

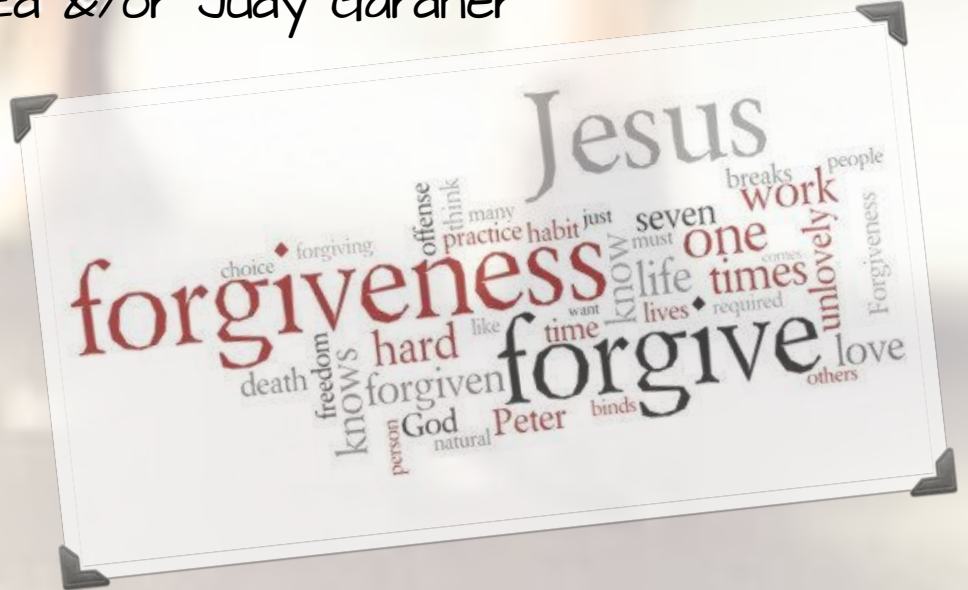
February 5-9, 2024 Edition

The Year(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 110

What Is (and what isn't) Forgiveness?

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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 yuo knew the rest ;D) 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: This week we are finishing our months long study in the book of James by 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?

Tuesday 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 (NLT)*

Jesus can forgive us without any help, but we heal when we share our weakness 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.

Wednesday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about confessing our struggles, weaknesses and failures to each other. That opportunity is one of the great blessings of community. We are offered the chance to realize that we are not alone or even all that unique. We all have struggles. Others can usually relate to our difficulties, problems and mistakes. True community makes struggles and mistakes easier to bare. Of course, that doesn't make confession easy, but we can usually see the value.

The word that James is using in this passage for confession, however, is a whole different animal. When we confess, it is our choice. We can choose who we share with and how much we share. We can accept or reject the other person's view of our problem. The word James is using here is more like confirmation than confession. The word translated as "confess" here literally means to "say the same thing".

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so God can heal you. James 5:16 (NLT)

So what James is literally saying is, “say the same thing to each other about your sins.” It’s what we do when we say we’re sorry. It is the opportunity to confirm (and apologize for) a weakness or failure that we didn’t realize we had but that someone has been trying to tell us about. When we “confess” we are telling the person who said they were hurt by us that we are agreeing with their assessment and would they please forgive us?

It happens like this- one minute everything is normal and the next someone informs you that they have been wronged or feel hurt by you. Suddenly you're the “bad guy” in someone else’s struggle or story. Often we are blissfully ignorant that we did anything inappropriate and then someone starts pointing fingers. The ingrained human response is to explain why we did what we did and deny that the other person has any right to be upset. That is how we mortals feel about being corrected. It never feels right. Rarely do we think, “you know... they might have a point... I may have made a mistake.” Instead we want to defend ourselves and our reasoning for why we did what we did and why what we did was right. We hate to think that we could have possibly messed up. It is like surrendering to an enemy to consider that we aren’t above accusation. But when we allow for the possibility that perhaps, maybe, possibly we might have blown it, then God can start to bring about healing in our own lives and in our relationships.

You will never succeed in life if you try to hide your sins. Confess them and give them up, then God will show mercy to you. Proverbs 28:13 (GNB)

I don’t know about you but when the Bible talks about “dying” to ourselves, that’s exactly how I feel to admit I did something wrong. There is something deep within me that wants me to believe I don’t make mistakes and even though I know intellectually it’s just not even close to true I can’t seem to make my heart believe it. We don’t want to be judged which makes us desperate to reject the other guy’s point of view. But the reality is that finding fault with human beings is like shooting fish in a barrel. If you are a human, you probably screwed up. The other person may have screwed up too, even screwed up more, but it is unlikely that you were entirely blameless. Their interpretation of your actions may not be fair or accurate. After all, they’re human too. The purpose of confirming their viewpoint isn’t to “set the record straight,” but to express acceptance and understanding for how we impact each other.

Being confronted by someone else’s experience of you is actually a gift. It may be a gift that nobody wants, but it’s a gift all the same. Only God sees reality clearly and can sort through our innermost motives. Only God knows our efforts and struggles at any given moment. We can’t even see ourselves clearly. We judge when compassion is appropriate, and we rationalize when confrontation is needed. The friction of community provides endless opportunities to affirm other people’s perspectives, show compassion for their struggles, and accept their imperfect experience of us. It gives us access to multiple points of view, which in turn makes us wiser and more

compassionate. No one likes what it takes to develop wisdom and compassion, but they are treasures to those who will accept them.

Thursday Reflection: Yesterday we talked about being confronted with someone else's difficulty with us. James asks that we use this as an opportunity to confirm and agree with each other. This is ridiculous and impossible by human standards. We just don't naturally have this setting. Fortunately we have access to God's wisdom for dealing with humans. He gives each of us what we need rather than what we deserve, and He's in the business of teaching us how to do the same. He wants us to love like Jesus loved. I can't pretend that I am personally enjoying this process. I can't recommend it as fun or easy, but I can tell you how this works (or sometimes doesn't work) at my house.

When Judy and I were first married it was more important to both of us to be right than to be happy. I was prone toward foolishness and she was prone toward unreasonableness. In short, she thought I was stupid and I thought she was crazy. We were both right. Looking back we often feel a bit sheepish about our expectations and behavior in those early days. It's nice to have more options now and not always do the knee-jerk reaction dances that left us both feeling miserable. We have compassion for our younger selves and realize that we were often doing our best at the time. But life is mostly a whole lot easier now that we know better and can do better. We've learned that what we give each other is valuable and needs to be honored:

Those who are trusted with something valuable must show they are worthy of that trust. 1 Corinthians 4:2 (EXB)

In our immaturity, it often felt like accepting the other person's perspective meant that they were "right about us" or that we had been "bad" or "wrong." Now I understand that my perspective doesn't have to be wrong for Judy's to be right. It's sorta like the story about the group of blind men being introduced to an elephant. One guy who has hold of the elephant's trunk says, "an elephant is like a snake." Another who is feeling the side of the elephant says, "What are you talking about!?! An elephant is like a wall." Yet another standing at the back and holding the tail says, "That's ridiculous! An elephant isn't wide at all and it's not like a snake... it's like a stinky rope!" In truth, all of the blind men are correct in their assessment, but none of them are experiencing the whole elephant. God sees all the blind men and the elephant. He affirms our human experiences while nudging us to broaden our horizons about what can be true not just for myself but also for another.

In practical terms, this can mean that Judy feels neglected by me when I have not set out to neglect her. In fact, I can count up the attention I've paid to her on a day she feels neglected and have it be higher than the amount of time I spent with her on another day when she didn't feel neglected. Her perception is based on an invisible mathematical formula that involves how much attention she currently wants and

needs rather than the actual minutes I spend with her. She's not a stopwatch. She's Judy. Stopwatches are much more accurate but they're not particularly fun to joke around with. And when I stopped expecting her to be empirically accurate in what she said and instead see what she was saying to me as a clearer representation of her own feelings and reality rather than my performance things got a lot easier. I was able to stop taking her feelings as a personal attack on my performance and instead of defending myself I could put my energy into validating how she felt. I have to tell you- I still don't always understand why she's upset but I've stopped caring so much (on my best days). The fact that she was somewhat unhinged is a big part of what attracted me to her. My life was boring and life with her is NEVER boring. She has also gotten to a point where she has pretty much ceased losing her patience over my seeming stupidity. She still doesn't understand why I do things the way I do them or see them the way I see them but she has come to the conclusion that my "stupidity" is a big part of what attracted her to me in the first place. And we've both learned that you can't have the benefits of a certain kind of temperament without also learning to roll with the detriments. We didn't have this verse in mind but now looking back our journey reminds both of us of this:

Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:8 (NLT)

I used to think when Peter said that love covers a multitude of sins he was talking about the kind of forgiveness that only Jesus can offer. I'm not so sure anymore. Now when I look at that verse I think that the love we offer each other covers over an awful lot of the conflicts we used to have over each others shortcomings. In essence it covers a multitude of sins. It has allowed us to stop being so sensitive toward each other's quirks that are a result of her being crazy and me being stupid (so to speak).

When Judy tells me about how she's doing at the moment she is telling me about HER experience and feelings. I am given the opportunity to validate (agree with) her disappointment in feeling neglected without feeling responsible. I can even provide the extra attention that will reassure her of my commitment to her. It may not be convenient. It may not be what I would have chosen to do next. But it will provide the rapport that makes it more likely that she will validate and accommodate my perspective the next time when I need it. We all crave a witness to our experiences, someone who will say, "I get it. Your thoughts and feelings make sense. I can see how this is a big deal for you." People thrive when we allow them to be who they are - with all their tangled expectations and unpredictable feelings.

If we break an agreement with someone, or act against our mutual values we will obviously need to apologize, listen and make amends to restore the relationship. But usually community involves more friction than betrayal. Learning to accept each other's experiences doesn't mean giving up our own perceptions. We can all be right

about how we see things, even when none of us has the ability to see everything accurately. Accuracy is God's job- compassion is ours.

Friday Reflection: So we've kind of beaten around the bush about this but today we will deal with the concept of forgiveness head on- what is forgiveness and what isn't it? Well, first of all forgiveness is something we are required to do as followers of Jesus. In fact there are three things the New Testament tells us that Jesus did for us and now we need to do them for each other and forgiving is one of them:

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

And in the Lord's prayer- the model prayer that Jesus gave His followers when they asked Him how to pray- Jesus tells us this is something we should pray:

Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us.
Matthew 6:12 (NCV)

I'm guessing you've recited the Lord's prayer before. Did you really think about what it meant when you basically said, "Lord... I want you to forgive me exactly the way I forgive people who hurt me"? Are you thinking about it now? Yeah... me too. Gulp!

So if forgiveness is something Jesus asks all of His followers to do then why is it so doggone hard to do? I think the biggest reason is that we misunderstand forgiveness. We have been brainwashed with Hallmark's version of forgiveness and forgotten God's definition. So what is God's definition of forgiveness? Well, first of all forgiveness in God's reality doesn't mean forgetting. Just because I forgive someone it doesn't necessarily mean that things will ever go back to the way they were before I was hurt. This is an important thing to remember when someone is asking me to forgive them and when I'm asking someone to forgive me. In the story of the Prodigal Son we find an almost perfect and complete example of an apology. Look at how the Prodigal Son asks for forgiveness from the father he hurt by rejecting him and leaving the family:

"I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" Luke 15:17-19 (NLT)

Look at the Prodigal Son's apology- he admits he has sinned not only against his father but also (maybe first and foremost) against God Himself and he recognizes that he has broken trust and that he can't just go back to before he did what he did and pretend it never happened. He knows he can't just come back home as a son... he is ready to accept a relationship that is completely different than the one he enjoyed before his "sin". This is not the Hallmark definition of forgive and forget. I think one of the biggest things that makes forgiveness so hard for us is we think that if we forgive it

means everything goes back to the way it was before I was hurt. Not in God's reality. In God's reality there is a big difference between reconciliation and forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't mean everyone gets a mulligan (a do-over for those of you who aren't into golfing terminology). But it does mean I have to "let go" of the offense and the offender. In fact, to forgive literally means to let go. It's not easy but it's a whole lot easier than reconciliation and restoration. God is an expert at restoration but sometimes it's just not possible in human relationships. There are so many factors that will determine whether a new relationship will be possible but there's only one factor that matters when it comes to letting go of an offense and an offender- will I do it or not? Will I make a conscious decision to let go? Will I do what Jesus asks me to do?

I'm not saying it's easy- it may take years to get over being hurt. And that's why forgiveness is like shampooing your hair (have you ever read the instructions on a bottle of shampoo?)- wash, rinse, repeat as necessary. Forgiveness is the same way- let go of offense and offender, repeat as necessary. At least that's the way it works in my life. I am continually having past hurts rush to the front of my consciousness and demand my attention. Even past hurts that I thought I had already let go of. When it happens I try my best not to let that thought dominate my life but I try to let it go again. If you've spent much time in church you've probably read this verse:

Peter asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" 'No.' Jesus replied, 'seventy times seven!' Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

I used to think Peter was talking about seven separate incidents or events that needed forgiveness. And maybe that is what was going on but for me this verse is painful for the reason that I often have to forgive someone seventy times seven times for the same stinking incident. How do we do that? By letting go seventy times seven times.

Corey Tenboom was a dutch girl who was put in a Nazi concentration camp during WWII. Years after the war was over and she had been released she went to see her pastor and confessed that she was having trouble forgiving some of the guards that were especially cruel to her or her sister. "Why do those memories keep coming back? Does it mean I haven't forgiven?" Her pastor took her to the church's steeple and had her pull on the rope that rings the church bell. Corey started pulling and at first nothing happened. No ringing. But after several tugs the bell started ringing. When the pastor told Corey to let go of the rope the bell continued to ring for a bit even though she was no longer tugging on it. He told her that's what forgiveness is like. Even if you "let go" the bell continues to ring. It will get softer unless we grab hold of the rope and start tugging again. The pastor told Corey that whenever she heard that bell of unforgiveness ringing in her heart to consciously decide to stop pulling the rope that makes it ring. The ringing may continue for a time but as long as we stop yanking on the rope it will become quieter and quieter.

So stop yanking on the rope.