

Introduction to Christian Ethics
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Unit #7 Key Ethical Themes in the Teaching of Jesus
7F Forgiveness and Reconciliation

- In our last lesson, we examined Jesus' teaching on the subject of our ethical duty to love others.
- We saw that His teaching is designed to stretch us in our dealings with others, teaching us humility and unselfishness in our service to them.
- He redefined the love standard in terms of His voluntary death for our benefit.
- He said that we must have that kind of love for fellow believers.
- Jesus' emphasis was not on tender feelings toward others, but on loving actions that focus on their needs.
- We are to love our enemies with loving actions aimed at their welfare.
- If we devote ourselves to such actions, in time our feelings will fall into line with those actions.
- Whether we feel like it or not, our love is to show itself in concrete loving actions toward both believers and unbelievers, close friends and bitter enemies, but especially to believers.

1. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

- Another extremely important theme in the ethical teaching of Jesus is the subject of **forgiveness and reconciliation**.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation are exemplified in the work of Jesus.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation are clear examples of love in action.
- In the life and death of Jesus we see the **God the Reconciler** in action.
- God in Jesus is the innocent offended party, the sinless one that others reject and mistreat, just as they have rejected God and offended against Him.
- Jesus made reconciliation possible by His cross.
- **[READ Rom 5:9f]**
- He takes the initiative in reconciliation by reaching out to the offender; and He freely forgives the offender who repents and believes.
- **[READ 2 Cor 5:17-21]**
- Notice that reconciliation is not just described here as *Jesus' task*.
- It is *our task* to help others to be reconciled to God.
- The message of reconciliation with God is ours to share with them.
- The great difficulty of this task is that a rebellious world has no

appreciation of the gravity of their estrangement from God.

- They don't think of themselves as rebels or offenders in need of reconciliation with God.

- So the front end of our task as reconcilers is to help people to understand their true situation with respect to God.

- If our lives are what they should be, we can raise the awareness of those who know us well concerning their own sinfulness.

- Jesus did that.

- But our lives may fall far short of demonstrating the high, honourable standard that they should meet.

- And even if our lives do exhibit a high moral standard, it may be that only a few people will come to know us well enough to be convicted by our lives.

- Consequently, we usually have no good alternative but to speak to people about their condition as God sees it in order to help conviction of sin to begin to grow in their hearts.

- But it is **very** difficult to help people to come under conviction with words.

- When we speak about the subject of human guilt, people commonly misunderstand our message.

- They may take offence, thinking that we are being judgmental or talking down to them.

- They often jump to the conclusion that we think we are better than them, so we must make it clear that we have the same sin problem and the same reconciliation need that they have.

- Alternatively or simultaneously, people may think that they can only approach God when they finally manage to clothe themselves in goodness of their own.

- They may even think that we have done this, if our lives radiate a wholesome purity and concern for others.

- People have a hard time understanding that good deeds and a pure life are not the key to receiving God's forgiveness and acceptance.

- It seems counter intuitive to them that good deeds and a pure life follow after God's forgiveness and flow from His cleansing.

Q: What has been your experience in trying to help people to understand that they need God's forgiveness and cleansing?

A: [DISCUSS]

- Our own individual lives are often marred by conflict and estrangement from others.

- Jesus' emphasized our duty of forgiveness and reconciliation on a personal level, and linked these duties to our status as forgiven by God.

- **[READ Lk 11:4; Mt 6:12-15]** (disciples prayer)
- Jesus teaches that when we ask God for forgiveness, we must be able to tell Him that we have forgiven others.
- He says very clearly that *forgiving others is a condition of being forgiven by God* and He insists that we acknowledge this truth in our prayers.
- He does not say that our forgiving others is a **ground or basis or reason** for our forgiveness by God.
- Rather it is a **condition** of receiving God's forgiveness.
- There is a very important distinction involved here, and Jesus expects thoughtful students of His to appreciate it.
- In the same way, young people may be invited on a weekend retreat on the condition that they get a parental permission slip.
- They are not invited on the weekend because they have such a slip or can get one, but they are not allowed to come without one.
- **This requirement that we forgive others is addressed to believers, and it is based on the fact that we are all great sinners who have been forgiven much by God.**
- Because we have been forgiven much by God, we can reasonably be required to forgive those who wrong us.
- We can love others because we have experienced God's love.
- In the same way, we can forgive others because we have experienced God's forgiveness.
- In fact we have been forgiven far more than we can possibly forgive others.
- If we refuse to forgive others we show that we have hard unrepentant hearts, and we do not appreciate what God has done for us in forgiving us.
- Jesus explained this principle in His parable of the unmerciful slave who was forgiven a very great debt, one absolutely impossible for a slave to repay (Mt 18:21-35).
- **[READ Mt 18:21-35]**
- According to this parable, we cannot refuse to forgive people, no matter how often they wrong us, because of the much greater debt that God has forgiven us.
- The clear point of this parable is that if we do not forgive others, we forfeit God's forgiveness.
- Those stubbornly unforgiving will be denied forgiveness by God.
- Even those who appear to have received God's forgiveness will find themselves unforgiven if they are unforgiving.
- **Of course, it is assumed here and elsewhere in Scripture that repentance is an essential step on the path to receiving forgiveness.**
- **[READ 1 Jn 1:9]**

- It is wonderful to know that Jesus practices what He preaches where forgiveness is concerned.
- We can be confident that Jesus always forgives the sincerely repentant.
- **[READ Mt 5:6]**
- *Our thirst for righteousness is not something that we can satisfy by and for ourselves.*
- *The truly repentant person experiences this hunger for righteousness and is keenly aware of his personal inability to satisfy this hunger for himself.*
- *He wants to be clean within and right with God, and it takes Jesus and God's grace to make this possible.*

- But what if the person who has offended against us does not repent or ask for forgiveness?

- Is it all right for us to stand back, keep our distance and withhold forgiveness until the guilty person apologizes or asks for forgiveness?

- This seems to be the normal human pattern that we naturally slip into.

Q: But does God endorse it?

A: [READ Lk 17:3]

- Jesus is saying here that *we have a responsibility to rebuke a brother in Christ who sins or offends against us.*

- The word, "**brother**" makes it clear that Jesus is speaking about the situation when one believer sins against another one.

- And Jesus' instruction to **rebuke** the offender implies that there has not been any repentance yet.

- *Obviously, it is not right for a believer to do nothing until the offending believer feels guilty, says he is sorry and asks for forgiveness.*

- Jesus instructs us to rebuke the offender.

- Of course, how we rebuke someone is very important.

- And the right way is not with ranting, yelling or self-righteous accusation as though to say, I the "rebuker" am good and you the "rebukee" are bad.

- Put your finger in your Bible here at **Luke 17:3** so that we can come back to it in a moment; and turn with me to the epistle of **Jude**.

- There is some very important teaching on the subject of rebuking in this very short letter.

- **[READ Verse 4]**

- This verse makes clear that Jude is speaking about people who appear among God's people although they don't really belong there.

- These impostors show their true colours in various ways.

- **Verses 8 and 10 [READ]** remind us that these are the kind of people who rant against others, slandering and speaking abusively.

- In contrast to this unacceptable sort of behaviour, Jude points us to the good example of an angel's behaviour in verse 9

- **[READ verse 9].**

Q: Now what is the point of this verse?

A: Jude is telling us that rebuking is something that should be done in a soft tone of voice.

- We might think that when an archangel like Michael rebukes someone as wrongheaded, perverse and guilty as Satan himself, such a high-ranking and authoritative angel would let out all the stops and give Satan a real verbal blast.

- ***You or I might be inclined to do that to Satan if we had such an opportunity, and believers sometimes do this to each other.***

- But Jesus' half brother, Jude, tells us that ***even when rebuking Satan, Michael didn't speak harshly.***

- He just said to him, ***"The Lord rebuke you!"***

- In other words may God help you to see how wrong your conduct or attitude is from His point of view.

- ***The purpose of rebuking someone is to help him to see for himself that he is in the wrong, so as to change his mind about his behaviour.***

- That is why the most effective rebuking is not loud, angry or unnecessarily hurtful or insulting.

- It is an attempt to bring a person to repentance, not an opportunity to get even by scolding or administering a verbal thrashing.

- A loud, angry rebuke prompts a defensive attitude or an equally loud and angry retort.

- ***A proper rebuke points the individual to God's perspective on his behaviour, and by doing this encourages the offending person's conscience to do its proper convicting job.***

- The words, ***"The Lord rebuke you!"*** are not a prayer for God to give the person what he deserves.

- They are designed to try to bring the individual to his senses.

- If Michael had been asking God to punish Satan, he would have used words such as ***judge*** or ***punish***, not ***rebuke***.

- The Greek word used here <***epitimao***> means ***to reprove, censure, speak seriously to, warn.***

- The words, ***"The Lord rebuke you!"*** are an invitation to seriously consider God's perspective on one's behaviour.

- ***It is our duty to the person who offends against us to encourage that person to do just that.***

- Gentle words have the best chance of accomplishing this purpose.

- Turn back with me now to **Luke 17:3 [READ]**
- The second half of this verse tells us that *whether it comes early or late, when there is repentance we have no justification for refusing to forgive a fellow believer.*

- But the question we started out to try to answer a while ago was, *“Is it all right for us to wait to forgive until the guilty person apologizes or asks for forgiveness?”*
- **Repentance is very important; a person who is in the wrong needs to do this for the sake of his relationship with God.**
- That is why we are instructed to rebuke the person who sins against us.
- Even God requires repentance before He forgives.
- **So would God ask us to do more than He does?**
- Human experience shows clearly that **forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be complete without repentance.**
- Even if we forgive someone, there is always something missing when there has been no repentance.
- But *the importance of repentance does not stop God from reaching out to the unrepentant offender before the sinner has any thought of his guilt or need for forgiveness.*
- *So Jesus teaches us to rebuke the offender.*
- *And the example of God in Jesus encourages us to seek reconciliation when we are the offended party.*
- **[READ Mt 18:15-18; Mk 11:24f]**
- But Jesus also taught that *when we have offended against someone we should make personal reconciliation our highest priority.*
- **[READ Mt 5:23-26]**
- In other words, **the duty to try to initiate reconciliation belongs to me whether I am the offender or the offended person.**
- It is because of our obligation to love others and so to forgive them and actively seek reconciliation with them, that Jesus imposes restrictions on our personal anger:
- **[READ Mt 5:22]**
- The most reliable copies of Matthew’s gospel do not include the words, *“without cause,”* in this verse.
- Q: Just what do you suppose this teaching of Jesus means in practical terms?**
- Q: Does it mean that we never have a right to be angry with anyone?**
- A:** This would seem to be a very difficult principle to accept and live by, because at times we all feel justified in being angry with others.

- But if we take Jesus' words about anger seriously, each of us has a personal anger-management problem, and we are probably living by a lower standard than Jesus wants us to live by, where our anger is concerned.
- There are Scriptures that give us practical guidelines for our personal anger management.
- Let's examine a few of them.
- **[READ Rom 12:18-21]**
- We are to make every possible effort to live at peace with everyone.
- This means that instead of trying to get even with people who opposed to our best interests we should go out of our way to be kind and generous to them.
- This involves overcoming their evil with good, and it may succeed in making a friend out of an enemy.
- **[READ James 1:19f]**
- Verse 19 says that we are to be slow to anger, and verse 20 explains why.
- Jesus taught us to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness (Mt 6:33).
- The reference in verse 19 to God's righteousness, reminds us that we are to seek to make it ours, deliberately working to become more like Him.
- The problem is that human anger does not build or promote God's kind of righteousness in us.
- **[READ Ephes 4:26f]**
- The obvious meaning of verse 26 is that anger is not necessarily sinful, in and of itself, but it can lead to sin, and we are not to let it do so.
- This verse does not tell us how to do so, but the next verse does.
- The reference to sunset, reflects the Jewish view that each day ends at sunset.
- The point then is that one day's anger is not to be held onto and it certainly is not to be carried forward from one day to the next.
- Carrying it forward is sinful because it can lead to various forms of sin.
- One problem with holding on to anger is that ongoing anger is the best friend and ally of an unforgiving spirit, and no one can afford to hold onto that sort of spirit.
- **[READ Col 3:18f]**
- In verse 18 Paul warns wives against a failing that they may fall into, having a rebellious attitude toward their husbands.
- The balancing verse, verse 19, warns husbands against a failing that they are prone to, - becoming embittered against their wives.
- Such an attitude develops when small wrongs or big ones are remembered, perhaps not individually, but as a group.

- Thus, a low level of anger is allowed to simmer in a man's heart day in and day out, and a harsh, unloving attitude develops.

Q: Do you have any thoughts that you would like to share on the issues of forgiveness, reconciliation and personal anger management?

A: [DISCUSS]