

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



---

Date: September 29, 2019  
Sermon Title: The Power of Forgiveness 2:  
A Good Rebuke  
Scripture: Luke 17:3-4  
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Luke 17:3-4

*Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive.*

\*\*\*\*\*

It seems as though most of our Church and much of America has been caught up in the Public Television's Ken Burns's outstanding documentary on "Country Music." From Appalachian, Gospel, and slave music roots to Hank Williams, Dolly Parton, Charlie Pride, "Rhinstone Cowboy," and modern country fusion. If there has been a single recurring theme, it has been sin . . . and its consequences. In the Bible, and in life, sin—wrongdoing, hurting people or yourself—sin has two outcomes: death or forgiveness. And country music is full of both, in song and in real life.

One story that caught my attention was about Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard. Johnny Cash struggled mightily with sin of every kind, destroying his health, his career, those around him. And when Christian faith grabbed hold of him, he climbed back to the top. Beginning with a famous concert at San Quentin State Prison, where he sang his heart out. And his faith and his forgiveness.

One of the convicts in the audience was the young Merle Haggard. That concert turned him around, and when he got out, his career soared. Including a guest appearance on the old Johnny Cash TV show. Before the show, Haggard confessed to Cash he been in that prison audience, and Cash convinced Haggard to tell it that night, to confess his past. Both men lived the full scope of forgiveness. Some in their path whom they had wronged turned the other cheek; some forgave over and over again; some rebuked.

A prison sentence is a societal rebuke, “You’d better repent!” A failed marriage, people who don’t want to be with you, records that don’t sell, fans who stop coming—that’s all rebuke.

The bottom line . . . the only line is what gets us to forgiveness.

I began last week’s sermon with two Op-Ed pieces in *The New York Times*. The first was by a University of Michigan professor, applauding the pop music superstar Taylor Swift for refusing to forgive. And he went on to praise the power of resentment.

The second, by columnist David Brooks, told about a high school student who survived the gun-slaughter of students in Parkland, Florida, and went on to become a popular gun-rights activist, only to have his acceptance taken away when Harvard learned of some really ugly racist texts he had sent to friends in his junior year. The boy tried to convince Harvard that he was a changed person, but Harvard denied him. Brooks wondered whether forgiveness might have been a better, nobler, even more educational act.

Those two stories were our jumping-off points for preaching about forgiveness from Jesus’s perspective. For Jesus, forgiveness is central, vital; heck, mandatory. It’s who we are. It’s what we do. It’s what he did.

So we had Taylor Swift with her immense popularity hanging onto resentment, refusing to forgive. We had Harvard, with its roots in New England Congregationalism, denying a troubled and changed teenager a second chance. We had David Brooks arguing to think again.

Well, I’ll use another David Brooks column. In a masterful September 6<sup>th</sup> column, Brooks takes on the fictional persona of an Internet-obsessed hater staring at his screen all day, filling his heart and mind with vile filth from the left and the right against the left and the right, against women, against blacks and Jews, against Trump and Obama, against urban people, rural people, rich people, poor people, immigrants. You name it, somebody hates it. He begins his fictional column this way:

“I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man . . . I am one of those fanatics on the alt-right and alt-left, the ones who make online forums so vicious . . . who fill the air with hate.” In that fictional online persona, he goes on: “I’ve lost faith in reason. Communication is for condemnation and arousal. Forgiveness has become foreign to me. Sometimes you have to be vicious for justice . . . Online war is a force that gives life meaning. Hatred gives that delicious simulacrum of power . . . I am indignant. I am superior . . . ” (Brooks, David. “And Now, A Word From a Fanatic.” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2019, p. 23.)

Nothing captures our spiritual dichotomy better than those two lines: "Forgiveness has become foreign to me. Sometimes you have to be vicious for justice." We live in a time when forgiveness is for wimps and apology is for losers. A perfect storm.

I actually have another Op-Ed with this astounding headline: "Apologies Are for Losers." Yes, that's a real headline: "Apologies Are for Losers." Its premise is that in this day and age, apology shows weakness. Better to dig your heels in, stick to your guns, full speed ahead. No apology. No confession. No regrets. So there's our theological and societal impasse. To forgive or not to forgive. To apologize or not to apologize. To accept an apology or not to accept an apology. (Sunstein, Cass. "Apologies are for Losers." *The New York Times*, July 28, 2019, p. 8.)

Apology is a secular version of repentance. Repentance just has more religious overtones because, yes, Jesus said to "repent," and Churches have long told folks to "repent." Both acknowledge you did something wrong, and you're going to try really hard not to do it again. That's basically the test of an apology, right? A sincere apology is evidenced by not doing it again.

Repentance is a bit stronger. It is manifested by changed behavior. That's repentance: changed behavior. And changed behavior makes it easier to forgive. Forgiveness is extremely intimate, isn't it? For you to forgive, somebody must have done something to you or to people you love. The pain is real. The hurt lingers.

Meanwhile, we've got a whole Church service on "Forgiveness." We've got a whole Bible full of it. We've got a whole religion based on it. We've got Jesus hanging on the cross talking about it. And that doesn't always sit well with us. In the face of evil, large or small, forgiveness feels as if it's too easy. We don't want to let people off the hook.

I've learned through the years that what makes preaching about forgiveness so tough is Adolf Hitler. Seriously. Or the Holocaust. Or Charles Manson. Or serial killers. Any talk about forgiveness leads us to the worst-case scenario. I talk about unconditional love. I talk about Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I talk about "Amazing Grace" or the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts AS we forgive our debtors." Any talk about forgiveness, and someone always raises their hand: "What about Adolf Hitler?" It's both a good question and mostly irrelevant.

Or, Michael Dukakis. Remember Michael Dukakis? Successful governor of Massachusetts, the Democratic candidate for president, until one debate when the moderator asked Dukakis, "Governor, if your wife, Kitty, was raped and murdered, would you favor the death penalty for the killer?" Dukakis, a lifelong

opponent of the death penalty, answered immediately, "No." That was the end of Michael Dukakis.

But most of us don't live our lives, thank God, at the level of Adolf Hitler or serial killers or personal murderers. Our areas of forgiveness are mostly closer, personal, intimate. Someone said something to you yesterday. Someone did something, shouted something at work, in the neighborhood, on the team, on social media. Someone failed you, betrayed you, slighted you, hurt you. And you can't shake it off. You carry it with you. This is where our Scripture for today comes in handy, Luke, 17:3: "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

So here's my sermon for today. Last Sunday's sermon was correct. Jesus forgives, period. That's how he lived his life. That was his dying wish. That's what he hopes for us: Forgive. Let go. That's the kind of people he'd like us to be. "Turn the other cheek." "Forgive 70 times seven." Be better. Aim higher. Go further than the other guy. And sometimes we can do that. And sometimes we can't. I mean, usually, family life, friendships, parenting bring out the best in us. Most often, we can forgive and forgive and forgive some more. In those areas especially, and even in Church life, we extend our patience and understanding and forgiveness over and over. But there are limits. When your heart has been broken once too many times, when you've been lied to, abused, disappointed, hurt once too often, that's where today's verse is also correct. There is a need for repentance. There is a place for rebuke. Repentance is change.

Jesus provides a strategy to get there. "Rebuke," he says. Stand up. Speak out. Something's got to stop. Something's got to change. No more. I've had it. Nose to nose. Face to face. Clear as day. Blunt.

My exercise routine is varied and often includes a long walk around the cinder track at Fairfield University. A lot of times the women's soccer team is practicing, and recently I've noticed a new practice regimen. Instead of playing on the 100-yard long field with all the players spread out across a vast space, instead, they're on the much smaller practice field, and even there they are only using the width of the field, not the length. Not 11 young women playing against another 11. Instead, it's usually four on four. Playing on a field that was barely 30 yards wide.

Puzzled and intrigued, I wrote the head coach, and he got back to me. He said, "We set the dimensions to suit the number of players in the activity. We adjust the size to be suitable for the players involved. We attempt to teach lessons based on the influences of space and pressure."

In other words, he makes the game more up close and personal, more intimate, more "in your face." Which is where most altercations take place, in soccer or in

life. That's where most forgiveness gets decided. Not on the Adolf Hitler level. Not on the front-page-of-the-newspaper level.

What size field do you play on? Most of us aren't playing on Hitler's field, populated by 6 million Jews killed, 70 million total killed in World War II. Most of us aren't playing on any kind of killing field—mass murderers, serial killers, crazed psychopaths. Most of us are on a very small field, and there are just one or two or three people making your life miserable. And you can't ignore it. The space is too small. You have to address it, in tight corners. Rebuke is for when you're on a small field, in your personal space, and you have to push back.

That's the rebuke part. Note Jesus's formula:

1. the brother (someone close to you, personal to you),
2. who sins against you (hurts you, does something wrong, uncalled for);
3. so rebuke him (get to the point, make it clear, no beating around the bush).

Why? Because . . .

4. to get them to repent. Rebuke is a strategy. Rebuke is not the end game. Rebuke is not to make you feel better. Rebuke is not revenge. Rebuke is a strategy. And strategy is always personal, tailored to that situation, that person.

When I was younger, the popular theory of coaching, teaching, leading, even being a pastor, was to treat everybody the same. *Wrong!* We try to treat everyone equally. But not the same. Some of us need a soft touch. Some of us need a kick in the seat of the pants. Some of us need a hug. Some need a rebuke.

I saw this in my early years of baseball, playing and coaching. The best team I ever played on, we won the championship, and we had an old-school gruff coach with the great sports name of Al Dam. Everyone hated him. Parents hated him. Other coaches, the whole league hated him, except us kids. Me? He rode me hard. He yelled, he cursed, he pushed. My best friend, Frankie? Never called him out. Never criticized him. But after practice, we'd see Coach Dam walking with Frankie in the outfield, Coach Dam's arm around Frankie's shoulder. I got the rebuke; Frankie got the 70 times seven forgiveness. And together we won.

Years later, as an adult coach, I had a "Frankie" on my team. As a pastor, I knew who the troubled kids were in town, and I would draft them on my team. So one day, "Frankie" is just shuffling around, not listening, not taking instruction, and doing the wrong thing over and over again. So, I rebuked him. "What are you, stupid?" I said in my best Christian pastoral voice. "Yeah," he said, "that's what

everybody tells me." And he walked off the field. Great job, David, you showed him! But, of course, I hadn't. I had rebuked for the sake of my own ego, not as a strategy to help my "Frankie." Thank God I got my act together later that day and in a true Biblical sense, got "Frankie" back in the fold.

So, in a sermon on the need to rebuke, I've told you back-to-back stories of rebuking and rebuking, Cautioning you about rebuking. Pick your battles. Pick your times. Pick your words. Remember the goal.

The problem with Jesus's verse is that in modern English, "rebuke" is a harsh word, "repent" is a harsh word. But if we take the harshness out of it, repentance is the necessary change for healing to happen. I repeat, *repentance is the necessary change for healing to happen*. And rebuke is a strategy, *one* strategy, often a last-resort strategy, to wake somebody up for the need to change.

In the rebuke, you're trying to save a teenager or save a relationship or save a friendship or save a marriage or save a life, a career, a dream. You're not trying to make yourself look good or the other person look bad. Strategy, strategy, strategy.

There you have it. Jesus is all about forgiveness, and sometimes it's 70 times seven, 490 times you forgive before crying "uncle." Sometimes it's "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Sometimes, it's "Forgive as we want to be forgiven." Sometimes it's "Turn the other cheek." And sometimes it's take a stand, call it out, "rebuke," wait for the necessary change, and then "forgive."

And, no, it's not usually easy. In my short story about the mother of the Prodigal Son, Jesus is trying to convince her to let her difficult son go. In my story, Jesus says to her, "Love isn't easy. But it is always lovely." Same for forgiveness. It's not easy. It *is* always lovely.

Our closing hymn today is "Spirit of the Living God," No. 259 in your hymnal. We'll sing it twice:

*Spirit of the Loving God,  
Fall afresh on me.  
Spirit of the loving God,  
Fall afresh on me  
Melt me, mold me, fill me use me.  
Spirit of the loving God,  
Fall afresh on me.*