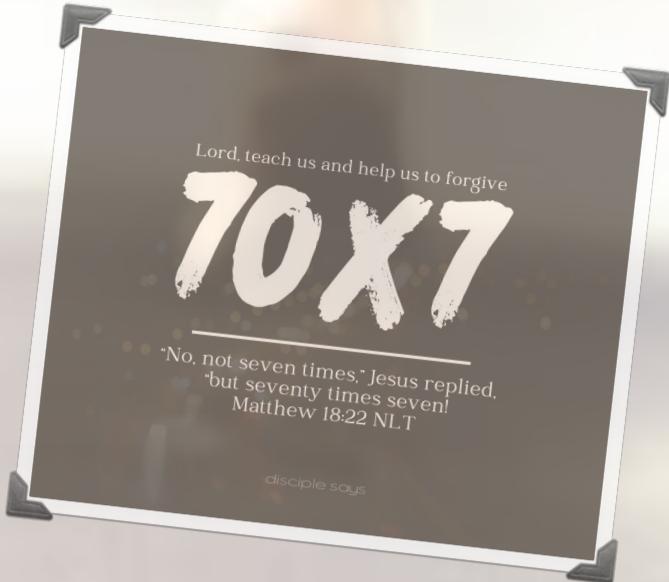


October 7-11, 2024 Edition

Following
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The Year_(s) Of Jesus Part 144
What's The Deal With Forgiveness?

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

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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 you 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 promised in a lesson two weeks ago that I would do a lesson on hell in the next few weeks. I didn't promise exactly when I would get to it but I promised it was coming. Since then I've been percolating on exactly how best to deal with that sticky topic and I'm not quite ready to go there yet (neither figuratively nor literally ;o) so I decided to move on to the next story in the Chronological story of Jesus' life and I was kind of surprised (although not really) that in the very next story Jesus tells a parable that I always thought that Jesus referenced hell in. And by the time you get done reading these reflections on that next story you may wish I had decided to deal with the hell lesson this week. So what is the next story about? I'll let you read all about it:

Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven! "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold-along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned-to pay the debt. "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. "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 18:21-35 (NLT)

So forgiveness is what's on tap for the next story in the chronological story of Jesus' life. And what does Jesus say happened to that unforgiving servant in His parable? He's tossed in jail until he can pay back the entire sum he owed. But parables are metaphors. They are a story that us humans can relate to that describe a much deeper spiritual reality. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the king in this story is God and that the unforgiving servant is me (or you since you're reading the story yourself here). Do I have to be the unforgiving servant? No. That's why Jesus tells the parable. To warn us to not be that guy (or girl but you know what I mean). So it's pretty easy to figure out what the king and the servant stand for in this spiritual metaphor of Jesus' but what does the jail where this man would be tortured represent?

I grew up believing it represented hell. That what Jesus was saying was, "forgive or I'll toss you in jail and torture you until you can pay what you owe". But can that be the true

meaning? Haven't we learned over and over through the teachings of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament that we aren't saved by the things we do and we don't get what we deserve- we get grace and mercy if we trust in Jesus? Yes. We have. Over and over again. So what's the deal with this parable? And that's what we'll spend this week mulling over and reflecting on. So maybe for today you and I could spend some time reflecting on what saves a person and how to harmonize the fact that I'm saved by the grace of God through my faith in Jesus and not by my record and how the parable of Jesus' figures in.

Tuesday Reflection: So one of the first things we learn in this parable of Jesus' on forgiveness is just how important it is to forgive others in the mind of Jesus. Turns out it's quite important:

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 18:32-35 (NLT)

Can you feel the urgency that Jesus intends for all of us to feel when we hear this parable? Has it made you start asking yourself if there are people in your past you have withheld forgiveness from? If so then congratulations- that's exactly what Jesus was shooting for. He wants us to live our lives in freedom- not in the dungeon that unforgiveness erects in our hearts. And maybe this is a good time to define true, Biblical forgiveness. I always thought it was the same as the Hallmark definition. You know what I mean, forgive and forget. If someone says "I'm sorry" then that means I have to forgive them and let everything go back to the way it was before they hurt me. But that's not Biblical forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness is simply to let go of whatever you believe the offender owes you. And it is in the letting go that we find freedom. Forgiveness doesn't make the offender right- it makes you free. And if there is to be a relationship going forward then it's the offender's responsibility to rebuild trust but sometimes that's just not the best way forward. Not every instance of forgiveness needs to include reconciliation.

Now that that's out of the way let's continue with the parable. It sounds like what Jesus is saying (at least it always sounded like this to me), "forgive or I'll toss you into hell". We dealt yesterday with the problems associated with that understanding but I'd like to explore it a bit more today. Is Jesus saying that if you don't forgive you'll end up in hell? Yes, but maybe not in the way we think. Let me explain.

I've talked quite a bit the last few weeks about the part of the Lord's Prayer where Jesus invites us to pray this:

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Matthew 6:10 (NLT)

What does that part of the prayer mean to you? I know I always thought that part of the prayer was me saying to Jesus, "please hurry up and come back already so your Kingdom can be established here on earth and Your will can be done here on earth just like it's done

in Heaven". And how is God's will done in Heaven? Perfectly. And how is God's will done down here on earth? Imperfectly. Very imperfectly. What this part of the Lord's Prayer is inviting us to pray is that even before Jesus' return we want to do our part in making God's Kingdom a reality here on earth. We are asking to see His will done down here as it is done in Heaven. And where is the only place you or I have any control over whether or not His will is done down here as it is done up there? Well, it's only in our own lives that we have even minimal control. So one way I like to interpret that part of the prayer is that I'm saying to God, "let Your Kingdom come, and let it begin with me. Right here. Right now. Today".

And when we are successful at following through on that part of the prayer's sentiment what we are doing is bring "up-there, down-here". We bring a little bit of heaven into our lives and into this broken world when we do our best to ensure that His will is done down-here as it is done up-there. But what happens when we don't do a very good job of that. What happens when we fail miserably and do the opposite of bringing up-there, down-here? Well if we're not careful (and sometimes even if we are) we'll do the opposite of God's will and instead of bringing up-there, down-here we'll bring down-there, up-here. In other words instead of unleashing heaven-on-earth by doing our best to do God's will we will unleash hell-on-earth by bringing down-there, up-here. Wondering how that's possible? Well Jesus' brother, James tells us this:

But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself. James 3:5-6 (NLT)

Do you see what James is saying? You can probably identify strongly with this verse—either because someone has unleashed hell-on-earth in your life with the words they said or because you unleashed hell-on-earth in someone else's life (and probably your own at the same time) with the words you said (or more likely you have experienced both). This is why forgiveness is so important to Jesus. Not only because of what unforgiveness does to our relationship and to our own health but because when we embrace bitterness and unforgiveness we are destroying our own lives, which then in turn damages the people all around us:

Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace which God gives, for if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit which is not only bad in itself but can also poison the lives of many others. Hebrews 12:15 (PHI)

Bitterness isn't just destructive because of what it does to you and me. It's also destructive because of what it does to our relationships. Whenever I read this verse it reminds me of reckless drivers on the Glenn hwy during the winter. If you've live in Alaska for long you know exactly what I'm talking about. Everyone is cruising along safely (well as safely as one can cruise with snow and ice on the ground) and there's always this one knucklehead playing Grand Theft Auto: Anchorage Edition. This yahoo is weaving in and out of traffic trying to get ahead of everyone else and not caring what kind of destruction he (or she) leaves in his (or her) wake. Inevitably justice is not served as this individual causes someone to swerve or hit their brakes in order to avoid crashing into the yahoo and that

begins a chain reaction that leaves 10 cars in the ditch while the yahoo goes on his (or her) merry way oblivious to the carnage he (or she) has left in their wake.

That's what unforgiveness does in our lives. We may not see how much it's impacting us personally for years but everyone around us can see the damage it's doing to our relationships and the people we claim to love. So what's Jesus' advice? The same advice that Elsa gave to her sister Anna in the movie Frozen- ♪ let it go ♪.

I know, easier said than done. This week we'll talk about what Jesus said about how to go about letting it go and where to find the power and help you and I will need if we are going to be successful in letting it go. But for today maybe you and I can spend some time reflecting on what Jesus is saying can and will happen to us if we don't learn to ♪ let it go, let it GOOOOOOOO ♪ (and now you have that song stuck in your head all day- either you're welcome [if you like that song and don't mind having it stuck in your mind all day] or, sorry, will you please forgive me [if you aren't crazy about having Elsa singing in your mind all day long]).

Wednesday Reflection: So far this week we've looked at the parable of the unforgiving servant that Jesus told in response to a question He got from Peter asking how often forgiveness was required. How about 7, Peter asks. Jesus tells Peter he's way off- try 70 times 7. This didn't mean 490 times was the limit- it was Jesus' way of saying that forgiveness works the same way that your shampoo does- repeat as necessary. In that parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus gives us a 3 step recipe to forgiveness. And Jesus' first step in the process is very unusual and perhaps even shocking:

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him... Matthew 18:25-27 (NIV)

So the first thing Jesus says the king in this parable does is he took-pity on the servant. The word Matthew uses that is translated into English as "took pity on" is the word for compassion. It is the most used descriptor of Jesus' emotion in all the gospels. Yes, sometimes Jesus got mad. Sometimes He was sad. Sometimes He was filled with joy. But by far the word used most often to capture Jesus' emotions is this word that we translate as compassion or to "take pity on". But there's one more way that English translations attempt to help us understand this complex Bible word and we see it here:

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Luke 7:13 (NLT)

His heart went out to her. What does that mean? It means he identified with the woman. He felt compassion and that caused Him to act but that phrase, His-heart-went-out-to-her is incredibly descriptive. Jesus looked at her and somehow He identified with her grief and it moved Him to act. We see the same thing dozens of other times in the gospels. And when Jesus saw us floundering in our sin and brokenness His heart went out to us and He

made plans to come to this earth as a baby human so He could ease our pain. To have ones heart go out to someone basically means we identify in some way with that person. So how does that work when someone hurts me and Jesus asks me to forgive them? How do I identify with someone who harmed me- especially if they did it on purpose?

Well that is difficult for us because we see ourselves as so much different from the offender. You may or may not have noticed this in your own life (yet) but maybe you've noticed this tendency in others who have been harmed by someone. We tend to separate ourselves from the offender and we tend to separate the offender from the category of "human". When someone hurts me things are quite simple. They wronged me. They did it on purpose. They did it because they're evil. They're not human. Sure they've got an excuse for why they did what they did but the excuse is meaningless- they did what they did because at their core they are inhuman.

But when we do something to someone else that requires an apology we refuse to see ourselves in the same light we cast our offenders in. When they did what they did it's because they're evil. But when I do what I did (maybe the same kind of thing my offender did to me) it's a different story. It's complicated. The situation is nuanced. There was a good reason I did what I did and doing what I did does not make me inhuman (the way what my offender did made them inhuman despite their loud explanations of why they did what they did). Are you exhausted after reading that run-on sentence that was worded so strangely? I know I'm tired just having typed it. But you see what I'm getting at, right? Unforgiveness keeps its hold on us when we dehumanize another human being. I once read that "forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners". Unfortunately I can't remember the name of the person who said so I can't give them credit- I hope if that person ever discovers this faux pas that they'll forgive me for forgetting them but I never forgot the quote. Tomorrow we'll look at the final two steps in Jesus' recipe for forgiveness but for today maybe you and I can spend some time reflecting on how often we exclude our enemies from the community of humans and how often we exclude ourselves from the community of sinners or wrongdoers.

Thursday Reflection: We'll pick up with Jesus' parable on the unforgiving servant on Monday but for today I want to spend some time looking at the concepts of confession, forgiveness and restoration. Let's read James' final words to a group of people who were being torn apart by suffering and misery and persecution:

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you. When a believing person prays, great things happen.... My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins. James 5:16-20 (NLT)

And that's how James ends his letter. With advice that is so often misunderstood it has caused an awful lot of pain and misery in a world that doesn't need any more of it brought about by well meaning followers of Jesus. This concept of confessing our sins to each other is one of

the most powerful ideas in the Christian faith and yet it can also become one of the most toxic if it's used to control and manipulate people.

The concept of forgiveness is so often misunderstood and misapplied that there are those of us who automatically put up a wall and refuse to listen when someone wants to talk about it. And restoration- this idea has been used by some followers of Jesus to justify their abuse and attacks on people who shouldn't be attacked. It has given the church a black eye and is one of the most identified reasons why people won't have anything to do with church any longer. In fact, there is an entire movement in modern day America that boasts of loving Jesus but hating the church.

And I can sympathize. I've spent some time in that camp myself. And yet, most of these concepts that James talks about in his book can only be lived out and practiced in community. And anywhere that a group of people who claim to be followers of Jesus gathers together- even at a "love Jesus but hate the church" conference- there you find Jesus' church. The word church simply means, "the called ones". It's nothing more than a gathering together of people who trust Jesus with their lives. Have there been abuses in the church over the years. There sure have. Will there continue to be people who hurt each other and use pressure and guilt and shame to manipulate people into doing what they think people should be doing? There sure will.

And yet, we can't live out the Christian life on our own. There is no such thing in the Bible as a "Lone Ranger Christian". We all need Jesus' church. Does that church have to look like the church you grew up with? No. It doesn't. But it does have to look like a group of people (how many isn't that important- there are strengths to large groups and there are strengths to having very small groups) who are sharing life together and doing their best to follow Jesus and trust Him with their lives.

And as we talk about confession, forgiveness and restoration we come to one of the toughest things that Jesus asks us to do with one another. So what do these spiritual practices look like practically speaking? What do they not mean? We will spend this week looking at that very question but maybe for today it'd be good to ask yourself a very important question: am I a part of a community where these things are needed? Am I part of a community where I am able to work out these concepts in my own life as others work them out in theirs? It's not the easiest path to walk but it does lead to a kind of growth and maturity that nothing else can give us. Can I confidently say that I am part of a community like that or have I separated myself from any possibility of conflict and pain?

Friday Reflection: There are two forms of confession that go hand-in-hand with community. The first is confessing our weaknesses, hardships and failures with each other. The Bible teaches that confession is a key component of healing.

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you. James 5:16
Jesus can forgive us without any help, but we heal better when we share our burdens with each other. One reason for this is that human beings seem to need a witness. We struggle to make sense of our experiences. Sharing our process with someone we trust (emphasis on the word TRUST) allows us to navigate the sharp corners and dark hallways of our thinking.

When our thoughts are kept to themselves they seem like a highly accurate depiction of reality. We don't see our blindspots. We take our assessment as fact and feel accordingly. If it seems hopeless, we feel hopeless. When we feel hopeless, we don't look for a way out. In situations like this, it is helpful to get our reasoning out into the open. Voicing our thoughts afresh as we explain them to someone else can often open up insights just from hearing ourselves tell our story. We are reminded that there is always room for interpretation and that our current interpretation may not be helpful.

Confessing failures and mistakes is an especially vulnerable process. It is important to seek out a compassionate listener who won't judge or violate our trust. People need just as much compassion when they are the authors of their own predicaments as when they are not, maybe even more. We despise confessing things that show how foolishly we sometimes think, feel and act. But getting these things out helps us to see that we are not limited or defined by our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We can love the sinner while we clean out the sin. Jesus has the power to redeem all human experiences. Getting out the guilt and immature reasoning is like cleaning an infection out of a wound. It doesn't feel good. We may even be tempted to hide the foulness and pretend everything is okay, but that slows down the healing process and leaves us vulnerable to the further spread of infection.

If you've ever had any experience with the recovery community then you are VERY familiar with this concept- our secrets keep us sick. As long as we keep something deep within us that nobody else knows about we are giving the devil a very powerful weapon against us. We think that if anyone knew what we've done that we would be shunned and rejected. So we keep our secret deep within is because we believe the lie that making it known will crush us. But the Bible warns us not to fall for that lie:

When I kept things to myself, I felt weak deep inside me. Then I confessed my sins to you and didn't hide my guilt. I said, "I will confess my sins to the LORD," and you forgave my guilt. Psalm 32:3-5 (CEV)

Have you ever considered that it's not just what we eat that makes us sick (although in America we do eat a lot of stuff that hinders our health...). It's not what we eat that makes us sick it's what's eating us... from the inside out. Maybe the most important question you can ask yourself is, what have I been keeping to myself? Hiding never works. When I hide sin, it increases. Becomes compulsion. Hide fear, it intensifies. Hide memory/hurt it imprints on your mind and gets stronger. Secrets will enslave you... but Jesus said:

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. John 8:32 (NIV)

Jesus knows what He's talking about. Confession is indeed good for the soul and we need someone that we trust enough to share the things we struggle with. Have you got someone like that? If you do, make sure you don't let any secrets keep you sick. If you don't have anyone like that in your life right now then pray and ask God to send you someone. And start hanging out in places where such people might be found. You'll never cultivate that kind of spiritual friendship by locking yourself up at home and refusing to go out because of all the terrible things you've done. What I've learned after almost 20 years in ministry is that people are rarely as messed up as they fear they are. And even if you are... God loves you anyways. So confess your sins to someone and God can begin the healing process.