Good & Beautiful & Kind
Chapter 8 ~ The Gift of Forgiveness

In the opening paragraph of this chapter Rich lays out the stark reality, "*At some point, someone will hurt you…When this experience comes our way, there are two agonizing options before us: to forgive or not to forgive.*" (page 159) I think we all know the "right", or "Christian", option to take. We also know that is far easier said than done. While forgiveness is of paramount importance in the Christian faith, it generally takes deeply well-formed people to truly forgive…people who are very secure in the Father's love, who have experienced forgiveness themselves and have a deep desire to pursue God's will over their own. In other words, we have to become the type of people who can forgive.

- *If you're willing, describe a time when you struggled to forgive someone. (Or, perhaps there's currently someone you're struggling to forgive.) Conversely, if you're willing, describe a time when you needed forgiveness.*

"*The question is not whether forgiveness is the right thing to do. The question is, In a racialized, politicized, and polarized society, can we hold together all the layers of pain while pronouncing grace over another?*" (page 162) "*To forgive is to cancel the debt owed, to forego retribution, to say no to revenge. It's the clear recognition of wrongdoing but the refusal to continue the cycle of offense.*" (page 163)

Why is forgiveness so important? First, because it reflects God and His character/nature…thus to forgive bears witness to the reality of God. Second, because it values relationships and prioritizes peace…without forgiveness there can be no peace. (I'm reminded of the book *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu) Third, it recognizes the malformative, cancer-like damage it can cause to the inner-self when forgiveness is withheld. As Rich says, "*Forgiveness is inner freedom from allowing the wound inflicted from another to be the primary and permanent point of reference from which we relate to the world.*" (page 163)

In this chapter Rich gives us some practical, realistic guidance on forgiveness. He offers us some key points regarding forgiveness…or rather what forgiveness is not (see pages 167-169)…

- ➢ Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting.
- ➢ Forgiveness doesn't mean there are no consequences.
- ➢ Forgiveness doesn't mean you no longer feel the pain of grieving.
- ➢ Forgiveness doesn't always mean reconciliation with another person.

- *Which of those did you need to hear? Which of those would you like more clarity on?*

Rich, leaning on the work of others, also points out that forgiveness is a journey that comes in stages which mirror the stages of grief that come with dying (see pages 171-173)…

- ➢ Denial
- ➢ Anger

- ➢ Bargaining
- ➢ Depression
- ➢ Acceptance

"*All these stages are not necessarily linear and neatly lived out, but they offer important language to name the interior movements of the soul. Forgiveness is such a holy, redemptive act that it requires careful attention to the many layers at work within.*" (page 173)

- *In your own experience of forgiveness, can you share if/how you've experienced these stages?*

The point is that forgiveness is a challenging process. One temptation is to "forgive" in a shallow, superficial, quick and easy way that actually isn't true forgiveness. The other temptation is to refuse to forgive…but, as we've already established, that just eats away at us and will likely come out sideways and create even more damage.

How do we know when we've actually come to a place that we've truly forgiven somebody? I think the words of the great 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas can be helpful. "*To love is to will the good of another.*" Since love is supreme, when we can get to the point that we want good even for someone who has hurt us, we can probably safely say we've forgiven them. It is important to note this connection between forgiveness and love. God desires us to become people who love like He loves…which by extension means we need to forgive as God forgives.

We all know Jesus taught in parables. Two of the most well known and well loved parables are The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) and The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). These have formed the Christian imagination for centuries. But I would add a third parable…the same one Rich brings up in this chapter…The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18). All three of these parables teach us something about love, as well as the lack of love. We would do well to ruminate regularly on these parables.

Reading this chapter reminded me of a book I read years ago, *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande. In it he outlines "The Seven A's of Confession"…

1. Address Everyone Involved
2. Avoid, If, But, and Maybe
3. Admit Specifically
4. Acknowledge the Hurt
5. Accept the Consequences
6. Alter Your Behavior
7. Ask for Forgiveness (and Allow Time)

I don't offer this as a set of steps to follow, but these are wise considerations for when the time comes for us to apologize and seek forgiveness.

- *If you're willing, share a time when someone sincerely apologized to you? What convinced you of their sincerity? How did you respond? Share a time when you sincerely apologized to someone. How did you know you needed to ask for forgiveness? How did they respond?*

Forgiveness is a central theme and emphasis in the Christian faith…

- ➢ Our need for God's forgiveness
- ➢ God's desire to forgive us
- ➢ The need for us to forgive one another

In fact, we could say that if the whole theme/topic of forgiveness were removed, there would be no Christian story. Additionally, it seems self-evident to anyone who's been in relationships that we are very challenged to get along with one another. It doesn't take long before forgiveness becomes a necessity if relationships have any hope of enduring and being healthy.

I appreciate the letter Rich shares near the end of the chapter to his wife Rosie. It highlights an often overlooked reality in relationships (often between spouses or any long-term relationships with frequent interactions)…that is, the tendency to fall into patterns of behavior or relational rhythms that slowly take a toll on relationships. So, it's not so much that some big incident occurred that brought major hurt and pain with it. Rather, it's small, almost incidental, often unintentional, little slights that become a way of relating. Over time this cultivates bitterness, resentment, and a dysfunctional relationship.

All that to say, relationships (especially the important ones) require a lot of paying attention and cultivating healthy relational patterns. It is tempting, and lazy, to overlook "little issues", as they tend to snowball into bigger ones. Think back to the last chapter and the emphasis on "healthy speaking", "careful listening", and helpful phrases such as "*I notice…*", "*I value…*", "*I feel…*".

Earlier I referenced the book *The Peacemaker*. I'm also reminded of a helpful graphic from that book…"The Slippery Slope of Conflict"



adapted from "The Peacemaker" by Ken Sande

If I may get personal with you for a moment. My personal tendency is to "overlook" an offense (or try to…often convincing myself that I have)…which, if I haven't truly let it go, slides to

"denial" or perhaps even "withdrawal" or disengagement. There have been a few conflicts in my life where involving a mediator was necessary.

- *We all have our ways of dealing (or not dealing) with conflict. As you look over The Slippery Slope graphic, what's your tendency when offended or hurt?*

As we wrap up this week, let's put all this into the BIG picture, theologically. What God is ultimately up to is restoring all things…making all things new in Christ Jesus. One of the main things that needs restoring/renewing is relationships (between God and us, and us with one another). That can't happen without forgiveness…both giving and receiving. This being the case, then, it is imperative that we have practices (maybe even habits) that we lean on to help us…

- ➢ Pay attention to what's really going on inside of us.
- ➢ Self-regulate when things get tense.
- ➢ Process through our emotions in healthy ways.
- ➢ Relate well with God and others.

Much of the spiritual formation practices we encourage (i.e. Soul Training Exercises) are designed to help us cultivate such habits.

- *What practices do you utilize specifically with the goal of developing emotional and relational health?*

- *Is there an important relationship in your life in which the status quo is less than desirable? Is it possible that there's some relational pattern you're stuck in? Is it possible that there's a need for forgiveness and healing? How might you apply this, and recent chapters, to that situation?*

<u>Soul Training Exercise ~ Giving & Receiving Forgiveness</u>

This week's invitation to take some time to sit with God and inventory your relationships. Is there a relationship in your life in which you need to extend forgiveness (or at least start moving in the direction of being able to forgive)? Is there a relationship in your life in which you need to seek forgiveness?

It's possible that the relationships in which forgiveness is needed are "out of sight, out of mind"…i.e. They are not relationships with people you are currently in regular contact with. Thus, it's easy to forget about the issue, the fissure, the rupture in the relationship. This is why sitting with Jesus and asking Him to bring it to mind is a key part of this exercise.

Should a relationship come to mind, then also seek God's guidance on how to approach it…what might be the next steps. You may also want to seek wise counsel or a trusted friend for perspective. (Talking to another person also increases the likelihood that you might act on it as opposed to making this simply a mental exercise, thereby short-circuiting the forgiveness process.) Remember, true forgiveness bears witness to the reality of Jesus and His kingdom.