

Forgiveness and Mercy Versus Trust and Consequences

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Brethren, if you've lived any length of time at all, I'm sure at some time in your life you've had conflict with others. That's almost impossible unless you're a very small child to have not had some kind of conflict with someone else at some point in your life. If you've been in the Church of God for any length of time, I'm sure at some point you've heard sermons covering the Matthew 18 process of how to deal with offenses like that and how to work through things. Of course, we always kind of walk through the steps, of course, with the hopes that a situation will work out and both parties can talk out their differences and forgive any offenses that have taken place and hopefully be reconciled and joined back together.

But as we know, in the real world it doesn't always work out like that, because when we're dealing with complicated personalities, situations don't always end that nicely. In fact, over the last couple of years, especially just right before Passover, I've gotten a number of questions from different members in dealing with situations like this. In others words, how do you deal with situations that are not quite as easy and cut and dried as some in that scenario? They get much more complicated or difficult. How does a Christian deal with a situation like that? To phrase it the way one member recently asked the question, "How do you balance the subjects of forgiveness and mercy versus trust and consequences?" If you'd like a title for this sermon, it's:

Forgiveness and Mercy verses Trust and Consequences

That will make more sense as we get more into this as to why I titled it that way.

To set the scene for this and give you an idea of some of the situations I might be referring to here, I'm going to give you a brief example from my own life and the situation I got to deal with regarding my personal relationship with my father, to give you kind of an idea of some of the complications that can happen in this regard. I'm sure that most of you who are familiar with me know I grew up in the Church of God. My parents were baptized a year or two before I was born. So all of my life I grew up as a church kid. In 1976, at the age of about eight and a half, my parents decided to get a divorce. Typical of a situation like that, it's complex with lots of issues, but it was probably primarily due to my father's alcoholism. As you can imagine, that creates its own set of straining dynamics in relationships in the family. As you might expect in a situation like that, my mother and myself and my siblings then all moved to Alabama and moved in with her mother, my grandmother. I'm now living in a different state from my father. As you can imagine just the dynamics of a family affected by alcoholism, there were a lot of issues that came with that alone.

But the situation got even more complicated. By the early 1980s, my father decided he no longer wanted to be a part of the Church of God. He didn't just leave a corporation, he left a way of life and a belief system. He basically decided that it was not something he believed in anymore and really didn't want much to do with. In addition to that, he also decided that because he felt he was very instrumental in getting the rest of the family involved in the Church of God, which truly he was, he now felt it was his responsibility to get his children out of this church, and in fact he actually articulated these exact words. I'm almost quoting him. As the years played out, his perspective on this was, you might say, he was on a mission to pull his children out of this church. So as a result, oftentimes I would receive mail from him of anti-church literature or various other religious ideas that he now believed in. He even got into conspiracy theories and things of that nature. This was back before the days of email. This was snail mail coming through the postal service. But oftentimes the mail I received from him was in one way or another oriented like this.

As you can image, this creates a lot of strain on a relationship. Now we live in different states and there are lots of other issues. I'm just scratching the surface here. You have this situation where you're trying to grow up as a church kid and trying to obey God and try to have a relationship now with your father who is now very much opposed to this. As the years played out, there were numerous times I attempted to, what I would call in my view, try to negotiate a peace treaty with him. In other words, basically try to have a discussion of saying, "Look, this subject of religion, you and I are probably never going to agree on this subject again. We see it very differently and we're probably not going to change each other's minds, so why don't we just put this subject on the shelf and leave this one alone. Let's agree to disagree and put this aside and try to be father and son outside of this subject."

I lost count of how many times he would at least tell me initially, "Sure, sure, I'll go along with that." But that never lasted for any length of time. Basically what I learned after a while was, he's saying what he needs to in order to get through this moment because he knows if he says, "No, I'm not going to abide with that," my reaction is going to be, "Well, I really don't want to have a relationship anymore under these conditions." So what would happen is he would kind of say that but then this never really changed. As you can imagine as this goes on, this becomes a very complex issue, trying to have a relationship with this person. I don't mean to make this sermon about that relationship, but just giving you an idea of some of the complex situations that can play out.

The question now is how does a Christian manage a situation like this? There are lots of other scenarios and I'm sure everyone has their own stories, but my point in trying to illustrate this is it's not a simple situation where two converted Christians have some kind of disagreement with each other. They can sit down and talk about it and hash it out, work through their issues and be reconciled and move forward. It's not always that simple and sometimes this becomes much more complex and complicated.

How does a Christian work their way through this? I mention this because over the last several years, I've received questions that are oriented like this. One of the things I find

is oftentimes church members that are struggling with something like that, some of the questions are basically, "Is it okay for a church member as a Christian to set boundaries in managing a situation like this?" Like in my situation you've got issues of: Well the Bible tells us we should honor our father and mother and we should be respectful with that. It tells us to forgive and let go of past offenses. But how do you manage all of this in that situation? Again, I don't suggest that I have all the answers on this today, but my objective is to cover this subject and try to address some of the major principals associated with this. So again, if you'd like a title for this sermon, it's:

Forgiveness and Mercy versus Trust and Consequences.

To start off with, I think it's important for us to understand that the subject of forgiveness and the subject of reconciliation are actually separate issues. I point that out because oftentimes we think of them intimately connected with each other and in an ideal situation they are, because when we try to work through an offense, not only should there be forgiveness, but our objective is also always to try to heal the relationship. We try to work with each other to get along and move forward. I think it's important that we understand the separate issues here, because again one of these is a Biblical requirement. The other one is not necessarily always possible, because what we have to understand is forgiveness is something that can be done unilaterally. In other words, one person can decide to forgive. They can decide they want to let an issue go and put it behind them. They can decide that by themselves.

To do reconciliation requires the actions of at least two people. I say at least two people because depending on the circumstances, it could be more complicated than that. But that requires at least two people taking action because one person alone cannot reconcile a relationship.

To begin looking at these dynamics, turn with me to Matthew, chapter 6. Let's start off by trying to understand some dynamics of what forgiveness is about. We will start in verse 12.

Matthew 6:12. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (NKJV)

What I want you to notice is that forgiveness is spoken about in the context of like a financial debt. That's an important thing to understand and we're going to take apart some of the dynamics of that as we talk about this subject. Notice that in several cases here, the Bible is going to talk about the subject of offenses, when someone has sinned against us or offended us, in terms of a financial debt. Turn with me to Matthew 18:21. This is the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Matthew 18:21. Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (NKJV)

Peter obviously feels he is being generous by saying, "Up to seven times." Notice Christ's response here.

22) *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (NKJV)*

In other words, He exponentially increases this.

23) *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants."*

24) *"And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents." (NKJV)*

Notice again, we're talking about this in the context of a financial debt.

25) *"But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made."*

26) *"The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'"*

27) *"Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him and forgave him the debt."*

28) *"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took [him] by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'"*

29) *"So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you all.'"*

30) *"And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt."*

31) *"So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done."*

32) *"Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me."*

33) *'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'"*

34) *"And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers... (NKJV)*

Now notice the concept of "torturers." We're going to come back to that a little later.

34b) *... "until he should pay all that was due to him."*

35) *"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." (NKJV)*

Now notice here, we're given a Biblical requirement for us to forgive others. It even gives us, quite frankly, a very frightening analogy. It says that God will basically measure back to us at the same measure we measured to other people. In other

words, our forgiveness in the eyes of God hinges upon our ability to forgive others who have offended us. That's kind of a frightening concept when you think about it.

But notice here again, all of this is put in the context of a financial debt. The reason I point that out is, I'm sure all of us at some point in our lives have dealt with a financial debt. I think for most people the largest debt they typically deal with is going to be the mortgage to their home. If you don't own a home, you have probably owned a car at some point and you had a monthly payment you were making on that car, or you had a credit card bill. So you had something you had to make regular payments on. My point is you get used to the idea that you have to constantly pay against that debt. I point that out because what we're going to look at and understand later is, whose really typically making the payments on that debt?

When we hold something against someone else, when we've been hurt or wounded and we feel offended and sinned against and we have feelings of resentment or hostility towards someone who has hurt us, what we're going to see (and I'm getting a little ahead of the story here) is very often it's us who is making the payment on that debt and not the person that has offended us. We seem to understand the dynamics of how that works. When you think back on a time in your life when someone hurt you, someone offended you or really upset you and how they treated you, when you think about that and mull it over in your mind, if it really upset you, maybe you even got kind of obsessed with it. You got up every day and thought about it and you think about all the things that person did and all the reasons why you were right and they were wrong and then what should be done to them because they hurt you. In one way or another, you feel like that person owes you. They owe you for the hurt and the pain that they have caused you and the effect they had upon your life. You're expecting them in one way or another to suffer and make payment for that. That's how we tend to think of it.

The reason I mention that is, having fallen into this trap myself and seen others throughout my life, oftentimes when someone is hurt and offended toward someone else, and you mention that maybe they should just forgive and let it go, our thought process and maybe our statements tend to go like this: "That dirty rotten so and so doesn't deserve forgiveness. Let me tell you what they did to me." Then we can list out what the issue was, because we look at it from the standpoint of that person doesn't deserve it, because we think we're giving them a gift when we release that debt and forgive them.

Here's one of the best things I can say to you today, and we're going to look at some examples of this in the Bible. Forgiveness is not a gift you give the person who hurt or offended you. It is a gift you give to yourself. The reason I say that is because you have to understand who is making the payments on that debt. What we're typically going to find is it's not the person who hurt and offended us who is making the payments. We're making the payments ourselves because one of the easy ways to see that, and I've seen this scenario play out a number of times in my life where someone has been deeply hurt or offended by someone and maybe that person has even died. I've seen a number of cases where it was parents who had abused a child and they had

deep hurt and pain as a result of that, but it's still affecting their lives years after that parent is dead. When you think about it, is that anger and resentment hurting the person who is dead? No, they're completely unaware of it. Who is it hurting? It's hurting the person who is living. When they let go of the debt, they're not giving a gift to the person who offended them. They are freeing their own life. Again, we're going to see that as we go forward and see some examples.

First of all, let's notice a Biblical warning that's relevant to this subject. Turn to Ephesians, chapter 4 and we'll read verse 26.

Ephesians 4:26. Be angry, and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath. (NKJV)

Notice verse 27.

27) nor give place to the devil. (NKJV)

In other words, God is saying that it's okay to be upset about something. It's okay to be angry, but be careful because there's a trap here. If you let that harbor in your heart, it tends to lead to resentment, bitterness, and it gives Satan an opportunity to step in your life and use that as a tool to really get at you. It winds up being a poison; it's like a cancer in a person's life. As I've often heard the analogy, when we harbor resentment towards someone else, it's oftentimes like drinking poison ourselves and hoping that the other person gets sick and dies. Oftentimes that's what we are doing. We are poisoning our own life and we think we're hurting them. In reality, we are hurting ourselves even more.

Let's look at a Biblical example of this. Turn to the book of 2 Samuel. We're going to look at the example of Ahithophel. Before we go to a specific scripture, let me explain a little history here. You may not be readily familiar with the name Ahithophel, but I'm sure you're familiar with the name King David. Ahithophel was an advisor, a counselor to King David. The Bible even tells us in a number of cases that Ahithophel gave such wise advice that, in those days, inquiring of Ahithophel was as if you inquired of the oracles of God. It was like you went and asked God a question. This guy gave such great advice. What we're going to see here, and we're going to look at this story in a minute, there was a time when Ahithophel became very angry with David. He sets out and literally has a plot to kill King David. He's trying to get even with him and he's trying to murder him. The Bible doesn't tell us explicitly why he is so angry, but if we look at his family connections, I think we can safely speculate what this beef is about that he has against David and why he wants to hurt him so badly. Let's turn to 2 Samuel, chapter 23 and let's notice what the Bible tells us about his family connections. This will shed a lot of light on what his issues were. I'm going to jump into the second half of this verse because it's what is most relevant and a lot of these old Testament names I know I'm going to butcher if I try to read them, so I'm going to spare you having to listen to me butcher them. We will pick up in the second half of the verse.

2 Samuel 23:34. ... *Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, (NKJV)*

What I want you to get from this verse is that Eliam is Ahithophel's son. Now let's notice who is a child of Eliam. Turn with me to 2 Samuel 11:3.

2 Samuel 11:3. *So David sent and inquired about the woman (NKJV)*

Now this is the incident of David and Bathsheba that we're all familiar with.

3b) ... *And [someone] said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (NKJV)*

What this reveals to us is that Ahithophel is Bathsheba's grandfather. As you can imagine, you can immediately start thinking of some issues that Ahithophel might have with King David. Just imagine the connection he has with his granddaughter now, especially if there's a good relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. They tend to be the apple of the eye of the grandparent. You can often see how a little child can have their grandparent just wrapped around their little finger.

In fact, just a couple weeks ago I met a gentleman I went to Ambassador College with. I've known him for over twenty years. My friend has a four year old son and I met my friend's father in the last couple of weeks. We were talking and his dad was joking about the fact that recently he referred to his own son as the father of his grandchild. He was joking about it and then stopped and said, "Well, he's actually my son too." He was talking about how precious his grandchild is and how much he loved his grandchild and how much this was a focus for him.

Well imagine Ahithophel, and Bathsheba is his little granddaughter, and he plays with her when she is young and he bounces her on his knee and she's the apple of his eye. She grows up and he builds this relationship with her. Then she grows up as an adult and gets married. Then King David has an affair with her. As a result of this affair he sets up her husband to get murdered. Basically, David did a lot of damage through his actions to this family. You can imagine as a result of this, although the Bible never specifically says why Ahithophel sets out to kill him; if you look at some of the advice he gives to Absalom, and we understand the family connections, it's pretty obvious as to what this is about.

Let's notice when he sets out to get even with David. Let's pick up in 2 Samuel 16:20. I'll explain some of the history here. Absalom, David's son, basically starts trying to lead a rebellion. In fact, he actually gets a sizable following at some point where he's basically wrestling for power of the throne. He's trying to take over Israel. Well, Ahithophel sees this and basically joins forces with Absalom because he sees this as an opportunity to get back at David. Let's pick up in verse 20.

2 Samuel 16:20. *Then said Absalom to Ahithophel, "Give counsel among you what we shall do."*

21) And Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in unto your father's concubines, which he has left to keep the house; and all Israel shall hear that you are abhorred of your father: then shall the hands of all that [are] with you be strong. (NKJV)

Notice the advice he's giving him here. He's saying, "Go take your father's wives." A concubine in Old Testament history was a wife of lesser status. He's basically saying, "Go take his women and have your way with them." What is he saying? "Go do to him what he did. Go take what's not yours and take his, just like he took Bathsheba." He basically wants to use Absalom to hurt David just like David hurt Uriah and others. He's getting even with him. Pick up in verse 22.

22) So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the top of the house, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. (NKJV)

So Absalom took his advice and did this. As we're going to see later in this sermon, this is something that Nathan the prophet had warned David was going to happen. God was basically telling him, "You did it in secret. It's going to be done publicly to you. We're going to measure back to you exactly what you dished out."

Again, if you follow Ahithophel's thought process, he's trying to inflict the pain back to David that David had caused. Notice in verse 23.

23) And the counsel of Ahithophel, which he counseled in those days, [was] as if a man had inquired at the oracle of God; so [was] all the counsel of Ahithophel both with David and with Absalom. (NKJV)

But Ahithophel doesn't stop at just saying, "Let's get even and hurt him." Let's notice what else he says, starting in chapter 17, verse 1.

2 Samuel 17:1. *Moreover Ahithophel said to Absalom, Let me now choose out twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue after David this night:*

2) And I will come upon him while he is weary and weak handed, and will make him afraid: and all the people that [are] with him shall flee; and I will smite the king only: (NKJV)

In other words, "He's the only one I really want to get. I don't have a beef with the rest of them. I just want to kill this guy."

3) And I will bring back all the people unto you: the man whom you seek [is] as if all returned: [so] all the people shall be in peace.

4) And the saying pleased Absalom well, and all the elders of Israel. (NKJV)

So they decided, "Hey, this is a good idea. We'll get David knocked off and we'll let Ahithophel carry out the plan that he wants to do. He obviously has a serious beef with David." Let's notice how this was eating a hole in him. Notice his reaction later when this plan doesn't work, because he sets out basically with this plan to murder David.

God intervenes and prevents this from working, so David continues to live through this. Let's notice what Ahithophel's reaction was when this happens. Go to chapter 17 and verse 23.

2 Samuel 17:23: *And when Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled [his] donkey and arose, and went home to his house, to his city, and put his household in order, and hanged himself, and died, and was buried in the sepulcher of his father. (NKJV)*

Notice his plan to kill David didn't work, but he was so consumed with hatred and bitterness from this, what does he do? He wound up committing suicide. He destroyed himself. Think about this. This is a situation where we know from reading Psalms 51 that David has already repented of this. He has already asked God's forgiveness for what he had done, but Ahithophel is still carrying all this resentment, to the point that when he is not able to kill David, he kills himself. You can see just how self destructive that is. That's what happens with bitterness. We hold that inside and don't resolve it and let go of those issues, and it gives opportunity to the devil. It ate him up.

Let's also ask the question: Who was making the payments on the debt? I'm sure if you ask Ahithophel, David owed him for all the pain that was caused, but whose life got destroyed? It was Ahithophel's. Forgiveness is not a gift you give to the person who hurt you; it's a gift you give to yourself. If he had let it go, it wouldn't have changed David's life, it would have saved his own. He would have kept all that negative emotion from eating him up and destroying his own life and that cancer eating away at him. If he had let all that go, again it didn't change David's life necessarily in that regard, but it certainly would have freed up his own life.

That's why we need to understand what forgiveness is about because this had nothing to do with his ability to let go of the debt you might say. It had nothing to do with David's actions. Even if David had never repented and had never acknowledged his sin, Ahithophel could have let this go for himself and not ruin his own life, because David wasn't making payments on the debt, Ahithophel was. He destroyed himself. If he had let go of the debt, he would have been freeing himself from the torturers.

Remember it said that he delivered them to the torturers. If you think about that, what Ahithophel did to himself, he was torturing his own life. He was obsessed with getting even with David but he destroyed himself. It doesn't make a lot of sense. Oftentimes if we really have a beef with someone and we're offended and hurt and angry, we always think about forgiveness from the standpoint of, that person doesn't deserve it. It isn't about whether that person deserves it or not. We are freeing ourselves.

We also have to realize that this is a Biblical requirement. God tells us that if we can't forgive others in our heart, He won't forgive our sins that we have sinned against Him and others. So again, it's kind of a frightening subject in how we look at this.

I point this out because we need to understand what forgiveness really is, it's letting go of that debt. It's releasing that resentment and that requirement, letting the issue go and moving on.

Reconciliation is a separate subject. I say that because reconciliation requires the actions of multiple people. One person can unilaterally decide to let it go. Just to use the financial example, not that this would really happen in our world today, but your mortgage company could decide to call one day and say, "You know what, you don't owe us any more money for that. We're just going to let it go." I wouldn't hold your breath on that happening in today's world, but my point is that the financial institution could decide to say, "We're just going to write this off." That could be totally separate from your actions. They could just let that debt go. That's what forgiveness is about. Again, if we look at the subject of reconciliation, this is a separate issue because it requires the actions of multiple people.

Let's turn to Matthew 18 and look at this subject. We will look at scriptures I'm sure we've all seen numerous times in the context of conflict resolution.

Matthew 18:15. *Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16) But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17) And if he refuses to hear them, tell [it] to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. (NKJV)*

Notice this is a scenario where one person is trying to work through an issue. They're trying to be reconciled with their brother. They're trying to work through the issues that are happening. But the scenario that is presented for us is the person who committed the sin, you might say, who sinned against the other is not willing to acknowledge that they did anything wrong. Even through multiple attempts to work this out, they're basically insisting, "I didn't do anything wrong. I don't know what your problem is," and they refuse to acknowledge this. Notice at the bottom of the scenario it says that if you've tried multiple times to work through this and you can't get anywhere and this person is not trying to change, let them be to you as a heathen and a tax collector. What the analogy is talking about here is; how did Jews at that time interact with heathens and tax collectors? They avoided them; they saw them as someone they shouldn't associate with. That's basically what the Bible is saying. Notice that this doesn't nullify or quench the requirement to forgive others because, again, God's forgiveness of us is still directly tied to our ability to forgive others. But it's acknowledging here that reconciliation is a separate subject that requires the actions of multiple parties.

When you think about this, why does it say to avoid that individual? Logically think about that. If someone has severely sinned against others and is offensive and abusive in that regard, and you've tried to work through this issue and they're not hearing this. They don't feel that they've done anything wrong and there is nothing to change for

them. As human beings we tend to work off of a very simplistic logic which is, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. In other words, if we don't feel like we have a problem, why are we going to repent of something that we don't feel we've done wrong? Don't we have to admit first that we did something wrong to want to change? We're not going to make significant changes in our lives if we don't feel like we did anything wrong. People don't try to fix what they don't perceive to be broken.

In a situation like that, what is likely to continue to happen? If this person continues to hurt and offend you and you keep sticking your hand back into the fire, what is most likely going to happen? Well, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. They're probably going to keep doing the offense because they don't see it as something that they need to change and they're going to continue hurting and offending. As physical human beings, what is likely to happen as a result of that? The more upset we are, the angrier we are and that gives opportunity to the devil to work on us and get us stirred up. So its saying that after a while what you need to do is remove yourself from that situation, because one thing that we're going to see in the sermon today is that it is okay for Christians to have boundaries. I'm not saying that we should not make every effort to reconcile and work situations out. Please understand, I'm not saying that. We have a Christian duty to try to work through issues and to try to reconcile relationships. What I'm saying is if we get in situations where that is not possible, the Bible does give us instructions on how to deal with that.

I find this oftentimes if people have grown up in, you might say, in a dysfunctional or abusive situation. Oftentimes they struggle with the subject of boundaries, of being able to set a limit and say, "No, I'm not going to continue to be in this situation. We've reached a point where this is unacceptable." They tend to struggle with that type of subject. Sometimes at looking at Christian requirements, this can be confusing. Turn to Luke 17 and we'll start in verse 1.

Luke 17:1. Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe [to him] through whom they do come!"

2) "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

3) "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

4) "And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." (NKJV)

Again understand that releasing the debt is a Christian requirement. But I find sometimes that Christians can look at this and feel like, "Well, this means that I'm not allowed to set limits. In other words, if a person just keeps abusing me, but they mouth the words, 'I'm sorry' at some point, but their behavior never changes then that means I'm not allowed to set boundaries and deal with that." That's really not an adequate explanation because we have to look at multiple scriptures. Again, we are required to forgive and let go of the debt. It's never justified in the Bible that we should hold

resentment or bitterness towards others, but it certainly gives us instructions about setting boundaries if we're in a situation where that is needed.

Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 5. We're going to look at a situation where the Apostle Paul was correcting the Corinthian church for an issue that they were not setting any boundaries, in a situation where he felt this was something they should absolutely do. They weren't doing that, and they felt they were doing the right thing by not setting any boundaries.

1 Corinthians 5:1. *It is actually reported [that there is] sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father's wife! (NKJV)*

In other words, this guy is actively involved in an adulterous relationship and the woman he is doing it with is married to his father. Pick up in verse 2.

- 2) And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.*
- 3) For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.*
- 4) In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,*
- 5) deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (NKJV)*

Notice what he is correcting them for. Obviously this was a sin that was well known. It wasn't like it was a hidden matter because the way he is writing this, obviously the people were aware of the situation. But the Corinthian church was, quite frankly, proud of the fact (from the way this is written) that they were very tolerant. Like, "Yes, we know he's doing this and it's wrong, but it's okay. We put up with it. We have him here." Paul is correcting them for that very thing saying, "This is wrong. This is not like a guy who is sincerely struggling to overcome a sin and has slipped. He is actively involved in a double life. This isn't going to work and you shouldn't be understanding of this, because he is openly and defiantly keeping one foot in the church and one foot in the world. You've got to take a stand on this." He's telling them that they need to set boundaries. Pick up now in verse 6.

- 6) Your glorying [is] not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?*
- 7) Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*
- 8) Therefore let us keep the Feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened [bread] of sincerity and truth.*
- 9) I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people.*

10) *Yet I certainly [did] not [mean] with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.*

11) *But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person.*

12) *For what [have] I [to do] with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?*

13) *But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person. (NKJV)*

In other words, Paul is saying, “Look, you should establish a boundary with this guy, and you should lay out to him, ‘as long as you’re continuing in this behavior, this isn’t going to work. We’re not going to allow you to keep coming and being part of the congregation because of your behavior.’ You should establish a boundary with all of this.” As he mentioned here, he’s not saying that we can’t have any contact with sinners because you couldn’t go to work, you couldn’t go outside of your home interacting with others. He’s mentioning this in this context because this was the guy sitting in the congregation with them representing himself as a God-fearing Christian, yet he’s continuing in this behavior that is totally against God. That’s why he is laying this out.

Again, the principal of what I’m pointing out is that of setting boundaries, that it’s okay for a Christian to say, “You know, we’ve reached a point here where I can’t deal with this anymore and I’m not going to be able to continue in this relationship as long as this behavior continues.” That’s what he is laying out here.

Turn with me to Romans 16 and we’ll see a similar instruction that Paul gives us.

Romans 16:17. *Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.*

18) *For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. (NKJV)*

Notice they can have smooth words and flattering speech.

19) *For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.*

20) *And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [be] with you. Amen. (NKJV)*

What I’m getting at here is that Paul is telling them to establish boundaries. There is behavior at times when you can say, “I’m not going to associate with this individual as long as this person is continuing in this type of behavior.” Again, that’s not writing someone off permanently, like in the case we just read in 1 Corinthians 5. If you read in

2 Corinthians, this guy repents. He repents before God. He stops carrying on that affair and then Paul tells them to welcome him back into the congregation. Don't shun him after he has changed his behavior. Welcome him back and give him a second chance and move forward. He's not saying to write the guy off. He is saying, "Establish boundaries from certain behavior."

Notice it says here that a person can have flattering speech and smooth words in a situation. That doesn't necessarily always agree with their actions. In other words, they can say the right thing. I'm sure we're all familiar with the concept of politicians, just to pick on a common example. People that are known for saying the right things at the right time because it's politically expedient, but their actions don't necessarily go along with the words they are saying. We're going to see from a Biblical example that fruits of our behavior always trump whatever our words are. A person can claim one thing, but what the Bible tells us is that we look at the example of their actions and how they behave, because that's really what tells us where they are going.

The reason I mention that; let me give a common example. I'm going to give what we might call the stereotypical version of domestic violence. I say stereotypical because the subject is oftentimes more complicated than it's sometimes portrayed in the media, but that's a whole other subject. I'm not going to get into that today. Your stereotypical example is an overbearing, aggressive husband who is violent and abusive to his wife. Oftentimes if you're familiar with the dynamics of how a situation like that tends to work, there tends to be a cycle that plays out in the typical behavior in a situation like that. The pressure builds up for whatever life pressure is going on. This individual lashes out, becomes aggressive, becomes physically violent and slaps his wife around, that type of thing. Well soon afterwards he can be very "repentant" (and I put that in quotations). Not that he is necessarily repentant, but he's remorseful, he promises he will never do this again, he's sorry for doing this. He's saying, "Please don't leave me." Now he's got flowers and chocolates and he is sweet talking. Now the wife has moved out and living with her mom for a while and she is threatening to get a divorce. She's basically saying, "I'm not putting up with this anymore." Now he's wooing her back. What happens oftentimes though is that this cycle keeps repeating itself again and again and again. For every time he slapped her around, he promises he's never going to do it again, but yet he does.

My point is that the fruits of behavior always trump words. There are times when it's appropriate for a Christian to look at a situation and go, "Wait a minute, maybe I need more evidence than just your words, because the fruits of behavior are going in the other direction." In a situation like this, those words are not necessarily indication of real repentance if the actions don't back them up. It's fair for a Christian to question that, and again under the appropriate circumstance.

I'm not saying we should grill someone every time they've committed an offense and tell us that they are repentant, because we are supposed to be forgiving and willing to give people second chances. What I'm just trying to get across is that the Bible does allow us and tells us to establish boundaries.

Turn over to Matthew 7. This is a principal that Jesus Christ tells us. I like to call this the Biblical criteria for assessment. In other words, when we are assessing situations and individuals, this is the criteria that Jesus Christ gives us that we should base decisions on.

Matthew 7:15. *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*

16) *You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?*

17) *Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*

18) *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor [can] a bad tree bear good fruit.*

19) *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

20) *Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (NKJV)*

In other words, Jesus Christ is saying that the ultimate criteria to look at are the fruits of a person's actions and fruits are evaluated over time. It's the track record of a person's behavior. The point I'm making here is, notice it says that there are individuals that can come to you in sheep's clothing. In other words, they say the right words and put on a good appearance, but inwardly their actions are the opposite. It's good to understand that because some individuals can be very manipulative in their types of behavior. The way to sort that out is you always come down to a person's actions and not just the words they say.

Let me ask a question. This can be a difficult subject to apply these principals to, and to know what we should do in what situation. Is it fair for a Christian when a person maybe is mouthing the words, "Hey, I'm sorry. I won't do this again," but it's been a habitual behavior, for a Christian to say, "I'm not so sure the words are going to do it for me at this point. I need to see some actions." Is that a fair thing to do, to question that? Let's look at a Biblical example. Turn to Matthew 3 and we will start in verse 5.

Before I start reading, I'm going to set the scene. The principal character in this example is John the Baptist. If you are familiar with how John the Baptist is spoken of in the New Testament, Jesus Christ Himself tells us that John the Baptist was the most righteous man who ever lived up to that point in history. In other words, of all the heroes we have in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ is saying that John the Baptist is the superstar, and when it comes to being righteous, he outdid everybody who had lived up to that time. He is kind of a superstar of Christianity. Let's notice an example that played out in his life.

Matthew 3:5. *Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him*

6) *and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.*

7) *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"*

- 8) *"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,*
9) *"and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as [our] father,' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*
(NKJV)

Notice the scenario that has played out here. What we have recorded here is what we might call the Readers' Digest version of the story. We don't have all the details of the conversation that played out, but what tends to happen in the conversation when a person comes up and says, "I want to be baptized?" Isn't the traditional logic of a situation like that, "I want to be baptized because I want to repent of my sins and I want Jesus Christ's sacrifice to cover that, and I'm looking to change my life. I want to make a major course correction here." That's typically what is expected for a person to say in a situation like that. But in this case, realize that we're dealing with the Pharisees. I won't take the time to go through this, but if you want a good idea of what these individuals were like, just read Matthew, chapter 23. Christ had some very scathing words of how He critiques this group. He is very blunt and even brutal you might say, in being very honest with them about the track record of their behavior. He did not have kind things to say at all. So in this situation, it's obvious that John's assessment was that these individuals were not coming sincerely wanting to change from this behavior and make a course correction and change their lives. This is more of a manipulative game that they are playing, if you look at his reaction. He said, "Brood of vipers," and that's a pretty harsh response that he is giving them. But the bottom line that he tells them is, "Just because you're mouthing the words, that's not going to do it for me with your track record. I'm going to need to see fruits of your behavior. Your actions need to show a real course correction and a real change in your behavior." I'm sure if they had demonstrated that, John would have a totally different point of view. He's not going to hold them off just because they had sinned severely in the past. If they sincerely wanted to change, I'm sure he would have had a totally different point of view.

My point in all of this is that it's okay in circumstances like that for a Christian to be able to establish boundaries and say, "I think before I'm going to trust you going forward with this, I need to see some evidence in your actions that this is for real and that you're really sincere."

Again, I'm not at all suggesting that we have to grill someone every time there has been offense and someone is repenting. I'm not suggesting that at all. This sermon is more intended to address the subject where people sometimes struggle with boundaries and how to manage a situation like this, where they want to be right before God, they want to be forgiving and act like Jesus Christ, but dealing with a very difficult and challenging situation and want to know what is acceptable before God. The Bible certainly gives us permission to establish boundaries. Again, you will see repeatedly that it always comes down to the fruits of someone's behavior that trumps everything else. Regardless of what we say, the evidence of our behavior is really the issue that it comes down to.

I want to address one other issue that's kind of related to this subject. What if you are on the other side of this equation? What if you're the individual that has sinned against

others and they are severe sins against others and you really hurt and damaged other people's lives, but you sincerely want to change? You sincerely want to turn and to go with this. What are some important concepts here? I think one of the important things to realize here are the realistic expectations going forward. To demonstrate what I mean by this, I'm going to share a lesson that my Mom taught me when I was a teenager. I'm the bad guy in this particular example. When I was a teenager, I had the concept in my mind that if I said, "I'm sorry", well that means all the consequences go away. If I say, "Hey, I'm sorry and I won't do it again," that meant that any other punishment or consequences should just magically go away because I said I'm sorry! My mother tried to get this across to me that life didn't always work like that. She always worded it, and these are words that kind of stuck in my mind all these years. She said it to me like this, "Son, you can say you're sorry, but that doesn't undo what you have done. It doesn't take back any previous actions." The concept that she was trying to get across is that some actions that you do have inherent consequences that continue on even after you said, "I'm sorry." Even though you may be sincerely repentant of what you did, there may still be damage that you have to deal with that you created through your actions. She was trying to give me realistic expectations of life because, as a teenager, I didn't quite get that.

To look at this, turn to 2 Samuel, chapter 12. We're again going to look at King David in the matter of Uriah the Hittite. We're going to see here that even when sincerely repentant before God, there were still consequences that he had to deal with as a result of his actions. If you've ever read through Psalm 51, you know that David very sincerely and in a heartfelt manner repented of the sins he committed. However, it's interesting if you notice, there were still consequences due to the gravity of the sin that he committed that he dealt with for the rest of his life.

The way to think about sin, if you've ever gone to a pond, especially where the water is still and take a rock and throw it in the water. What you will see when the rock hits the water is a shock wave. It goes out in every direction from where the rock hit; the bigger rock that you throw in there, the bigger the wave that goes out in every direction. Well, sin is kind of like that. There is a shock wave that goes out and sometimes innocent bystanders that have nothing to do with the situation get hit with the shock wave, especially if it's a big rock.

What we're going to see from this is that David basically took a big boulder and threw it in the water and there were lots of shock waves that went out. Even though he had apologized and repented, it didn't stop that shock wave from going out into the lives that were affected. He had to deal with the ramifications of that for the rest of his life.

Let's pick up here in 2 Samuel 12:1. This is where Nathan is talking with David.

2 Samuel 12:1. *Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said to him, "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor."*

2) *"The rich [man] had exceedingly many flocks and herds."*

- 3) *"But the poor [man] had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him.*
- 4) *"And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."*
- 5) *So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "[As] the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!*
- 6) *"And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."*
- 7) *Then Nathan said to David, "You [are] the man! Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul.*
- 8) *'I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your keeping, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if [that had been] too little, I also would have given you much more!*
- 9) *'Why have you despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife [to be] your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon.*
- 10) *'Now therefore... (NKJV)*

Notice these next several verses because these are the consequences that he was going to deal with as a result of these actions.

- 10b) *... the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.'*
- 11) *"Thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give [them] to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. (NKJV)*

This was fulfilled with Absalom's actions that we read about earlier.

- 12) *'For you did [it] secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.'"*
- 13) *So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." (NKJV)*

In other words, "You're still going to make it into the kingdom. God is not holding this against your salvation. You're still going to be in God's kingdom." The Bible tells us even what role he is going to have. Let's notice the rest of it.

- 14) *"However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also [who is] born to you shall surely die."*
- 15) *Then Nathan departed to his house. (NKJV)*

Notice, even though God put away his sin and didn't hold it against him in terms of his salvation, and we know David winds up in God's kingdom, he still wound up paying for this as a result of his actions for the rest of his life.

You notice as we read, Absalom later basically stages a coup. He's got a rebellion going on and he's wrestling basically with David for the throne. David winds up with folks like Ahithophel setting out trying to kill him. These types of things happen for the rest of his life, because even though David had repented, if you think of the gravity of the actions that he took, there were a lot of people hurt. There are a lot of people offended and there was a shock wave that went out in every direction that he had to deal with. Some of these were not things that God would have necessarily had to bring about against him. All God would have had to do is not stop it. Follow the scenario here for a moment. Notice Ahithophel; we read about his situation and we know that he was Bathsheba's grandfather, and he was consumed obviously with hatred and bitterness over this, to the point that when he wasn't able to kill David, he killed himself. Imagine what his day-to-day life was like. He had to be seething with anger and resentment and bitterness over this. Probably not a day went by in his life when he didn't think about it. He played over and over in his mind what he'd like to do to David.

Now think about that. A guy that consumed with this kind of an issue, he didn't keep his mouth shut about that issue. You can guarantee it. He would have shared that story pretty much with anyone that would listen to him rant and rave about it. If he was that angry about it, every time David's name would have come up, "Let me tell you what that dirty so and so did to my family and what I'd like to do to him!" He would have shared that story. Imagine the ramifications of this.

This is commander and chief of the Israeli army and what has he done? He has taken one of his troops who got sent out on his orders to risk his life, fighting in hand-to-hand combat on the front line as a result of the king's instructions. Then word gets out amongst the troops. "You know what the king has been doing? While he sends us out to risk our lives to fight for him on his commands, he's back there at the mansion fooling around with your wife, and when he decides that you're inconvenient and you need to go away to cover up his sins, he just sets you up to get killed." What kind of affect does this have on troop morale as this story goes through the grape vine? You know this was hot, juicy gossip. David is the king. This story would have gone like hot potatoes through the whole place. Imagine the reaction this gets and the lack of trust that this creates amongst his people.

If you think about that, Absalom got a significant following. That didn't just happen because the king's son decided he wanted to try to get power for himself. Yes, he could have done that all on his own and politick for it, but why did he get such a following? Because there were a number of people who had a beef, who had issues with David and that would wind up basically pulling a lot of support to Absalom's side of the equation. These were natural consequences that played out that David would have to deal with for the rest of life. I say that because if we have really sinned against others,

it's important for us to realize that even when we say we are sorry and try to make amends for that, there can be damage. There can be damaged trust and hurt feelings, and it's not realistic to think, "Well, I said I was sorry. Don't all the consequences go away now? Isn't all the trust restored because I said I'm sorry?" Not necessarily; again depending upon the gravity of the sin that has been committed.

I've heard of situations where an individual actually demanded reconciliation. In other words, "I said I'm sorry with this, and now everybody is supposed to be my friend again." Okay, if we're taking that approach, we really don't understand the subject of how this works, of what forgiveness is about and how to reconcile with others. Because if we've caused that damage, we must be aware of that and be patient with other people to gain that trust back and realize that trust is gained over time.

Again, it comes down to the evaluation of the fruits of our behavior, and fruits are evaluated over time. Again, my point is to have realistic expectations of moving forward in a situation like that. It's important on both sides. That doesn't give us carte blanche to not be able to forgive other people. Realize again, that is a Biblical requirement. God requires us to let go of the debt of others because He attaches His ability to forgive us or the degree which He will forgive us to our own actions and how we forgive others. So we definitely want to be willing to let go of the debt and let those things go.

My point in this sermon is to realize it is okay for Christians in this situation where there has been repeated behavior, to set boundaries. Yes, we forgive others, but we can also set boundaries and say, "As long as this behavior is continuing, I'm no longer going to continue this relationship." Just to wind up the story where I started off in my introduction, that's the point where I came to with my father. It basically got to the point where the only mail I would get from him was either was some kind of anti-church literature or the religious idea of the month, because it was always changing and over time it got stranger and stranger. It got to an untenable situation to where we couldn't peaceably have a father and son relationship. I finally had to say, "You know, this isn't going to work anymore." I stopped that relationship because we couldn't get anywhere.

My point ultimately in this is that it's okay for a Christian to do that if you get into a situation where there is no other choice. You've tried to reconcile, you tried to work things out and the person you're trying to work with just won't hear you.

Again, it's also important if you've been on the other side of that equation and maybe you've been the person who has sinned against other. Realize in trying to do that reconciliation, you can't demand reconciliation. That's something you can request and try to work out. But realize it takes time for the person who has been wounded, if they have been hurt by that. Earning back that trust is something that takes time, and it can be the fruits of their behavior. It is the natural consequences that come with our wrong behavior with our own sins. We have to realize just like the lesson I learned when I was a teenager, just because we say we're sorry doesn't necessarily erase the damage we have done. We have to realize it can take time for people to heal and get over that for reconciliation to happen.

Well, as I mentioned in starting this sermon, it has not been my purpose to try to cover everything about the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation. That would certainly take a series of sermons to even try to attempt to cover all of that. That has not been my objective here. It's been more specifically to deal with the subject of; it is okay at times when we have to try to figure out as a Christian how to juggle the subjects of mercy and forgiveness versus trust and consequences. It's okay for us to set boundaries.

If we've been on the other side of that equation, we also should be patient and mindful of the damage we might have caused to others and allow them the chance to heal from that and not be demanding of the subject of reconciliation.