

Today I am wanting to start a two part series on one of the most central **themes** of the Christian message, that of **forgiveness**.

I am going to do it in two parts – today focusing on the total & utter forgiveness that is **available to us** as children of God; & then next week focusing on how we **extend that forgiveness to others**, to those around us.

Today, there are going to be **two key words** we look at – **blame & shame** – and how the Spirit of Christ in our lives deals with them both.

I don't know if you ever read the lifestyle section of the **Otago Daily Times** – but back in **April**, an article appeared in it about a burns doctor in the US Called **Dr Ewin**, who discovered something very interesting & unexpected about the way the healing process worked for the burns patients that he was working with.

He could hear that many of his patients, when they **described** to him how their burns had happened, **told stories & used words** that were full of **anger and blame**, and **guilt & shame**.

For a while he wrestled with this, and he wondered to what extent these **unresolved emotions** were interfering with **the healing process**. Sometimes it was the patient themselves who had made a mistake or done something careless or **stupid** that had lead to the fire & to the burns – and in that case what he began to do was to lead that patient in **a process of forgiving themselves** for what had happened. And it could be quite a lengthy process

In other cases, he needed to lead his patient in **a process of letting go of their anger & blame** towards someone else, and in a process of **forgiving that other** person.

And what he found was that **the rate of healing was faster & better**, in every case where he was able to get the patient to let go of blame & practice forgiveness towards whoever it was who had played a part in their hurt – **whether it was themselves or someone else**.

But when it comes to healing & wholeness, **it's not just about burns patients is it?** In life, every single one of us has, to some extent been deeply hurt in some way...a **betrayal**, an over the top **criticism**, a hateful **judgment**, a **false accusation**, **unfair treatment or an act of abuse**.

And **sometimes we don't forgive**, instead we **hang on to blame**, & we let **resentment keep building** in our hearts. We **hold someone in judgement**, in the belief that because they have hurt us, **they should be punished**. And the tragic thing is that hanging onto resentment & unforgiveness **doesn't punish the other person** – it only punishes **us**. As someone once said – *“refusing to forgive is like drinking poison & hoping that the other person will die”*.

As I was preparing for this message, I was reading a material by a number of **medical researchers** that talked about the **link between** what goes on in our hearts & minds, in terms of **unresolved emotional pain & blame**, and what goes on in our **bodies**, in terms of **physical pain & physical illness**. And what is becoming clearer and clearer to researchers is that all our negative emotions - **like blame, like unforgiveness** – are destructive, and if left unattended & unprocessed inside us –they will **eventually manifest** themselves in our physical bodies **as illness**.

A 2nd article I came across was by a researcher at the Harvard Medical School, a man named **George Vaillant**, who specialises in understanding **healing processes in body & mind**, and in his research he has identified what he calls **Eight positive emotions or qualities** that always lead to greater healing & recovery in people, from both mental & physical illness:

love, hope, faith, forgiveness, joy, compassion, awe, and gratitude.

Do you **notice anything** about these qualities, does anything seem familiar to you about them?

Yes, these are **deeply, deeply Biblical** words - Scripture overflows with mention of these qualities. Half of them are the **fruit** of the Holy Spirit mentioned in **Galatians 2:25**. The others – **forgiveness, compassion, gratitude and awe** are all talked about in Scripture as **gifts God gives** to us & as **responses we should make to God**. Jesus is **overflowing** with these qualities. We as followers of Jesus & those **filled with his Spirit** are to be **overflowing** with these qualities.

But in order to be moving in these qualities & fruit, **so often the first step is that we need to be set free from blame and unforgiveness** – either **towards ourselves or towards others**. But here is our **Good News**.

In Jesus we have been given **every resource** for dealing with **blame and unforgiveness**. Of all people on earth, we have access to resources for healing and **release**, like no other.

But one of the **tragedies** of the Christian life is that we can be Christians & yet **not tap into all these resources** that the Spirit of Jesus has given us.

We are an **incredibly blessed people**, for in the coming of Jesus we have the **fulfilment of all that was promised** God's people in the Old Testament & under the Old **Covenant**.

Let's have a look at what **Jeremiah** says during his magnificent prophesy about the New Covenant that the Messiah, Jesus would bring:

in Jeremiah 31:34 he says:

*No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, "Know the Lord,"
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,'
declares the Lord.
'For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.'*

And the thing we need to see here is **the completeness of the forgiveness God wants to give us**. We've all heard the phrase **"forgive & forget"** but the reality is, it's impossible for us as human beings to do that. We can't just forget. And in many cases it would be **dangerous if we did forget**.

We learn from mistakes by remembering them. We put up **appropriate boundaries** around abusers by remembering what they have done to us. As people, we can **forgive even while remembering**. **But God**, here, Jeremiah says he will remember our sins no more.

Micah 7:18-19 says something similar. Here the prophet says

¹⁸ Where is another God like you, who pardons the sins of his people? You cannot stay angry with your people, for you love to be merciful. ¹⁹ Once again you will have compassion on us. You will tread our sins beneath your feet; you will throw them into the depths of the ocean!

God not only forgets our sin, he symbolically throws them into the depths of the ocean!

The message is clear - God forgives **and** forgets. **God's love & forgiveness is bigger & greater & stronger & deeper than any sin, any mistake, any failure we or anybody else can ever make.**

And all of this mercy and compassion and forgiveness reaches **its peak in the person of Jesus**. We saw that in the first story that Debbie read to us from Luke 5:17-26.

Actually it's a story of love, & it begins with some people who love their sick friend so much they were prepared to go to **any lengths** to take him to where Jesus is for healing. We have no idea how far they carried him to get to the place where Jesus was teaching – it could have been miles. But once there, **they are so determined they refuse** to be put off by the fact the house is crowded & that they can't get in to see Jesus. **Their love for their friend takes them up on to the roof** where they start removing tiles so they can lower their friend down in front of Jesus. **I mean these guys were determined!**

And when Jesus sees their **determination & their love** for this friend – which he labels **"faith"** interestingly - he says, *'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'* And this is the thing you see in the gospels, when dealing with **people who are struggling**, who are **desperate** (the bruised reeds & the flickering candles) - Jesus is always looking **for what is right & good in them** – what we call these days **a strength based approach**.

And the gospels starkly **contrast that with the attitude of the Pharisees**, who do the opposite – they are **fault finders**, who always seem to be looking for **what is wrong with people, & where their sin is, & where the blame lies**. They loved to **label people as 'sinners'** & point out their sin & mistakes, & remind people that **they aren't good enough**.

Jesus models **love, acceptance & forgiveness**, but sadly, the Pharisees model **fault-finding, judgment and self-righteousness**.

But as soon as this happens in this story, **Jesus challenges them**.

‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? And besides, which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ And then he said to the paralysed man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ Immediately the man stood up in front of them, picked up what he had been lying on and went home **praising** God. Everyone was **amazed** and gave praise to God. They were filled with **awe** and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’

Well, I’ll tell you who’s **moving in those 8 positive emotions** now – it’s not the Pharisees, **it’s the man** who’s been healed and forgiven, and **it’s the crowd** who have been watching. There is **praise**, there is **gratitude**, and there is **awe**.

As I said, this is **a story of love**, and it’s **a story of healing** – healing from the **inside-out**. It begins with **forgiveness**, and ends with a man walking again.

Now let’s look at **the second story** Debbie read to us, which has many similarities; because it’s **also a love story**.

It starts with **Jesus having dinner at the home of a Pharisee, named Simon**. And already here’s a sign of Jesus’ **graciousness** & ability to accept people. Even though he’s continually at logger-heads with the Pharisees, he always seems **willing to sit & eat** with them, to talk & dialogue, & to try & help them move forward towards God.

And while they are **all reclining on the floor & eating from the kind of low table** they used in those days, a woman enters the **back of the room**. Luke says she is a woman who **has lead a sinful life** – the implication being that she has been sexually promiscuous, and perhaps a sex worker. She approaches Jesus from behind, where Jesus is reclining on the floor with **his feet tucked behind him**, & she **begins to weep**, so much so that she soaks his feet & so she then bends down to dry them. She removes her **head scarf, and loosens her long hair** which is tied-up, & she begins to use her hair to very **tenderly dry Jesus feet**. And then she **leans even lower**, and begins to **kiss Jesus’ feet**. She uncorks a bottle of **perfume**, & then begins to **massage** this into Jesus’ feet.

I mean this is an **extraordinary scene**. This is incredibly sensual what this woman is doing, & she is breaking **every rule of propriety & decent behaviour** that existed. Then, as now in many parts of the Middle-East, a **woman’s hair was supposed to be covered at all times**, and only ever to be uncovered in private for her husband’s eyes only. But she does way more than just uncover her hair, she gets way closer & more personal with Jesus than that.

And of course, **Simon** & the others there are really **shocked**. Not just shocked but **revolted**. Revolted by this woman, revolted by her past, & revolted by her present behaviour. Simon spits out the words like a curse – *“If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of **WOMAN** she is – a **sinner**.”* And you can imagine the emphasis he put on the word **sinner** when he said it.

But again, as in the previous story, Jesus has this incredible capacity to look past the outward appearance, to look past the labels, to look past all the mistakes and failings and weakness of this woman – and look straight into her heart and see the intentions, and see the beauty & the love that is trying to express itself.

And **at the end** of it all Jesus says to her *“know that your sins are forgiven, go in peace”*.

Jesus confirms that she – **regardless of anything she has done before** – **is completely, utterly forgiven**. And again the **Pharisees** are scandalized & **outraged by such lavish, gratuitous, freely given forgiveness & grace**. They want to see forgiveness **earned & paid for** - & no way this woman has earned or paid for it.

God wants to, really wants to, freely give & lavish forgiveness and grace on us, so that we might lavish it on others - & this all finds its **perfect fulfilment & power in Jesus**, the one who said *“forgive them Father, 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.

And yet **we've all had the experience haven't we, of screwing things up, of failing, of falling short, of sinning** – and afterwards of not being sure we **are** forgiven. Or of asking for forgiveness, and yet **not really feeling forgiven**. We know the Scriptures – we know that **1 John 1:9** says that *'if we confess our sins, He is faithful & just and will forgive us and purify us'* - but we sometimes struggle to really feel it in our heart, in our gut.

Why is that? **Why do we sometimes not feel forgiven even after we've asked?** Well we need to recognize that **we have an enemy**, & that one of the **names** in Scripture for that enemy is **'the accuser'**, the one who accuses. And it's he who is **the author of accusation & condemnation**. And at this point we need to understand the difference between **conviction and condemnation**. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit, & it is conviction about a **specific** thing in our lives that we need to put right, & when we ask, **God will show us how to** put it right. **Condemnation** on the other hand is a **blanket sense of shame about who we are**, and that is not from God, it is always from from the Evil One.

Before we were talking about **BLAME**, and how **Christ's forgiveness removes** that from us. Well now we are talking about **SHAME**, & how **the Spirit of Jesus wants to remove every trace** of shame from our lives as well. We've just seen in that story from Luke 7, how **Jesus did everything he could to make sure that that women was not shamed**, but that her sense of shame would be **lifted from her**. He treats her with so much tenderness & respect. **It is only the religious Pharisees who want to shame her**.

And it's the **same for us** – **Jesus so** wants to bring us out from any sense of shame or condemnation, and **into the light & freedom of his grace and forgiveness**.

As it says in Romans 8:1-2

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.

And as it says in Romans 10:11

*No one who believes in him will **ever** be put to shame.*

Because Jesus, on the cross, has taken away all our sin & our shame

As it says in Colossians 2:13-14

***Even when we were dead** in our sins... **God made us alive with Christ**. He forgave us **all** our sins, having cancelled the charges which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, & he has nailed it to the cross.*

Imagine what kind of world it would be if we could go out from here & live in those qualities of the Spirit that we talked about earlier - **hope, faith, joy, compassion and awe?**

Imagine how good a world it would be if we could go out & consistently live **lives of gratitude & grace & love towards others?**

We'll we can. Galatians 4:6 & 7 says, *'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, & this Spirit calls out, 'Abba, papa, Father.'* *And so we are no longer slaves, but God's sons & daughters; and since we are God sons & daughters, we will also inherit everything God has for us'.*

As we come to a close, I want us to **pray and to do a symbolic exercise**.

Sitting where you are, extend your hands out to God in a gesture of **surrender** like this. And in your hands, give to God anything you are struggling with that you want to hand over to God. It could be hurt, or blame or guilt or disappointment. It could be something you need forgiveness for, or that you need to forgive others for. It could be something you blame your-self for, & more than anything, you need to forgive yourself for.

Now let's pray together. PRAYER OF SURRENDER

Now let's change the position of our hands a little, so that they are more **cupped**, & this is more a gesture of **receiving**, because now we are going to pray to **receive God forgiveness & love & grace in a fresh way**, in a deeper way, in all of those areas we just surrendered to God.

PRAYER OF RECEIVING.

Now I realise we might have touched on some deep areas for some people today, & if you want to come up **for more prayer at the end of the service**, there will be some of us up here happy to pray with you. Or if there is anything you are struggling with that you'd like to talk to myself or Nancy about, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us & make a time to get together.