

Biggest Barrier to Living the Jesus Life

Week 5

There are many barriers to hitting our stride and fully becoming the person God created us to be. We could have a spirited debate on creating such a list, and we could spend the next several weeks dealing with it, but we won't. In reality, we can't. Time is precious right now. We have a window to relaunch the church in a world that is not the same as it was 18 months ago. Our world has unique scars caused by the pandemic, which by the way isn't over. Obviously the worst of it is over, but this virus is still hanging around, people are still getting sick, and we are told it may never be fully eradicated. Life changed in March 2020, and we are still trying to determine the extent and scope of the change. But we know there was damage. Many of us are testament to that reality.

But what about the unaffiliated out there? What about the non-faith people who may have navigated the entirety of these months without a spiritual anchor or without connection to a community? There are many, and these are the people we have opportunity to reach with the healing reality of Jesus. So, let's get to it, right? Well, yes, but also, no. Are we ready for this mission? We have talked about the need for being whole and well and about getting back into a steady spiritual routine, and both are paramount to our faith service. There's something else as well. We all have a strongest weakness and all the Lenten seasons in history haven't lessened what Paul terms our "thorn in the flesh." For the most part our thorns are unique and different, just as each of us are unique and different. There is one, however, that is so equal opportunity, and so pernicious, many of us may share it. **Forgiveness** issues just may be the negative tie that binds many of us together.

We tend to struggle with letting go of past slights, which is especially true if the *slight* wasn't *slight* at all. People wrong us and we hold a grudge, refusing to let it go, even when that person may not be aware they hurt us. And Oh Boy, we reserve a special place for people who hurt us on purpose, with malice as their motive. There are two other types of forgiveness issues: We have trouble forgiving ourselves over past failures and have trouble believing God has forgiven us. Ever caught yourself praying for forgiveness for a sin committed 20 years ago?

“Dear God, forgive me for what I did in 1996.” We know God forgave us 2 decades back, but we can’t seem to let go. Are we naturally forgiveness-averse?

We’re human, we don’t like being treated unfairly, or wronged or betrayed. And we agree with the old Native American proverb: “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig 2 graves.” Another adage is also relevant: “Revenge is a dish best served cold.” We don’t want to be hurt but we see the negatives of holding onto such hurts, especially if the hurt is so strong revenge comes into play. A lack of forgiveness can also do great damage to our overall health.

Forgiveness is primary to emotional healing. Not participating in forgiveness can negatively affect physical health, causing poor sleep, fatigue, high anxiety, depression and a damaged immune system. The APA states: “Forgiveness is a topic that’s physical, social and biological in nature.” Dr. Karen Swartz of Stanford tells us, “there is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed. Chronic anger puts one into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.” Let’s liven up this conversation by flipping it around. Acts of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for our holistic health by lowering the risk of heart attack, lowering cholesterol levels, improving sleep, reducing inflammation and pain, and lowering blood pressure. Toss in a bowl of oatmeal and we could live to 100...if we overcome our forgiveness issues.

What about our spirituality? Well, a lack of forgiveness in any direction can act like a dam holding back the progressive power of God in our lives. A major study of people of faith across the spectrum of religions found that a lack of forgiveness effectively “freezes your mind,” causing a paralysis of spiritual progress. Psychologist Rikki Miller writes, “Lack of forgiveness lies behind the breakdown of relationships in general, even our relationship with God.” Amanda Rowlett calls this the “prison of unforgiveness,” a captivity that will, at some point, render us less and less sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Think about it: if we lose sensitivity to God’s Spirit we will become wholly ineffective in living out our calling? This is scary: If we don’t deal with our forgiveness issues, forgiveness of any type, we could miss this huge opportunity to impact the world with the Gospel. We need to be *use-able* to be used by God. Let’s talk about how to get there.

