

This week we are onto the 2nd part of our mini-series on this key, key cornerstone of the Christian message – that of forgiveness.

Last week we talked about two great shadows that often hang over our lives – **that of blame, & that of shame** – and how the work of Christ for us, & the Spirit of Christ in us – deals with these two things, completely and utterly removing them from us, if we let him.

We looked at some medical research that showed that burns patients healed so much more quickly if they were able to let go of anger & resentment & forgive the person that had caused their burns – whether that person was themselves or someone else.

We saw that **unforgiveness is toxic** & self-destructive, so much so that it's been rightly said that *"refusing to forgive is like drinking poison & hoping the other person dies"*

And this was confirmed by much medical **research** that demonstrates a **link between** what goes on inside us, in our hearts & minds, in terms of **unresolved emotional pain**, and what goes on in our **bodies**, in terms of **physical pain & physical illness**. And what is becoming clearer and clearer is that all our negative emotions - **like blame, like shame, like unforgiveness** – are destructive, and if left unattended & unprocessed inside us – will **eventually manifest** themselves in our bodies **as illness** or dis-ease.

We saw that forgiveness is not an easy thing for most of us - & it often **is** a process that we have to work through & revisit many times, before we can fully let go & forgive.

Forgiveness is difficult, but in Jesus, our guide and our empowerer, we have one who's forgiveness is **total and overwhelming**. In Jesus we are lead by the one who said *"Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34) – even as people were killing him, nailing him to a cross, & gambling for his clothes.

In Jesus we have one who teaches us & demonstrates for us that **God's love & forgiveness is bigger & greater & stronger & deeper than any sin, any mistake, any failure we or anybody else can ever make.**

In Jesus, we have the one who

...forgave us **all** our sins, having cancelled the charges which stood against us and condemned us; who has taken them away, & who has nailed them to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

and

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death."

Romans 8:1-2

And so, as Christians, we have access to the most powerful & stunning resources of forgiveness & healing that exist in the Universe.

Last week we looked at two stories from the gospels that exemplified the love, & grace, & mercy of Jesus towards all those who struggled with condemnation, with blame and with shame. In particular we focused on the story of the woman who, in Luke's words, had lived a sinful life, who came and wept over Jesus and anointed his feet, and how Jesus made every effort to lift blame & shame from her.

This week, our emphasis is shifting slightly, as we hone down to look at the beautiful, liberating power God has put in **our** hands to forgive others, & in doing so, to liberate ourselves from ~~resentment & hate.~~

and ourselves

blame & shame

At the end of **John's** gospel, in chapter **20 v 23**, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples hidden together in a locked room, and he greets them with peace, and he breathes the Holy Spirit on them, and he says ²³ "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Meaning, I think, that if we refuse to forgive others their sins, we **can** keep them **trapped in a box**, but here's the thing, when we do that we keep ourselves trapped in the same box with them.

Forgiveness is a powerful thing – it heals, it liberates, it sets free.

It is a powerful spiritual force.

In **Mark 11:20 – 26**, when Jesus is talking to his stunned disciples about the fig tree that he has just caused to wither, he assures them that they can do the same thing, & even move mountains on - two conditions:

1. *When they pray, they pray with faith; and*
2. *when they pray, they pray having forgiven anyone they have anything against.*

In other words, Jesus is saying that un-forgiveness blocks prayer & makes us spiritually powerless. It is only those who are **moving in both faith and forgiveness who are able to move mountains.**

OK, I just want to go back & look at a little bit more of the **fascinating medical research** that's been done around forgiveness & unforgiveness.

MRI scans have been done that show that when we hold on to **grudges & resentments**, that the parts of our brain that specialize in **criticism** grow more active & bigger . They feed on our thoughts about the resentment. The neurons involved lay down more & more connections, strengthening this response further.

So practicing either forgiveness or unforgiveness is **like exercising a muscle** – the more we do it, the stronger it grows. And if we allow the unforgiving, resentful part of our self's to grow - what happens next is this: **the next time** someone does something we don't like our brain much more quickly **jumps straight to criticism and to judgment.** Increasingly we become a more critical & judgmental person, and not the kind of person that most people want to be around.

OK the gospel story we are going to look at this week, which James just read to us, is from **Luke 18:21-25**

This story follows on from teaching Jesus has just given the disciples in Matthew 18:15-20 about what to do when someone sins against us & the process we need to go through in order to be reconciled & get things put right.

Peter then comes to Jesus & asks him **a clarifying question:** *"how many times do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me?"* And then he answers his own question by suggesting a very generous *"Seven times?"*

I think Peter thought he was being very magnanimous by suggesting such a big number, & displaying such big grace.

But Jesus comes back at him with – *"No Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times"*

And **why 77**, why has Jesus chosen this particular number? Well he's probably making a reference way back to near start of the Bible, where in

Genesis 4:24 it talks about a famous ancient warrior called Lamech who had a war-song he sung, a boast, in which he proclaimed *"I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech is avenged seventy-seven times."* And so really, Jesus here is contrasting the human thirst for revenge, with his command, under the New Covenant, that his followers to be a people of forgiveness, not of revenge.

And then he follows this up with a parable about a King who has a servant who owes him a vast amount of money, the equivalent of millions of dollars - and when it becomes obvious that this servant cannot possibly repay him, the King has this servant seized, all his possessions stripped away, and he & his wife & children sold into slavery, in order to recoup some of the debt.

This servant then falls on his knees & begs the king not to do that, but to be patient with him, because he promises to work hard & try pay off the debt somehow. Now, interestingly, he doesn't ask for pity or for mercy, but for patience while he tries to work off this debt. Which is a crazy idea, because the debt is so large, millions of dollars, that there is no way he as a servant ever going to be able to work it off.

But the king is moved by this servant's pleading, and **instead of granting him time** to try & work off the debt, which would have meant slavery for life, the King goes much further and grants him mercy and forgiveness - and cancels the whole debt - wipes it out completely.

Now the 1st obvious implication of this parable, of course, is that this is how God treats us, when we come to him with our debt of sin, of failure, of mistakes, & of a wasted life. We see the same thing in the story of **the prodigal son**, who when he returns from having wasted his life & wasted the gifts his father had given him, also comes & falls on his knees offering to be a slave & to work off the debt. And the father in that story also refuses to let him think he can work off the debt, & instead completely & utterly wipes the slate clean, forgives him, and receives him back as a child, as a beloved son.

Which is what God longs to do for each of us.

But in this parable in Matthew 18, there is a **twist**. When the freshly forgiven servant leaves the king's presence, who should he meet but a fellow servant, someone who owes him a much, much smaller debt, a **handful of dollars**. And now he has a choice - he could choose to take the incredible mercy & forgiveness he himself has just received and

extend it to this fellow servant: or he can stay locked into this mode of thinking that says everything must be earned & paid for.

Worked for

And that's what he chooses, grabbing his fellow servant by the throat, demanding repayment, and then having him thrown into debtors prison.

And again these are themes we also see in the story of the prodigal son. **This servant is so much like the older brother in the prodigal story** who is also locked into a works-mentality, so sure that everything must be earned & paid for, and who becomes so angry when he sees his younger brother being embraced by the father, & forgiven so freely.

And the story of the prodigal son actually ends on a **tragic note** for the older brother, it closes with him still burning with anger & resentment, & refusing to enter into the joy & the freedom & celebration that both his younger brother & his father are experiencing.

And **this** story in Matthew 18 ends in a similarly tragic place – with the unforgiving servant finding himself imprisoned in a place of torture. And symbolically, I think Jesus painted this as a picture of what happens to us when we don't or can't forgive others – spiritually, emotionally **we end up in a prison of torture & torment.**

We have two paths before us, & God says "choose life". Do you remember those eight healing emotions we talked about last week? **love, hope, faith, forgiveness, joy, compassion, awe, and gratitude.**

Scripture urges us to choose grace over resentment & bitterness.

Hebrews 12:14-15 makes this clear

***14** Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. **15** See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

Verse 14 urges us to make every effort to live at peace with each person around us, something that is related to holiness. Do this & we will find ourselves flowing in the grace of God. **But**, verse 15 warns us, if we deliberately choose not to live at peace with others – a bitter seed is planted, and a bitter root begins to establish itself - a root that if we allow it to take hold will ruin us and ruin those around us.

We have a choice between getting caught up a cycle of bitterness, or in a process of grace

The cycle of bitterness works this way:

Hurt – unforgiveness (we refuse to forgive) – resentment – bitterness – further hurt
& around & around it goes

The process of grace works this way: (& it breaks the cycle)

Hurt – forgiveness – grace - peace – healing (& the grace keeps on growing).

Now we need to get 3 things straight here. Some Bible translations start verse 14 with *"as much as it depends on you, try to live at peace with all people"* – & we need to realise that we can only control **our own** actions & own responses, we can't control & are not responsible for other people's negative reactions or their baggage.

Secondly, we need to know that forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. The Scriptures are clear that we need to let go of resentment & anger and move towards forgiveness. But that is not the same as re-establishing the relationship or being reconciled together with that person. That may never happen. And in fact if they are an abuser, then reconciliation may be the last thing you want to be doing.

3rdly, forgiveness is not about letting someone off the hook for doing something criminal. We can forgive someone who has wronged us and still call the police and still be a witness against them in court. If they are abusing & hurting others, then the most loving thing we can do is to stop them from abusing & hurting others.

Who do we forgive?

I like what Joyce Meyers says about this:

1stly - Everyone from the person who badly hurt us long ago through to the stranger who stepped on our toe in the supermarket yesterday – and everyone in between.

2ndly – Ourselves. There are times we have to forgive **ourselves** for past sins and stupidities, and for hurts we have caused to others. We do

this of course, drawing on God's incredible and limitless forgiveness for us.

3rdly - There are times we may even need to forgive a **situation or an institution** – maybe a company or a firm or a church that treated us unfairly.
workplace

4thly - And crazy as it sounds there may even be times, that we need to forgive **God** when we are angry at him because our life or parts of our life haven't turned out the way we thought they should have. Now that might sound blasphemous to some, but don't worry, God is big enough & loving enough to take that.

And there are some notes from Joyce Meyer on the **back of your Newsletter** on the process of forgiveness.

But for our own sake, & the sake of the world, we need to get rid of **any** poison that comes from bitterness, resentment & unforgiveness in our lives.

And when we do we become channels for God's amazing grace to be poured into this world like a healing balm, like the fragrance of Christ – and the world will see & the world will be changed.

I am going to end now with a clip from Egyptian state TV, it's of a Christian woman forgiving extremists who have just killed her husband outside a church. Watch, and see the impact and the effect this has on the Muslim presenter who is hosting this show – because every time we extend God's love and grace and forgiveness out into the world, we also are bearing witness to the work of Jesus on the cross and in our hearts

Video clip/ Egypt (2.23)