

THE SCIENCE OF FORGIVENESS



Scripture:

Psalm 27

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh — my adversaries and foes — they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! ⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek. ⁹Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! ¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. ¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



This is the second Sunday in Lent with our sermon series on “The Science of.....” Today we address the **Science of Forgiveness**.

Where in this passage in Luke do we see forgiveness? The word forgive is not mentioned. But it is implied in the compassion Jesus has for

Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it. Despite so many disappointments with the people of Jerusalem and their hard hearts, he still imagines being a mother hen gathering the rebellious people of Jerusalem under his wings.

Theology professor Ruth Reese explains that in this passage, Jesus' journey of ministry is now headed towards the historic seat of Jewish power where both kings and priests reign. His prophetic ministry in the face of power is a dangerous activity that jeopardizes his life as he bravely spoke the truth of God's kingdom.

Even though Christ characterizes the city leaders as being responsible for the killing of prophets and apostles, Jesus responds to them with the compassion of a mother. Jesus longs to gather Jerusalem under his wings (v. 34). Jesus longs to comfort those who would reject him. He envisions Jerusalem as a brood of vulnerable chicks in need of their mother's protection and longs to offer the same protection, salvation, to the very city where he will die.

Dr. Reese points out that: Jesus sends his disciples out to heal even those they might not perceive as deserving. Healing was central to Christ's ministry and his forgiveness was a key ingredient in the recipe for healing and wholeness.

Think for a moment about a time when forgiveness was healing for you or when your forgiveness was healing for someone else.

Tom McGrath, the author of **Finding God in All Things**, tells this story from his own childhood about how forgiveness heals relationships.

"When I was in 5th grade we had a new teacher we liked a lot, but our class misbehaved and made his life miserable. One day I organized a prank. I spread the word, "Hey, at 10:05 let's all let a book slide off our desks." A bunch of my buddies did precisely that. Our teacher continued on with the lesson, ignoring us and took the steam right out of our fun. But then Patty O'Rourke, a girl who always behaved and never acted up, slid her geography book belatedly off her desk and it slammed onto the floor.

This was apparently the last straw, and our red-faced teacher scolded her and told her she'd have to stay after school. Patty covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. Our teacher's face contorted with agony and anger.

I sat in my desk, feeling miserable. I had a secret crush on Patty and I had great respect and even affection for my teacher. I saw what my silliness had wrought. I sat stewing for what seemed hours, and then I walked up to the teacher's desk.

"I was the one, sir. I'm the one who told everyone to do that. It wasn't her fault. I'm sorry."

Our teacher looked at Patty. "Miss O'Rourke, your punishment is lifted. Mr. McGrath, you'll see me after class."

When class was over I sat in my seat. The teacher sorted papers, erased the blackboard, and straightened his desk. Eventually he came and stood looming next to me.

"Tom, I forgive you," he said. And that was that. A total gift. I had been expecting punishment or a lecture. Never did I expect forgiveness. I thought my relationship with this good man had been shattered. He chose otherwise. It was one of the best lessons I learned in school and one of the greatest gifts I ever received.

Still many of us are not like this teacher and we don't forgive easily because we think the person should apologize first and not get off so easy. We want the other person to suffer. And we don't want to appear weak, easily doling out cheap grace.

Thoughtful and sincere forgiveness is never cheap. It takes a faithful person to forgive deeply and authentically.

But when you do, the benefits to you are significant! God made us to give and receive grace. And the blessings abound when we do.

Everett Worthington, who has dedicated his career to the study of forgiveness, believes there are tremendous health and social benefits with forgiveness. He tells the story of Chris Carrier.

When Chris was 10 years old, he was abducted near his home in Florida, taken into the swamp, stabbed and shot in the head. Miraculously, he awakened hours later with a headache and a blind right eye. But he was able to stumble over to a highway where a car stopped and took him to the hospital.

Years later a police officer told Chris his abductor lay close to death in prison. The officer suggested he confront him while he had the chance. But Chris did more than that, he comforted his attacker in the man's final weeks of life and forgave him creating a sense of peace and wholeness for them both.

This kind of miraculous forgiveness may seem odd, but Dr. Worthington reports that there is new research that shows Chris's story is not an anomaly. Forgiveness is not just for saints and martyrs he says, there are connections between forgiving behavior and mental, physical, and spiritual health. And it plays a key role in the health of families, communities, and nations.

Charlotte Witvilet, a psychologist at Hope College assessed the blood pressure, heart rate, stress facial expressions and sweat production when she asked a group of people to think of someone that had offended or hurt them. Of course, you can guess all of these went up. And when she asked them to think of reasons to show compassion, and imagine forgiving their offender, their mental practice of forgiveness caused their stress reactions to all decrease to normal.

They also have found that the physical benefits of forgiveness increase with age. So as we age the more important it is for us to forgive. A study of 1500 found that middle and older age people forgive more often than younger adults. And they feel forgiven by God more often as well as feeling a greater life satisfaction. Further studies have found unforgiveness causes immune system disruptions and can interfere with the ability to fight off infections.

Dr. Douglas Brodie has worked with cancer patients for 30 years. He has come up with what he calls the cancer personality. Three of the traits he believes predisposes someone to getting cancer are: Having a deep-seated need to make others happy. Being a "people pleaser" with a great need for approval. 2. Often lacking closeness with one or both parents, which sometimes, later in life, results in lack of closeness with spouse or others who would normally be close. 3. A person who harbors long-suppressed toxic emotions, such as anger, resentment and / or hostility. The cancer-susceptible individual typically internalizes their emotions and has great difficulty expressing them. He recommends trying to heal these ways with therapy, etc. Remember in the majority of instances when Jesus heals someone he adds that they are forgiven as well. Healing and forgiveness work together. When you carry around with you guilt, anger, hostility, resentment and unforgiving ways, you are creating a force field keeping out the powerful force of forgiveness and healing.

There is a study center that focuses on Forgiveness. This one in Texas is called the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. They wrote a paper called **The Science of Forgiveness and developed research they call: The Campaign for Forgiveness.** They say that lives are transformed as hope takes the place of guilt, anger, loneliness, and fear. Forgiveness causes relationships to be restored through the love of God. Their **Campaign for Forgiveness research** at Baylor found that forgiveness decreases the severity of heart disease, and prolongs the life of cancer patients. In their

forgiveness studies, they discern between an internal decision to forgive and an external decision to be back in relationship with the person who offended. The research found that there is still great benefit from the internal decision to forgive even if the external relationship is not possible for reasons such as the victim may still be vulnerable to abuse or further offenses if they come in close contact with the offender.

Jesus says: Love others as I have loved you, forgive others as you have been forgiven. And one of his last prayers on earth was: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." That is a good prayer to say when you are upset with anyone.

Psychologist Brene Brown talks in her book, *Rising Strong*, about the advantages of reframing your life by deciding that everyone is doing the best they can considering the circumstances they face today.

So for instance, when someone bumps you in the grocery store, realize, they are doing the best they can with the circumstances they are currently facing. Maybe they just lost their job, or is going blind, or in a huge hurry because they feel sick...

Brown gave a good example of how we imagine things either positively or negatively and how that affects our ability to forgive and get along well with others. One day when they were vacationing at a lake, she was angry at her husband for swimming ahead of her as they decided to swim clear across the lake together as they had in their younger days. Brown conjured up all sorts of reasons in her mind for why her husband might speed up and go so far ahead, like: "He thinks I look fat in my swimsuit.... He doesn't love me any more..... He is showing off his athletic ability..... He is hurrying back so he doesn't have to spend any more time with me today....."

But in fact, when she calmly discussed her concerns when she reached the shore, she discovered he was having a panic attack. But he was too embarrassed and actually scared to tell her while they were in the water together.

Her husband is a Pediatrician and he explained that as they were swimming he started going over in his mind a difficult situation in the office that he experienced the day before. As he was pondering the problem, he realized he was in a very cold deep lake where he couldn't see anything beneath him. Both of these thoughts added up to a big anxiety attack and all he could do was get to shore as fast as possible or drown.

He was doing the best he could under those circumstances. But Brene was interpreting his

behavior as offensive towards her. It wasn't about her at all.

How often do we do this? Too often. Instead of giving people the benefit of the doubt and realize they are doing the best they can in that moment, we tend to get hostile and offended by behaviors that can probably be easily perceived in a more compassionate way.

Having an attitude of Forgiveness will inspire you to see the world and its people with more empathy, care and kindness. But most of us need to pray for this power. It is not easy but it is important to God. The word, "Forgive," is mentioned in the Bible 74 times! **Mark 11:25-11:26 says:** 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.'

And **1 John 1:9:** "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Robert Enright has also been conducting scientific studies on forgiveness at the University of Wisconsin in Madison since 1985. He explains what forgiveness means: Forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation. It does not necessarily eliminate continued suffering or take away the consequences of another's act. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing the offense, nor is it an acknowledgement of weakness. Forgiveness is often a slow and thoughtful process. In his book: *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, Enright says, "Although we may not always have to tell people we forgive them, we should always ask for forgiveness when we have wronged another person. Asking forgiveness requires that we confess our faults, which can be difficult. Forgiveness is a gift and you can't demand forgiveness. At the same time you are worthy of receiving forgiveness. Everyone is forgivable, even you."

Enright adds that one of the symptoms of non-forgiveness is displacement. This occurs when people transfer their angry feelings from the person who hurt them onto someone else. When a man was young his mother was overly controlling. Now in his marriage he over-reacts when he interprets his wife's suggestions as trying to control him. The wife becomes angry at his over-reactions but she is afraid her husband will leave her so she shows her anger through over - controlling their son. Her son responds by displacing his anger at his mother onto his younger brother. So the displaced anger and hurt gets carried down from generation to generation.

In Deuteronomy 5:9 it talks about: "the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation."

This happens in families where forgiveness is rarely given. The displaced anger and bitterness continues over generations and causes other family miseries.

So have an attitude of forgiveness for the sake of your families, for your health and wellbeing and for God's sake. Because if Jesus can say while hanging on the cross, "**Father forgive them for they know not what they do,**" then YOU can forgive anything. Amen



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