

“Spiritual App of Forgiveness”

Matthew 6: 9-15 and Mark 11:22-25

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Have you ever kinked a hose in order to shut off the water while you were working in the yard or washing the car? You don't have to walk all the way back to the faucet, all you have to do is fold the hose and kink it. With the hose collapsed on itself, the water stops flowing. Consider this image of God's blessings flowing through a prayer hose. Bitterness, unforgiveness, is a kink in the hose that blocks us from healthy relationships. .

How many of us have experienced uncomfortable baggage related to hurt feelings, harsh words, or broken relationships in the workplace? Most of us have felt the frustration of working in a place where there are tensions because some people don't get along with others. It can get so bad that we actually quit a job rather than have to put up with the constant stress. How different might the workplace be if we and our co-workers accessed the spiritual app of forgiveness?

Bitterness and hurt feelings are common in family relationships as well. How many of us dread family gatherings because we are very aware that this aunt and that cousin refuse to talk to each other. The hurt goes back years, but they refuse to work it out. Everybody picks up the tension of bitterness every time the family gathers. Think how much the spiritual app of forgiveness would change the family dynamics.

Jesus warned that lack of forgiveness damages our own internal spiritual lives as well as our relationships. Bitterness can actually keep us from experiencing God's answer to our prayers.

This weekend we are winding down our summer series on spiritual apps by looking at what is perhaps the most difficult and yet the most effective app of all. We call it the spiritual app of forgiveness. The benefits of this app can impact every part of our lives.

Mark 11: 22-25

22 Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. **23** Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart,

but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. **24** So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

25 ‘Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.’

A woman went to see a marriage counselor. She announced that she was ready to get a divorce. The counselor began to explore with her what the problems were in the marriage. “Do you have grounds?” the counselor asked. She thought about it for a moment and then answered, “Yes, we own about ten acres.” The counselor realized that she had not understood the intent. Rewording the question, the counselor asked, “Do you have a grudge?” “No,” she responded, “we have a carport.” The counselor decided to be more direct. “Lady, does he beat you up?” “No, I wake up about a half hour before him every morning.” With frustration the counselor finally asked, “What is the problem with your marriage?” She answered, “My husband just can’t communicate!”

Like that wife, we sometimes claim God isn’t answering our prayers, when the problem may be our own unforgiveness. Jesus warned that bitterness injures our connection with God. In fact, bitterness in one area of life kinks the hose of prayer so effectively that nothing can get through. Even prayers in completely unrelated areas are impacted.

“You mean I have to forgive in order to receive God’s answer to my prayers?” “Yes.” This is the reason we need the spiritual app of forgiveness.

For many of us this app of forgiveness is the most difficult app of all. How are we to forgive someone who has deeply hurt us? It is extremely difficult to forgive someone who has betrayed us. Fortunately Jesus modeled it for us.

Years ago I was guest speaking at a pastor’s conference in Alexandria, Egypt. I noticed when they celebrated communion that they said at the communion table, “On the night that Jesus was arrested.” I learned that this is the way it reads in their Arabic Bible. In our American Bibles we read it as on the night Jesus was betrayed.” The original Greek word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11:23 means “On the night Jesus was *handed over*.” We interpret Paul’s focus as Judas’ betrayal and handing Jesus over to the authorities.

Why is this important? Because Jesus understands betrayal. Bitterness, lack of forgiveness, happen when we have felt betrayed. Someone we trusted turned against us. The challenge is to join Jesus in the words from the cross, “Father forgive them...”

Perhaps the difficulty for most of us forgiving someone who has deeply hurt us is that it feels like we are letting them off the hook. Forgiveness feels like we are letting them get away with it. Not at all. Maybe it helps to remember that there is a difference between forgiveness and trust. It is one thing to forgive someone and genuinely move on with our lives. It is another thing to put ourselves in the place where we keep letting that person hurt us again and again. With God’s help we can forgive, releasing the bitterness of our hearts. That does not mean we have to trust the person. Trust is always earned. Forgiveness is given.

Forgiveness is a choice. We forgive because God tells us to forgive. Perhaps we need to pause and hear the word again with an emphasis on the second syllable: for-GIVE-ness. It is like grace. *Forgiveness is something we give. It cannot be earned or repaid. It is a gift.* When we forgive, we grow in appreciation for what Christ has done for us. Because Jesus forgives us, we forgive others. As we forgive others, we open our lives to the mystery of God's flow of blessings. Somehow bitterness is the kink in the hose of God's blessings flowing to us and through us to others. When we forgive, we unkink the hose and release the flow of God's grace in our lives.

How do we practice this spiritual app? Let me review a couple baby steps to get us from anger, hurt feelings, even bitterness to forgiveness in our hearts. Step one is to admit in prayer to the Lord that you can't trust the other person yet. We separate in our minds the difference between forgiving and trust. "Lord, I know you want me to forgive. I am willing to work at it, but let's be clear that I refuse to trust this person or let them hurt me again."

Step two is to review in prayer all the ways God has forgiven us. "Lord, I confess that you have had to forgive lots of sin in my life. I am not perfect. Thank you for forgiving me."

Step three happens as we ask the Lord to give us the want to forgive. "Lord, I don't want to forgive them. But I ask you to give me the want to forgive. You can change my heart to want supernaturally what I can't want in my normal humanity."

Baby steps toward releasing bitterness and granting forgiveness.

As hard as this spiritual app is to practice, it is often the most transformational spiritual practice of all. In fact, did you know that more than a hundred years ago it was common for churches to make sure people were practicing forgiveness before they could join a church? A standard membership question to join a church was, "Do you have anything against anyone?" The person confessing faith in Jesus was expected to forgive.

President Andrew Jackson experienced how powerful it is to forgive. He did not apply to join a local community church until he was retired from the Presidency. At aged seventy, he was ready to make his confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. It had not been an easy decision for him.

It was a big deal for the local church to have the former president of the United States joining their church. In fact, they invited a highly recognized preacher to lead the ceremony of membership that day.

In order to appreciate what happened that day we need to know that President Andrew Jackson was a deeply hurt man. He had experienced the worst of ugly politics. His wife died as a result of the negative presidential campaign. Jackson was so bitter toward the outgoing President that he refused to meet him and or go to the White House until the former President had departed.

His bitterness in office had grown when some of his own Cabinet departed and never spoke to him again. He knew that the question would be asked of him in order to join the church, "Do you have anything against anyone?" He decided to answer honestly that indeed he did hold bitterness against others.

That day the guest preacher asked the question. The congregation held its breath as the President answered that he still held bitterness in his heart against some political opponents. The guest preacher loved the President enough to not let him get by with bitterness in his heart. The preacher announced that this was so serious an issue that he would need to hold off on President Andrew Jackson joining the church until he could deal with this problem of unforgiveness.

Jackson's eyes became tearful as he realized how much the church loved him and actually wanted his best in Christ. Finally, he responded, "I forgive them all." Even the most conservative members of the congregation burst into applause and shouts of excitement as the guest preacher announced that he was now accepted as a member.

Bitterness stunts our lives and keeps us from experiencing God's grace. Who do you need to forgive?