

Key verses:

Luke 19:10 (NIV) – "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

1 Peter 3:9 (NIV) – Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Today I am going to talk about the central Biblical topic of Forgiveness. I have two theme verses for today's message:

In Luke 19:10 (NIV), Jesus tells us His primary mission– "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

And then in 1 Peter 3:9 (NIV) we are told the primary way we should relate to our fellow human beings – "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

Today I am going to talk about the two sides of forgiveness: 1) forgiving, and 2) being forgiven.

After we have the experience of forgiveness from God, we can come back to the true purpose for which we were created: to bear God's image, which He intended for us in the beginning. This is how we should live in the Kingdom of God, sharing blessings with one another.

After we are invited into fellowship with God and brought into God's family, we are given important life principles in two basic spheres of life: to keep fellowship with God (the vertical relationship) and to maintain fellowship with other human beings (the horizontal relationship). These life principles include, for example: daily study of the Bible, prayer, being filled with the Holy Spirit, confessing sins, and forgiving one another. We do not often talk about the word "forgiveness," but I would like to share this word with you today. "Forgiveness" not only maintains a good relationship between God and myself, or between myself and other people, but also there are other great blessings that can be ours if we follow God's way.

The Bible says we humans have original sin, however, some people question if there really is such a thing. About ten years ago (August 22nd 2013), I found an interesting article in "The Japan News" newspaper. The article was about an investment trust called the "Vice Fund." Vice means "evil." The article said something like this: A mutual fund called the Vice Fund in America has been showing a very good performance, except during the year of the Lehman Shock in 2008. This Vice Fund is a mutual fund established in Dallas, Texas, which invests in industries associated with human bad habits and greed. They are sometimes called "sin stocks." This mutual fund anticipates that human beings have something inside which compels us to do bad even if we know we should not do so. The article said this fund has been showing a good performance financially.

We human beings have something inside us that we cannot control. Paul says in Romans 7:15 (NASB) – "For I do not understand what I am doing; for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate." I myself suffered this problem often before I met Jesus. As I told you a few weeks ago, in the Bible the word "sin" is used for the lifestyle that is off-mark (missing the mark) and it shows that we have turned our back on God. Sin can be an obstacle in every person's life. It seems that everything goes in a bad direction when we turn our back on God. But there is

something more that results from sin. Because of sin, we are in the state of having lost our true life, the Bible says.

Romans 6:23 (ESV) – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Yes, the Bible says that when we turn our back on God, we are in the state of being lost.

Let me explain the Bible teaching on “forgiveness.” There are three main Hebrew words translated as “forgiveness” in the Old Testament – three verbs:

1. כָּפַר (*kā-pār*). It means: to make atonement, cover, compensate; *eg.* Psalm 78:38.
2. נָשָׂא (*nā-sā'*). It means: to remove guilt; *eg.* Genesis 50:17.
3. סָלַח (*sā-lāh*). It means: to pardon, release; *eg.* 1 Kings 8:30, Leviticus 4:20.

When we look at these words, we get the impression that we cannot accomplish this by ourselves, so somebody has to do it for us. Our need for “Forgiveness” shows what a big gap separates us from God; therefore, it means that God himself takes the sin away from us. When sin is removed, the relationship between God and us will be restored. When we have re-connected with God, who is the source of life, this means that we will be able to receive every blessing which God had planned for us long ago.

Let’s look at “Forgiveness” in the New Testament. The main Greek word used is:

1. ἄφεσις (*aphesis*). It means: pardon, release.

When we have the Communion service, we often read Matthew 26:28 (NIV) — “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Here, the term “forgiveness” signifies pardon of debt (acquittal), pardon of punishment. It is used for those who are released from prison.

This word emphasizes God’s free (one sided) grace and mercy. Through the Atonement of Christ, this leads to the forgiveness of debt, that is, forgiveness of the sins we have committed.

Jesus is sent by God as a liberator authorized to forgive sins, so Jesus Himself proclaims the forgiveness of sins.

In Mark 2:5 (NIV), Jesus says, “Your sins have been forgiven.”

In Acts 4:12 (NIV) Peter says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

By this we experience the unconditional love of God, and now those who partake of this forgiveness are expected to forgive their neighbors. In part of the Lord’s Prayer, we read in Matthew 6:12 (NASB), “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” In Matthew 18:21 (NASB) we read, “Then Peter came up and said to Him, “Lord, how many times shall my brother sin against me and I still forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus answers “up to seventy times seven,” meaning we are to forgive our brother countless times.

This teaching from the Bible is the word of life, the word of grace. Not only are we liberated and blessed by our forgiveness from God, but we also can inherit blessings from one another. Let’s read 1 Peter 3:9 (NIV) – “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Let's look at some stories of "Forgiveness" in the Scriptures, beginning with the story of Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was the Head tax collector of Jericho. Although he had great wealth, he was ostracized by his fellow countrymen. When Jesus passed through Jericho, Zacchaeus was converted through his contact with the love of Jesus, and the good news of the gospel was also brought into his home.

Let's read Luke 19:1-10 (NIV) – Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The "tax collector" mentioned in the Gospels is the man who collected taxes. Such men were agents of the Roman Empire's tax collectors. These local tax collectors often squeezed as much money out of the provincial people as they could, and made extra money beyond the money that they paid to the Roman government. Thus, most tax collectors were ostracized by the Jewish people (Matthew 9:10-13) and condemned (Matthew 21:31). For this reason, they could not join the Jewish community, and most people were reluctant to even become friends of such men. However, experiencing the love of Jesus, not a few tax collectors, such as Zacchaeus and Matthew, believed in Jesus.

Let's look again at Luke 19:1-10

v1: Jericho. You remember Jericho, right? In the book of Joshua, Jericho is the first city the Israelites conquer. And in the Gospel narratives, this is where Jesus healed the blind man Bartimaeus (Matthew 20:29, Luke 18:35).

v2: Zacchaeus lived in the town. He was a chief tax collector and he was very rich.

v3: He wanted to see who Jesus was. There were a lot of people in the crowd. He probably understood his sinfulness, so he sought salvation. He had heard of Jesus, too.

v4: He climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Jesus, because he was quite a short man. Jesus was coming that way. I wonder: can a grown man climb a tree? Wow – he really wanted to see Jesus.

v5: Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name. Zacchaeus must have been so happy about that. He was a social outcast, but Jesus actually knows this man's name. Since Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, maybe his name was well-known.

"I must stay at your house," Jesus said. This is what we call a "Divine Appointment."

Zacchaeus realizes that he is accepted by Jesus.

v6: With great joy, Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus. We can imagine how great was his joy.

v7: We see how negative the people's reaction was.

v8: Now that Zacchaeus has been accepted by Jesus, he was able to face his own sins honestly. Thus, he is able to break away from his sins. So Zacchaeus knew what to do next.

According to Jewish rules, it is quite common to pay back four times as much for "stealing" (Leviticus 6:5, Numbers 5:7). In the book of Leviticus it is written that a man must return what he stole plus one fifth of the amount. Zacchaeus can see from this action that he has truly been changed.

v9: In response to Zacchaeus's conversion, Jesus declared, "Salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus was touched and changed by Jesus. Jesus says that Zacchaeus is also a son of Abraham. That means he is a true Jew.

Not only are they descendants of Abraham's lineage (God's chosen people), but they also walk in the footsteps of Abraham's faith (Romans 4:12). Although he was ostracized in Jewish society, Jesus recognized Zacchaeus as a human being in need, despite being a tax collector.

v10: "Son of Man" is a key phrase in Luke. This was a title used for Christ. This title "Son of Man" has a few meanings: 1) He is representative of all human beings when he carries our sins, 2) He is a man who can atone for our sin, and 3) Jesus is the first fruit of resurrection. In Romans 4:25 (NIV) we read: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." This "rising from death to life" means that Jesus had paid all our debt. It means He has triumphed over the consequences of our sin (death).

Seeking and saving the lost is the most crucial aspect of Jesus' mission. He came to earth to lead people into saving, eternal life (Luke 18:18), into the Kingdom of God, and walking with God. To give all these to human beings is God's desire. All of this is summed up in verse 10.

When a man's sins are forgiven and he is accepted, he finds his own worth, and he will know what to do. I understand that in this way he will be able to be the way God created him to be. Zacchaeus, by his faith, was given true life and he began to walk with God. By looking at Zacchaeus, we can see how a forgiven man begins to live.

Next, let's see how people around us sometimes act.

Let's look at the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:3-11 (NIV) – "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

To obtain a reason to accuse Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus "In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such woman. Now what do you say?" Jesus did not answer anything, but instead wrote on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone." At this response, those who heard began to leave, one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman. This condition 'only Jesus with the woman' indicates to us that it is Jesus who has the authority to forgive sin.

I am going to read verses 10-11 once more: ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
Jesus taught the woman "Go now and leave your life of sin." That statement is very short, but she

must have felt very reassured. She had been facing the death penalty, but instead was brought to forgiveness and life.

Jesus did not accuse anybody there, but we see that when they left one after another, Jesus spoke to their heart and to her heart. Jesus taught them some lessons: 1) who can judge? 2) what kind of person am I? 3) what is right? Jesus taught them these three things in their heart.

The people who gathered came and judged her by their own ideas. When we are angry, when we have hatred, when we think we are right, are we acting as judges over people? Do not act as a judge over other people, rather give everything into God's hands. This is "forgiveness." What we should do is not to judge, rather forgive one another, namely we practice "love."

Let me show you one more example that is a bit closer to home.

This example is not about a Christian. But it is a true story about somebody who could start living with more humanity in his life because of forgiveness.

Many years ago, my wife watched a documentary on TV which deeply moved her. It was about one member of the cult group that attacked the Tokyo subway system with sarin gas. It was the story of prisoner Hayashi Kunio.

I think it was an NHK special documentary, and my wife was deeply impressed by a certain lady's statement and then by the way of that man's lifestyle after that. Even if it was a terribly hard situation, it is wonderful to get an opportunity to live with humaneness. It was deeply moving.

In the documentary program, they described it like this: "The convict Mr. Hayashi showed signs of deep regret, and he was ready to accept the death sentence. Then a certain lady who was one of the victims took the witness stand. When she saw that the convict Mr. Hayashi was deeply regretful, she decided to forgive him. With her one word, his sentence was changed from the death penalty to life imprisonment."

The death penalty is very controversial, but at the almost same time that my wife watched the case of Mr. Hayashi, she heard the story of other death row inmate. But in that other story, the man wanted desperately to die.

This reminds us of the difference between Peter and Judas. Both of them betrayed the Lord. In the biblical account, the statement by Peter "I do not know the Lord" is very awful. But Peter acknowledged his sin, and he knows that God forgives, and so he asked forgiveness for his sin. After that, Peter became the Lord's true disciple, a friend, and he walked on the path with the Lord. On the other hand, Judas suffered the heavy pain of his sin like Peter did, but Judas chose death. He committed suicide. It was God's plan, but he failed to take advantage of God's forgiveness.

Actually, what lies behind 'forgiveness' is a love relationship. Judas lived with Jesus. He must have known who Jesus is. Actually, Satan also knows who God is, and he is afraid of the day of judgment on the last day. Satan knows it will happen, but he never asks forgiveness from God. Knowing who God is and loving God are totally different things. Peter loved Jesus, so he did not want to lose the relationship with Jesus. Peter could not bear to lose the relationship, so he repented and asked Jesus for forgiveness. But Judas did not.

God hopes humans will repent and come to Him. God does not want any to perish. I remember in Ezekiel 33:11, God says: “choose to live.”

Mr. Hayashi noticed the seriousness of the things he had done, so he wanted the death penalty, but now every day he recites all the names of the victims (about 3000 people), while chanting a Buddhist prayer.

Many inmates want the death penalty, but my wife learned from Mr. Hayashi what a humane life is like, even if it's only for a short time. Just one word from one of the victims' family members saying “I will forgive him” gave Hayashi an opportunity to live like a human being. This was a really impressive word. Carrying a heavy burden is hard, but it is also one of the human ways to live. My wife says she deeply hopes that Mr. Hayashi will receive true forgiveness, salvation, and peace from the true God.

Mr. Hayashi's current life is not the life God wants for any of us, according to the Bible's teaching, but this man has been given a good opportunity to live a human life. Forgiving one another can give us such an abundant life. Because there is love behind this forgiveness, it leads us to a blessed fruitful life. God hopes many people will be touched His Love as soon as possible. And I hope so, too.

Now, let me ask you a question: how will the unforgiving person live his or her life? Do you live a life filled with bitterness, anxiety and anger? When you are deeply wounded, it is difficult to forgive the other person. This requires the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, but all we have to do is decide to “forgive.” And just as you are about to take a step in that direction, a miracle happens. The Holy Spirit is at work. It's something like the miracle that happened when Joshua and the Israelites crossed the Jordan River. The snowmelt had increased the volume of the river, but as soon as the priests stepped into the river, the flow of the water stopped, and they crossed the Jordan River. What we need to do is to take that step and to make up our minds to forgive the other person.

An effective medicine for healing emotional wounds is “forgiving the other person.” Forgiveness blesses the lives of others, but also brings freedom, peace, and healing to one's own heart.

Let me return to something I said earlier. This is today's theme:

After we have the experience of being forgiven by God, we can come back to the true purpose for which we were created: to bear God's image, which God intended for us in the beginning. This is how we should live in the Kingdom of God, sharing blessings with one another.

God's teaching is always like that: not only is each individual blessed, but also the people around us are touched with these blessings.

Forgiveness is a law of grace that not only restores relationships, but also gives each other a chance to grow and to have a richer way of life. I thank God for this wonderful gift.