

selected sermons

* Published ~~sermon~~
sermon

9/13/81

"The Final Test of Love:
A Sermon on Forgiveness"

Date of Sermon: September 13, 1981

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Position: Senior Minister, Southminster Presbyterian Church, Mt. Lebanon, Pa.

Title of Sermon: THE FINAL TEST OF LOVE: A Sermon on Forgiveness (no original copy)

Text: "...So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your neighbor from your heart." Matthew 18:35

Elite

Pico

1 It just could be that the number one underlying cause of the
2 spiritual and personal malaise on the loose in our society takes
3 primary root in our inability to find forgiveness for ourselves and/or
4 to share it with the others in our world. Professor Donald Baillie
5 used to say from his lofty theological chair at the University of St.
6 Andrews, while the wild North Sea was pounding fury on the shore
7 beneath: "Our casual attitude to sin and its consequences betrays a
8 profound ignorance of human nature and our needs." It does. Ritschl
9 once said that forgiveness was the central doctrine of Christianity.
10 Without Luther's "forgiveness", there would have been no Reformation
11 as we know it, nor a Methodist witness without Wesley's "joyful
12 awareness of the forgiveness of God". Karl Meninger taught us in
13 our time what happens when we try to fiddle with our sins: Respon-
14 sibility burns and so does practically everything else around. And
15 the rest of us know it too, when we pause to ponder what it means
16 to be alive. Sin and forgiveness go together, at least for us they do.

17 Originally in the scriptures it was not so: sin and punishment
18 went together. Lot's wife turned to salt for the meager sin of
19 turning around. The snake lost his legs. Adam and Eve lost their
20 lovely garden and were driven to the East. Cain was driven even
21 further with a mark upon his forehead. The Tower of Babel was

selected sermons

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 2

Elite

Pico

1 flattened to the earth....And only Noah and his family were aboard
2 the Ark. It was merciless at the beginning.

3 But then came Moses and his intercessions for the people, and the
4 stiff-necked populace came to know a God who was plenteous in his
5 steadfast love. On and on through the prophets and the psalmist
6 sin could be carried away, or at least covered over or, if neither, *it could be*
7 exchanged for something new. When his brothers appealed to Joseph
8 in Genesis 50 to forgive them of their wretched deed, they used a
9 Hebrew word which means literally "carry it away"...It has been a
10 burden all these years, Joseph..done when we were young and ridic-
11 ulous. Please carry it away for us now. It is too heavy to bear..
12 I like the sound of that (even if I abhor the sight) when Jesus
13 carries his cross up the Via Dolorosa on his own back, taking away
14 the sins of the world. Did you notice, with Joseph and with Jesus,
15 it is the one who is forgiving who does the carrying away. It is
16 not easy to forgive, much as we normally think the other: forgetting
17 is easier than forgiving. To forgive means you end up carrying the
18 burden away.

19 Sin, the Bible says, is like a wall. Each and every evil act of
20 disobedience (Jesus would add, each and every evil thought) adds a
21 huge and mighty stone to the wall which separates us from God and
22 from our greater selves.

23 Over in Dumfermline in the ancient kingdom of Fife in Scotland,
24 up near the Abbey where Robert the Bruce is buried, near where
25 Andrew Carnegie was born in 1835, there is one of the loveliest
26 gardens in the world, Pittencrief Park. When Andrew was a boy,
27 Pittencrief Park was private property, and a big wall separated it

selected sermons

Author: _____ Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 3

Elite

Pico

1 from the city, and only the master of the land could enjoy it or his
2 family and a chosen few. For generations, in the gray drab of Dum-
3 fermline, the flowers and the stream and the orchards were a necessary
4 touch of beauty and loveliness; and, because of the world being the
5 way it was, that beauty was denied by the walls that were built around
6 it. So do you know what happened?

7 The little boy who used to climb up the wall to look over went off
8 across the ocean, as you know became a billionaire in Carnegie Steel,
9 as you know shared his wealth in libraries, museums and church organs
10 and philanthropic institutions all around the globe. But in Dum-
11 fermline they will show you the self-admitted most favorite thing
12 he ever did, the greatest fun he ever had; the nicest feeling in the
13 world was the day he bought the Pittnecrief property and he tore down
14 the wall. He donated it to the city for the free use of everybody;
15 and the last time I was in Dumfermline not long ago, the little
16 children were everywhere playing in the park. The wall was gone.
17 Something new had come. The way was open for people to behold things
18 as they were and should have been. *That's forgiveness at its best.*

19 To take the analogy a tiny bit further, the wall is on God's
20 property. You and I cannot remove it; we cannot even get there.
21 You know how that is true. Think of someone you have wronged, in
22 thought or word or gossip. Think of some wall you have built up -
23 and each and all of us have done it - between you and someone else.
24 Think about it. You might want to take the wall down, but the one
25 who is wronged is the one who must remove it, right? One must have
26 the sanction and power to remove it before the removal can occur.

27 Our need of forgiveness, you might say, is just that simple.

selected sermons

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 4

Elite

Pico

1 With the depth of our modern psychology, with the height of our new
2 theology, with the breadth of our ecclesiastical concern, still it is
3 very simple. We construct the wall between ourselves and God, and
4 God himself must tear it down. With a myriad of footnotes and qual-
5 ifications and theological tomes and deep theological exegesis, and
6 after a lifetime of intense study and reading and thinking...it is
7 really very simple. That's what forgiveness is. It is really
8 very simple. God in Christ takes down the wall. Something there is
9 that doesn't love a wall (Robert Frost is speaking):

10 "Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
11 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it..."
12 And hunters will knock it down...
13 And every spring you have to go out to mend them...
14 "We wear our fingers rough with handling the stones...
15 Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

16 Would it occur to you to ask the question, "Why?" Why is there
17 something or someone which will not tolerate the wall? What is the
18 motive for forgiveness? Why would God choose to do it that way?
19 Does it matter in our time? "Nonsense...", one existentialist scholar
20 said, "this matter of sin...just do your best and keep going...."
21 And Archie Bunker once said, "What's wrong with me and the missus,
22 with all the kooks running loose in the world?"

23 Forgiveness arises like the headwaters of the Susquehanna River
24 up above Addison, New York. Forgiveness arises, theology has always
25 said, within the nature of the God who made the world. Because he is
26 a God of law and justice, he simply cannot allow our sin to go
27 unnoticed, for he could not be God if he did not care what was done
28 by his children, up above the tumult in the quiet of the hills
29 and gentle streams and lovely valleys. What kind of father would

selected sermons

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 5

Elite

Pico

1 he be if he did not care? But because he is a God of love, he can-
2 not abandon his children. The Bible says it matters to him, it
3 grieves him to the heart. He wants them each to have a better, more
4 productive life. His forgiveness comes at a mighty cost. It is not
5 easy to forgive. Your life was paid for with a price, it says. It
6 cost God his only Son. And the theme comes back again...because He
7 is the God He is, He must seek out his children. He cannot let them
8 go, but it costs him more than seeking.

9 Fostick once hypothesized the scene which will bring the point
10 right home. He said, "Pretend that after Joseph had been sold off
11 by the brothers down to the Midianite traders on their way to Egypt,
12 they came back and told their father that his favorite son was gone.
13 Suppose that remorse overtook them - the Bible never says it - but
14 suppose they went to Jacob and said, "Father, we sold Joseph and he
15 is gone. Your son is gone because of what we did. We're sorry."
16 What would Jacob then have said? Faced with such a scene, can you
17 imagine a father saying, "Oh, that's okay. Joseph's gone...too bad."
18 Can you imagine Jacob saying, "It doesn't matter. It's okay,
19 everybody makes mistakes..." Forgiveness doesn't come so easily.
20 The intensity which Jacob felt for his favorite son Joseph is the
21 intensity with which God's love goes out to every son and daughter
22 of the world, each and every one.

23 The point is not that it is nice to forgive, or even that you
24 should forgive, or even that you should be Christlike and forgive,
25 but the point beneath the point is that unforgiven wrongs and
26 grudges and hurts and the sins of others, assumed or real, are like
27 burdens which you must carry in your life. So long as you are

selected sermons

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 6

Elite

Pico

1 unwilling or unable to forgive, you carry the burden of the offense.

2 You are the one who staggers around with hidden anger...you.

3 Think about it in your own life, the thoughts you have about

4 those who have wronged you and whom you have not forgiven. I mean,

5 everytime their name comes up it causes tension in your body. Every-

6 time someone mentions the name, it strikes you to the heart. Every-

7 time he enters the room, or she walks down the street, it is the

8 whole sad and hurtful wound opened up again...until you forgive it;

9 because, in forgiving another's sin against us, you not only free

10 the other person, you free yourself from the burden of the other's sin.

11 Now, if you catch that, your next question will be: How do I do

12 it? What do I need to do to drop the burden? The Bible says it is

13 related to God's forgiveness of you in Jesus Christ our Lord. That

14 could be the clearest symbol of what it means when we say "in his

15 death we are forgiven". The pain of the offenses against God and

16 man, in the horrible deeds and hidden acts perpetrated in this mortal

17 life, the pain of what it means to forgive, is ended, is taken up,

18 is hallowed, is removed, when a perfect sinless man, the God Incar-

19 nate, died on Calvary. That way - from that angle - forgiveness,

20 the woman said, is easy: If you love the person first, it is easy

21 to forgive.

22 But until that forgiveness flows through you to someone else,

23 well, remember in Matthew 18 there was the king who wished to settle

24 accounts. Who knows why, but he did...And one of his overseers

25 owed him 10,000 talents - oh dear, that's astronomical! -15 years

26 of wages. And out of pity, when the man begged the king relieved the

27 debt and said, "It's all right." The overseer went out to a servant

selected sermons

Author: Dr. Richard M. Cromie - page 7

Elite

Pico

1 of his who owed him one day's pay, a couple of bucks. The servant
2 begged forgiveness, only to be put into prison. What a rotten trick...
3 end of story, right? Wrong! The Lord heard about it and summoned
4 the man to him. "I had mercy on you," he said, "and you could not
5 have mercy on another." So he delivered him to the pits of jail
6 until the debt was paid. End of story. No....Jesus went on to say
7 also, "So also my heavenly Father will do to you if you do not for-
8 give your neighbor from your heart...."

9 Steimle once defined sin as the denial that God means for you
10 and me to have the abundant life, the life of joy and significance
11 on his terms. Forgiveness means that God says he accepts you, that
12 he can start you out again, that he can place you on his team - not
13 because of who you are, not because of what you have, not because
14 you are good, not because you have the right belief, surely not
15 because you are better than the others; but because you are
16 irreplaceable and infinitely worthwhile in his eyes, because you
17 are his child and a brother and a friend and a fellow traveller
18 with Jesus Christ Himself.

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

selected sermons

Date of Sermon: _____

Author: _____

Position: _____

Title of Sermon: _____

Text: _____

	Elite	Pico
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		
17		
18		
19		
20		
21		