



The Freedom of Forgiveness

Part 2

Last Sunday we looked at the way in which we often allow our emotions to control us in a way that is not connected to the truth of God but to the lies of the world, the flesh and the devil. We looked specifically this morning at unforgiveness which is the source of bitterness, suspicion, grudges, anxiety, fear, anger lack of trust and all sorts of other issues. Most of all, emotions and feelings based on lies instead of the truth of God are massively destructive on our relationship with God. We had the stark truth this morning in the verse: MATTHEW 6:14-15: *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."* And we saw how this works itself out in believers that usually do not achieve their potential in Christ and who find their walk with God difficult.

On their first day of college back in 1968, Marsha Lockwood and Michael Cramer met. They were both freshmen at the University of Massachusetts. They liked each other immediately. They learned that they came from neighbouring towns, and they were only weeks apart in age. They had much in common, both played instruments in their high school marching bands. Their families had friends in common.

As they began to date they discovered that they both had grandfathers who worked in the same office building. One was an accountant; the other was an insurance man. The two grandfathers were both in their seventies. When the two grandfathers were young boys they had gone to school together. They had been good friends all during their childhoods. In the 1920s, though, they had a feud. It was over a business matter. Hyman Brodsky and Louis Cramer were furious with each other. They stopped speaking to each other entirely.

They did not speak a word for over fifty years. When they would be in the elevator with other business persons, they would talk to the others, but never to each other. They would not even look at each other. If they happened to find themselves with just the two of them in the elevator, the two boyhood friends would ride upstairs in total silence. Fifty years of this. Meanwhile, the romance of Marsha and Michael was growing more and more serious. In 1974 they became engaged.

As Hyman Brodsky and Louis Cramer were riding upstairs in the elevator, one of them remarked casually, "Well, it looks like the kids are going to get married." The other one said, "Yes, it looks that way." The silence of fifty years had been broken. Dynamic Preaching Feb 1993

The problem is that many of these feelings and unforgiveness can go back a long way in our lives. The problem is that the more long-standing our feelings, emotions and attitudes, the more difficult as strongholds they become and they can be difficult to shift. But nothing is impossible to the God who finds a way when there seems to be no way.

TRAUMAS One of the amazing things when we come before God is that He starts to deal with the truth issues that burden us. The problem is that many of our feelings can be shaped by what happened a long time ago. Psychologists tell us that our attitudes and feelings are strongly shaped by our childhood. What happened then can deeply influence our life and attitudes with us being barely aware of them. They'll be things about ourselves that we feel we can't change. They come out in all sort of ways – being afraid of the dark, or spiders, having a problem with authority, having feelings of inferiority, having superstitions. These are just the trivial ones. That's apart from all the unforgiveness, resentments, suspicions, fears and anger we may have acquired as adults. I talked about strongholds the other week. These are exactly what I was talking about. They block our lives and our relationship with God and provide footholds for the devil.

GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO BE LIKE THIS. No surprise! God has called us to be like Jesus, in our behaviour and in our feelings. Counsellors may offer you therapy for it. That can be helpful but God offers us the Holy Spirit – He changes people from the inside out. How?

WE REMAIN IN BONDAGE not because of the trauma but because of the lies. Remember this morning that I said that people often suffer more from the bitterness and grudges of unforgiveness than the original offence! Strongholds are always based on lies, which funnily enough is how the devil works – on lies. If it's bereavement we can't come to terms with, the problem is usually the lie that "I'll never get over it". If it is a problem forgiving someone, it's the lie that he deserves it, or I'm quite right to feel that, what he did was bad, what he did was unforgivable." If it is a problem with God then we say "I'm sure God understands". I'm sure He does too – only too well. And like slaves or prisoners, we are chained up with the enemy fully in control of the stronghold.

BUT ... God has made us someone new in Christ, so we can face the past, discover the truth and have the right attitudes, emotions and feelings towards God and in our relationships to other.

GOD CAN'T CHANGE THE PAST – but He can change our attitude towards it. I've given you some examples over the last two Sunday mornings of things that happen in life that affect our feelings towards God and others in a negative way. In a way that destroys relationships. In a way that means we don't grow spiritually as we should

STRONGHOLDS – remember this from the other week? We had a scripture for it. We have a God who has given us the ways and means to break these strongholds down, to understand the truth and to match how we feel with the situation as it is. That's through His word and by His Spirit. As we go back to the promises of God we see what He has done. As we reflect on our lives and see what He has done – as we count our blessings – we see God's perspective. In the end, spiritual change isn't something we counsel people for or give them pills for it – its a work of the Spirit of God. I've seen so many people transformed when they allow the Spirit to identify strongholds in their lives, when they recognise how the sin that the strongholds represent is not acceptable to God, when they repent and renounce those sins and ask God to free them from those strongholds through the truth of His word and the Spirit's power to change our thoughts and attitudes and bring them in submission to Christ.

Whether we have been a Christian for five minutes or 50 years, we all have areas in our lives which are not in submission to Christ. All of them are strongholds because if they are not in conformity to His will, then they are based on lies and satan will exploit them to gain a foothold. The reason for this series is to recognise that the issues I focus on are endemic to Christians and need to be dealt with if we are to have a close walk with Jesus. Take forgiveness for example. Forgiveness isn't just a one-off. Because of the complexity of our relationships its easy to build up a whole string of bad experiences over many years and if we don't keep short accounts (most people don't) then unforgiveness can be something we build in and don't think too much about unless we ask the Spirit to bring it to our remembrance so we can deal with the feelings and attitudes that we have allowed ourselves to live by as a result.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr.: *"Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude."*

So WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

- ➔ NOT FORGETTING *"Modern Office Technology" recently printed a squib about the savvy owner of a document shredding service on the East Coast who has a real knack for attracting customers. He simply roots through trash bags collected from the local dump by two young helpers, finds several pieces of sensitive correspondence and sends them to their places of origin with a note that says: "Should I be reading this material? If not, why did your company make it public by throwing it away in one piece?" It's not surprising that in most cases, he gets a response within 24 hours.*

We can best understand forgiveness by thinking about what God does with our sins. God shreds our sins, so that no one can accuse us of them. That's why it is important to identify strongholds because when dealt with we walk free because God dumps them. How? Because the death of Jesus was sufficient to deal with our sin permanently. When we realise this we are free from guilt and God does not hold them against us.

In "A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World," Ron Lee Davis retells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had repented but still had no peace, no sense of God's forgiveness. In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The priest, however, was sceptical. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed.

A few days later the priest asked, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did," she replied. "And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?" "Yes." "Well, what did he say?" "He said, I don't remember."

God never forgets our sins (because He can't forget), but He doesn't remember them any more. He does that for us – we should do the same. Forgiveness means that we no longer hold the sin of someone against them. Peter said the obvious: but what if they keep on doing it? Do we still forgive them 7 times? Jesus' reply was 70x7. Just keep forgiving them. How often have we not given someone a second chance because we won't wipe the slate clean. I've found that if you want to see someone grow in their faith, then allow them that latitude to make mistakes and forgive them because through it they grow if you encourage them in the right way.

But you may say to me. "That's just a trivial example, xxx did awful things. OK I can forgive, but I can't forget what they have done." Why not? God doesn't have any problem not remembering for far worst things – like the sins you and I have committed for a start! . Amy Carmichael once said: *If I say, "Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget," as though the God, who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world, could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary love.*

- ➔ NOT TOLERATING SIN Forgiveness does not mean that we are prepared to forgive someone who has wronged us. God hates sin and expects us to do the same – hate the sin and love the sinner. Forgiveness is the loving response to how we have been wronged and finding the right way of showing them love. If we are mugged, God commands us to forgive the mugger, but part of that process is also realising that the God of justice also requires that mugger to be brought to justice because that protects others and hopefully may bring the mugger to his sense.
- ➔ NOT SEEKING REVENGE Many people don't forgive because they want to get even. It's about payback time. But forgiveness can be so productive. Lincoln was asked why he was pardoning Southerners at the end of the Civil War: "Mr. President, don't you want to destroy your enemies?" Lincoln: "Is that not what I do when I make them my friends?" God wants us to destroy our enemies by forgiving them and making them our friends!

Someone has said *"I am convinced that forgiveness is one of the untapped - and least understood sources of healing power. Essentially, it involves a decision to abandon the impulse to get even. Though the idea may seem passive to some, genuine forgiveness is a positive act that requires enormous spiritual strength."*

Forgiveness involves a paradox. *"It looks contradictory to our self-interest to let go of wrongs," says therapist Donald Hope, "but most of those who hurt us are people we are closest to - parents, siblings, spouses, friends. Trying to get even only leads to a vicious circle of retaliation. In the long run, forgiveness is the best choice for the forgiver - and the forgiven."*

A moment ago I talked about justice. Where's the justice in making enemies friends? Well, where was the justice in the cross? Jesus died so that we, the enemies of God could be His friends. The just died for the unjust. We haven't been brought to justice – just made righteous in Christ. The biggest cost we make when we forgive and make an enemy our friend is that we don't demand payback because God didn't with us.

And if we don't forgive? God is right to demand payback from us and that can be painful! *"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."*

- ➔ RESOLVING TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF ANOTHER'S SIN This is the upshot of everything that has come before. Forgiving is so often living with the consequences of someone's sin so that we can turn an enemy into a friend. In the example I give you at the beginning involved two men who would not back down over a matter years before. Neither was prepared to bury the hatchet (except in the other's head of course!). Neither paid the price of backing down, probably because of their pride. James Buswell: "All forgiveness, human and divine, is in the very nature of the case vicarious, substitutional.... No one ever really forgives another, except he bears the penalty of the other's sin against him."

Forgiveness costs. There is one eternal principle which will be valid as long as the world lasts. The principle is - Forgiveness is a costly thing. Human forgiveness is costly. A son or a daughter may go wrong; a father

or a mother may forgive; but that forgiveness has brought tears.... There was the price of a broken heart to pay.

Divine forgiveness is costly. God is love, but God is holiness. God, least of all, can break the great moral laws on which the universe is built. Sin must have its punishment or the very structure of life disintegrates. And God alone can pay the terrible price that is necessary before men can be forgiven.

Forgiveness is never a case of saying: "It's all right; it doesn't matter." Forgiveness is the most costly thing in the world.

So why pay that price? Why not just get even or just wash our hands of someone who has brought us grief and sadness? Because God has commanded us to do what He did – pay the price to make an enemy a friend by forgiving them – even though they may in the end rebuff you.

Why does God ask us to do it? For our own good and for our relationship with Him. By forgiving we are freed from the bondage of a stronghold in our lives. It's a massive release. The devil no longer has control over that area and we walk in freedom with Christ; to grow in Him and reach our potential.

FORGIVENESS IS TO SET A CAPTIVE FREE AND THEN YOU REALISE YOU WERE THE CAPTIVE.

Forgiveness frees us from a bondage that can radically change other people's lives. In 1994 a 75-year-old former herd-boy and political prisoner assumed the most powerful post in Africa's wealthiest nation. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in a 7-foot-long prison cell and emerged free of bitterness, anger, and vengeance. Because of his dignity, even his white prison guards called him "Mr. Mandela." Incredibly, he invited two of his former guards to the inauguration of South Africa's first black president. "People respond in relation to how you treat them," he said in a published interview. "If you treat them with respect and ignore the negative aspects, you get a positive reaction." You may say "but what about all the things the guards did to Mandela". And as Mandela put his personal position on forgiveness he did the same in his politics. He asked South Africans to forgive one another two. There were no witch hunts for the monsters of the apartheid regime, no executions, no lynchings, no bloodbaths as in other African countries.

It didn't mean that the sins of the past were ignored, but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up (in which Christians play a huge role I might add) to examine the atrocities of the past and to reconcile people and communities in ways that are just, that don't forget what happened but recognised broken communities and relationships and tried to find the best way to restore them.

Let me finish with a story that comes from one of these hearings in South Africa which I found quite moving and I put into *In Touch* last year.

The scene is a courtroom trial in South Africa. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is over seventy years old. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers. One of them, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found guilty in the murders of first the woman's son and then her husband. He had come to the woman's home, taken her son, shot him at point-blank and then burned the young man's body while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later Mr. van der Broek and his cohorts returned to take away her husband as well. For months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, Mr. van der Broek came back to fetch her. How vividly she remembered that night. She was taken to a river bank where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as Mr. van der Broek and his fellow officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, "Father, forgive them. . ."

Now the woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions of Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?" "I want three things," begins the old woman calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She pauses, then continues. "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me." "And finally," she says, "I would like Mr. van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me

across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

As the court assistants come to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek faints, overwhelmed by what he has just heard. And as he struggles for consciousness, those in the courtroom, family, friends, neighbours — all victims of decades of oppression and injustice — begin to sing, softly but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."¹⁶

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. Nelson Mandela

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