

Freedom in Christ

Forgiving from the heart

Do you want to be free? This is a question you need to answer: Do you want to be free – to live in the Freedom of Christ? Then you need to forgive. And there is no short-cut you cannot find a way round this. Most Christians know they should forgive, but most probably still harbour some un-forgiveness. Some feel that they are perhaps a special case because of the trauma they have suffered. Some are deceived into thinking they have forgiven, when in fact all they have done is pressed the problem down and chosen to ignore it. Some believe, wrongly, that they cannot forgive. Some believe they should not forgive.

“I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4 v 13. “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and Godliness” 2 Peter 1 v 3. Why would God ask us to do something impossible? He hasn’t! Forgiveness may be hard, very hard, but it is necessary if we are to live in the freedom that God so longs for us to live in.

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’

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 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. The servant fell to his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow

servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had mercy on you?' In his anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.' Mathew 18 v 21-35.

One day the founder and CEO of Gatwick Airlines calls in his directors. It is tax time and the inland revenue are auditing the books. What comes to light is that one of the directors has had his hand in the cookie jar. He's been stealing Gatwick Airlines money, what's more is he's been doing it over a long period of time. He has a weakness you see – he wants to maintain a lifestyle he simply cannot afford. The way Jesus tells this story – we would have to say this guy owes zillions. And to make matters worse for him, this guy has not been sensible with what he's stolen. He's not interested in making it work for him, he's used it to support his lavish lifestyle so he can impress people who, in truth, care nothing for him. This guy was simply and solely about greed, and right now his prospects are bleak.

He will lose his job, family, everything he owns – and he faces an extended stay in prison. The day of reckoning comes – the shareholders meeting. This man has to stand before the founder of Gatwick Airlines, the person who has trusted his employee and who gave him his chance and believed in him. This man will have to admit his greed, his theft, his breaking of trust. Imagine the tension in the room, this will not be pretty. Imagine the employees fear: his heat pounds, his body sweats. It's over, no more bluffing, lying, cheating - he has no way out and no-one to blame but himself – this is it. He's going to have to pay – and he will fall hard. And his family will have to pay to – maybe for generations to come. The sentence is read: "Sell everything he owns, take the lot, everything in the family, everything, and make them work until it's all paid – however long it takes. And

throw him into prison. Next.....” For a moment there is silence. Into the mind of the director comes an idea – it’s a long shot – but hey – what’s he got to lose? What if I were to fall on my face, humble myself and beg for mercy? It’s a one in a million shot – but why not? So to everyone’s astonishment, he falls to his knees and blurts out: “I know I’m guilty. I know what I owe. Please show me mercy. I’ll pay it back – I just need some time. Just give me grace.”

Everyone in the room knows this won’t happen. The law is - you owe, you pay – and rightly so. This is embarrassing now – everyone’s eyes are on their shoes, he’s just making a fool of himself. He lined his pockets, he cheated, he got caught, he pays! You’d have thought he’d at least want to go down with dignity. They look at the CEO – he won’t fall for this, he built this airline and he won’t go soft on something as big and as serious as this. But as they watch – waiting for his response – they see an extraordinary thing happen. The CEO’s eyes begin to fill with tears and his lips begin to tremble, and then he speaks: “Alright – get up – I’ll rescind the sentence.” The director will not lose his job, or go to jail, his family will be spared, he keeps what he owns. In fact, more than that, the debt is cancelled – never to be paid. This is much more than the director ever dreamed would happen. He, and his family have moved from death to life. He almost cannot believe it. The debt – well it doesn’t just disappear, there is still a vast fortune to be accounted for, but it is the CEO who pays it – absorbs it – this costs him hugely.

Imagine Peter’s surprise when he asks Jesus how many times he should forgive! He’s expecting Jesus to commend him – 7 times! That’s more than double what the law required at 3 times, 7 times is huge! But Jesus stuns Peter by saying – Peter you need a different kind of heart. How’s your heart? Do you harbour unforgiveness? Then to be free – you need a different kind of heart.

Friends, we have accumulated an enormous debt before a just holy God – and it’s been growing for years.

Every time we are...less than honest

- Treat a child harshly
- Make a cutting remark
- Don't speak the truth in love
- Gossip
- Tell a racist joke
- Have sexually impure thoughts
- Think about getting even...

...we add to the debt. But God wants to keep his dream alive – to enjoy relationship with people like you and me. And since sin wrecks relationships – and especially our relationship with him – he came up with a new way to keep the dream alive. It says: “You owe – I’ll pay”. It’s called forgiveness. But forgiveness comes at a huge price – Christ on the cross.

The cross shows the heart of the father towards you and me – a different kind of heart. And the real challenge of this story – as Jesus answers Peter’s question is this that Jesus invites us to do what he does – to forgive with the Father’s heart. Imagine how Peter must have felt as what Jesus was saying slowly dawned on him. “Peter I invite you to have the same heart as the father.” He invites us to do the same. To be free, and to live in the freedom Christ has won for us, we must forgive from the heart.

This is a big subject and you can discuss this further in your small groups or at Steps to Freedom in Christ – but very briefly...

Forgiveness is not:

- Forgetting what someone did
- Excusing what someone did
- Forgiveness does not mean ‘you simply tolerate sin’.
- Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation – although it may lead to it.
- Forgiveness is not seeking revenge

Forgiveness is – in a sentence: “giving up the right to hurt you back, whatever you did.”

A definition that I have found personally very helpful is that forgiveness is “taking the sword out of your own stomach.” Truth is if you refuse to forgive you are only destroying yourself. When I forgive, I set you free from the prison I have placed in my mind for holding you captive. I stop entertaining fantasies of vengeance in which you fail, or are hurt, or in which I can get you back. Then I begin to see in a new way and a different way - seeing past and beyond the hurt. I see someone else created in the image of God just as I am.

I have been very challenged by the line from “The Shack” where God says: “And I am especially fond of that one!” I love to believe it’s true for you, I have a harder time believing it’s true for me! But I have a harder time still when I realise its equally true for the people I find I want to hate because God would say: “And I am especially fond of that one” When forgiveness really begins to happen we find we can wish the other person well – we hope for good things for them and this means our heart is becoming like the Fathers heart.

Friends, if we want to live in freedom in our relationships – with one another and with our heavenly father – then we must forgive. This is simply the best way to live. The alternative is that I refuse to forgive and I remain a prisoner of the hurt for as long as I live. “God commands forgiving because to refuse to forgive means I allow the one who hurt me to keep me chained in a prison of bitterness and restraint year after year. No human beings are made more miserable than the unforgiving.”¹

The miracle of forgiveness is reconciliation – healing of broken relationships. What stands in our way is pride, resentment, stubbornness and defensiveness. If that’s the road we choose, we carry a burden that will crush our humanity out of our spirit. Every day we will grow a little colder and every day we will die a little.

That’s why the story Jesus told doesn’t end here. The director owes absolutely everything to his CEO and to his abundant mercy and grace. He doesn’t have to pay anything! On leaving the meeting the director bumps into a colleague who owes him some money. This debt is worth about £20 – peanuts to the director but he demands it is paid. His colleague can’t pay, but asks to be given until the end of the month – a little time. He asks for grace. Interestingly he uses exactly

the same words the director used when pleading before the CEO. The difference this time is that this debt is finite - it is payable. The director's response is crucial and it is incredible: "I'll not make the same mistake the old man made with me," he thinks. "I'm not interested in your excuses," he says. "Did you think I'd fall for your tricks? What kind of a sucker do you take me for?" And he has the man thrown into prison. He cannot see beyond the debt. He lives by - you owe, you pay. We tend to think we can receive forgiveness from God without having to give it to others. This story tells us that's impossible - forgiveness is not about avoiding pain or punishment. True forgiveness is never that cheap. There is only one thing that costs more than forgiveness - and that is un-forgiveness. Un-forgiveness costs you your heart.

Jesus said the unforgiving director ended up in prison. How's your heart? Do you have a new kind of heart that is beating like the father's? Or are you in a prison of bitterness and coldness of heart?

There is a final part to this story. The director is called again to the CEO - and this time the meeting is different. The CEO knows what's going on - that the director has gravely misunderstood him. "I was willing to pay - still am - but you don't want to take up the offer do you? You were showered with grace - but you won't extend it. You were drenched in love but you won't live in it. You were offered forgiveness - a chance to go beyond "you hurt me so I'll hurt you!" But you cannot receive it yourself and not extend it to others - it's a package deal. Take him away and put him in prison until he pays!"

Friends, forgiving from the heart is a choice and the choice is yours: freedom or prison.

1. Ortberg pg 163/164

Note: I have leaned heavily on the chapter on Forgiveness in John Ortberg's book: "Everybody's normal 'till you get to know them." in this talk.

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