

“Forgiveness”
Pastor John Bronson

(Matthew 6:5-13)

June 26, 2011

Order of Worship for June 26, 2011
Pre-service Song
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Barbara Conley for Women’s Ministries and Jennifer G. with a DVBS report

Call to Worship: Psalm 119:17-32 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“Come, Christians, Join to Sing ”

Song # 225

“How Great is Our God”

Overhead

“Make Us One”

Song # 418

“Bind Us Together”

Song # 425

“Shine, Jesus, Shine”

Song # 431

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “Forgiving” (Matthew 6:5-13 and)
By Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “God Be with You”

Song # 232

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evenings in God’s Word
5:30 to 7:00
The Henneker Music Building
Cancelled
(While Pastor Bronson is on Vacation)

“The Prayer Closet”

June 26, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania:** that they will lean on the Lord and not their own understanding; they Lord will grant them good housing and a team of teachers for training as church planters; that the Lord will prepare the hearts of those who will be hearing the gospel
2. **President Obama:** the Lord will grant him wisdom, humility and courage to know and do the truth; the Spirit will give him insight to distinguish good from evil; he and his family will enjoy good health
3. **The Board of Elders:** they will heed God’s call to be men the Word and men of prayer; they will seek and find Gods will for the direction and development of this local church; they will stand strong together to bring God’s grace and truth to our community
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: MSgt David Howell,** (nephew of Eileen Hewitt): home from deployment; that he make wise decisions in regards to his son; safety for he and Jared; that he remain stationed home
5. **Young Adult of the Week: Megan Cardwell at Butte College** (daughter of Jim and Allison Cardwell): that God will help her through the difficult personal times she is going through and help her in finding a job and surround her with people who will support her and care for her

The title of today’s message is “Forgiveness.” The text is Matthew 6:5-13. I am going to begin in a place that might surprise you; I am not, in other words, going to begin immediately with the topic of forgiveness.

There are many excellent qualities which have withered away from our lives in the transition from the strongly Christianized culture of our more distant past. One of these is our understanding of honor. I believe that in our culture today we struggle with the meaning of honor, and more than just the meaning of honor, I believe we struggle with knowing how to treat others honorably and to affirm them as honorable.

This is actually part of a larger social reality which is nearly vanished from our culture. The fancy name for this reality is etiquette. The substance is respect. Modernity, the age in which we live, exalts two universal values. These are the two universal values that are fostered in our culture: on the one hand is equality, on the other is liberty. These interweave. Every person – this is the theory of our culture – every person is to be accepted as equal to every other person. And every person has the right, that is they are to be at liberty, to live in whatever manner they choose, or the corollary, the other side of that same statement, is that no one has the right to tell someone else how to live. I think if you tune in to our cultural mouthpieces, the media today, you will hear that affirmed over and over and over. This makes social life difficult, even risky. One of the consequences of attempting to live without rules or any clarity of expectation, one of the consequences is that modernity, [which] at least theoretically [has] eliminated all social rules or patterns, for a rule or pattern is somebody else telling you how to live, [is that] in our culture therefore what has happened is that affirming one’s liberty is more important than giving respect to others. What has faded from our understanding is that respecting another person’s right or liberty to be wrong is not the same thing as respecting the error itself. But in the attempt to affirm each person’s liberty to speak, act, and look, and generally carry on in whatever way they feel like, the permissible range of personal response to others is, you either affirm them, or you are neutral. What we cannot do is, we cannot simply disapprove of someone else. Never disapproving includes asking no questions that might be perceived as critical or negative. The practical effect, how this actually works out, is interpersonal distance and non-involvement, or as was stated in a study that I read, we have come to the place where we treat people impersonally, that is, as if they were not persons. Instead we deal with people as service providers. We deal with people as functionaries. We deal with people in such a way that a clever machine could do what they do just as well. Here are a couple of illustrations: ATMs, or when you go to the grocery store and other places, automated check outstands, or perhaps the increasing preference in our culture to make all of your purchases on line and on line banking. For some in the room you probably think that is just life. It is, however, not just life. It is a set of choices, and these choices have profound consequences in the lives we live.

Having a personal relationship with business people at one time constituted an important aspect of the quality of life. This indeed was a special aspect of community. I can remember when I was a young boy that my mom would take me down to our small town. She knew the bank teller, she knew the grocery [clerks] at the check-out stands, we went to the hardware store, she knew the people who worked in the hardware store and she knew the man who owned the hardware store. We would go to the garden supply store: we knew everybody by name in that town. Do not think that this was an isolated town like Oroville living in a small niche of the foothills far from civilized society! This was a town just twenty miles outside of San Diego: it was already a bed-room community. These relationships have now largely been swept away in the anonymous commercial culture of the big box stores, the shopping malls, the fast food restaurants and food courts, the on-line shopping and most recently the fantasy world of Facebook. Facebook is where you can develop an “in-depth relationship” with someone you never met, and you can make yourself whatever you want to be, because they will never know.

Now, why do I bring this up? Today we are moving to the fifth petition in the Lord’s Prayer. *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...”* Now we come to the fifth, *“...and forgive us our debts as we forgiven our debtors...”* also translated as *“...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.”* With the fourth

petition, “. . .give us our daily bread. . .”, Jesus called us to put all of the issues of our commercial life, all of the issues of our economic pursuits under an understanding of God’s blessing in our lives. People through the centuries have struggled in every which way to understand the Bible’s promises of blessings and peace and wholeness and joy in the context of the new Covenant. In the Old Covenant it was relatively easy to grasp how this was supposed work. It was a sign: prosperity and peace were a sign of obedience. If you were an obedient person, an obedient family, an obedient nation, you could anticipate that God would bless you. That was a good arrangement: it didn’t work, but it was a good idea.

The reason it didn’t work is because the blessings of material prosperity are dangerous blessings. It was the persistent message of the prophets to remind the people that they were dangerous blessings. Prosperity works change in the hearts of those who enjoy it. So the prophets tried to warn the people that material wealth could easily become a false god; and that as our hearts fall in love with the things we have, our love God diminishes and finally fades away and is lost entirely. Israel never did understand. But that perception of the dangerousness of material blessings comes with the Lord Jesus Christ right straight into the New Covenant.

Now [Today] the blessings of God are distributed to His people in a different manner than they were in the Old Testament. We do not live in a kingdom apart where our blessings can be sort of heaped up and enjoyed as a separate people. We are called to live as a people scattered amongst all of those in the world. Ours is a hidden kingdom, and most of the world wishes we wouldn’t be there. The animosity and the hostility are the consistent and persistent misunderstanding and suspicion of the world toward Christians does not mean that we do not enjoy God’s blessings. We do. You can enjoy blessings of peace and joy and God’s unfailing care. What the Old Testament people of God forgot was that the very essence of God’s sustaining grace, His true favor, was wrapped up in the concept of manna. We looked at this last week. Manna was a very peculiar type of material blessing. You could never get rich on manna. The characteristic of manna was that you had to gather it every single day. The second characteristic of manna is that there was always just enough no matter how much you had gathered or how hard you had worked. Manna does not work in a capitalistic economy.

But there is a profound lesson: when you and I finally understand the true nature of God’s blessings: we are stewards. We are actually called upon – given the opportunity - to take care of God’s wealth for His purposes, and He graciously lets us enjoy many wonderful things as we do this. But the reason we know we are stewards of someone else’s property is because God’s blessings come with requirements. We are not at liberty to simply do with the things God gives to us whatever we want. We are indeed expected to adhere to those requirements for their proper use. If we ignore the requirements, trouble comes. Trouble has come. Our house is troubled. The disobedience of this great and wealthy land has been sustained.

The rule for economic life, the governing principle we found, was Matthew 6:33, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all. . .”* the stuff will be added. There is a larger rule, a more profound rule for all who would be the children of God. That more profound rule Jesus articulated in Matthew 22, it was actually given in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6. You know this rule: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This,”* Jesus reminded the man speaking with Him, *“. . .is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* I would encourage you if you are taking notes to write down the word “neighbor”, for this is the issue. Jesus concluded by saying, *“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*

I have mentioned recently a book, the subtitle of the book is “why it is so easy to live as if God doesn’t exist.” Remember, that was the unstated temptation at the heart of Satan’s first testing of Jesus when He came out of the wilderness. Jesus had been in the wilderness and eaten nothing for forty days, he comes out of the wilderness, Satan meets him, say “Are you hungry Jesus?” He then says, “Look, there are some stones. Turn the stones into bread.”

What is essential to appreciate in that dynamic is that Satan at that time never said a word about God. He didn't argue with God and he didn't deny God, all he did was leave God out. Jesus response was to put God back into where He belongs: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth.”

The world system in which we live puts immense pressure on us to leave God out. We know this. The world system is not really too concerned that we would deny God. The world system certainly is not interested in arguing with God. The world system just wants you to ignore Him. That is all. If we do, Satan is satisfied. We all know this; I am just telling you what you already know. How awkward is it to raise the issue of God in most situations? How awkward is it to raise the principles of God's truth, to try and turn to the word of God in any discussion? It is exceeding difficult. We should ask our self, why is that so difficult?

Here is my connecting point: What we have overlooked is how the depersonalizing of life, the reducing of other people to nothing more than service providers who carry out limited functions, continues the pattern of removing God from our lives. Dealing with people in this way, we empty them of all moral value and spiritual content. We would never say this; we don't even think this. If someone were to ask us we would affirm the unique personality and moral worth of every person we meet. That however is a theoretical statement. The practical reality is that we deal with people as ciphers: a person or thing without importance or value, nonentities. Such people as can be irritating, of course; their words or behavior may be offensive, but rarely do such people actually offend us, rarely do they wound us in our inner person. Consequently we have no need to forgive them. You see, they are no longer our neighbors. And therefore they do not ask us to love them.

Jesus said we are to pray to the Father and ask Him to forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors. At the conclusion of the prayer Jesus went on to say this – this is after the body of the prayer: *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* That is really heavy. Any counselor or psychologist will tell you that it is good advice to forgive. To not forgive is to retain within yourself the offense, and eventually an offense retained becomes bitterness and poisons the whole soul. Some people in the world seem blessed to have a kind of naturally forgiving spirit. Do you know anyone like that? They just seem to go through life casting blessings all over the place. I am married to one like that. It is a good thing, because I give her lots of opportunities. Other people are not so blessed. These are people who move through life and they are burdened with the kind of sensitivities to others that makes it almost impossible for them to let go of an offense or a perceived slight. That is a horrible burden. For most of us, however, who are in between, for virtually all of us in between, it is hard to forgive, but it is a lot easier to ignore, to treat people so superficially, so lightly that they are scarcely persons at all. If we do that, we become blind to the fact that they are our neighbors and we are supposed to love them.

Jesus told a parable about forgiveness, and I encourage you to turn in your Bibles to Matt. 18. This is a wonderful, powerful, deeply convicting parable that once you come into contact with it I think it remains permanently in one's awareness. I will read the parable beginning with verse 21.

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. . .’ (an impossible sum, almost as big as the American debt – well not that big, but almost) *“And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. . .”* (a very nominal sum) *“...and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his*

fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.”

That is a pretty gripping tale. Obviously is a tale for us to take to heart. We have been forgiven more than we could ever repay, therefore we should forgive the small offenses that come between us.

As powerful as the parable is all by itself, there are two things that make it more so. The first is its context, the second is its conclusion. What about the conclusion? The conclusion is the verse I didn’t read. It is verse 35. This is what Jesus said. “*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*” To forgive is a matter or an action of the heart. That is the conclusion. It is a very powerful one. It means that forgiveness is not an external or very slight thing. Rather it is something that involves all that we are in relationship to the other.

Now let’s look at the context. The context begins in 18:1. We will not read all of this, for it will take too long, but I think you are familiar with this. In chapter 18:1-6 there is a little discussion, a question arises amongst the disciples. You might be familiar with this question. How many of you have raised sons? If you have raised sons you know this question with overwhelming graphic clarity! “I am the best!” “No, I am the best.” “Let’s go ask mom and dad who is the best.” In this case they are asking Jesus who is the best! Jesus uses this as an opportunity – it is perfectly normal for a bunch of sinners to want to know who is the best – so Jesus uses this as an opportunity to talk about the necessity of humility within the kingdom. Then he goes on and he begins to talk in verse 5 all the way down through verse 9 about children. And when you read those verses what you need to read is verse 7: “*Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come. . .*” What a terrible necessity! And what terrible consequences! There are a very few, but an unforgivable number, an unforgettable number of occasions in the rearing of my own children where I look back and with deep grief recognize my actions pushed them towards sin. If you are a parent and you are a Christian you understand exactly what the journey of the soul is. You would do anything to remove that from the past. Then Jesus moves directly into one of the most lovely parables of forgiveness in all of Scripture. He speaks of the shepherd who has one lost sheep. The shepherd abandons the one hundred that are ok and strides off across the hills to find that one sheep. O my! Does that not inspire us, does that not encourage us, does that not excite and stir up hope within us that perhaps indeed my sin is not such as to have alienated me from the grace and goodness of God that I cannot then be restored to the fellowship of the Holy Spirit? Our God is a forgiving God! Consequently of course we are to be a forgiving people. He says indeed that all the angels of heaven rejoice when one sinner finds God’s grace.

Now it would be delightful if the whole account stopped right here. But it doesn’t. Forgiveness, as most of us know, involves more than going out and finding those who have wandered away. If I need to forgive, then it is likely that my life has become to one degree or another entangled in the sins of another. It is the characteristic of sin to render the issues of life obscure, complex and confusing. The practice of forgiving often includes, therefore, the process of straightening things out, bringing clarity to what has become confused and peace to where turmoil has clouded thinking with pain. Notice where Jesus goes after the parable of the lost sheep, He goes to the discussion of forgiveness in the life of the church. This is Matthew 18:15-20. It is worth reading. While we read these together what I want you to do is to have visibly in your mind the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, striding across the hills to find the lost sheep, and put it into the context of His words about forgiveness in the life of the church. “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his faults, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the*

church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” O! What happened to the shepherd? Nothing! We are not sheep. We are made in the image and likeness of God. Consequently the business of forgiveness is not so easy as finding a stupid sheep who has wandered out of the pasture. God knows our souls. We are made in God’s image. Because we are made in God’s image issues of justice and truth, fairness and equity are no less needful for our well-being than mercy and kindness and compassion and patience and gentleness and acceptance. We live in a culture that wants us chop our image of God in half and be nothing more than kind, gentle acceptance; but that is not what we are, for that is not what God is, and we are made in His image.

Some here may recall that earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had given what looks like a very different guide to our response to offense: Matthew 5:23-25. Please turn there and we will read. This is advice He had already given, *“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that you brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.”* How we respond to offense and the sin which is its likely cause depends upon whether or not we are the offender or the offended. As most of us know, it can be as hard to ask for forgiveness as it is to give it. But if we are the lost sheep, the one who has offended, when we stand before God He says, you’ve got problems: go and reconcile.

Some here are no doubt a bit disappointed at this point. Is it the case, they would ask, and understandably so, that forgiveness always demands running through all the particulars and straightening everything out? How many have tried this? O my goodness, it is the most difficult process. Often times you end up causing more damage than there was in the first place.

At two places in Scripture we are told that it is better to forgive than to either fight for justice or to inquire after clarity. If you turn to I Corinthians 6:1-7 there you will read Paul’s reprimand to the believers in that church who were so offended at one another that they were actually taking one another to court. He has two pieces of advice for them. In the first he says, “Look, if you have got differences, conflicts, misunderstandings, oppositions of perception and will, then for heaven’s sakes, why would you take them to unbelievers in the civil system? Can’t you find some mature believers within the body of Christ who will enable you to resolve your differences? Then the second piece of advice is that it is really best to just be wronged. Why not just be wronged? *“So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother and that before unbelievers?”* And then verse 7: *“Why not rather suffer wrong?”* Ah, now there is a caveat, a little addendum. If you are going to “just forgive”, remember, you must do it from the heart.

That takes us, you see, to the next statement: I Peter 4:7-8, Peter says, *“The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”* So if there is an adequate resource and depth of love, then you are able to sustain simply overlooking the offense and bringing yourself and your brother or sister before God in a common act of worship celebrating His goodness and your reconciliation in Christ, and releasing all offense and bitterness. Hallelujah!

We know that the defining quality of biblical love is not emotion, but conviction or commitment. The one who loves is committed to what is best for the one who is loved. I read an article recently and this was the gist of the article: many marriages that end in divorce are the sad result of one or both parties actually marrying a feeling rather than a person. It just so happens that a particular person excites that feeling in them. But before long that feeling fades away, and at that moment that marriage is gone, because all they were marrying was the feeling. They wanted

what made them feel so good; they failed to notice it was absolutely selfish and it could not sustain the commitments of marriage thereafter. The bond we share in the fellowship of the church is a bond of love, but it is not a bond of feeling. It is a bond of commitment to seek what is good for the other for Christ's glory above all and for others as the means or pathway for glorifying Christ. This is the kind of love that covers a multitude of sins. It is out of this love that forgiveness comes, whether of one sort or the other. Sometimes that kind of love will say, “Forget it! Let's be reconciled; let's lay aside our offenses, simply link arms and hands and hearts, move forward down the road, let bygones be bye and concentrate on tomorrow! Good thing? O, beloved, that is a fabulous thing. But it cannot always be that way. Sometimes love knows the matter must be torn apart and set right, and love is the only thing I know that has sufficient strength to endure that sometimes painful and difficult process. But in the end it is to the glory of God. Remember: Jesus said, *“...if you forgive other their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, either will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* That is not an unreasonable statement. The reason it is not an unreasonable statement is that the refusal to forgive is a sin. And therefore it is a sin renewed every day that the refusal continues. Unavoidably it is unforgiven for it is practiced. Let me close today by citing another verse we know exceedingly well. I John 4:10-11, *“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (the price) for our sin. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought to love one another.”* I commend to each of us here today to reflect and ask the Lord, “Am I fully reconciled with all others in the body of Christ; can I walk in harmony? Is my soul well? Am I at peace, not just with God, but at peace with my brothers? In that way we will glorify Him and be blessed all the more richly in the days to come.

Please pray with me: Our Father in heaven, we have heard your word. I am sure it is not a new word to any of us. It is a word that we need to hear again and again. If we would take it into our understanding that it would become the pattern of our thought and the guide to our will and in all things reflect Your purpose, Your character and Your grace in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. What forms or means of honoring others are most meaningful to you? Is honoring others an important part of how you handle relationships both private and public?
2. How can or should be demonstrate respect for those with whom we disagree and to those of whom we disapprove?
3. Why is it difficult to bring up God's Word or spiritual truths, principles and values in the course of our daily activities in the community or, often, even at home?
4. Do you agree that it is easier to ignore people than it is to forgive them? What is the likelihood that you will pray for or witness to people that you ignore?
5. When is it important to “straighten out” that which sin has obscured and confused in the process of forgiving? When is it best not to try?
6. Which is harder, to forgive or to ask for forgiveness? Why are those so difficult?
7. Have you ever experienced Paul's instructions in ICor.6? What make these seem so impossible?
8. Have you experienced an unforgiving spirit and bitterness in the life of the churches you have attended? How can such bitterness be healed? What are some ways of working towards the reconciliation of bitterly divided people?