

Do You Want To Be Forgiven?

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(John 20:19-31 NRSV) When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." {20} After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. {21} Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." {22} When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. {23} If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." {24} But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. {25} So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." {26} A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." {27} Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." {28} Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" {29} Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." {30} Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. {31} But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Today we continue our journey through the *Book of Joy*, this morning we look at the pillar of forgiveness.

The reality is you're going to be hurt in life.
by things people say about you,
by things people do to you,
even by things that people think about you.

Some of these hurts are still fresh because many of you have been hurt very deeply.

My message this morning is pretty simple.

First, we're going to look at "Why in the world should I ever forgive anybody who hurts me?"

And then we're going to look at how we can learn to forgive.

Because until we learn to forgive (and be forgiven) we will never fully experience JOY.

Let me share with you a couple of reasons why we should forgive others.

1. BECAUSE GOD HAS FORGIVEN YOU

This to me is the most important thing I will say today.
God has already forgiven you.

The problem is, I am not sure that we really believe in a God who is willing to forgive us.
I want God to forgive me
But I am not so sure I want God to forgive the person who hurt me.

We tend to believe in a God who wants JUSTICE, and justice for most of us means that a price must be paid.

So if someone wrongs us --- a price must be paid.
At the very least they have to be sorry.

But throughout the New Testament, the message of Jesus is we must forgive (period!)
Not forgive if they ask
Not forgive if they are sorry

JUST FORGIVE

In Ephesians 4:32 Paul writes:

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

But if I don't really believe that God has already forgive me
I'm going to have a tough time forgiving anyone else.

If you are one of the people who have a hard time forgiving others, you probably have a hard time letting go of hurt, you have a hard time of forgiving a grudge, the possibility is that you yourself don't really feel forgiven.

If I don't feel forgiven, I don't want you to feel forgiven.
If I don't feel grace, I'm certainly not going to be very gracious to you.
If I don't feel set free from the things I've done wrong, I certainly don't want you feeling forgiven about the things that you have done wrong to me.

I need to realize that I'm living in the presence of God's love and grace because God has forgiven all the things I deserve to be punished for. God's forgiven me. When I

remember that, it makes me want to be a little bit more forgiving.

You will never have to forgive anybody more than God has already forgiven you. God will always forgive you more than you forgive anybody else.
God has already forgiven me and you.

2. BECAUSE RESENTMENT DOESN'T WORK

Actually it's very self destructive.

It's counterproductive.

Resentment always hurts you more than anybody else.

If anybody in the Bible has the right to be resentful it was Job.

But three times in the book of Job we're told that resentment doesn't work.

Job 5:2

"To worry yourself to death with resentment would be a foolish, senseless thing to do."

It's foolish and it's senseless. It's illogical, it's irrational, it's dumb.

The author of Ecclesiastes (7:9) writes: "It's foolish to hold a grudge."

No matter how resentful you are, no matter how bitter you are toward that person who hurt you: (mother, father, ex-husband or wife, that person at school, that former friend who betrayed you) all the resentment in the world is not going to change the past.

It's not going to change anything.

It's stewing without doing.

All the resentment in the world will never solve the problem. All the resentment in the world, in fact, never hurts that person, it just hurts you.

Research has shown over and over, that the single most destructive emotion is resentment, bitterness, being unforgiving.

When you hold on to resentment, you only hurt yourself.

3. BECAUSE GOD IS CLEAR, IF I FAIL TO FORGIVE OTHERS, I WILL NOT BE FORGIVEN

Jesus says it like this in Matthew 6:14-15 (the Message)

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.

Jesus is saying we cannot receive what we're unwilling to give.

That's just the way it works.

I've talked to many people over the years about letting go of hurt.

I've heard this many, many times, "You just don't understand.

You don't know my hurt.

You don't know how that parent hurt me.

You don't know how for years and years I was abused."

You're right. I don't know.

But God says: for your own sake you need to learn to let go. You're not helping the situation by holding on to the hurt. When you hold on to a hurt, you're still allowing somebody in the past to continue to hurt you. That's your choice. They can't continue to hurt you unless you choose to allow it.

So how does one forgive?

Our story begins this morning with the disciples hiding — scared to death — that the fate that has happened to their friend Jesus is going to happen to them also. They had given up everything that they had to follow this man Jesus — they banked their whole lives on him — and now — now Jesus is dead

They obviously did not believe Mary Magdalene's insistence that Jesus had risen from the dead. Their fear and unbelief left them literally separated from the community, secluded in a locked room, much like fear and unwillingness to forgive can separate us from our own families and communities. Then, Jesus appears, wishing them peace.

There is a great story in the *Book of Joy*:

Anthony Ray Hinton spent thirty years on death row for a crime he did not commit. He was working in a locked factory at the time of the crime that he was accused of. When he was arrested in Alabama, he was told by the police officers that he was going to jail because he was black.

Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years in a five-by-seven cell in solitary confinement, allowed out of the cell for only one hour a day!

Can you imagine the anger — the bitterness that had to go through Anthony Ray Hinton's mind every single day that he spent in solitary confinement?

Forgiveness is hard!

I don't know what else to say!

How do I let go of the anger that I hold toward those who have wronged me?

How do I accept forgiveness from somebody that I have wronged?

How do I accept God's gift of forgiveness to me?

Let's go back to our story:

The disciples are hiding in a locked room — thinking that it's over — their dreams — their hopes — everything had died with Jesus on that cross.

Suddenly — what must seem to them as a ghost comes into the room — right through the locked door — and when this “ghost” speaks to them he says “peace be with you”.

Now I don't know much — but what I do know is that the disciples did not feel peace at that moment!

Jesus says to them again: “Peace be with you. As the father sent me, so I send you.” But this time he does something more: Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he said. “If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?”

When Jesus breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” — the disciples physically felt the breath of God on them, and then they heard the command to accept the Spirit.

As soon as he gives them the Spirit by deed and word, Jesus provides instructions on what to do with it:
they have the power of forgiveness, as well as the choice of whether or not to use it (John 20:23).

WOW!

The good news is that you have received that same gift from God.

It is a free gift from God.

We have that same choice today.

We can forgive — or we can continue to hang on to the hurts and frustrations that hold us locked into our room — afraid!

Remember Anthony Ray Hinton?

During his time on death row, Hinton became a counselor and friend not only to the other inmates, fifty-four of whom were put to death, but to the death row guards, many of whom begged Hinton's attorney to get him out.

When a unanimous Supreme Court ruling ordered his release, he was finally able to walk free. "One does not know the value of freedom until one has it taken away

When Hinton was interviewed on the show 60 Minutes, the interviewer asked whether he was angry at those who had put him in jail. He responded that he had forgiven all the people who had sent him to jail. The interviewer incredulously asked, "But they took thirty years of your life—how can you not be angry?"

Hinton responded, "If I'm angry and unforgiving, they will have taken the rest of my life."

Unforgiveness robs us of our ability to enjoy and appreciate our life, because we are trapped in a past filled with anger and bitterness. Forgiveness allows us to move beyond the past and appreciate the present.

Hinton is a powerful example of the ability to respond with joy despite the most horrendous circumstances. As he was driving in a taxi in New York, he said, "The world didn't give you your joy, and the world can't take it away. You can let people come into your life and destroy it, but I refused to let anyone take my joy. I get up in the morning, and I don't need anyone to make me laugh. I am going to laugh on my own, because I have been blessed to see another day, and when you are blessed to see another day that should automatically give you joy.

"I don't walk around saying, 'Man, I ain't got a dollar in my pocket.' I don't care about having a dollar in my pocket, what I care about is that I have been blessed to see the sun rise. Do you know how many people had money but didn't get up this morning? So, which is better—to have a billion dollars and not wake up, or to be broke and wake up? I'll take being broke and waking up any day of the week. I told the CNN interviewer in June that I had three dollars and fifty cents in my pocket and for some reason that day I was just the happiest I have ever been. She said, 'With three dollars and fifty cents?' I said, 'You know, my mom never raised us to get out there and make as much money as we can. My mom told us about true happiness. She told us that when you are happy, then when folks hang around you they become happy.'

"I just look at all the people who have so much but they are not happy. Yes, I did thirty long years, day for day, in a five by seven, and you have got some people that have never been to prison, never spent one day or one hour or one minute, but they are not happy. I ask myself, 'Why is that?' I can't tell you why they are not happy, but I can tell you that I'm happy because I choose to be happy."

God is here today — he has walked through those back doors and what he desires more than anything else is to breathe on you his breath of life — his breathe of forgiveness.

What you do with it is up to you, but Joy is found when we let go of the hate and bitterness and learn to forgive.

So quickly, let me give you a couple of suggestions on how to forgive.

First, recognize that we are all imperfect.

When we are filled with anger and bitterness toward somebody, we tend to lose our perspective about them.

When we're filled with resentment and bitterness and hurt, we tend to dehumanize the offender.

We treat them like an animal.

We demonize them.

We forget that they're a human being too.

The truth is we all sin and are capable of hurting others.
Every one of us has intentionally wronged other people in our lives.

Recognizing that we are all imperfect can help set us on the path of forgiveness, because we are all in need of forgiveness.

Second, let go of your right to get even.

This is the heart of forgiveness. This is what forgiveness is all about.

James Dobson once said: "Forgiveness is not taking the revenge you're entitled to."

The second step in forgiveness and what forgiveness really is, is when I say, "I give up my right to get even with you. You deserve to be hurt back but I'm not going to do it. You deserve to be retaliated against, but I'm not going to do it. You deserve to be punished, and I deserve to get even, but I'm going to give up that right."

Your resentment doesn't work.

Your resentment keeps you from being forgiven.

Your resentment keeps you unhealthy.

How often do I have to do that? How often do I have to release my right to get even with the person who's hurt me? As often as the hurt memory comes back. Every time you start to get resentful again, you have to do it again.

Forgiveness is not a onetime shot where you say, "You're forgiven" and you never think about it again. If you've ever been deeply hurt you know that doesn't work. You can forgive a person and really mean it and five minutes later -- or five seconds later -- feel the pain again and think, "I don't know if I want to forgive them or not." You do it over and over. Forgiveness is not a one shot deal. It's a repeated act of saying, "I give up my right to get even."

Jesus taught this. *"Peter asked, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?' [Peter thinks he's being real generous here!] 'No,' Jesus replied, 'seventy times seven!'"*

In other words an infinite number. Don't even try to count it. Every time you remember that hurt you must forgive them again and again until you know that you've released it.

Third, respond to the evil with good.

How do you know when you've fully released someone?

When you can understand their hurt and when you can pray for them.

Luke 6, *"Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you."*

There's no way you can do that on your own power.

Humanly speaking, you don't have enough love and forgiveness and joy in your life from the human standpoint to continually forgive everybody who's hurt you.

The only way you can do that is if you get Jesus in your life and He fills you with His love and His peace and His forgiveness because human love runs out.

If you want to experience the freedom of forgiveness, there's a fourth step and you have to take this one too.

Fourth, You have to move on.

Stop focusing on the offense.

Stop focusing on the hurt.

Stop focusing on the person who has offended me.

Instead begin to focus on moving forward in your life.

As long as you continue to focus on that person who has hurt you they control you.

Back when I started Celebration Church I lead numerous Divorce Recovery Workshops. One woman who came through the program was elderly (probably my age now) --- in

talks with her, her divorce seemed like it was fairly recent (my guess in the prior year or two).

At the last workshop, I would lead the participants on a guided meditation, inviting them to say to the person who hurt them all the things that they wish that they had said --- and then say goodbye.

Later, in talking with this woman, she shared how for the first time she felt freed from her anger. That for thirty years, her ex-husband was still hurting her because she had refused to let go and move on.

Until she let go, she was allowing him to continue her pain, anger and unhappiness.

One of the most powerful prayers in the Christian tradition is what we call the Lord's Prayer. Have you ever really paid attention to what you say?

What I dislike about the Lord's Prayer the most is when it says: that God will forgive me my sins only to the extent that I forgive others their sins against me.

I would probably be more comfortable if the line went, "Forgive us our sins BETTER THAN we forgive those who sin against us."

But that is clearly not what it says — nor what Jesus intends.

Jesus knows that the only way we can find joy is to let go and move on.
And that is forgiveness.

Let me close with these words, written at least three thousand years ago and eventually called Psalm 103:

GOD is sheer mercy and grace;
not easily angered, he's rich in love.
He doesn't endlessly nag and scold,
nor hold grudges forever.
He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve,
nor pay us back in full for our wrongs.
As high as heaven is over the earth,
so strong is his love to those who fear him.
And as far as sunrise is from sunset,
he has separated us from our sins.
As parents feel for their children,
GOD feels for those who fear him.