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A Christ-like Response Attitudisms

Matthew 18:21-22, read to 35

1. What Forgiveness is Not

- Easy

- *Psalm 130:3-4*

- Forgetting

- *Isaiah 38:17; Micah 7:19; Jeremiah 31:34*

- Trust

- *Proverbs 26:23-25*

*** Trust is Earned, Forgiveness is Free**

2. What Forgiveness Is

- Preceded by God

- *Isaiah 43:25; 1 John 4:19; John 3:16-17; Matthew 18:32-35*

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- For Your Sake, Also

- *Mark 11:25*

- Commanded by God

- *Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 6:14-15; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29*

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Isms: A Christ-like Response Attitudisms

Today we are going to explore another installment of “attitudisms” – Pastor Casey preached a message early on in our “isms” series about attitudisms, and we are going to conclude our series today with another one.

With all the ugliness going on in our culture today, this particular attitudism we are going to talk about seems to be missing. And it's unfortunate, because with all the Christians we have in the US, we should be seeing this practiced all over our culture today. Sadly, it is missing in too many places, in too many communities, and in too many relationships. Besides genuine love, I am convinced that this particular issue is the *one* thing that could make all the difference in our world today; certainly in our culture. In fact without this, you cannot love, and if a person genuinely loves others, this is going to be evident – sooner or later. You could say that it is the greatest proof of love.

This Sunday is the last sermon in our summer-long sermon series called “Isms: A Christ-like Response,” looking at some of the different ideas facing us in our culture today. We will wrap all this up next weekend with a pastors' panel discussion, answering questions that you have raised.

I also want to remind you that we've been in this series because there are bad “isms” and ideas and philosophies that are around us every day and dominant in our culture. Often they affect and infect our faith without our ever, even being aware of it, and there are Christian responses that we should have. So in this series we have been calling these hot-button issues to our attention, so that we can see what the Bible says about them, and know what our position should be and how to respond in Christ-like, loving, grace-filled ways to the people who hold to these views, with the intent that we can better introduce them to Jesus.

So what is this mysterious, missing “ism” we are talking about today? It is *forgiveness*. It could help us so much today, because we are reminded daily about how divided our country is: whether it is liberals vs. conservatives, gays against straights, Muslims against Christians, whites against blacks, or if you watch the news or listen to late night comics: Trump against immigration, or Trump against Mexicans, or Trump against his own cabinet, Trump against *any* news media, or Trump against everyone. Almost everything we read on social media or hear on the news is fomenting horrible vitriol and division in our country. It seems like all we focus on anymore is our *own* “rights” – the right we have to our own opinions, and heaven forbid if someone has a different opinion than our own! We focus on our right to *not* be offended by someone else's opinion that is different than ours. That kind of attitude even makes its way into churches when people disagree about things going on in a church. In the words of my friend, Norm Koenig, “We've lost all civility!”

So what would happen if we quit focusing on our own rights? What if we quit focusing on how we've been ignored or how we've been offended or how we've been hurt, and what if we started practicing forgiveness?

One time in our marriage, I did something really dumb (I know – you can't imagine I would *ever* do something dumb in our marriage!). Well, Shelly let me know about it, and I apologized, and we made up. But from time to time, Shelly would mention that dumb thing I did.

Finally one day I said, "Honey, why do you keep bringing that up? I thought your policy was 'forgive and forget'." She said, "It is. I just don't want *you* to forget that I have forgiven and forgotten."

Okay that was a joke – that didn't really happen. I'm sure you knew it was a joke as soon as I claimed that I did something dumb, right? Truthfully, I am incredibly blessed; being married to a woman who forgives me for a multitude of dumb things I've done over the years!

Now, if I were to ask the question, "Should we forgive others?" I'm pretty confident that everyone here would say "yes." (At least I hope you would – if you don't believe that, then you've got a whole bunch of other issues.) So I don't intend to speak about *that* we should forgive; I think a better question to ask is, "*How* can I forgive?" And that is a very good question. It's not a question to be taken lightly either, because choosing to forgive can be a life-altering thing.

Learning to be a person who forgives will set you free; *not* being able to forgive can cripple you for life and even kill you emotionally and physically. Because I know, when we talk about forgiveness, we're not just talking about forgiving someone who cut in front of you in line at the grocery store, although we should readily do that. For many of us, we are carrying around deep wounds that are incredibly heavy. I'm telling you today that there is freedom in forgiveness.

The reality is that one out of every three women in this room will suffer some form of sexual abuse during their lives. A quarter of all women are victimized before they turn 18. That's true for one in six men, too. The number one cause of injury among women between 18-44 is violence.

Ninety percent of those were abused by a family member, or someone outside the family that they knew and trusted. That doesn't even take into account the amount of spousal abuse that happens every day, of all sorts; physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual. Just those of us in this room alone have a lot to forgive.

Maybe you are thinking that those are national averages, and so it must be better among Christians, right? While Christian marriages have been shown to have a slighter lower incidence of abuse, the tragic truth is that wife battering occurs in Christian homes as well. Generalizing from all the studies done in churches among Christian women, one can conservatively estimate that for every 60 married women in a church, 10 are being verbally abused by their husbands, and two or three are being physically beaten as well.

Reverend Joy Bussert, director of the Battered Women Project of the Minnesota Council of Churches, says, "Batterers are often pillars of our churches, men who teach Sunday School

and serve on the church council.”¹ Beyond abuse, *every day* people suffer from things ranging from being victims of violent crimes to being victims of racism to being victims of gossip and victims of disrespect. We’ve all got wounds, and therefore we all have things to forgive. Now don’t misunderstand me – I’m not saying if you are in an abusive marriage that forgiveness means you should continue to submit to abuse. My point is that statistically, everyone in this room has a need to forgive someone.

Some of you have buried your pain so deeply that you can’t even consciously acknowledge it. But let me tell you that those who interact with you, and those who are close to you, they know something is there, because that junk is spilling out in your interactions. They see it and feel it. You may not see it, but I bet if you were honest, you’d admit you feel it, too – it is not as deeply buried as you might think. The need to forgive is something that comes with being human in this sin-busted, broken world. It is something we all have to deal with to some degree or another, all the time.

Jesus taught about this issue of forgiveness quite a bit – it is something that he knew we would struggle with, but that we needed to do. In one passage, the Bible describes an exchange between Peter and Jesus about this issue:

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” (Matthew 18:21-22, read to 35, niv)

In this passage, Peter asked Jesus a question, and then gave his own answer. Peter was not so interested in finding the answer as he was trying to impress Jesus with *his* answer. Peter thought he was being very generous in using hyperbole to suggest that he would forgive seven times. He had good reason to feel that way – the Jewish rabbi’s taught that a man should forgive his brother three times, and after that he didn’t have to do it anymore. So Peter thought that he was being very generous in his offer to forgive seven times. And Peter expected Jesus to tell him how good he was – kind of like getting a gold star. But instead, Jesus’ answer is that Christians must forgive “seventy times even.” What Jesus is really saying is that a Christian *never stops* forgiving.

Let me begin by explaining...

1. What ***Forgiveness*** is ***Not***

In all my over 30 years as a pastor, helping people deal with sin and with pain and with dysfunction in their lives, I find that in almost every case, if they could forgive, they would find deeper if not complete healing. But often what stops us from being able to forgive wrongs done against us is that we struggle with misconceptions about what forgiveness is and what it is not.

First, accept the fact that forgiving someone is not...

¹ Marlin Vis, *Battered into Submission*, “Preaching Today,” Tape #134

- ***Easy***

Forgiving someone who has hurt us is not an easy thing to do, so don't be surprised when you struggle to do so. The Bible makes it evident that the reason we stand in awe of God is because *He* forgives:

“If you kept a record of our sins, who could escape being condemned? But you forgive us, so that we should stand in awe of you.” (Psalm 130:3-4, gnb)

You've probably heard the old maxim, “to err is human; to forgive is divine.” That's actually quite true. It is a godly thing to be able to forgive someone, which means it is something difficult, if not impossible, for us as humans to do.

So if you are going to begin the task of forgiving someone, just note that it won't be the easiest thing that you do; in fact, you will need the help of God to do so. Remember that – we will come back to it.

Keep in mind also that forgiveness is not...

- ***Forgetting***

We might make another maxim that says, “To forgive is divine, and forgetting is too!” God seems to be able to forget our sins. Isaiah says:

“In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.” (Isaiah 38:17, niv)

Another Old Testament prophet by the name of Micah said:

“Compassion is on its way to us. You'll stamp out our wrongdoing. You'll sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean.” (Micah 7:19, tmt)

And the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that God forgets our sin when he quotes God himself who says:

“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
(Jeremiah 31:34, niv)

Someone has once said that if you asked God about a sin that he has forgiven you of, he will say, “I distinctly remember forgetting that.” But forgetting sin does not seem to be a trait that God has passed on to us humans. Sometimes we can forget those slight offenses against us, but ask anyone who has suffered abuse whether or not they can forget that it ever happened. It is not possible for us to forget such dreadful things; they are a part of us, and always will be. They have become a part of your psyche as much as your arm or your leg is part of your body. But just as Jesus still has the scars from when we humans crucified him, our scars can become reminders of the great work of healing and restoration that God can bring into our lives.

The fact that we can't forget leads to another myth about forgiveness, namely that forgiveness is not...

- ***Trust***

This is something that people often misunderstand. They think that if they forgive someone then that means that they have to immediately trust that person, too. But that simply is not the case!

The Bible does not say that we should trust evil people. In fact, it actually warns us *against* doing so. I love how direct the Message Bible translates it:

“Smooth talk from an evil heart is like glaze on cracked pottery. Your enemy shakes hands and greets you like an old friend, all the while conniving against you. When he speaks warmly to you, don’t believe him for a minute; he’s just waiting for the chance to rip you off.” (Proverbs 26:23-25, tmt)

Listen carefully: you give trust to those who have *earned it* – or at least they haven’t broken it. Trust is earned. But no one earns forgiveness; you forgive whether they’ve earned it or not. This is something you are going to want to remember:

Trust is Earned, Forgiveness is Free

You will see that forgiveness is something that we are to *do* – it does not matter whether the offender has earned it or not. But *trust* is a different thing. You can choose to withhold trust, but forgiveness you must choose to give.

Now I do want to make a note here, however: if you’ve been hurt, you do not have to trust the offender. To trust an offender could be a mistake. But it’s equally as bad a mistake if you *DON’T* trust someone who has not broken your trust, or not done something to deserve that. If you are making everyone else in your life pay for the sin that someone else committed against you, then you are not being healthy, in fact *you* are offending against *them*. I don’t mean that you should trust anyone and everyone, but I do mean that you should give people the chance to earn it.

So when you’ve been hurt, don’t think that forgiving the person who hurt you is going to be easy, and don’t think that it means you should forget the offense, or that you should right away trust the person who has hurt you.

So now let’s see...

2. What *Forgiveness* Is

I heard a story of a pastor who was nearing the end of a worship service, so he asked congregation, “How many of you have forgiven your enemies?” Everyone raised their hands except one small, elderly lady. The pastor said, “Mrs. Jones? Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?” “I don’t have an enemy in the world,” she replied, smiling sweetly. The pastor said, “Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?” “I happen to be 98 years young!” she said. “Oh Mrs. Jones, would you please come down to the front and tell all of us how a person can live 98 years and not have a single enemy?” So the little,

sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, slowly turned and faced the congregation, and said, "I outlived them all!"

Well, forgiveness is more than just waiting for our enemies to die, or outliving them!

Before you and I can be able to forgive, we must have first experienced it; it *must* be...

- **Preceded by God**

We must first experience God's forgiveness if we are going to be able to forgive others. We've already said that forgiveness is something that God does. The Bible tells us:

"I am the God who forgives your sins, and I do this because of who I am. I will not hold your sins against you." (Isaiah 43:25, gnb)

The fact of the matter is, we can't give what we don't have. We need God if we are going to be able to forgive. We need his forgiveness if we are going to be able to do it ourselves. The Bible says:

"We love because God loved us first." (1 John 4:19, gnb)

The converse of that is true, too: if we don't know God's love, we can't truly love others, either. So once we know God's love, we can love like He does. And you can't forgive without love, nor can you love without forgiving.

Have you experienced God's forgiveness? DO you know his love? Are you in a relationship with God, living in his love and forgiveness every day? You can have that! Because...

"God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!" (John 3:16-17, gnb)

If you have not accepted God's forgiveness for your sins (which are all offenses against him that have hurt him – that sent Jesus to the cross) then don't be surprised if you struggle to forgive those who have committed offenses against you and have hurt you.

In that passage we looked at earlier about Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone, Jesus said "seventy times seven." Jesus then told a story about a man who owed a king millions of dollars of debt, but was forgiven of that debt by the king and set free. As soon as the guy went free, he went out and beat up a guy who owed him a few dollars.

Then the king heard about it, and as Jesus tells the story, the king summoned the man and said:

"'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matt. 18:32-35, niv)

We cannot give what we don't have. Then, once we have it, we must give it. And yet we can't be healed if we don't give it. Therefore, we *must* experience God's forgiveness.

Something else you need to know is that forgiveness is...

- **Daily**

Forgiveness is not easy, so it's not something you will be able to just decide once that you are going to do it, and then you are done. The deeper the offence, the more this will be true. So it is something you will have to choose to do each day, sometimes even each hour. You will need to do it again and again. Because the Bible tells us:

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13, niv)

That phrases "bear with" and "forgive" in the original language have an *ongoing* intention, which means it is a daily choice you make, in God's power and help.

Also, very importantly, forgiveness also means...

- **Letting Go**

Forgiveness does not mean you can forget what happened to you – we've already talked about that. But it does mean that you can live without the hurt and offence having control over you. To forgive means you must let go of the offense. If you refuse to let go, you don't control it; it controls you.

The definition of forgiveness is:

*To grant pardon for or remission of (an offense, debt, etc.); to absolve.
To give up all claim on account of; remit.*

If we are going to forgive, it means we are going to let go of the right we *think* we have to make the person pay for their offense. That's why the Bible says:

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:31-32, niv)

To "get rid of" means to let go! Forgive.

Years after her concentration camp experiences in Nazi Germany, Corrie Ten Boom met face to face one of the most cruel and heartless German guards that she had ever contacted. He had humiliated and degraded her and her sister. He had jeered and taunted, leering at them as they stood in the delousing shower.

Now he stood before her with his hand outstretched and said, "Will you forgive me?" She writes, "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, 'Jesus, help me!' Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang

into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother.' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!"

When you don't forgive, you think you are putting the offender in an emotional prison. But, *to forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover that the prisoner was actually you. (repeat)*

You see, forgiveness is...

- For ***Your Sake***, Also

When God asks you to forgive, it is as much for your sake as it is for the person you are forgiving. In fact, sometimes the person you are forgiving won't even know that you've done so – I'm not suggesting you have to tell them you've done so. And sometimes the person has long since died.

Regardless, it is for your own good to do so. That pain in you will turn to bitterness, and bitterness is to your spirit what cancer is to your body, except that there is a 100% cure for bitterness, and that is forgiveness. Someone has said that bitterness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. The *only* way to get rid of the pain and bitterness is to forgive. And when you do, you will find fresh waves of God's love and forgiveness washing over you. Jesus said:

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11:25, niv)

Let me tell you about Michelle; I've talked about her story before. She was a girl in our youth group years ago when I was a youth pastor. She was in a wheel chair because when she was two years old she was playing in her front yard and a drunk driver drove up over their curb in their yard, hit her, pinning her under the car as he drug her down the street before finally stopping. She ended up paralyzed from the chest down. By the time I knew her, she had been through multiple surgeries to try to stabilize her back.

Surprisingly, she was a happy person – always very kind and sweet. But one day she showed up in my office distraught and angry. She said that things were going bad for her and she didn't know why. Lately she was in a bad mood all the time. She was getting into arguments with her mom, which was very unusual. When little kids would stare at her (as kids will do), she would snap at them in anger. She was a straight-A student who was suddenly flunking her classes; she couldn't concentrate. She asked me what was wrong with her.

I asked her when this started, and she said it had begun about three weeks earlier. I began to ask her questions, searching with her to find out what might have happened three weeks ago. Finally after all kinds of questions, we discovered, and she remembered, that she had heard from a friend, third hand, that the man who ran over her might be getting out of prison and might be moving back into the area. She didn't even know if it was true or not. She couldn't even remember what he looked like.

There was pain and hurt in her that she didn't even know she had until the possibility came up of her seeing that man. The solution to her problems involved her going through the process of forgiving the man who did such a horrible thing to her. It wasn't easy, and it took awhile; it was a daily process. The guy certainly didn't deserve it, and I don't know that he ever knew she did it. But soon she was back to her kind and gentle self.

I know it's not fair, because the person who hurt you will never deserve to be forgiven. But then, neither do you and I deserve to be forgiven by God. But you *must* give it, because you and I won't be free of sin until we first allow God to forgive us, and then we won't be free of the pain and bitterness until we forgive those who have hurt us.

Lastly, you need to know that forgiveness is...

- ***Commanded*** by God.

Forgiveness is not an option for Christians. It is so important, that God doesn't give us a choice – he commands it. The Bible says:

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32, niv)

Most of you know that about two and a half years ago I was involved in an auto accident; it was a pretty significant accident that resulted in me receiving a traumatic brain injury. The accident was not my fault. I was driving the speed limit when a guy driving a motorcycle, going 80 mph around the turn lost control and ditched in front of me, causing my vehicle to flip, slide upside down and roll several times down an embankment. He didn't even get a scratch.

I still deal with the results of that. My brain can still do what it used to do, but it takes a lot more work, and I've had to alter my lifestyle in order to continue working at the level that this church and my life needs me to. Every day I deal with it, and unless the Lord heals me, I will for the rest of my life.

I've never seen the guy again since that day. I climbed up the embankment with my head split open, blood running everywhere, trying to find *him* to make sure he was okay. He had pulled his bike out of the road and was standing there looking at it. He did not even try to find me – he seemed more concerned about his motorcycle. He has never contacted me to offer help or to say he was sorry. I heard from a friend of his that he was laughing about it later.

For a long time, I didn't think about him – I was too busy recovering. But my thoughts would wander, especially when we learned he had no insurance and no financial means of taking responsibility. He owns a business in Seattle, but it is a franchise, so it is protected from lawsuits against him. I will admit that a couple of times, I had to take my thoughts captive, because I wanted to hate him. I learned that he is Vietnamese, and the enemy even tried once to make me hate him for *that*. I admit that, but I'll tell you I threw that thought out of my mind.

I have chosen to forgive him. I *had* to; I couldn't let his choices continue to have control over me. I wasn't willing to be imprisoned in emotional and spiritual pain and bitterness. I

bear the scars of *his* choice on *my* body. I didn't want internal scars too. Does he know I've forgiven him? Not unless he listens to this. Would I tell him to his face if I ever saw him? You'd better believe it. I would *have to* – for God's sake, his sake, and mine.

Does that mean I should forget it? I can't. Should I trust him? I won't. Does that mean he shouldn't face the consequences? No. Our attorneys reported him to the police for driving without insurance and not taking responsibility. That is a punishable offense. The most that happened to him would have been a small fine and suspension of his license. That's all the law will do. Still, my forgiveness does not negate the legal consequences of his choice. Did I want vengeance? Absolutely not. What happens to him legally is up to God and the justice system. It is no concern of mine. I've forgiven him.

Do I have to forgive him daily? Sometimes. Some days are harder than others, and now I go for weeks without thinking about it. But when I do think of him – like right now – I *still* have to choose to forgive. Because I have been forgiven by Jesus for a whole lot worse than what that guy did to me.

And that is what I remember when I come to communion together with you; I remember that Jesus died because of my sin. And because of his death, I can be forgiven. So I can't come to the table with unforgiveness in my heart.

Jesus said:

“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:14-15, niv)

This is why the Apostle Paul challenged the church in Corinth about making sure their hearts were clear before they shared together in communion:

“Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,

This is my body, broken for you.
Do this to remember me.

After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:

This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.
Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of “remembrance” you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe.

If you give no thought (or worse, don't care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you're running the risk of serious consequences." (1 Corinthians 11:23-29, tmt)

So before we come to the table together, I have some self-examination questions for you to ask yourself:

- "Have I been forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, by accepting his death in my place, and living for him in his resurrection life?" *give time, lead in prayer.*

Secondly, ask yourself:

- Is there anyone who has slighted me, insulted me, offended me, or deeply wounded me that I have not forgiven? *Pause* Confess to God your desire to forgive. Ask him to help you, but say it to yourself: "I forgive _____. I will no longer hold them in an emotional prison for what they did (which really only imprisons me). God, forgive my bitterness, help me to forgive, and heal my wounds. I choose to forgive. And I will continue to choose it until my heart and my emotions come into agreement with you."

Now, let's come to the table (explain)