

Mickey S. Morello
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Forgiveness, the Key to the Shackles
Ephesians 4:29-5:2

Today's reading is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the community of believers in Ephesus - In this beautiful little letter, Paul offers some very practical instructions to the church in this fledgling Christian community. What we will highlight this morning is the portion of the reading that can be considered the kidney of the Gospel if you will, forgiveness. Our kidneys serves as a filtrations system, it disposes of the waste that is not beneficial to the body - Christ is the heart of the Gospel, and just below the heart are the kidneys.

Ephesians 4:29-5:2 (NRSV)

Chapter 4

29 Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. **31** Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, **32** and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Chapter 5

1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, **2** and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

May God bless the reading & hearing of His word.

So, what is forgiveness?

- Quite simply, the Greek word translated "forgiveness" in our Bible literally means "to let go" - as when a person does not demand payment for a debt. We forgive others by letting go of resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.
- Now, I grant you, there are varying degrees by which people can cause us offense.
- For example, when we were younger, Gary - your Pastor, my brother - would suddenly emerge from his bedroom adorned with a really cool, brand new, article of clothing or jewelry that would look exactly like something I had just purchased! Upon closer inspection, it became evident that this item **ACTUALLY** belonged to me!
- Then, he would spend the next couple of minutes trying to convince me of the irony - he had bought the same exact thing as me, and what a shame that some *thug* snuck into our parent's home and decided to steal the one that I bought. Thankfully, nothing else was stolen, *in the entire house*, except that one item.
This is the blessing and curse of having a sibling who has the same style and wears the same size as you,
- But this is surely an example of a very minor, easily forgivable offense. ...Though I will never forget about that bracelet you stole from me.
- Allow me to pose a question to you: Is there anything that you find unforgivable?

What is it that would push you to your absolute limit?

- I confess, one of the things I struggle with is when I see people taking advantage of others who are less formidable than themselves! (Pause) I really struggle with it!
- Be it: husbands abusing their wives, people abusing and taking advantage of the elderly, adults abusing children, I really, really struggle, if I may be honest with you.

To the parents here, what if someone harmed your child?

I want to share a story with you about Mary Johnson.

Mary was a single mother to an only child.

Her son, Laramiun, in February 1993 was shot and killed at 20 years old.

Laramiun's killer, 16 year old, O'Shea Israel

Mary wanted justice - in an interview, while reflecting on her thoughts at the time Mary said, "*he was an animal and he deserved to be caged,*" and caged he was. The 16 year old, O'Shea, was tried as an adult and sentenced to 25 1/2 years in prison. O'Shea served 17 of his 25 1/2 year sentence and upon his release he moved back into the *same exact neighborhood as Mary...*

In fact, the front door of their homes - 1 foot apart....

See, Mary had spent over a decade carrying around the burden of what O'Shea did to her, taking her only son.

As our text this morning warns against, she harbored *malice, hatred and wrath* against this young man who took her son from her...

Her hatred toward him though, turned on her and was killing her and eating away **at her own life, her own soul**. After this extensive time of bitterness and resentment, Mary, compelled by her commitment to following Jesus, resolved to see if she could, *some way, somehow*, manage to forgive her son's killer.

She reached out to see if she could set up a meeting, she was successful and this meeting would be the first of many.

In preparation for O'Shea's release, Mary, arranged for O'Shea to meet with her landlord and with her blessing, the newly released man was approved to move into the unit immediately next door to her.

Listen to what Mary says, "*Un-forgiveness is like cancer, it will eat you from the inside-out. It's not about that other person, me forgiving him does not diminish what he has done.. Yes, he murdered my son, but the forgiveness is for me... it's for me.*"

For O'Shea, it was more difficult to come to terms with what he had done but by Mary releasing him, he is more free to not only to forgive himself, but to recognize the forgiveness available to him through a transformed life in Jesus - and his life has transformed indeed - today O'Shea leads a worship ministry and reaches out to souls locked away in prison offering them the same opportunity of God's forgiveness that has been afforded to him.

O'Shea in closing states, "forgiveness is a powerful thing!"

[Forgiveness is the key to the shackles, indeed!](#)

In fact, so paramount is forgiveness that it is a staple in the most famous prayer of all time, known as the Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray "Forgive us our debts our trespasses our sins, as we forgive those who have harmed us." Put another way "let go of what we owe You, God, as we release others for what we feel they owe to us."

God's forgiveness when understood rightly *ought to* compel us to forgive others.

Many of us are familiar with the Apostle Matthew also known as Zacchaeus, one of Jesus' 12 original disciples. Matthew was not only a tax collector, but a **chief tax collector** - he served as a mediator between the despised Roman Empire and the people of Israel - Matthew was taking recourses from his own people on Rome's behalf, and because of this great offense, he was hated by the people! In the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Luke records that as Jesus is entering Jericho a great crowd was assembled to usher Him in and make Him feel welcome as a reputable guest.

Most of our translations, in verse 3, say that because Matthew (*or Zacchaeus*) was "short in stature" he could not see over the crowd so he ran ahead and climbed a Sycamore tree to get a glimpse at this Jesus that everyone has been talking about. Now, for centuries we have pictured Matthew as a short, little man because of this but there is another way of

understanding this verse. Matthew, being short in stature, could refer to his height or it could refer to his position in society.

In the culture of the New Testament, when an honorable guest entered a town or village a crowd would assemble to welcome them and usher them in; the prominent leaders of the community would be in front, the citizens of the community would be just behind them, any outside visitors would be behind the citizens, and the ‘outcasts’ would be in the rear, if they were welcome there at all. It is possible that Matthew was behind the crowd because he was *despised, unforgivable* - we know this for sure, Matthew was not welcome in his own town - but thank God that He doesn't judge as people judge, no, God wants to see us transformed into the image of His Son!

When Jesus, in verse 5, says to Matthew “**Come down from there immediately, I must stay in your house today.**” The Scripture tells us that “he came down at once and **welcomed Jesus gladly.**”

What did Matthew do with his newfound forgiveness?

He transformed his entire life!

After encountering Jesus, Matthew resolved to give half of his possessions to the poor, to payback four times what he owed if he stole from or cheated anyone, and most importantly he committed to following Jesus that day. Jesus says in very 9, “***today salvation has come to this house.***”

- Matthew shows us that forgiveness provides an avenue for transformation.

Forgiveness is the key to the shackles, indeed!

- This same Matthew authored one of the four Gospels, testifying of the life, ministry, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- In chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, he records a teaching from Jesus on forgiveness, in most Bibles, this portion is titled the “Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.”

- Peter inquires of Jesus, how much, Lord, how often are we to forgive someone who sins against us.
- In order to put forgiveness in the right perspective, Jesus told a parable, as He did so often, and so well. [Matthew 18:21-35]

In this parable, Jesus tells of a King, who is owed a debt from one of his servants; not just any debt, this was a debt *so large, so massive, so tremendous*, that the servant *could not possibly* pay it on his own - once the servant pleaded for forgiveness, the King was gracious and extended mercy to the servant, mercy over justice.

This same servant, after being released from a debt he could not repay, *seems to be stricken with amnesia*.

The forgiven servant goes to find his fellow servant who owes him a debt - a debt that is **comparatively minuscule**, to the tremendous burden that the King had just released him from - the king was owed ten thousand bags of gold, he was owed a hundred silver coins. When his fellow servant could not repay him, he choked him and had him thrown in prison.

The end of the parable is somewhat terrifying when we consider the implications. We may be tempted to cheer as the unforgiving servant gets what he deserves - in response to his unforgiveness, The King recalls his debt, the payment is due in full, and he once again owes a debt he cannot pay.

Earlier in Chapter 6 of Matthew's Gospel, after teaching the Lord's prayer, Jesus puts it this way:

Matthew 6:14-15 (NIV)

“14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

- We must examine our hearts, brothers and sisters, forgiveness is not a principle that is suggested to a follower of Jesus, forgiveness is a requirement!
- The parable of the Unforgiving Servant says, “Who am I, to hold anyone captive in the prison of my heart, when so much has been forgiven of me.” We may not choke someone or throw them into

prison for what they owe us or how they've harmed us, but doesn't Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, show us plainly that it is the condition of our hearts that define reality. Hatred is Murder in the heart, Jesus tells us, and un-forgiveness is holding captive in the heart.

As we begin to close, what have we seen in the examples we reviewed?

- With Mary and O'Shea we saw that forgiving others liberates the forgiver.
- With the Apostle Matthew (Zacchaeus) we see that being forgiven provides an opportunity for **earth shaking** transformation.
- With the Unmerciful Servant we see that by holding others captive, while we have been forgiven so much by God, we ultimately betray ourselves as hypocrites.

Forgiveness is the key to the shackles, indeed!

We cannot minimize this next point!

The most practical suggestion I can give you when journeying toward forgiveness, *is to behold the cross of Jesus.*

We deal with very real wounds that other people gouge in us; *broken hearts, broken relationships, slanderous and false gossip, lying, cheating, abandonment* - people **really, actually hurt us!**

When we forgive, there are very real sacrifices to be made, *a very real cost, if you will* - maybe our pride, maybe our ego, maybe our comfort...

What has helped me, more than anything else, when clawing over the mountain of forgiveness, is to meditate on Jesus and the price He paid for a forgiveness that was not His own. He was *mocked, he was lashed, he was rejected and He was crucified*, so that **we can be forgiven, reconciled back to God!** This is colossal, cosmic forgiveness. God is worthy of our trust, in all things, so even those who hurt us can be released to Him.

This takes a humble and contrite heart, after all, we are called to radical selflessness, so much so that we ought to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute or harm us.

I don't know about you, but this is **too much for me to do on my own**. I must *abide in Christ, the Holy Spirit must abide in me, and my eyes must be fixed on God, fixed on His cross*, for true forgiveness to come to pass. I must be empty of myself, *empty of ego, empty of defense mechanisms*. Offering forgiveness - in circumstances of all sizes must begin with prayer before God. **Prayer works!**

Payers like this, change lives!

“God, this person hurt me so badly, but I ask you to bless them, empower me to bless them, help me to want all the best for them, help me to forgive them, break these chains, help me forgive! Help me to be like You O God!”

- So I urge you to extend forgiveness to others as it has been extended to you.
- Labor if you must in prayer, ask for God's love for those who have harmed you or someone close to you.
- Look to Jesus, as your example.

As Paul puts it so eloquently in our reading today, *we must be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*.

Forgiveness is the key to the shackles, indeed!

May it be so... Amen