

October 21-25, 2024 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of [^]Jesus Part 146

Jesus' 3 Step Process To Forgiving Others

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Forgiveness
DOESN'T MAKE THEM RIGHT;
IT JUST SETS US FREE.

When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: I know that this week's reflections are much longer than last week's. Why is that, you might ask. Because last week I ran out of time and didn't have time to make phresh reflections so I recycled some from many moons ago that it turned out my wife Judy had written for me back when she had much more energy than she does now. She was very conscious about brevity but me- not so much. I understand these reflections might be more powerful if I spent some time editing them (I know you're shocked when I say I don't edit these because I'm sure you've never seen a mistike in these that would have been caught by a good editor) but I just don't have the time or energy to edit. These are really my rambling rhapsodies as I think about what to say in this week's sermon. If it seems like I don't know where I'm going sometimes it's because sometimes I don't know where I'm going. So please forgive me. And that brings us back to our topic for the week- forgiveness.

Jesus tells a parable about how to forgive and why to forgive and in it He gives us a three step process for forgiveness. It's not easy but it's not rocket science either. It's so simple it can be almost painful. The first step we looked at yesterday was to identify with the person who hurt you. Recognize that if you were in a similar situation and if you had experienced the same things that the offender has experienced and if I didn't have the advantages I've had I could see myself doing the exact same thing. Don't believe it? Think you'd never do what that evil so and so did to you? Maybe you're right but it's not necessarily because you're just a naturally better person- maybe it's because you had parents who taught you how to live amongst the other humans and so you'd never dream of doing what your offender did to you.

Or maybe you're living in denial. Either way, even if you'd never do what your offender did to you, it's important that you don't remove yourself from the community of sinners/offenders. You may not have done the exact same thing but you've done plenty that should've required an apology and a plea for forgiveness. And if you still aren't with me then I should probably call you Cleopatra. Why Cleopatra? Because she was the queen of denial (go ahead and think about that for a minute, we'll wait for you to realize that the Nile river is in Egypt and Cleopatra was- well I think you've probably got the gist of the joke by this time ;o). Anyways, Jesus first step to forgiveness was to identify with the offender. What comes next?

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt. Matthew 18:27 (NLT)

The first step was to identify with your offender (refusing to remove the offender from the community of humans and refusing to remove myself from the community of sinners/offenders). The second step is to cancel the debt. What does Jesus mean by that? Well let's get back to the parable. Remember the king had a servant who owed him 10,000 talents of gold (it could have been silver but let's stick with gold for now to simplify things a bit). How much is that in modern terms? Well in the first century a days labor paid an average of one denarius. There were 10,000 denarii in one talent of gold. Which means that one talent of gold was the equivalent of almost 28 years worth of labor. The servant lost 10,000 of those 28 years worth of labor. Scholars estimate in our day that servant's debt would have been approaching one trillion dollars.

Whoa. How did that king ever let a servant get that far behind? In what world would a servant have had the opportunity to lose that much of his king's money? Well almost assuredly this isn't a common servant who cooked or cleaned or took care of the gardens. In the first century Rome had a massive empire. But Caesar didn't actively manage very much of that empire- he had local governors for that. In Israel King Herod would have been one of those local governors. All Caesar required from Herod was to keep the peace and send in Rome's taxes on time. So scholars believe this is the kind of "servant" Jesus is referencing in this parable. And this "servant" had lost a MASSIVE amount of money that was owed to the king (most people listening in the first century would have been tracking with Jesus and thinking about the relationship between Caesar and Herod). Now comes the second question- how did this servant lose all that money? There's really only two options- first, the servant messed up but it wasn't on purpose. He wasn't trying to steal from Caesar- but through mismanagement or bad luck the vast sum was lost. The other possibility is that the servant stole the money. It was no honest mistake- the servant had wickedness in his heart (this is exactly the word the king will use of the servant at the end of this parable of the unforgiving servant- we began looking at that parable about 2 weeks ago and yes we kind of went backwards but it was how this lesson worked out) and he nefariously tried to steal from his king.

Scholars think it must have been mismanagement or the king wouldn't have identified with the servant and then cancelled the debt. But however the whole thing came about the king did identify with the servant and he did cancel the debt. Can you believe it? The equivalent of almost one trillion dollars and the king just forgave the servant (and really that's what forgiveness is in the end- cancelling a debt owed to you). So what does this have to do with you and me? Well have you ever had someone wrong you. I know, ridiculous question. Live long enough and we'll all have multiple cases of this in our own lives. So what does it mean to cancel-the-debt of the person who wronged me? Maybe the wrong didn't result in financial loss so how would you cancel a debt that didn't involve money? We'll talk about that tomorrow but for today maybe you and I can spend some time reflecting on what kind of losses (other than financial because that one's pretty self explanatory) we might have experience where we cancelled a debt that did not involve money.

Tuesday Reflection: So what does it mean to cancel-the-debt of the person who wronged me? Maybe the wrong didn't result in financial loss so how would you cancel a debt that didn't involve money? Well let's talk about that for a minute because forgiveness always involves a loss. One time I was at a small group meeting at the home of someone from Riverside Community Church. I have at times in my life been quite a bit heavier than I am presently. At my highest weight I was hovering around 260. So I'm at this family's house and I sat in a chair and heard a snap when I sat down. Turns out my glory was too much for that chair to handle at 260. Nobody noticed. I can remember the thought running through my mind- I could quietly get back up and get something to eat and then sit in a different chair and the next person to sit in this chair will think they broke it. I'm not proud to admit that thought ran through my mind but if I'm being honest I'm not proud of a lot of what runs through my mind. In fact almost all of my

initial thoughts about what I should or shouldn't do are not something to brag about. So I've learned to push the pause button and let the Holy Spirit check me on what I'm thinking about doing. "What do you think, Lord? Should I get up and leave this mess to the next poor slob that has the misfortune to sit here (now I think I should point out I don't think the people who go to church with me are slobes but you get the gist of what was running through my devious mind- and as I sit here typing it does occur to me that some of the people who go to church with me are slobes but I'm a slob too so there's no judgment there just a recognition of kindred spirits)?

I'm thinking you can guess what the Holy Spirit told me, right? He said, "no". He does that a lot to me which is a good indication of where my best thinking is on most days. Well I didn't pass the buck and make someone else have to think they broke that chair so I got up, went over to the host and told them I broke their chair. And do you know what the host said to me? She said, "don't worry about it". I told her I wanted to pay to have it fixed or replaced and she wouldn't hear of it. After a short debate I accepted her extravagant forgiveness.

So what happened in that not-so-flattering-story about my initial tendencies? I confessed my wrongdoing to my host and my host forgave me. What did she forgive? Well, whenever there is a loss (in this case a chair but it can be lots of things that we lose when someone harms us either purposely or on accident- things like reputation, peace, hope, security, etc...) there is always a price to be paid. In my case it would have been the cost of repairing or replacing the chair. And when forgiveness takes place that cost doesn't just vanish into thin air- the cost is just transferred from one person to another. In my case my host took on the cost of my mistake by absorbing the cost of the loss herself. And that's what forgiveness is. Anytime I forgive someone it means I'm choosing to absorb the loss associated with the offender's wrongdoing.

One of the toughest things about teaching on forgiveness is our misunderstandings of what forgiveness is. We think that if we forgive the person who harmed us then that person is going to get away with it and the price will never be paid for what they did. But that's wrong. The price will be paid if you forgive- but it will be paid by you instead of the offender. Oh sure, sometimes we forgive and the offender makes restitution of some sort but we can't expect that because it won't happen often. No, when we forgive there is an enormous price that is paid- forgiveness just shifts the payment from the offender to the offended.

I'm going to type that again so we can both reflect on what Jesus is asking us to do- He's asking us to pay the price for what the offender did to us if need be. What a sales pitch, am I right?!?! I mean who wouldn't sign up for that? Probably most of us. It's why there's so much turmoil in our world right now. Nobody's willing to absorb the cost of other people's wrongs. So why should I do it? Well, Jesus gives lots of benefits to forgiveness (eventual peace, joy, and a tender heart) and warns of the dangers of unforgiveness (bitterness, hatred and a hardened heart that seeks to protect itself from pain and loss but in the process builds walls between me and every important relationship I have) but ultimately the best reason to forgive when we've been wronged and to absorb the cost of

the offense ourselves is because that's what Jesus did for us. His last words on the cross were quite telling when it comes to learning what forgiveness is:

When Jesus had tasted it, he said, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30 (NLT)

What does it-is-finished mean? Well the Bible word used there is the Greek word, tetelestai. Tetelestai can be translated as it-is-finished but it was used most often in the first century in the banking industry. When someone had finished paying off a loan the bank officer would stamp, TETELESTAI, on their loan agreement. Yes it technically can mean it-is-finished but the better translation would probably be, paid-in-full. What was paid-in-full? My debt. Your debt. The debt of every human who had ever lived and would ever live. Jesus came to earth to forgive us for the wrongs done to each other and (more importantly) the wrongs we've done to Him. Remember how much the servant owed the king? Almost one trillion bucks. Now let's take a minute and try to tally up how much we owe Jesus for the wrongs we've committed. I know, it hurts. But let's look at something King David wrote 1,000 years before Jesus (David's great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson [but don't attempt to count those "great-greats" because nobody is exactly sure how many "great-greats" should be in there]) wrote about how God deals with our sin and with us sinners:

The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust. Psalm 103:8-14 (NLT)

And if you know anything about David's life you know how important those words were to him. And maybe this is a good time to remind both of us that in spite of his massive moral failures there were also massive moral victories in David's life. The Bible is the only ancient religious text that doesn't hide the failures of their heroes. Read ancient Egyptian, Assyrian or Babylonian texts and you'll find kings and heroes that never made one mistake in their entire lives and who were 10 feet tall and never lost a battle and always made the right heroic decisions. But not the Bible- if you've ever actually read much of the Old Testament then you know how messed up the "heroes" of our faith were. Starting with Noah (a drunkard who seems to have been a pretty sketchy dad) to Abraham (a chronic liar and a man who sometimes doubted God's ability to protect him) to Jacob (one of the most despicable humans ever written about in the pages of the Bible at least until his older years when he finally starts to figure out what trusting God really looks like) to David (a liar, adulterer and murderer). Are you starting to feel a tad better about your own sins? I hope so because I think that's what God's intention was when He had his inspired writers tell these "heroes" stories.

Because the good news is Jesus has already stamped the list of wrongs you've committed with the word, tetelestai. Your debt has been paid-in-full. And now Jesus wants us to

become more and more like Him. How do we do that? Well, you will never be more like Jesus than when you forgive someone. It's what He did for us and now He asks that we do it for each other:

Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

I know, ouch. It's not easy. In fact it's probably one of the toughest things you'll ever do. But it's crucial. When we've been wronged it's crucial that we attempt to identify with the offender (like Jesus did with me and you) and then cancel-the-debt (like Jesus did with us). Jesus does it for you and now He asks you to forgive others for Him. So let's spend some time reflecting on who we might still need to forgive. I'm not saying you for sure have to go to them and tell them you're forgiving them. Maybe you will need to do that. Maybe doing that would cause more harm than it would do good. How we proceed is not set in stone. But the importance of forgiveness is set in stone.

Thursday Reflection: We are on day 3 of Jesus' 3 step recipe for forgiveness. We've looked at how this parable of the unforgiving servant teaches us that in order to forgive we have to identify with the offender (we have to find some way to feel compassion towards them) and then cancel the debt. Today we'll look at the third part of Jesus' recipe- letting the offender go:

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.
Matthew 18:27 (NLT)

Let him go? I'm supposed to just let the offender go. Without paying? Without punishment? Just let him go? That's what you're telling me? Nope. I'm not telling you- Jesus is. I know that was a tad harsh, sorry about that. I hope you can forgive me. But seriously, yes, Jesus expects us to let them go.

What about their motives? What if they did it on purpose? Well that's the thing- how could we ever know for sure? I can't see into people's hearts. And I'm fairly certain that you can't either. And yet it doesn't stop us from claiming to know why people do what they do and why they don't do what they don't do. But Jesus is the only One who knows why you or I or anyone else does what we do. And yet He still forgave you. And He still forgave me. And while I often don't understand my own heart and often I can't figure out why I do the things I do, I know one thing for sure- Jesus always knows why I do what I do. And to this day it surprises me that He's willing to identify with me, cancel my debt and then let me go. All He asks in return is that I go-and-do-likewise.

But what happens if we don't? What if we refuse to forgive others? What then? Well let's go back to Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant because Jesus answers that question clearly. He says that after the servant was forgiven a massive debt this was his next move:

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. Matthew 18:28-30 (NLT)

Wow. How could that guy do that?!?! I mean seriously, what kind of monster would do something that obviously wrong?

Hi, I'm Ed and if I'm not careful I'll do that all the time. I'm Ed and I'm a recovering unforgiver. Just like alcoholics, we unforgivers don't just "get better" and stop having to worry about our disease rearing its ugly head when we least expect it. And my guess is you should be there with me at Unforgivers Anonymous sharing your stories of the times you've been tempted to refuse forgiveness to someone that wronged you. I know there's no such things as unforgivers anonymous (although forgiving those who've harmed you is one of the steps in Alcoholics Anonymous). But to be honest, I guess you could consider church to be a support group for us recovering unforgivers. If we're not careful we'll remove ourselves from the pool of people who wrong others and believe we don't need to recover from anything. I'm doing great. I don't need to repent.

And then like the unforgiving servant we walk away from Jesus' presence where He has just forgiven us a massive debt and come across someone that owes us a perceived (whether it's a real debt or just something we imagined) debt. What happens if we fail to forgive that individual. Well, what happened to the unforgiving servant? His debt was restored and he was tossed into jail until he could pay the entire sum owed- something this servant would never have been able to do. So what happened? Why was the king so upset that the forgiven servant didn't forgive his fellow servant?

Well, it turns out that his unwillingness to forgive was a sign to the king of what was really in servant #1's heart. Yes he was pleased as punch to receive forgiveness but he had no intention of becoming a forgiver. Why not? Because servant #1 would've believed he deserved forgiveness but servant #2 did not. When the king hears about it he is livid. How could he be forgiven so much and yet not have that impact how much he is willing to forgive? The king changes his mind and throws servant #1 into prison because servant #1 revealed the condition of his heart with his unforgiveness. The king was willing to accept that servant #1 lost his 10,000 talents of gold by mismanagement until servant #1 demonstrated by his behavior the condition of his heart. And that made the king realize- this guy doesn't share my values at all. And the result was that servant #1 was tossed into jail. And then Jesus ends with this menacing pronouncement:

That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." Matthew 18:35 (NLT)

So is this where Jesus starts talking about hell? Well, no. But then again, yes. Kind of. Sort of. In a round-a-bout way. We'll get into the last part of this story tomorrow but for today maybe you and I could spend some time reflecting on the concept of hypocrisy and what it looks like to our King when He forgives us for a trillion dollars worth of sins and then we refuse to forgive those who wrong us.

Friday Reflection: Yesterday I ended our time of reflection with what happens in the story of the unforgiving servant when he refuses to forgive after he had been forgiven so much by the king:

When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." Matthew 18:31-35 (NLT)

What exactly does that mean? Did you just have to loosen your collar and swallow hard? Gulp! Is He talking about hell? He is, isn't He? Oh man I'm in deep, deep trouble. Sometimes when Jesus talks about hell He's talking about the literal lake of fire that will be the destiny of the devil and his demons and anyone who rejects Jesus' offer of Life. But a lot of the time (and I'm tempted to say most-of-the-time but I'm not ready to make that bold claim just yet) He's not talking about that literal place but rather something we do to ourselves. Sometimes He's not talking about hell as someplace we "go" but rather something we unleash into our lives and the lives of others through the decisions we make. If we refuse to forgive, Jesus says we will end up living this life in a prison of our own construction. And when we do that we unleash hell-on-earth. And that doesn't just impact us- it impacts the ones we love as well. When we unleash hell into our own lives we unleash hell into the lives of those we care about whether we intend to or not.

On Monday we dealt with this idea quite a bit so I don't want to spend too much time on this today but the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved not by the things we do but by the grace of God. Nothing we do can save us- only Jesus can do that and He does it freely and without cost to us. All He asks in return is for us to start the lifelong journey of becoming more and more like Him. A journey where our hearts will be trained to share the values of the One Who created us and Who forgives us of our sins. One of the things that means is learning to forgive like Jesus forgave. We aren't saved or lost because of what we do or don't do (I know that statement probably needs to have some time spent unpacking it because at first glance it's going to seem untrue but we don't have time for that today- if you've got questions about that email me and we'll discuss it but I would point your attention to this scripture for you to consider as you ponder the question: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21*)- we are saved only through the grace of God revealed through Jesus. We are lost when we refuse to accept what Jesus has done for us by treating others as though they are unforgivable.

Ok so then what was Jesus saying here? I always thought He was saying, forgive or God will send you to hell. But is that what He's saying? I don't think so. But this is a VERY serious thing that we do have to work out in our lives. Jesus says something quite provocative in the Sermon On The Mount. In His most famous speech (heck it isn't just the most famous speech Jesus ever gave- it's the most famous speech ever given. Period.) He teaches us to pray. In the middle of that prayer He invites us to pray this: *Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us. Matthew 6:12 (NLT)*

Have you ever thought about that part of the prayer when you recited it? Maybe you don't recite this prayer but for those in the recovery community it's part of their daily lives. So let me ask again- have you ever really thought about what you're asking God for when you pray that part of the prayer? Do you really want to pray that part of the prayer? Do you feel comfortable telling God, "hey, you know how I forgive people who hurt me? Would you treat me exactly like I treat them please?" No? Me neither. I know, ouch. What happens if we don't forgive others just as God has forgiven us? Well it's kind of fascinating that Jesus explains that part (and only that part) of the prayer. After He's done teaching us what has come to be called the Lord's Prayer He says this:

In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part. Matthew 6:14-15 (MES)

Ok so what exactly is He saying? I used to think Jesus was saying, "forgive others or God will refuse to forgive you". But the more I reflect on this the more I think what Jesus is saying is that there is a portal through which God's forgiveness flows to us and there's a portal through which our forgiveness flows to those who wrong us. The problem is, they're the same portal. Which means if we close that portal to others so our forgiveness doesn't flow to them when they wrong us, we have inadvertently closed the very same portal through which God's forgiveness must travel to secure our forgiveness. Close one and you've closed both.

So now let's get back to the unforgiving servant- what did Jesus mean when he said that the servant was tossed into jail? Doesn't it mean God did the tossing? I don't think so. I now that's how the parable goes but we have to be very careful interpreting Jesus' parables literally because they were metaphors that explained deep heavenly mysteries through stores we could identify with. The parables are not literal- they're stories that Jesus intends for us to ponder and wonder about. I know there are a lot of people who would disagree with me but that's nothing new and it's never stopped me before.

I think the prison cell Jesus is talking about is a prison with walls of our own making and when I finally get around to doing that lesson on hell I think you'll see what I'm getting at so please be patient. In a way I think that's one form hell takes in our world right now on this side of death's door and eternity. When we choose not to forgive we are sentencing ourselves to time in jail and while in that process we think we are only separating ourselves from the offender who wronged us there is another hidden result of this decision- we don't just cut ourselves off from the wrongdoer when we refuse to forgive- we also cut ourselves off from the rest of the world including the people we claim to care about. That will slowly eat at a relationship and if something isn't done it will eventually destroy all of our relationships.

Including our relationship with the forgiving king- Jesus. That's why this is all so serious. So when you are faced with the daunting task (and Jesus knows it is a daunting task) of having to forgive someone who injured you deeply how do we find the power and help to forgive the unforgivable? We look to Jesus because He did it for us. If you're having trouble letting go of the wrongdoers in your life I hope you'll spend some time with me

reflecting on this passage- I hope it helps you as much as it helps me to get through those moments and I hope it will help you to see just how awesome Jesus is:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1-3 (NLT)

And I love the way the Message paraphrase renders the last part of that verse so now you have to read that too ;o)

When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

Hebrews 12:3 (MSG)

When you find yourself having to forgive the unforgivable the only way to get through it is to recognize that we are never more like Jesus than when we choose to forgive the unforgivable by identifying with the one who wronged me, cancelling the debt they owe and then letting them go. If you're having a tough time doing that first of all welcome to the club but secondly, if this is a struggle then try to take your focus off the person who wronged you and put that focus squarely on Jesus. Remember what happened to Peter when he was walking on the water with Jesus? As long as he had his eyes on Jesus he was walking on the water. But as soon as he took his focus off of Jesus and started looking at the storm and waves raging all around him he immediately started to sink. But what did Peter do? Do you remember? He cried out, "save me Lord!". And what did Jesus do? He saved Peter.

So let's take a lesson from Peter and spend some time reflecting on the storms in our own lives. When we find ourselves in the midst of life's greatest storms (and often those storms are unleashed into our lives because of the decision of someone else to unleash hell-on-earth into their own lives that then splashes over into our own lives) and we are struggling with forgiveness please take your eyes off the storm and put your focus squarely on Jesus. Because if we take our eyes off Jesus we will sink just as surely as Peter did. Will we be wise enough to cry out, "save me, Lord!" is really the only question we have to answer because we will all struggle with this.

Isn't Jesus the coolest?