

THOUGHTS ON FORGIVENESS: NO FISHING ALLOWED

Matthew 5:44-45a

Worship Moment Message

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44-45a NRSV).

MESSAGE

When dealing with issues in life where we struggle to forgive, we need to look to the cross. Unfortunately, many Christians, including those from the first century, have had difficulty accepting the fact that Jesus was so willing to forgive those who tortured and killed him. Some early copyists of the New Testament had so much trouble with this that they were willing to violate their pledge to accuracy by deliberately omitted Jesus' prayer from Luke's Gospel, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (23:34). But we have plenty of other reliable manuscripts that indicate that Jesus did indeed offer this prayer. And by doing so he was modeling what he had taught them: "Love your enemies."

The concern behind this teaching is this: your behavior shows to whom you belong. If you behave like those who hurt you then they own you. Not only have they hurt you but you have allowed them to pull your soul down into a dark abyss. But if you behave like Jesus then you show that you belong to God and your soul is free.

Jesus would have been expected to pray an entirely different prayer. Those who were about to be executed were supposed to say, "May my death atone for all my sins." But unlike the rest of us, Jesus had no sins of his own to atone for. Instead he confesses the sin of those who had wrongly condemned him.

If we have done something wrong we need to acknowledge that and seek to make amends. But many Christians suffer from what is called neurotic guilt. This is because we tend to reject self-love and foster ridiculous standards of perfection. As a result, the most difficult person to forgive is the one we see in the mirror each morning.

If we do not learn to forgive ourselves then we have a double problem. Our inability to forgive ourselves makes it harder to forgive others. Our inability to forgive ourselves also means we get trapped in an immobilizing circle of blame, shame, guilt and fear.

By the grace of God we can accept ourselves as we are. God's love for us is not based on appearance or performance. It is an unearned gift. It flows from his grace. Such love in turn leads us to self-acceptance and a healthy self-love.

The Bible clearly teaches that even as Christians we will continue to struggle with sin. The fact of this struggle often leads us into self-judgment. But we must remember that though the struggle will remain a part of this life, the final outcome is assured. Christ is victorious over sin and death!

Corrie ten Boom survived a concentration camp during the WWII and afterwards she spoke often about forgiveness. She wrote about confessing her sins to God and commented on what God did with them, "They are now cast into the deepest sea and a sign is put up that says NO FISHING ALLOWED!"¹

1. Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (Fort Washington: CLC Publications, 1974),116.