

# ***Finite Living: Reconcile***

**Matthew 5:21-26  
Philippians 3:12-4:7**

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Well, this past week was another one of those that made me very aware of how limited our lifespan on earth can be. Beginning with a weekend call - a 57 year old had just died of pancreatic cancer. I used to think that was pretty old. Hmm - now I'm finding that to be getting too close to home!

And then Coby Karreman passed away - a much richer age from a human point of view. 90, she was.

Still - along the time line of human history, let alone cosmic history, even Co's life was just some infinitesimally small blip.

Here, and before we know it, gone.

Which, as we realized last week, it not something we're always too comfortable thinking about. In fact, as a society we like to avoid the topic of death altogether.

We have sanitized death - removing it from our living rooms to funeral parlours, from our bedrooms to hospitals or nursing homes. Increasingly, funeral homes are asked to dispose of a body without even a whisper among relatives. Total avoidance.

The Bible, on the other hand, speaks freely and candidly about the fact that our lives are finite. There is an end to the trip for each of us. And for many the end of the ride is far sooner than we'd care to think.

Last week we considered Psalm 90, and reflected on how it is that we can approach that end point with peace and confidence.

With that in mind there are two tasks that I'd like to consider with you, tasks that are important to people still on the way - people between the time of birth and death. They are tasks that can provide a great degree of freedom along that trip, as well as make the trip a much richer experience both for the traveller, and for those encountered en route.

This week, then, the first pre-death task - reconciliation.

A task I was reminded of this past week. The news carried reports of dramatic developments in the cases of the murders of Ardeth Wood and Jennifer Teague. Both of the men accused have indicated that they will be pleading guilty to these atrocious crimes which changed the lives of so many people in such needless and painful ways.

What caught my eye was not the admission of guilt. But rather the response of the families. I can't even begin to imagine the pain they must be experiencing, or the gallons of tears they have cried, or the many sleepless nights they have endured, or all the trips to the cemetery. And if it's not bad enough for them to have to walk the hot coals of grief's road, they also have to deal with seemingly constant media scrutiny. And to top it off is the never-ending, and oh-so-slow trek through the justice system.

Ever wonder what your response might be if caught up in that kind of nightmare? How would you feel? What would you be thinking? What sorts of words would come out of your mouth? What might you do?

What would be your response?

We can only imagine, eh?

Which is what makes the response of the Teague and Wood families so amazing - and to some people even confusing. Ottawa Sun columnist Ann-Marie McQueen summed up the response of many who have been covering these stories with this label -

*"Confounding."*

It was confounding how the parents of Ardeth and Jennifer "have forgiven the men who killed them."

“Brenden and Catherine Wood, and Ed Teague,” wrote McQueen, “are people of deep conviction and faith in God.”

“In the months and years since their children died so violently, they continue to amaze by refusing to vilify or condemn Chris Myers, who this week pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in Wood's death, or Kevin Davis, who signalled through his lawyer he will plead guilty to first-degree murder when he is next in court on Jan. 25.

"God desires not the death of the sinner," Catherine Wood told reporters, "but that he be converted and live. I will pray for him, as all our family will."

“Shortly after Davis was arrested, Teague told the Sun's Earl McRae if he could meet him, he would forgive him.

Then McQueen wrote this, “For all that faith gets a bad rap these days, when the chips are down, those who believe deeply seem to be able to draw on something the rest of society... could never imagine.”

The ability to forgive, the drive to forgive,  
- may we even call it - the compulsion to forgive.

These people, who have experienced pain that few can even begin to imagine, have given testimony of its power in enormous ways.

I want to suggest to you that the grace of forgiveness that they have demonstrated points each of us to something powerful, something deeply important to every human life.

Learn it, master it, practice it and your ever-so-finite trip through life becomes much more bearable. It becomes much richer.

Ignore it at your own peril. For, never minding the one who has violated you, you will be trudging through life with a burden far bigger than necessary.

While the Teague and Wood families will carry the wounds of their precious children's deaths, at least they will not continue to be poisoned by the burden of resentment and hatred.

For they have handed that over to God.

They have forgiven.

And in doing so, they have followed as disciples along the path of their master, who looked at his murders and said, “Father, forgive them...”

Not everyone will have such deep work to do as the Teague and Wood family has had to do. But all of us will encounter times when relationships with others are stressed, cracked or even broken. There isn't a single person here who will never have to process the work of reconciliation, in one form or another. From one side or the other. Justified or not.

Read with me two sections from God's Word, please.

**Matthew 5:21-26**  
**Philippians 3:12-4:7**

In Philippians 3 we see some of Paul's reflections about finite living - the race towards the great finish line. It's not a haphazard experience, that race isn't. It calls for focus. It calls for firm determination. That's what Paul says.

And then, no sooner is he done saying so at the end of chapter 3, than he turns his attention to two co-workers. Sincere, these two fellow believers are. And both committed to serving Jesus. Both central in the life of the Church. About as core to the cause as you could possibly imagine.

And yet, Paul singles them out and says, “Hey, sisters, quit your bickering. Cut out the game playing. Bury the hatchet... and not in each others’ backs! And the rest of you, help them get their junk sorted out.”

“I urge Eudia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord... and you... help these women...”

Do you notice that it is not **UNTIL** Paul has knocked their proverbial heads together that he can resume his conversation about running towards the great finish line by saying -

v. 4 -

*rejoice in the Lord always*

Seems like

there’s no joy

before

the work of reconciliation

is done.

For the Master himself says the same thing in another context.

Hey - perhaps that’s where Paul gets his motivation.

Could it be ;-)

Jesus tells us that there is no fullness in the Lord, no fellowship with God to be found, no fullness in the sacred space of the sanctuary, if we’re limping along with damaged relationships between ourselves and other human beings.

Go...

*first be reconciled to your brother or sister,*

*and*

**THEN**

*come and offer your gift.*

Don’t sit and think about it.

Don’t huddle in a corner and pray about it.

Don’t run off to some renewal fellowship for a shot of spiritual enthusiasm.

Go.

Just go.

The gospel promise is that forgiveness **IS** available – full and free in Jesus. Amazing. It flows into and through our lives like a crystal clear river, sweeping away the sin and guilt and wrong we’ve done. Cleansing us. Refreshing us. New beginnings. Renewed relationships with our Heavenly Father.

### **HOWEVER**

When we, who seek holy forgiveness for ourselves, refuse to forgive others we behave like beavers building a dam across a sparkling country stream. The water backs up and floods the landscape. Brush and debris accumulate. Nothing gets washed downstream. Everything clogs up. A sodden mess. Trees begin to rot and eventually death happens.

When we deliberately hold back forgiveness, we build a dam that holds back the flow of God’s mercy from sweeping through our lives and washing away the junk that accumulates within. Bitterness, guilt, sullenness, a brooding spirit, dark attitudes, and even demonic oppressions begin

to gather. Joy rots away. Christian freedom and the liberating sense of being a child of the heavenly king gets all clogged up and muddied.

We begin to rot, spiritually and emotionally.

And if this condition lasts long enough it can kill us spiritually.

Forgiveness - letting go, and letting God.

Vital for our own spiritual life and liberty.

As one horribly abused person once mentioned to me some years ago, "*Ken, I **have** to work on forgiving this person. If I don't I'll be carrying this dirt around for the rest of my life and it will kill me. I want to live. I want to be free. I don't need this garbage! I didn't deserve it and I don't have to keep it. I won't!*"

Forgiveness is also vital for the sake of the community.

Where there is no forgiveness, there can be no renewed relationships.

Where there are no renewed relationships, the body of Christ is broken.

Where the body of Christ is broken, there can be no communion.

That's why Paul had to interrupt his talk about the race of faith.

Because the Body of Christ was broken.

A few thoughts about forgiveness and reconciliation. These come from teachings of Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Bob deVries.

1. Notice that in Matthew 5 Jesus doesn't mention anything about waiting for the other person to be ready or make the first move. He doesn't even mention about whether they had it coming or not.

He just tells us to get on with the business of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Thank God that Christ didn't wait for US to make the first move.

Or for US to be deserving.

2. Don't think that when you see someone forgive that they are condoning whatever act has been committed. They're just copying God in saying, "I won't hold this against you."

3. Our forgiveness doesn't depend on the other forgiving us. It depends on us handing the person and the situation into God's hands, and releasing our grip on the poison and the desire for revenge.

And perhaps having to do that again and again each time a memory of the wrong comes up. Each time willing the forgiveness a little deeper, and a little more complete.

4. Don't think that when someone pardons you, all the scars are somehow magically erased. They're not. We don't, somehow, begin to act as if it all never happened. Because it did. And the memories may still remain very much present.

We can forgive.

We can reframe the situation.

But sometimes things cannot go back. The alcoholic may never get his license back. The molester may never be alone around children again. The gambler may never be granted full control of the family's finances again.

In that way, then, there may well be forgiveness, but things will never go back to how they were before.

Please always bear in the mind a nuanced difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. The former is our act. The second requires heart-felt, deep action from both parties. The former we are called to do. The second is not always possible on this side of heaven.

And then, consider this -

Most of the broken relationships I've observed over the years are not a result of one or two big traumas, of the magnitude that the Wood and Teague family endure. Rather, they are most often the result of an accumulation of a whole series of situations that were never dealt with. Built up emotional and spiritual clutter.

If people would deal with them honestly, deal with them as they come up, life would be much, much more free.

And quite frankly, friends, as we saw again this past week -

life's TOO SHORT to let all this junk get in the way.

It's TOO PRECIOUS to let it weighed down by stupid game playing.

So, how about it?

Do you need to stop praying and get going?

Don't say you can't forgive.

Because you can.

You **CAN** learn how.

Everyone can.

And you'd better get to it today.

'Cause there may not be a tomorrow.

You just need to be willing to try.

And you just need to be willing to practice with the little things, first.

Fred Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says that we can all learn how to forgive. He has been involved in many studies that show we reap emotional and physical benefits when we forgive, effects like lowered stress and depression and boosted energy. One study taught angry hypertensives how to forgive, Luskin said, and they ended up lowering their blood pressures by doing so.

"Unforgiveness," he says, "is just continuing to stress yourself out about something that's happened in the past, you can't change."

[Quoted by Anne McQueen, Ottawa Sun Jan 10, 2008]

The Wood and Teague families are learning all about this.

They're on the way.

And this past week they shared something incredibly precious with the rest of us in Ottawa about that way.

About living the finite life.

They showed us Christ's way.

Will we follow?