

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

March 1, 2016

Survey Results. Well, as may happen with today's "Super Tuesday," the voting was a bit underwhelming this week for what to call this column and what image to use for "the Five Things." Most of the feedback leaned toward keeping the title as "Dave's Laptop" or something similar.

For the moment, at least, I've retitled it with one of the suggested titles that seems to capture what I'm trying to do here. And of those who offered feedback, I believe the image of the cross was the unanimous choice as a way to display "The Five Things."

On Paying Attention. Like most pastors, my hope from Sunday to Sunday is that you will be like the saints in ancient Berea, "*who listened eagerly to Paul's message [and] searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth*" (Acts 17:11).

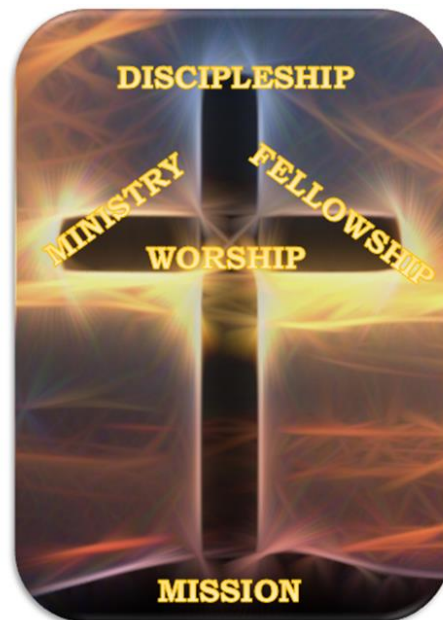
Along that line, as you participate in your 40-Day groups this week, you may notice Pastor Warren saying something that seems to contradict something I said in last Sunday's sermon. Here's what I said:

"People frequently say, 'God will never put more on you than you can bear.' Unfortunately, that's not only not in the Bible, that's simply not true. God frequently does allow us to face burdens that are more than we can bear—so that we can learn to allow God to bear them for us.¹

"My friends, God doesn't call you to do what you can do. God calls you to do things too big for you—so God can do them through you and for you. God's purpose is to give you incredible peace, unbelievable power and unstoppable joy *in the midst of* life's pain and misfortune, but this only happens through discipleship—through learning to live like Jesus—through trusting and obeying Him."

And as you heard me say that, some of you may even have thought about the verse Rick cites in the video to support his apparently contravening point: "*The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. **He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure***" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

I pondered that verse as I was preparing the sermon, and still decided to say what I said, and here's why. It seems to me that when people use the phrase "God will never put more on you than you can bear," the implication almost always has to do with their own strength.



¹ Dr. Steven Drake, Director of Supervised Ministry Experience at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, at the Annual Meeting of the Lebanon Baptist Association, Friendship Baptist Church, Meadowview, Virginia, October 14, 2004. (This is a post I once held at the seminary.)

Actually, I can't *ever* remember someone using that phrase—which is more or less in the Bible, as you can see—without using it apart from its *critical* context: “**God will show you a way out.**” And that’s precisely the problem. God’s purpose isn’t to show us how strong WE are. God’s purpose is to show us how strong HE is.

My good friend, Herb Peak, explains this verse in a way I find helpful. Herb says, “Whenever we become aware of temptation, almost in that very same moment we are also aware of how we can resist or avoid it. The first impulse comes from Satan; the second from God’s Holy Spirit. It’s as though God gives us the exit, the off-ramp, just as quickly as Satan springs the trap. If we take that exit, we receive the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13. If we don’t reflexively choose God’s way, then we usually find that it’s a long way to the next ramp.”



It’s when we don’t take the off-ramps God provides that we find ourselves lost in the wilderness. As someone memorably quipped, “**sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.**”

And as often as we continue to make the very same mistakes over and over again, just so often is God’s promise Good News for us: “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Now *that’s* Good News; and that brings me to the idea of “forgiveness.”

On Forgiveness. The small group that Earl Sasser and I are facilitating meets right after worship on Sunday, and among other things, we had an excellent discussion this week about the process of forgiveness as we experience it—or don’t—in our lives. I shared with the group some thoughts about forgiveness that I learned from Lewis Smedes’ book, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (HarperOne, 1996).

While I think Dr. Smedes’ title creates more problems than it solves, the process he describes has real power for spiritual transformation. Here’s my summary of the ideas I find most helpful

As I’m sure you know, forgiveness represents the very heart of the Good News of Jesus. Forgiveness offered and received is central to Christian faith. Still, I suspect that most of us know a lot more about standing in need of forgiveness than we know about the power to forgive. Forgiveness is difficult. It is not for the faint of heart.

When wrong is done to us, or to persons or to institutions that we love, our relationship with the perpetrators of this wrong is fractured, if not completely shattered. While we know that Jesus told us to love our enemies and to forgive our offenders times without number, this is much easier to say than it is to actually do. We say the words, “I forgive you,” but many times I think we say the words long before they become real. Such premature speaking may in fact short-circuit much of the spiritual power that the Cross of Jesus released into the world, robbing our lives and our churches of much that God would give us.

Professor Smedes helps us greatly when he points out that forgiveness is really a **four-**step process. How long it takes to move through the process is determined by many variables, chief of which is the depth of the wound. Smedes’ four stages are HURT, HATE, HEALING,

and COMING TOGETHER (reconciliation). Each stage needs to be filled with the desire that God's Spirit will enable us to see and feel as God sees and feels.

Now persons who have been offended are frequently advised—especially in religious circles—to move directly from stage one to stage four, from “Hurt” to “Coming Together” (and this is what Rick does in our book). Far from producing forgiveness, such short-circuiting (which is really denial, distortion, and dishonesty) leads instead to avoidance, to distancing from others, and to creeping spiritual impotence. All four stages must be honored if healing is to come

1. **HURT** doesn't need much explanation. Hurt is the visceral experience of being wounded, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes the wound is physical, sometimes psychological or spiritual. Physical responses may include anger, hyperventilation, avoidance, flight, fight, etc.
2. **HATE** quickly follows hurt. Hate involves our nearly instinctual desire to hurt in return, the desire to inflict pain even beyond that which we have suffered. While we cannot nurse our hate, we must acknowledge it and allow it to speak, if real forgiveness is ever to follow. While healing only comes through the release of forgiveness, we short-circuit the healing process if we avoid acknowledging the depth of the wound. Forgiveness will not be complete if it fails to penetrate the depth of the wound. Hatred and anger take us to that darkest place.

When we are in this stage we often ruminate about the offense. We have a hard time thinking about anything else. We avoid the other person, and we're afraid of what we might do if we see them. We may fantasize about what we'd like to do to them. When the offense comes into our minds, we feel anger. Our heart rates increase. We may clench our fists, actually or metaphorically. If healing is to come, we do not *nurture* hate, but we do *acknowledge* it.

Healing must be powerful enough to deal with all of this intensity. Superficial statements of “it doesn't matter” or quick statements of forgiveness do not get to the bottom of the wound. This stage can last quite a long time.

3. **HEALING** is the longest stage. After we have experienced the darkness for a time, and it is sometimes a long, long time, we begin to be aware of another Presence beside us in our pain. If we open our suffering as best we can to this Spirit of God, we are gradually enabled to view our afflictors through “softer eyes,” and the third stage, an “Inner Healing” begins.

Forgiveness is not “acting as though it didn't happen,” because while trust is easily destroyed, it is not easily rebuilt. If our relationship ever returns to a place of great trust, that restoration is significantly dependent on the offender's willingness to behave in trustworthy ways. Still, this requires that we grant the offender some opportunity to be trustworthy.

We don't let our guard down entirely, but we do let it down enough to permit small demonstrations of trustworthiness. When we're with the offender, we don't give him or her “the silent treatment,” but are as courteous and kind as we can manage. While we don't protect the



offender from the natural and appropriate consequences of the offense, neither do we try to augment or supplement her or his pain.

In this third stage, we are past the intensity of our pain and have entered a time of relative emptiness. We may quietly discover that our anger has subsided, and we may feel little or nothing when the wound comes into our minds. We may feel sadness. We may no longer avoid the offender, but we have little interest in being with him or her. As God's Spirit continues to work in us—sometimes over a period of years—we begin to see our offender through God's eyes.

We begin to sense his or her own pain and brokenness, out of which our own wound was given. We begin to be able to pray just the tiniest bit for this person's healing. We begin to think of him or her with growing compassion rather than with anger or hatred. We no longer experience physiological changes when the offense comes to mind. As God continues to grant us the mind of Christ, we eventually find ourselves able to say with our Lord, "*Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing.*"

At long last, we find that we can "put our end of the rope down," no longer feeling any need to tug or pull against the offender. We can walk away from the wound into the future, continuing to pray for God's healing and blessing in the offender's life. While we may think of the wound when seeing this other person, we do not ever bring it up again except as an expression of thanks for God's healing.

As healing becomes complete, we become able to invite the offender to restore the relationship at some level—the "Coming Together." This final stage of forgiveness, leading to reconciliation, depends as much on the offender as on the offended. Forgiveness, like grace, must be received.

4. **COMING TOGETHER** may or may not happen. Coming together has to do with reconciliation, with spoken forgiveness, which we can offer with or without repentance on the other person's part, even as Jesus did from the Cross. Sometimes the other person is dead by the time we ourselves get to this point. Sometimes they have become unavailable in other ways, such as dementia or distance. Our own final release sometimes comes through writing a letter offering forgiveness that we may or may not ever mail. Many people find it very powerful to burn such a letter as an act of sacrifice to God.

If you and I are to offer authentic forgiveness to each other, forgiveness that liberates us from the quicksand of bitterness and sets us free to love our neighbors—of whatever color or tribe—as we love ourselves, *we are going to have to give them what they need, not what they deserve.* Is this not the essence of the grace God has given to us? As Dr. Smedes put it, "**When we forgive, we ride the crest of God's cosmic wave. We walk in stride with God.**"

I'm challenged by Martin Luther King Jr.'s words a year before his death: "We shall match your capacity to *inflict* suffering by our capacity to *endure* suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. . . . Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you.



Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”²

Let me close with this prayer, found on a scrap of paper in one of the Nazi death camps:

*Lord, when you enter into your glory, do not remember only people of good will.
Remember also those of ill will.*

Do not remember their cruelty and their violence.

Instead, be mindful of the fruits we bore because of what they did to us.

Remember the patience of some and the courage of others.

*Recall the camaraderie, humility, fidelity, and greatness of soul
which they awoke in us.*

*And grant, O Lord, that the fruit we bore may one day be their redemption.*³

May it be so, O Lord.

Dave



² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 40.

³ Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 87.

P.S. On Sunday I mentioned C. S. Lewis's wonderful sermon, *The Weight of Glory*.⁴ I mentioned it in the context of suffering, but Lewis also has some wonderful things to say in this sermon about forgiveness. I've appended the entire sermon, but below I've pulled out the specific things he says about forgiveness:

"To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not nearly so easy as I thought. Real belief in it is the sort of thing that very easily slips away if we don't keep on polishing it up."

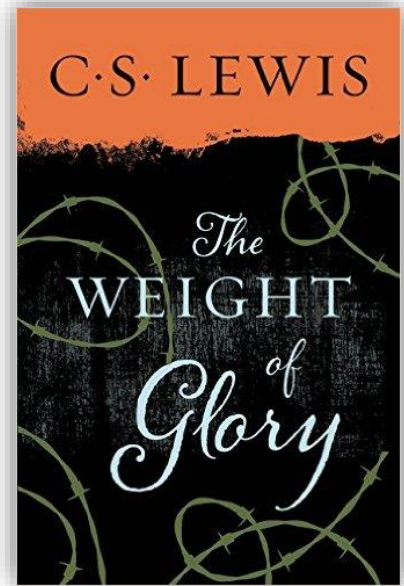
"We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. . . . If you don't forgive you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it."

"There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says, 'Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.' But excusing says 'I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame.' If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites."

"If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your action needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. But the trouble is that what we call 'asking God's forgiveness' very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses. What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some 'extenuating circumstances.' We are so very anxious to point these out to God (and to ourselves) that we are apt to forget the really important thing; that is, the bit left over, the bit which the excuses don't cover, the bit which is inexcusable but not, thank God, unforgivable. And if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves."

"There are two remedies for this danger. One is to remember that God knows all the real excuses very much better than we do. If there are real 'extenuating circumstances' there is no fear that He will overlook them. . . . The second remedy is really and truly to believe in the forgiveness of sins. A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in it, from thinking that God will not take us to Himself again unless He is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favour. But that would not be forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it."

"When it comes to a question of our forgiving other people, it is partly the same and partly different. It is the same because, here also, forgiving does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think that it does. They think that if you ask them to forgive someone



⁴ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," originally preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, England, on 8 June, 1942.

who has cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out that there was really no cheating or no bullying. But if that were so, there would be nothing to forgive. They keep on replying, 'But I tell you the man broke a most solemn promise.' Exactly: that is precisely what you have to forgive. (This doesn't mean that you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every taste of resentment in your own heart—every wish to humiliate or hurt him or to pay him out.) The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God's forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people's we do not accept them easily enough. As regards my own sins it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are not really so good as I think; as regards other men's sins against me it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are better than I think."

"To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.' We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what He says."

