

We wanted to start the year by talking about happiness, and answer the question: Does Jesus actually give you a better life?

Does a person who follows Jesus have a happiness advantage? Culture would tell you “no way!” Christianity is repressive and old-fashioned, but Jesus said he came to give life to the fullest. So which is it? Is Christianity about rules and misery or is it the way to a life of purpose and joy?

Well... some of the smartest scientific and health experts in the world would tell you Christians have a happiness advantage... even the non-Christian ones.

We've shown you these stats each week, but let me give them to you one more time. Harvard professor Tyler VanderWeele and journalist John Siniff found that those who regularly attend worship services

People who regularly attend church:

- * are more optimistic
- * have lower rates of depression
- * are less likely to commit suicide
- * have a greater purpose in life
- * are less likely to divorce
- * are more self-controlled
- * and even reduce mortality rates by 20–30 percent over a 15 year period

Even Atheist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt said,

“Surveys have long shown that religious believers in the United States are happier, healthier, longer-lived, and more generous to charity and to each other than are secular people. . . . Religious believers give more money than secular folk to secular charities, and to their neighbors. They give more of their time, too, and of their blood.”

Speaking of Christians giving more blood... we have a blood drive this Friday, we still have spots available and everything is on the app.

It turns out Jesus knew what he was talking about after all. The happiest you will ever be, will be when your life is fully surrendered to Jesus. I don't know if you believe that or not, but my prayer is that you will keep coming back until you do.

And so over these last few weeks we've been learning that: Jesus doesn't just give you eternal life, he gives you a better life too.

We've talked about Generosity, Purpose, Gratitude, Self Control, and today I'm going to finish by teaching on Forgiveness.

And to do that we're going to read a story from the Gospel of Matthew with a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. It's in Matthew 28

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" 22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" 23 "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. 24 In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. 25 He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. 26 "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' 27 Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. 28 "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. 29 "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. 30 But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. 31 "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. 32 Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' 34 Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. 35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

The Tension

In the passage we read, Jesus answers a question from one of the disciples about forgiveness and then he tells us a story to illustrate the point he wants to make, and we like the story, but we don't like the first answer.

Jesus was asked a question: What is the appropriate amount of forgiveness for a follower of Jesus to give? And Jesus' answer was, there's no limit.

When we read that probably 3 thoughts come to mind immediately:

1. That's unreasonable

Doesn't Jesus think people should have to suffer the consequences of their decisions? They just keep getting forgiveness

2. That's unwise

Doesn't Jesus know that someone who hurts people will keep hurting people? Doesn't he know that? Does he want me to keep getting hurt?

3. That's impossible

Doesn't Jesus know how fragile our relationship already is? I mean I forgave them once, but he wants me to just keep forgiving them over and over again?

What is it?

What it's not:

Forgiveness is not condoning, excusing, denying, minimizing, or forgetting the wrong

Forgiveness is a freely made choice to give up revenge, resentment, or harsh judgments toward a person who caused a hurt, and to strive to respond with generosity, compassion, and kindness toward that person

So how do we do that?

Jesus gives us the example of what forgiveness is in verse 27

Matthew 18:27

27 Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

Then the master was...

1. Filled with pity for him
2. Released him
3. And forgave the debt

This is a much more comprehensive idea of forgiveness than just saying, "I forgive you." so let's look at each one:

1. Filled with pity for him

"Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." - Frederick Buechner

When you stay angry, it makes you feel so righteous. So wronged.

Have your heart go out to them. You're identifying with them. Reminding yourself of how much you have in common. Emphathize. Sympthize. Which is the exact opposite of what you want to do. I'm really the same, maybe not exactly the same, but I've hurt people too.

You stay bitter by caricature them. You have to take away their humanity. "They're just a liar"

As long as you're superior to them, you'll never be able to forgive them.

2. Released him

This is the kind of forgiveness we think of traditionally. "I forgive you. I'm not gonna hold it against you anymore." What does it look like to release them, well you've already empathized with them, so releasing could mean understanding how what they did was possible, or it could mean telling them you forgive them, or it could mean telling God you forgive them.

Sometimes it can be an incredibly powerful symbolic act. (Letter story)

But I think there is another element to releasing someone from a past hurt that is important but often ignored.

I think part of releasing someone is telling others you've related to that person. (Jennifer story) "I have zero hard feelings against the person anymore."

3. Forgave the debt

We said earlier that forgiveness is not minimizing what someone did. This is where forgiving the debt comes in, because in this story, the man is not saying, no one will have to pay the debt, he is saying, "you don't have to pay the debt, I will take the loss. I will pay the debt. I'm owed, but I know you can't pay it, so I will take the loss.

A talent is 6,000 denarii or 20 years of wages. IN essence, a denarii is a days wage, so you could say this man owed him 200,000 days.. It's a comical sum. Jesus isn't trying to get us to dissect the literal amount as much as making the point that this man owed a debt he could not pay.

But the second man only owed 100 denarii, meaning he owed this man about 100 days of his life back.

Forgiveness doesn't mean there's no debt, it just means you agree to pay it. This is a powerful concept.

You hurt me and cost days and years of my life. You cost me relationships and self-confidence, and holidays, and a marriage and maybe relationships with my kids, maybe my personal, emotional, or physical health. You did that to me, and you owe me that back, but I am choosing to pay that debt, You don't owe me anything. It's not your problem anymore, It's my burden to bear.

So that's what it is, but why is it necessary?

Why is it Necessary?

Unforgiveness is a prison. Look at the end of the story in verse 34

Matthew 18:34-35

34 Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.
35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

Doesn't this seem harsh? "Put him in prison, he's unforgiving." But we know this is true, because we've lived it.

Now Jesus is making 2 points here, one figuratively and one literally.

On one hand this story enforces what we know to be true that unforgiveness puts us in an emotional prison. It's torture, and we think that our hate is torturing the other person, but it's not, at least not near as much as it's torturing us. It dominates your mind, your relationships, your mood. The longer you have been held in bondage by someone's hurt against you, the deeper in the emotional dungeon you go.

The University of Michigan conducted a study in 2006 called the "Religion, Aging, and Health Survey, that measured life satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, and perceptions of control.

Forgiving others unconditionally and forgiving yourself for past mistakes correlates with increased happiness, better mental and physical health, and more self-control and. While unforgiveness correlates with higher levels of depression and anxiety.

Not only that but forgiving others has been shown to improve hormonal balance, strengthen your immune system, and reduce cardiovascular levels

But Jesus is also making a literal point here too, that someone who refuses to forgive someone who hurt them, also will face a literal and eternal punishment and torture, talking about hell, and this is where we want to push back and take offense to this teaching.

Wait a minute... I thought we were not saved based on what we did or didn't do, I thought you always say that it's my faith in Jesus that determined my eternity. Of course it's Jesus.

Jesus is not saying, it's faith in Jesus plus forgiving grudges that gets you to heaven, he's saying that someone who refuses to forgive is someone who does not understand forgiveness. It's a person who believes that debts have to be paid in full.

Which leads us to our last point... why is the message of forgiveness different for a Christian.

How Is It Different For A Christian?

Up to this point, I guess technically you could not have a faith in Jesus, and still see the emotional, mental and physical benefits of forgiveness, but for a Christian it's so much more than that.

This is really the gospel message: You have been forgiven an infinite debt. You have experienced grace

A Christian who can't forgive doesn't understand forgiveness. They still believe debts have to be worked off, or there debt was not that great

This is so important that when Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray he included this in the prayer, "Forgive us our tresspasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Part of the daily rhythm of our prayer is being reminded of our wrongs, asking for forgiveness for our wrongs, and that should cause us to have no objections to releasing others of their wrongs against us.

Student loan forgiveness example... One of the controversial political issues lately has been the idea of student loan forgiveness. I have no desire to get into politics, but I do think this particular issue is the perfect example of our mentality when it comes to forgiveness.

It's simple, but it's not easy. Jesus gives us the model. We're going to read 1 verse from the part of the Bible where Jesus is hanging on the cross, and just to remind you people who he gave his life for, did miracles for, who earlier said he was the king, turned on him, and got him crucified. Now he's hanging on the cross, and looking at the people who hung him there, and this is what he said...

It's so hard to let go of our hurt because you're hoping the person who did you wrong will feel just an ounce of the pain you've experienced. You can't let go until you feel pain has been fairly distributed, but sadly, that's almost never the case. In most instances, those who are hurt stay hurt and locked up for years, sometimes even decades, while the guilty party moves on with their lives.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross a few hours from dying he had the supernatural ability to take action. He could have called down lightning to strike the people who had him crucified. No one in history had more ability to get even with his enemies than Jesus, the options were endless, but instead of taking recourse, he chose to pray to the Father on their behalf and forgive them. In his prayer, he gives the secret to offering forgiveness when it seems impossible to give:

Luke 23:24

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

You're waiting to offer forgiveness once they own what they did, but it's never going to happen because they don't know they need to. I'm sure there is a small percentage of people in the world who are terrible, hateful, despicable human beings, and they hurt people on purpose for the fun of it, but I've never met one. In all my years, I've just met lots of hurt people who hurt people, and when you give hurt the time and space to grow, its roots run deep in your heart and affects the trajectory of your life forever.

What if today, with God's gracious help, you made the same decision Jesus did hanging on the cross? Would you consider praying on behalf of your offender, "God forgive _____ for _____."