

***Word to Live By: Six of Life's Most Important Words***  
***Matthew 5:23-24, Colossians 3:12-17***  
***July 12, 2009***

Last Sunday we began to look at some Words to Live By, words that can provide a solid foundation for our lives. We looked at the Golden Rule: Do to other people what you would like them to do to you. Today I want to suggest two sets of three of the most important words that we might ever speak.

Here are two hints to help you guess the first three words. First, in a research study of married couples and couples whose marriages failed, married couples said these three words twice as often as those whose marriages failed.<sup>i</sup> Second, in 2002 the University of Michigan Healthcare System began to instruct their physicians to say these three words to all of their patients in certain situations. When their doctors began to say these words regularly to their patients, this is what happened: between 2002 and 2007 the numbers of letters of intent to sue for malpractice declined from 262 to 83 a year – by 68%. The amount of money the hospital has had to set aside for legal fees and claims has decreased by 2/3.<sup>ii</sup> Have you guessed these three simple words: “I am sorry.”

The Bible teaches us of the need to reconcile with our brothers and sisters, indeed with anyone we have offended. One of the basic principles Jesus teaches is that before we ask God to forgive us our sins, we are to ask forgiveness from our brothers and sisters. “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

The gifts being offered in Jesus’ day were animal or grain sacrifices brought to the temple in Jerusalem as fellowship and thanksgiving offerings. Some were atonement offerings, as a means of expressing one’s desire to be reconciled with God. Jesus says that before you bring that offering, while in midst of worship, stop and go be reconciled. Underlying this instruction is the command to regularly apologize to others.

Have you ever noticed how in worship when we open ourselves to work of the Holy Spirit, God seems to prick our hearts? God brings to mind people who we might have offended, people with whom we long to be reconciled, people to whom we need to apologize. This often happens to me in my preparation for worship. As I’m studying the scriptures and looking for the practical application to our lives, I find that I have an issue in my life that needs to change or be addressed. My preaching is directed as much to myself as it is to the congregation.

This past week knowing that I was going to be preaching about apologizing, I was more conscious about what I said – so as to avoid having the need to

apologize. But there were a couple times at home when I slipped and said things that didn't need to be said. I didn't hold in my frustration or weariness. The first time I immediately apologized for what I had said. The second time it took a bit longer because I wanted the other person to acknowledge that they had some part in the matter at hand also.

Let me share with you a word picture of why we need to do apologize. When we hurt someone with our words or actions we give them baggage. This weighs down their heart. They become angry, upset, hurt, even bitter. As they carry this baggage around with them, it becomes hard for them to look at us, hard to pray for us, hard to be with us. A distance grows between us.

I also begin carrying my own baggage. Every time I look at the person I have hurt I know he is mad at me. When it comes times for me to pray, I struggle because I know that something is dividing us. I try to pretend that I don't have these things weighing on my heart, but I really can't enjoy life as much. I know I've hurt someone and I need to make it right.

How do we go about apologizing? We know the ways that don't really work. Saying "sorry" while rolling our eyes doesn't mean anything. Or the non-apology apology: "I'm sorry that you feel that way."

In their book, *The Five Languages of Apology*,<sup>iii</sup> Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas suggest five elements of apologizing. First is communicating heartfelt regret, saying "I'm sorry," with not only our words but with a look in the eyes and the tone of our voice. Second is accepting responsibility by saying, "I was wrong." Third is making restitution. "How can I make this right?" The fourth step is genuine repentance. Repentance means to go a different direction. "I'm going to try not to do that again." The final step is requesting forgiveness. "Would you please forgive me?"

Sometimes in order to effectively apologize we've got to see things through the eyes of the person whom we have wounded. From that person's perspective, why is this so upsetting? Try to put yourself in their shoes.

Sometimes when it is time to apologize, we may not be able to apologize for the actual action, because maybe you couldn't have done anything else. We might say, "I don't think I had any other choices, but I realize this hurt you and I really care about you. I'm sorry that I was the instrument by which that hurt came. I'd love to find a different way to have done this. I care about you. I'm sorry." We can apologize for the impact our actions had upon them and the hurt feelings and then look for a way forward.

It is amazing how things can change when an apology is offered. In his forty years as a cancer surgeon, one doctor had never made a mistake like this one. He removed the wrong sliver of tissue, from the eighth rib instead of the ninth rib. Once an x-ray proved the error, the doctor said to the woman and her husband,

“After all these years, I cannot give you any excuse whatsoever. It is just one of those things that occurred. I have to some extent harmed you.” The patient accepted a settlement from the hospital, but decided not to sue because the doctor was so honest, so candid. Their anger dissipated and because of his apology the hospital settled for a lesser amount of money.<sup>iv</sup> There is great power in those three simple words: “I am sorry.”

When we apologize, a weight is lifted, but not all of it because other person has opportunity to decide whether they will accept the apology. Some weight still hangs on each person until the person offended chooses to say the next three most important words: “I forgive you.”

Forgiveness is not easy. Oftentimes it is a long process. There are some circumstances in which forgiveness is never offered, especially if the offender continues to wound us. There are four R’s that can help us in the journey toward forgiveness.

The first is to Remember our own sins. Have I ever done something that hurt another person? Have I ever committed the sin which has offended me – talking behind someone’s back or being overly critical of another? Clothed with humility it is easier to bear with those who hurt us, for we too have been on that side of the table.

The second R is to Reframe the other person. This is not to excuse what they did, but rather to try to understand why they did what they did. We try to empathize and see things from their perspective. We try to see them in the best possible light.

The third R is to Recognize the high physical and psychological costs to holding on to resentment. According to the Mayo Clinic website, holding on to grudges and bitterness results in long-term health problems. Forgiveness, on the other hand, offers several physical and emotional benefits, including lower blood pressure, stress reduction, lower heart rate, lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse, fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and less chronic pain.<sup>v</sup>

It is healthy for us to say, “I’m not going to let this other person kill me. I’m going to find a way to let go of my bitterness and resentment, because the person I am really hurting with it is me, not them.”

The final R is to look for the Redemptive blessings in our suffering. God is with us in our suffering to bring something good to birth. The most formative experiences in life are usually painful.

These are four steps to help us move toward forgiveness. Remember our own sins. Reframe the other person, seeing them in the best possible light. Recognize the high physical and psychological costs to holding on to resentment. And look for the redemptive blessings in our suffering.

When we let go of the hold the other person may have on us by forgiving them, we find ourselves liberated from all that baggage that was weighing us down. Through apology and forgiveness, both parties are able to release the stones that bind their hearts and make it difficult to live freely, breathe, and function.

A year and a half ago on January 10, 2008, 10-year old Christopher Rodriguez was taking a piano lesson in Oakland. At the gas station across the street, Jared Adams was attempting an armed robbery. The bullet, intended for the gas station cashier, whizzed across the street and struck Christopher. He was paralyzed from the waist down and has been using a wheelchair for a year and a half. Last month, now 12-year old Christopher attended the sentencing for the man who shot him. He didn't go out of a thirst for revenge or to gloat at the man who has caused him such intense suffering. Christopher went to the courtroom because he wanted Adams to know that he forgave him. In a closed session after the sentencing, he rolled his wheelchair over to where Adams was sitting, extended his hand, and said, "I forgive you." After the meeting Christopher said, "What happened in the past happened. That is something my mom always tries to teach me, and my dad, and these thoughts (about the past) can't really help you."<sup>vi</sup> Christopher is a healthier human being, physically, emotionally, and spiritually because he was able to utter those three words: "I forgive you."

Six of the most important words we can ever say in life. "I am sorry. I forgive you." Those simple words can make a profound difference in the quality of our lives and our relationships. May we be bold to offer them and to receive them with grace.

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<sup>i</sup> Thanks to Rev. Adam Hamilton, Church of the Resurrection, Leawood, Kansas, for this reference and the outline of this message.

<sup>ii</sup> Kevin Sack, "Doctors Say 'I'm Sorry' Before 'I'll See You in Court,'" *New York Times*, May 18, 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas, *The Five Languages of Apology: How to Experience Healing in All Your Relationships* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008).

<sup>iv</sup> Sack, *ibid*.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131>.

<sup>vii</sup> Tammerlin Drummond, "Boy's Brave Act Should Inspire Us," *Contra Costa Times*, June 16, 2009.

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