

## "Freedom Through Forgiveness"

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### OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 138 NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 18:18-22

*The economy is really bad!! I received a pre-declined credit card application in the mail. CEO's are now playing miniature golf; Exxon-Mobil laid off 25 Congressmen; Motel Six won't leave the light on anymore; A picture is now only worth 200 words; and they renamed Wall Street "Wal-Mart Street". Finally, when I called the Suicide Hotline I got a call center in Pakistan and when I told them I was suicidal, they got all excited, and asked if I knew how to drive a truck!*

Well, the economy is one of many things about which we have an opportunity to harbor resentment. There are also the many shortcomings of our childhoods, the opportunities we should have been given but which escaped us, the blessings that others have that we want. Then, there are the very real injuries perpetrated on us by persons who got away with it simply because they were more powerful and even worse - the injuries perpetrated on those we love whom we didn't have the power to protect.

Helen Mallicoat wrote the wonderful poem:

#### **My Name Is I AM**

I was regretting the past,  
and fearing the future.

Suddenly my Lord was speaking:  
"My name is I Am".

He paused.  
I waited.  
He continued,

"When you live in the past,  
with its mistakes and regrets,  
it is hard. I am not there.  
My name is not I WAS.

When you live in the future,  
with its problems and fears,  
it is hard. I am not there.

My name is not I WILL BE.

When you live in this moment  
it is not hard. I am here.  
My name is I AM."

We struggle with our amazing, creative minds and all the unused capacity of our brains. Our thoughts and emotions move far beyond the circle of things that we can affect and that are truly our responsibility, and reach out to concern themselves with so much that we cannot control. Most of us have many concerns that are not really driven by present-time issues, but which are driven by repressed fears, ancient hatreds, unresolved traumas, and unforgiven wounds and hurts. Much of our inner landscape is taken up by the wreckage of broken relationships, the sharp edges of icy cold fears, and the dark swamp of unresolved conflicts. But Jesus says, "Come all you who are heavy laden, take up my yoke instead, for it's easy. My burden is light." Yoke comes from an ancient world which means "Union". Both of the words "yoke" and "yoga" come from the same root. They both mean union. In yoking, we want to be in union with a partner that can lighten our burden, that will help us do the work, or even do the heavy work for us, as in yoking oxen and other work animals to our burdens so that they can carry them. This is literally what Jesus means when he says "take my yoke upon you". He is saying "be in union with me and let me do the heavy work - it's so much easier than trying to do it yourself." In fact, he's already done it, and in joining with Him we are going along for the ride!

But to be fully yoked, in union, with Christ we have to lay down our heavy work and let him take it. This is REALLY hard!! Human egos like to feel like they are in charge, human minds crave the illusion of control, and that makes letting go seem like hard work to us. Letting go, giving it to God, frees up space in us for God to be God in us. It frees up energy so that the Spirit can really use us. This is one of the ways that we enjoy new life in Christ. We are no longer bound to the past by hanging on to old wounds, resentments, and hurts. We are no longer resisting the future because we are afraid of being hurt again. We are open and attentive to God's will for us NOW. We can be yoked with him, in union with him, when we clear the inner space of our painful past and our fearful future.

Forgiveness creates an awesome spiritual alchemy - changes outcomes for others as well as for ourselves. It's so important that Jesus strongly instructs Peter on it; when Peter is asking a perfectly reasonable question about how to respond when someone offends him over and over. And Jesus says, "You can't stop at seven times. You have to go 70 X 7" and he wasn't referring to the multiplication tables - meaning he didn't mean 49 times. He was using symbolic language. In Hebrew numbers have meaning. We see the numbers 3, 7, 12, and 40 used throughout the Old and New Testaments. 7 is a number indicating a wholistic, completed cycle of events, and when joined with the number zero it indicates infinity - over and over without ending. So then forgiveness isn't an act but an ongoing process - not a one-timer, or a 7 timer, or a 49 timer, but an all-the-timer.

Well, if you are thinking about the incident you can't forgive, or the person who so does NOT deserve to be forgiven, or the innocent victims (who might be you, or maybe someone you know or deeply love), and if you are turning me off now because this topic is too hard, and because Jesus' teaching about forgiveness isn't realistic - then that's a good thing. Then you are truly in a responsive place to start understanding forgiveness and its benefits for you in a whole new way. It's been said that forgiveness primarily benefits the forgiver, and that staying angry and resentful is like drinking poison yourself, then expecting the other person to die. Those things are true. But I think too often forgiveness is treated in a simplistic, superficial way. It's applied like a band aid to avoid pain - not to transform it into healing. It makes us feel guilty when we can't forgive and when we don't want to forgive. Forgiving is as unique to the forgiver and to the relationship as loving is unique to each lover and each relationship.

Here are five brief, true stories on forgiveness. All of those interviewed had different experiences on their forgiveness journeys, and are in different places on those journeys. Because the authentic stories of real people are healing - much more so than lectures and sermons - I share these with you today as we seek to understand and apply the mystery of forgiveness to our own lives:

Lesley Parrott's daughter Allison was just 11 years old when she was kidnapped by a rapist who was out on parole – he brutally raped and strangled her, leaving her body under a bridge. The event had occurred in Toronto, Canada. From very early on Lesley affirmed and modeled forgiveness, begging her community to lobby against the death penalty for Allison's murderer even though she didn't know who it was. Her intent was not to allow revenge and hatred to be the outcome of Allison's life, but instead to help her family, her church, and her community heal from this violent event. Her friends said, "You feel that way now, but when they catch him, when you look him in the eye, you'll feel different. Ten years later that day came and Lesley said, "I didn't feel any different. I still wanted healing for everyone, including him." 22 years later she still holds her ground – she says, "You can't allow the evil in the world to cause you not to see the good that's there, the hopeful possibilities that are just under the surface. You can't let an event like this shape you because then it will direct and control your entire future. We can't anticipate a world full of God's love that doesn't include everybody – all people have to be included in the circle of those deserving of forgiveness – if everybody isn't included, then it's not God's vision of a transformed world". Regardless of the response of the community or the murderer (who maintains his innocence although overwhelming DNA evidence has put him in prison for life), Lesley has been able to hold her ground, both publicly and privately.

Jim McBride's young wife and infant son were killed in a bombing in Belfast, Ireland in the early 1980's. Jim said that he tried and tried to understand and forgive. He wrote a letter to the Irish Republicans who were responsible for the bombings. He received a letter of apology and condolence from them, followed by the phrase "but you've got to understand our side..." Twenty years later he found himself at a conference having lunch with two para-military leaders, very high up in the organization. They asked him his story so he told it, with no reservations. The man who was a high ranking leader on the Irish

Republican side looked him square, his eyes filled with tears, and he put a hand on Jim's shoulder. He said, "Jim, I am so sorry. It shouldn't have happened – there's no excuse". Jim waited for the "but you've got to understand..." and it never came! Jim said, "after all the years of trying to forgive that one moment transformed my life – one moment of genuine and pure reconciliation – one pure act of authentic confession and apology and compassion without any caveats, excuses, or rationalizations. And from then on the weight has been lifted off me – I can move on and I feel free and whole – more was accomplished in that instant than I've been able to accomplish in over 20 years."

Terri Jentz and her friend Shayna were students at Yale University in 1976 when they decided to bicycle across the United States. It was an amazing trip - they camped along the way and witnessed some of the most beautiful natural scenery in the world. One night they decided to camp at a park in Oregon. In the middle of the night a truck came barreling through the camp, purposefully hitting the tent and running over the girls. The driver got out and took up an axe. He struck both of the girls with the axe before getting back in his truck and driving away. Miraculously both girls survived. Shayna used her anger about the incident to fuel her determination to heal, recover, and get back to life. But after Terri's physical recovery she tried hard to forgive the incident and the perpetrator, but it sent her into a depression that lasted for years. Finally, 15 years later she decided to return to the scene of the crime to make sense of what happened. The statute of limitations had passed on the crime so she could not seek a conviction on the perpetrator. Her journey caused her to interview townspeople who knew intuitively who had done this, but would not speak. She wrote a book called "A Strange Kind of Paradise" about the incident. The research she conducted, the interviews, the revival of the story in local gathering places, the opportunity given to others to come out about the violence they had suffered at the hands of this man who still lived in their community, the publication of the book, the retelling of the story in local newspapers and at local book signing events allowed this community to confess its complicitness in protecting the perpetrator who had a long history of violent behavior. They apologized for their very human but very harmful response, and the entire community experienced a great healing through Terri's inability and finally her unwillingness to simply forgive and forget. And she has experienced a great healing too - she's way past this event, her efforts have transformed it into a healing event for an entire community.

Judith Fein traveled to Vietnam in 2007 to see how the people of that country are processing the many years of occupation, war, and terror they have suffered under American, French, and Japanese aggressors. She met with former Vietcong guerrilla, ex-soldiers, and members of the Communist party, kids and elders. She asked, "Are you angry about the war?" They responded, "It's over. We welcome Americans. WE have met with American soldiers who came back here. Some were full of guilt; some even went to village where they had killed people to apologize. We embraced them, and we cried together. We have no resentment against you. You are forgiven." Consistently from person to person it was that simple. They are so grateful to not be at war that they focus on the present and on building the future. A retired Air Force officer who had served in Vietnam heard this story, and he said to me, "When I was serving there several Vietnamese confided to me that they believed they were paying back a karmic debt for

atrocities that their country committed centuries ago. They did not blame us. They were eager to get it over with and move on."

Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale has been called one of the most influential men of the 20th century. He pastored the Marble Collegiate Church in NYC for 52 years, and wrote 46 books - including the familiar best seller "The Power of Positive Thinking". For many years after his retirement, Norman Vincent Peale held retreats for couples in ministry, and my friend Sandy and her husband Burleigh attended. Sandy recounted this story from that weekend: Dr. Peale was sharing about the time early in his ministry when he was called to his first pastorate. He believed that things were going well. He was asked to attend a meeting of the elders to address a matter of great concern. To his surprise, the great concern was him and the board of elders fired him that night. His point in sharing this incident was to encourage those in attendance - encourage them to persevere beyond obstacles, to remain committed to their goals in ministry. But as he told his story to the participants in the retreat, his voice broke unexpectedly and tears welled up in his eyes. In surprise he turned to his wife, Ruth, and said to her, "How about that! It's been over 50 years, and it still hurts! Wow. And after all these years of positive thinking. Who would have thought!"

In this the very rigorous curriculum called "life on earth", most of us are going to find that we have abundant opportunities to forgive. Some of us have been given tougher tests than others - only God knows why. But to live in and enjoy the freedom that's been secured for us in Christ, it's clear that we have to stay active in the process of forgiveness. With every step in that direction we increase our capacity for enjoying the benefits of union with Christ - of being an open window through which the light of Christ can shine to others, and of experiencing true joy and peace in our daily walk on earth.

I hope that we will all spend some time reflecting on the places in our inner landscape where grudges, anger, and resentment still reign. Invite the powerful spirit of God into those spaces for healing, and follow divine guidance when it leads you to seek help from others, to take time away for meditation and prayer, or to pursue an unexpected path to healing. And continue to make an effort to consciously and deliberately turn it over to God. It's your birthright to live a peaceful, transformed, and fully healed life in Christ and it's God's will for you to be a clear, joyful, open channel for that Spirit.

God does not live in the past, nor in the future, but right here, now, in the present - right here, now, where WE are! Thanks be to God for the healing power of forgiveness.  
Amen.