross. The violence done to Jesus was not a mistake. It was the plan of God from the very beginning, so that forgiveness would be paid for and earned by God Himself.

Folks, if you were going to try to describe the Christian Faith with one word, “Forgiveness” would be a good choice. The very beating heart of Christianity is the fact that

Slide: “In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.” (Eph 1:7 NIV)

If you pick up one of the Red Letter books that I've put together next week, one of the things you'll notice is that again and again Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins. And the Pharisees, the holy schmoes of Israel, didn't like it. "Who is this who even forgives sins?" They would say. And they would accuse Him of Blasphemy, and at times even try to stone Him, because He was claiming the authority of God. But what He was really doing was simply claiming and bestowing what He Himself was there to provide.

And folks, the fact is that the Jesus who shed his blood for your forgiveness is not content to let you keep it to yourself. And way too often, that's what we try to do. When it comes to passing on the forgiveness we received from Christ to those who have hurt us, something often seems to get in the way.

In fact, I can't resist playing a song I shared with you a few years ago called "Pray for You" by Jaron. It was a huge hit for a while and now it seems to have faded away and I'm o.k. with that. I cut it up a little bit so you didn't have to listen to the whole thing, so sorry about that, but here you go:

Slide: "Pray for You" by Jaron and the Long Road to Love Video clip.

That's a song that starts off pretty good, but doesn't end so well, does it? He listens to the preacher's advice all right, to pray for those who hurt you, but his prayers leave something to be desired. And you know the song itself is one thing. But it's sort of frightening to see the responding chord that song struck in so many people – who really somehow think that they will feel better if they embrace their anger and rage against those who hurt them – to the point where they even dare to try to co-opt God and justify that spirit of unforgiveness.

Last week two adult men in Ionia, ages 56 and 43, gave in to that feeling of rage and revenge and they got out of their cars at the Wonder Wand Car Wash and shot each other to death. Do you think they feel better now – or anyone in either of their families?

Folks, breakups happen. And not every boyfriend and girlfriend should get back together after they split. That's one thing. But revenge and rage is another. And the fact is that all of us need to stop closing the door on relationships just because we sometimes get hurt. By the way, this is not about what the **preacher** tells us to do. It's about what **Jesus** tells us to do. For instance, in the Red Letters of the Lord's Prayer, He asks us to pray:

Slide: 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' 14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.' (Matthew 6:5–15 NIV)

And that folks, is a frightening, frightening Red Letter statement. In fact, we saw Jesus say it again the Matthew 18 reading with the servant who was forgiven but wouldn't forgive:

Slide: 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'" (Matthew 18:32–35 NIV)

Folks, it doesn't get any clearer than that. And again, that's not the preacher talking; that's the Savior. You know, I've preached this same sermon in different ways, many times in my ministry. But it's one thing to hear it and another to do it. Often, after this message, somebody

will come up to me and say, “Preacher, you just don’t understand. **I can’t do that!** You don’t know what he did to me! You don’t know how she treated me! I can never forgive her for that!” And trust me, I get where that’s coming from, the depth of the hurt... But is that statement really accurate? Is it really true that there is somebody in your life that you **CAN’T** forgive? What would happen if you tried? Would your heart just explode from the strain of letting that offense go? Would your tongue simply freeze to the roof of your mouth if you tried to say the words: “I forgive you?”

Helen Prejean, in her book *Dead Man Walking*, tells the story of Lloyd LeBlanc, whose son was murdered. When he arrived in the field with the sheriff’s deputies to identify his son, LeBlanc immediately knelt by his boy’s body and began to pray the Lord’s Prayer. When he came to the words: "**Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,**" he realized the depth of the commitment he was making. "Whoever did this, I must forgive them," he later told Prejean. Though it has been difficult not to be overcome by bitterness and feelings of revenge that well up from time to time, LeBlanc said that each day, for the rest of his life, forgiveness must be prayed for and struggled for and won.

The fact is, it’s not true that you **can’t** forgive, is it? Forgiveness is a choice. And you are capable, with the help of the Holy Spirit, of making that choice and letting that bitterness go from your heart. So if you aren’t making that choice, then the reality is that you **WON’T** forgive. And that is something that just doesn’t wash with God.

Now, does that mean that you become a Mortimer Milktoast and simply allow yourself to be walked on and abused and taken advantage of in all your relationships? Not at all. Jesus goes in in Luke 17 and says:

Slide: 3 So watch yourselves. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (Luke 17:1–4 NIV)

If your brother sins, let him know he hurt you. Rebuke him, don’t shoot him, don’t pray that a flowerpot drops on her head. Rebuke and be ready to make the choice to forgive when he repents – 7 times. In other Red Letters He says 70 and in others 70x7.

Folks, God has a big eraser – and He wants you to have a big eraser, and when yours wears out, to let God give you the power to forgive one more time, to sit at the feet of Jesus and read His Red Letters that say:

Slide: “27 Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27–28 NIV)

And no, that’s not the kind of prayer the guy was singing about earlier. Once again, Jesus is out-of-step with society. He’s much **BIGGER** than the pettiness of the people who advise you to voodoo your ex...and to shut doors that could’ve remained open.

Folks, what great story are you missing in your life – stories of reconciliation and redemption, just because you are not willing to offer to others the forgiveness that God gave to you in Jesus? Will you always get a happy ending when you obey God in this area? Maybe not. But you might...And you will certainly set yourself free from the bitterness that otherwise will suck the joy out of your life.

Let’s pray:

Jesus, You are radical. You are different from what I see and hear in the world around me. The world tells me to stick it to my enemies. You tell me to love them, do good to them, to

bless them and pray for them. Lord, give me the courage to live that way... to be forgiving... to remember Your love and forgiveness for me and to extend that to others.