

## Forgiveness: Love in Action

Good morning A.M.C. family. When Sandeep asked me to preach originally we were beginning church at 11:00. This week at Church Council we decided in order to keep people more comfortable we would try starting earlier at 10:00. Seems like a good idea. Vaughn was the one who brought up that since we are starting early I will have to preach longer so that we can be here until 12. I know people are looking around hoping that I am joking. Trust me even if I were not joking the results would be the same, we will be done long before 12:00.

I want to talk about forgiveness this morning focusing on Jesus last words on the cross, **“Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”** I am getting some of my inspiration today from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s book, Strength to Love. I will try and give credit when I am using his thoughts, but may forget at times. If you hear me using words like “nullification” and “interposition” you can be pretty certain the words did not come from me.

I want to share with you an incredible story about a 24-year-old young man. It's a story of forgiveness, redemption and hope. It's a story that connects us with the essence of life. What this story reminded me of, is that though the life of this young man was marked by unspeakable violence and terrible loss, his life is also an inspiring story of hope, resilience, and strength.

Meet, Didier, a young man from Medellin, Columbia. When he was only 11 years old, Didier witnessed the killing of his mother, a street vendor. Recently he took the writer of this story to the spot where his mother was killed with 38 bullets. Dider was next to his mom when he saw her drop dead.

As a reaction to his mom's killing, Didier went down a self-destructive path and embraced a life of drugs, alcohol and crime for four years. “In drugs and alcohol I looked for the love that was taken away from me with the assassination of my mother,” he shared

In those years, Didier was also thinking about retaliation and vengeance. People in the neighborhood told him who the killer of his mom was. He was not living far away from Didier's home. Planning his vengeance, Didier started collecting guns and even two grenades in his room. At night he would cry and think of how he would kill his mother's assassin, but he never found the courage to do so.

The opportunity for change arrived when a friend, belonging to a Christian church, approached Didier. He was skeptical and dismissive at first but eventually accepted the words and the invitation of his friend. As he was realizing that the hatred he was harboring in his heart was consuming his soul and was killing him, he found the strength and the courage to forgive the man who killed his mom.

One day Didier saw the killer sitting on the the street curb. He joined him, sat next to him and asked him why he had killed his mother. The man broke down sobbing. Those tears were, for Didier, the confirmation that the man was the one who shot his mother to death.

Sometime later, Didier ran into the man again. He went up to him and told him, "I don't know why you killed my mother, but I forgive you." Didier embraced the man, and the guy once again broke down in sobs.

Only recently did Didier discover that it was indeed someone else who had killed his mother. He learned it from a friend, who inquired if Didier had indeed forgiven his mother's assassin. When he was assured, Didier's friend confessed to him, "My brother killed your mother." Since then, Didier has been trying to find the whereabouts of the killer, because he learned that he is facing troubles. "I want to give him my forgiveness, and try to help him," Didier told me.

For the past few years, Didier has been helping other youth who are facing trouble and problems. In a couple of months, he is planning on studying social work at a university. He has become an authentic and transformational leader, and a source of hope and wisdom for many. "If I was able to change and to forgive, then others can do so as well."

In today's text Luke tells us that when Jesus and the two criminals crucified with Him arrived at the Skull, the soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, along with the two criminals on both sides of Him. In this setting Martin says that, Jesus demonstrates by His words, His ability to match words with actions when He says, **In Luke 23** <sup>34</sup> **Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."** One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying. We tend to live in a persistent schizophrenia proudly professing noble principles on the one hand but seldom practicing them.

During Christ's ministry here on earth He talked passionately about forgiveness. He mentions in the prayer example He gave to the disciples, that in order for us to receive forgiveness we have to be forgiving. **Matthew 6: 14, 15** states, <sup>14</sup> **"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. <sup>15</sup> But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."** This idea of forgiveness as opposed to retaliation was quite unnatural. We have grown up with the Lord's Prayer so we are at least used to the idea, but in Peter's day Limited retaliation was the norm. In light of this Peter asks Jesus in **Matthew 18**, <sup>21</sup> **"Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"** Peter is actually being way too generous for his day, but Jesus answer is off the charts. <sup>22</sup> **"No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"**

M. L. King says, "A man cannot forgive up to four hundred and ninety times without forgiveness becoming a part of the habit structure of his being. Forgiveness becomes not an occasional act; but a permanent attitude." This resonates with the Kingdom values Jesus has been teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount He says, <sup>38</sup> **"You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'** <sup>39</sup> **But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. <sup>41</sup> If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a**

**mile, carry it two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.**

**<sup>43</sup> "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. <sup>44</sup> But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! <sup>45</sup> In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. <sup>46</sup> If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. <sup>47</sup> If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. <sup>48</sup> But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."**

Dr. King says that when His listeners heard these words it fell on their ears like strange music from a distant land. Their ears were not attuned to the tonal qualities of such amazing love. They had been taught to love their friends and hate their enemies. Their lives had been conditioned to seek redress in the time-honored tradition of retaliation. Yet Jesus taught them that only through a creative love for their enemies could they be children of their Father in heaven and also that love and forgiveness were absolute necessities for spiritual maturity.

We see Jesus live out His conviction when on the cross He says, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." The potential beauty of human life is constantly made ugly by man's ever-recurring song of retaliation. Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcome evil with good. Although crucified by hate, He responded with aggressive love.

What a magnificent lesson! Generations will rise and fall; men will continue to worship the god of revenge and bow before the altar of retaliation; but ever and again this noble lesson Calvary will be a nagging reminder that only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate.

The second part of Jesus statement is, “They don’t know what they are doing.” The men who cried “Crucify Him,” were not bad men but blind men. Martin Luther King said that the jeering mob who lined the roadside that led to Calvary were not evil people but blind people. They knew not what they did. Saul was not an evil intentioned person when he persecuted Christians, he was a sincere conscientious devotee of Israel’s faith. He persecuted Christians, not because he was devoid of integrity, but because he was devoid of enlightenment. The book Strength to Love was copywrited in 1963 a year before the Civil Rights Act. I am impressed with the way Dr. King called the people who wanted to hang on to a segregated society blind people not evil people. When I disagree strongly with someone else’s opinion do I categorize them as evil people or blind people? Of course before I get too judgemental I must also be aware of my own areas of blindness. Jesus talks about removing the plank in our own eyes before removing the speck in our brother’s eyes.

Though Martin Luther King talks about blind people rather than evil people he does not say it is okay to remain blind. George Floyd’s murder woke much of us up to our own blindness to the injustice around us. Unfortunately it has also woke up some of the white supremacists. We must be careful to not be blind to the un Christian rhetoric that we hear around us. This reminds me of a song we use to sing:

Who is on the Lord’s side?  
Who will serve the King?  
Who will be His helpers,  
Other lives to bring?  
Who will leave the world’s side?  
Who will face the foe?  
Who is on the Lord’s side?  
Who for Him will go?

By Thy grand redemption,  
By Thy grace divine,  
We are on the Lord’s side;  
Savior, we are Thine.

Let us remember Paul's words to the Ephesians, **“<sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. <sup>32</sup> Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”** Ephesians 4: 31, 32

Let us not forget our Savior's example who in great personal agony followed His own teaching and forgave.