

## *“Sorry, Not Sorry...”*

*Psalm 1; John 21:15-19*

June 6, 2021

Isn't it interesting that some of life's truly great insight or advice often comes out of the blue? As in, you're not expecting it but, all of the sudden, here's this amazing "life hack" or "pro tip" which, when followed, makes a positive difference in your life and those around you. Take for example once while I was working my first job, a colleague noticing my tie was tied rather sloppily. He offered to help me and, seeing as he was a sharp dresser, I accepted. I've tied that same knot he showed me back in the early nineties ever since.

Or take the time I was just hanging out with my good friend Matt at his parent's house back when I was in high school. Matt had done something to his sister, I don't really remember what but it was a minor irritation. But it was wrong, whatever it was. Matt's Dad came into the living room where we were at and he ask Matt if he'd make whatever it was up to his younger sister.

Matt replied, "I said I was sorry."

Matt's Dad gently shook his head and uttered words that struck home with me then and continue to reverberate in my life. He looked at Matt and, with a slight edge in his voice, he said, "Don't just say you're sorry, BE "you're sorry."

What he meant by that was immediately clear. Words, as they say, are cheap and simply saying "I'm sorry" is oftentimes far less satisfying a response to the one we've harmed than we imagine.

But we've often been on the other side, haven't we? Having been truly harmed, how acceptable is it to you when all you're issued is a half-hearted apology. I remember someone once telling me the sure sign that you'd crossed from adolescent to adult is that "Sorry, I was drunk" no longer is a sufficient response to the harm you've caused. And, again, I think this is totally right on the money.

I also can't help but look out and, with many, bemoan the state of our present "cancel culture." For those of you happily unaware, "cancel culture" is a name affixed to the grace-less dynamic of shaming others anonymously over the internet for actions oftentimes long since forgotten and abandoned. "Cancel culture" is the surest sign that we've become a grace-less society. We simply can't or won't forgive others.

But forgiving others isn't always the most difficult thing in the world. Too often we grow comfortable harboring the resentments in our life until they become as familiar to us as our aging pets. But just telling people to be forgiving is oftentimes as useless as suggesting to a group of overtired children that they settle-down.

But there is a way to become more forgiving but it might not begin in quite the place you think. I'm going to read you two passages this morning from the New Testament. The first comes from the Gospel of Luke, it's the story of Zacchaeus. The second passage is one from the Gospel of Matthew, specifically from the Sermon on the Mount, a section filled with Jesus's moral and ethical teachings.

I invite you to hear now the Word of our Lord from **the Gospel of Luke, the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 1-10** – "He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So, he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So, he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

**Matthew 5:23-27** – "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Zacchaeus's story from the Gospel of Luke brings us face-to-face with a cultural marker from the time. You see, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Now, today, we don't necessarily like IRS auditors very much when

they come calling but that is, in no way, comparable to the detestation felt by people in Ancient Israel had towards tax collectors. You see, back then, the Romans farmed out the actual collection of tax revenues to the Jewish people themselves. So, a tax collector would be given a revenue goal and, well, anything above that collected was his to keep. Moreover, tax collectors were granted the power and protection of the state. Which meant that if you didn't pay them the money they told you to pay, you could be arrested, killed even, for failing to obey Caesar's command.

So, they weren't well-liked.

Zacchaeus though, is just having an ordinary day, save for the fact that the much-talked-about Jesus was known to be coming through town. So, Zacchaeus got there bright and early. But, being a short man, soon the crowds were just too tall for him to see over. So, he shimmies up a sycamore tree to get a better look.

It's there that Jesus calls to him. Being summoned by such a well-regarded figure must've been a shock to Zacchaeus. Having been hated by so many for so long, it isn't surprising that Jesus' request is so gladly accepted. "I must stay at your house," Jesus says. Soon, Zacchaeus is scurrying down that same sycamore tree.

And he says to Jesus – "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Clearly Zacchaeus said something correct because Jesus' response is quite telling. "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

What Zacchaeus says which draws these words of praise from Jesus is that he is planning to make amends to those he'd done wrongly. IN fact, so great is his desire to make restitution that he's even going to give away more money than he's defrauded people of, four times as much, and even establish a fund for the poor. Jesus celebrates this desire to make restitution, to reconcile with those he'd harmed.

Now, it's important we don't read this wrong. Jesus isn't saying, "Because you are doing this, Zacchaeus, you will be saved." Quite the opposite actually. What Jesus rejoices over is the change of heart that Zacchaeus' amend-making clearly demonstrates. He's not just saying he's "sorry." No, Zacchaeus is being the embodiment of "I'm sorry." It signals that this once lost man has NOW been found by God. Through his summons, Zacchaeus has been changed by Jesus. Alerted to his standing with God Himself.

In that space of gratitude, of accepting that amazing forgiveness, Zacchaeus' life is so thoroughly righted that his primary desire is to be reconciled with his community, the very people he'd harmed. And, in order to do that, he's not just going to offer some weak words, some half-hearted apology. He's going to set things right in just the manner that Jesus has set things right for him.

Our other New Testament passage points us at the same theme. As I said previously, the Sermon on the Mount which runs from chapter 5 through chapter 7 of the Gospel of Matthew sees Jesus dispense His wisdom on various moral and ethical topics. One of which, as it relates to being "I'm sorry" is that Jesus specifies that in order to be in right relationship with God, one must be in right relationship with the people around you.

What Jesus is getting at is a deep concern. You see, those that aren't willing to forgive others are often blissfully unaware of their own faults and harm done to others. After all, as Jesus tells in the Gospel of John, "Let he who has no sin cast the first stone." That is to say that once one becomes convicted of their own sinfulness, forgiving others becomes much, much easier.

In the Sermon on the Mount, what we hear is that being reconciled to others, particularly those we've harmed, is a concern of the Almighty. In fact, if we're about to make an offering to God and realize that we've done someone wrong, harmed them in some real way, then we're supposed to leave the altar, right the wrong, and return only after having put things back in order.

Again, this isn't a salvation issue, it's a sanctification issue. Those Christians who've been truly called by Jesus are simply going to do things that don't make a ton of sense to the world around them. I can imagine that there were more than a few skeptical or critical voices concerning Zacchaeus' declaration. And there is sure to be puzzled looks or concerned words issued should any of us set out to make amends when nothing is really expected of us.

What we've been talking about over the last several weeks in the sermon series called "Authentically Christian" is a pattern of steps Christians take to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. We've talked about reaching the end of ourselves, about recognizing what God has done for us through Jesus' atonement and turning our lives over to God. Then, we take stock, looking at the good and bad in us with an eye to removing

those troubling traits and tendencies which harm ourselves or others. Now, having recorded those issues, we turn our attention towards setting right what we ourselves have done wrong.

So, who are the people that'll be on your list? Who are those people that you know, deep within, that you've done harm to? Perhaps its someone obvious like an ex-spouse or an old boss. Maybe the people you've harmed are closer, even. Maybe it's your children or your parents. Truth be told, it could be anyone in our lives. Sadly, the people we most often injure are those we love the most. But regardless of who it is or what we've done, it is essential that we as Christians do our very best in order to make up for our own misdeeds.

We do this for a number of reasons, really. First, we make our amends to the people we've harmed because we don't want that junk weighing us down. Here's what I mean by that. Quite often, it is the guilt we carry around over our own pasts that create all sorts of havoc in our life. Counselor Andy Green puts it this way, "the stress of the guilt itself can have a serious effect on some people. While mostly psychological, some physical effects can include insomnia, a loss of appetite, and an overall dreary feeling."

When we harbor feelings of guilt over things we've done in the past, our minds darken, our hearts harden and we're left wandering the earth in pain. And how does that old adage go? "It's hurting people that hurt people." How true that is.

But now, standing fully in the light of our Lord, having been summoned to Him by His Holy Spirit, we have both the desire and the energy to rectify those incidents in our lives where we've behaved wrongly. Galatians 5:1a reads, "For freedom, Christ has set us free...". You see, God doesn't want you living life under the lash of guilt so He's empowering you to set your life right. And that path to that freedom from guilt runs right through making things up to other people, as far as humanely possible.

But atoning for past misdeeds will not ONLY free you from guilt, it will ALSO strengthen your faith in Jesus Christ. As you make amends to others you will absolutely need God's strength to go through with it. Having sat down with the very people you've spent energy hiding from because of your guilt and then offering to sincerely make up for whatever it is you've done will, I guarantee it, require you to rely on God's power. It's hard to look into the face of people you've wronged. Harder still to swallow one's pride and admit that the harm done was truly your fault.

But just saying "Hey man, I'm really sorry I lied about you" or "stole something from you" doesn't necessarily do very much. On the other hand, making up for the misdeed, be it with words restoring someone's reputation or a cash repayment, is the right way to go. As Jesus says "Go make up with your brother." He's not telling us to just say "I'm sorry." No, what is clearly meant is that the harm done is set to right, be that with money, with time, with energy or with love.

I am positively convinced that if we Christians all did that, this world would change for the better. How? Hear me out.

To begin with, think about how freeing it will be for all the people we've harmed. Think for a moment, just in your own life. Is there someone who did you wrong in the past? Sure there is. Are you still on occasion, thinking about that past misdeed? Do you devote time and energy into actively disliking the person who did it to you? Sure you do!

Now, imagine just for one second, that that person, well, they call you on the phone and tell you they'd like to have a chat. Then, perhaps over coffee, they say those words you've longed to hear. "Hey, you know, I really harmed you. Not only am I sorry, I'd like to make things as right as I can." The person then proceeds to make good whatever harm they've done to you such that all feelings of ill-will recede. Freed from that active resentment, you find you've got more mental energy to do other, far more meaningful things than think lowly of the person who "done you wrong."

Wouldn't that be a blessing?

Well, imagine this, you can be that blessing to the people in your life that you've intentionally or inadvertently done wrong yourself. Way back in Genesis 12 when God calls Abraham, God tells him that his descendants will be a blessing to the world, my sense is this is one of the means by which we do so.

By seeking out forgiveness and making restitution, we Christians can set the tone for the broader society. We really can change the world and this is one that I believe will have an immediate effect.

First of all, one of the raps against Christians is always that they're hypocritical. That is the world believes that we say one thing but do the other. One of the means by which we disarm this poisonous perception is by being accountable. For as we talk with the person we've harmed, trying to find a way to make things right, we will invariably talk about what's prompted such a change of heart. There, it is fully appropriate to make a Christian declaration.

We can, by simply righting the wrongs in our individual paths, do two amazing things which, as I said, will help the world. First, we will be freed from our guilt.

I told you last week about a time where I turned off the lights on my sister's Brownie scouts meeting, effectively cancelling it. Well, what I didn't tell you is what happened afterwards. You see, it didn't take very long for my Mom to figure out exactly what had happened. Arriving at home, she sent me to my room. She let me stew there for a good, long while. During that time, oh, how my conscience worked on me. Finally, when she came in, I was ready to confess.

I don't recollect but I'm fairly well sure that I figured a confession was all my Mom was looking for. Ah, but Mom knew that I could learn a lesson here. She informed me that, at the next meeting, I was going to have to go and apologize and make it up to them.

I worried all week about that confession and apology. How would it be received? I was like 6 at the time and to this day I remember the worry I had that whole week leading up to it. But finally, the day arrived. I told the scouts what I'd done and I offered to clean up after them for their next several sessions. No, I didn't enjoy doing it. But here's what I remember. Sweeping up was easier to bear than carrying the guilt of having gotten away with doing something wrong.

Friends, are you ready to change the world?

What I'd like to challenge everyone to do this week is seek someone out you know you've done wrong. Putting aside whatever it is you think that person did led you to your poor behavior. Be accountable. Say more than I'm sorry. Be willing to make it up to them.

Here's a guarantee. If you don't feel better about yourself and your relationship with Jesus Christ, I'll bake you a cake. My guess is that my stand mixer will continue gathering dust though.

Better still, once you've started this process and begin feeling just how good it can be to live with neither regret nor guilt, you'll want to continue doing so. A couple of "pro tips."

1. Only do so if it won't injure the person or others. However, injury to your pride or pocketbook is not sufficient reason not to do this.
2. Sometimes the only way we can make things up to people, especially those who've died, is to simply avoid doing to others what we did to them.
3. Continue to seek out those you've harmed and set all things that you're able to aright.
4. Always bring God along

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.