

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Way of the Cross,  
A Lenten Series on Forgiveness:  
Honesty”**

**Matthew 5:43-48  
Matthew 7:1-6**

**Third Sunday in Lent  
March 19, 2017**

**Matthew 5:43-48**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

**Matthew 7:1-6**

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”

**“The Way of the Cross, A Lenten Series on Forgiveness: Honesty”**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week we talked a little about how the first step toward the end goal of forgiveness is self-examination. We read the parable of the Prodigal Son, who, after taking and wasting his inheritance, finally came to his senses and by doing so realized he needed to seek forgiveness. We also saw how in that same story the older brother had the opposite experience, and did not come to the self-realization that he, too, needed to seek forgiveness. Self-examination is the first step in the reconciliation process, but in order for us to offer forgiveness to others, we must first come to terms with our own sinfulness and seek forgiveness from God. By looking at the story of King David and his sins, we see that God does forgive us and is forgiving us. Which, I do believe, ought to inspire us to forgive others.

This week we shall continue in our Lenten series on forgiveness with the topic of honesty. This is the second step in the reconciliation process. Again, I am using Marjorie J. Thompson’s book *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study* as my source. Now, self-examination is hard. It’s hard to do when things seem to be going well, or even just okay, and it’s especially challenging when things aren’t going well at all. We saw in Luke’s parable that it wasn’t until the younger son was eating with the unclean animals that he started his self-examination. It took King David an outside revelation for him to come to terms with his actions against Bathsheba and Uriah. Even Augustus Toplady’s penning of *Rock of Ages* only occurred when he was taking shelter from a threatening storm. Self-examination, if it doesn’t occur in a frantic, emotional state, will certainly dredge up emotions that we may not like or are actively trying to suppress. This suppression comes to light whenever we start the self-examination process, but quickly come to the conclusion “Oh, I get along with everyone.” While it may be true we are generally quite amiable with most everyone, it is also true that the human race is naturally inclined to create enemies. These enemies may be

ourselves, those closest to us, those furthest away from us—“them, out there”—or even entire groups of people. Enemies also exist in the larger world, and those are easy to name: terrorists, dictators, or organizations. But sometimes it’s hard to admit that we personally do have enemies. It’s hard to admit it to ourselves. It’s hard to admit it to others. But we do create enemies closer to home. We create enemies by race, nationality, religion, or ideology. “Those people,” as we call them. Whether they be politicians, CEOs, drug addicts, or foreign nationals. We all know who “those people” are and often enough, we place “those people” as our enemies.

I sometimes imagine the Christian as doing a difficult balancing act. She’s on the middle of a see-saw, trying to keep the plank level, balancing every action that she does. If she leans too heavily on one side, she falls into the pit of sin and temptation, falling further and further away from God. If she leans too heavily on the other side, she falls into the pit of pious hypocrisy, putting on airs and strutting about with a sense of holy entitlement. Our natural tendencies lean us in one direction or the other—either we are attracted to worldly temptations, or we are drawn in self-righteousness. Our animalistic self likes both of those options. We Christians find ourselves trying to balance our ego while still maintaining healthy relationships with God and neighbor. Since we find ourselves teetering on the edges, we try to create safeguards or shortcuts. One of which is putting up safety barriers. When we feel threatened, our natural reaction is to either fight or flight. We think that if we attack that which threatens us head on, then we’ll either win or perish. Or, we think that if we don’t have to interact with someone we don’t like, or if we “love” a group of people from afar, then maybe we’ll be okay and get away without any confrontation. Thompson wisely acknowledges, “If I can admit that my heart fights to keep certain people outside the boundaries of my love, I can at least begin asking God to help me stretch those boundaries.”<sup>1</sup> Part of the self-examination process is being honest with ourselves that we create enemies and react to them with fight or flight. By being honest about this, we can ask God to help us tear down dividing walls.

Self-examination and being honest with ourselves are not easy tasks. If they were, we wouldn’t have need for sermons series like these, or the countless parables and sayings of Jesus on forgiveness. The Bible gives us the permission to acknowledge that we do in fact put enemies in our lives. The Psalms, especially, open us to the raw emotions of honesty. The words of the psalmists range from highest praise, to deepest lament, to even the darkest of images. The grisliest of which is the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!” O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. Page 26

done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

Those are some very graphic images! This Psalm is talking about the Babylonian exile. This is one of the most traumatic periods of Jewish history up until that point. Obviously, I think for today's Jews the Holocaust is right up there or even above the Exile. Here in Psalm 137, the writer has been uprooted from his home in Jerusalem. Not only has he been exiled, he's witnessed the destruction of the very House of God—the Temple itself! This Psalmist has real and present enemies: his captors mock him, taunting him, in the midst of his grief, to sing songs from his homeland. I'm sure we can think of a time when we've lost a loved one, suddenly and unexpectedly. We don't want to forget that person's name, their face, or their legacy. And if you've ever lost anything at the hands of another or have ever been mocked by someone, you want to cry out like the Psalmist and pray for revenge. These are natural responses.

The Psalms give us the license to cry out to God when we are in pain. Verse three of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm reads: "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" And verse nine: "I say to God, my rock: 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'" The brutal honesty of the Psalms reveals that even the inspired writers had stores of depression and anger. But none of them took those emotions and turned them into acts of violence against their fellows or dishonor against God. The Psalmists place their anger, distress, and longing for vengeance on the Lord. Psalm 43 opens with "Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!" Honesty with ourselves can bring up emotions of despair and anger. But this is a necessary step towards reconciliation. Instead of letting our frustrations out on a person or group of people, however, we should offer our frustrations to God. Express to God how impossible it is to deal with a certain someone.

"When we release pain and anger to God over people who seem impossible to embrace with love, the Spirit begins a mysterious process in our hearts. God reveals to us the enemy within our own divided self—the wounded, scary aspects of ourselves we have tried so hard to ignore, the sides of us that are humiliating to admit."<sup>2</sup> Each of us hides within ourselves little characteristics of greed, self-pity, lust, jealousy, or what have you. Again, these are parts of our natural, fallen selves, and when we are honest with ourselves, we see these parts of us face-to-face, as if looking in a mirror. When we take the self-examination and honesty deeper, we see where these aspects of ourselves originate and where they find manifestation in our lives. Upon deeper self-reflection, we can find what might trigger us or tip us over the edge. I can't give you an exact formula on how this works, but I do believe that if we take ourselves to God, then the Spirit will help us find healing. That's the proper release of anger and despair. When we take a page out of the Psalms, and we examine ourselves before God, God casts a light on the dark side of our life. And where there is light, darkness cannot be.

The negative characteristics of our person thrives on darkness. Self-reflective honesty can bring to light the sins that breed selfishness instead of openness. If we are not careful in this process, however, we may cast the reflections of our sinful nature onto others, especially on those with

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<sup>2</sup> Thompson, 27.

whom we disagree. This, my friends, is called judging. If self-examination and honesty are not done carefully, we may easily cross the line into judgment. For instance, if through the process of self-examination we discover that we are embarrassed about how we inherited our current lifestyle. And if we aren't careful in being honest with ourselves, we might look at those who are less fortunate than us and say, "Why don't you just pull yourself up from your boot straps," not knowing that person might not even have boots of his own. Or we might look to those who are wealthier than us and say, "O how I wish I had it that easy and was born with a silver spoon," not knowing the sacrifices or addictions that person is going through. Another theologian aptly notes, "When our insecurity does not lead us to others for help, how often does it lead us against others in defense? Sometimes it seems that gossip, condemnation of other people's behavior, and outright attacks against their life choices are more a sign of our own self-doubt than of our solidly grounded convictions."<sup>3</sup>

We cannot cast judgments on another because we cannot know the fullness of their situation. John Calvin, whom you'll quickly find out is a role model of mine, was the biggest proponent of predestined souls. Even so, he urged his congregations to never cast judgments on someone else's election, because that information is privy to God alone. This is the reason why Jesus encouraged his listeners to not judge their enemies but pray for them and love them. Matthew 5:45 is quite witty but very true, rain falls on the just and unjust alike. We cannot judge others because we do not have God's foresight and omniscience. Depravity, a theme developed by Augustine and refined by Calvin, means we cannot judge others because we have no room for judgment. The log in our own eye must first be removed before we can ever cast assessments on another's speck. And if we ever think that the log is removed from our eye in *this lifetime*, then we are deceiving ourselves. That log in our own eye, sin itself, will only be removed when we find ourselves standing before God's judgment seat. Since this is our reality, we Christians are called to do something other than judging. We are called to a higher degree of love. Jesus asserts that everyone loves the people of their own kith and kin, but we, as his followers, must love even those who lie outside of our comfort zones. Prejudice and judgments get in the way of our calling to love. When we are honest with ourselves, the Spirit plants within our hearts the necessity and desire to replace prejudice and assumptions with the love of Christ. It is the work of the Spirit that opens our eyes on the enemies *we've* created, and opens our hearts to love and prayer, not prejudice and condemnation.

Before I close this sermon, I do want to say a word about good judgments. Thompson brings to our attention that "When we speak of someone exercising good judgment, we mean it in the sense of useful discrimination or discerning perception. Discernment is the positive face of judgment."<sup>4</sup> Discernment is a good thing. Jesus even says after his warning on judging others, "do not throw your pearls before swine." There has to be an element of wisdom in our judgments. This is the key: Wisdom is the working of the Holy Spirit. When we are truly honest with ourselves, we are making a space for the Holy Spirit to come in and work with us. True self-examination and honesty open us up to the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance. If we do not lend ourselves to wisdom, then we make room for the negative face of judgment, or the opposite of discernment, and that is condemnation. We cannot condemn others because we are in

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<sup>3</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, New York: Image Books, 1986. Page 39

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, 31-32.

no place to cast that judgment. All of us sin and fall short of God's glory. Let us always remember, then, to be wise in our self-examination and in our honesty, because true and sound wisdom comes from God, and this will take us to the third step in reconciliation, which we'll talk about next week.

Please join me in prayer. "God of light, you shine in every part of creation and into every dark corner of our lives. Shed your light and grace today on our experience of enmity with others and enmity within our own divided selves. Help us to discover the motives behind our judgments and to begin seeing more clearly what it means to love our enemies. We pray in the name of him who loved us fiercely and tenderly while we were still your enemies. Amen."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, 78.