



UNCHAINED: What Forgiveness Is(n't)

Luke 7:36-50

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As the new year has gotten underway, I've been thinking quite a bit about what makes a new year better than the last. How is that we can make 2017 a better year than 2016. According to the statuses of many of my friends and family, some nearby and some far away, 2016 was lacking in what it had to offer. And if Mariah Carey's New Year's Eve performance is any indication, there is a lot of promise that 2017 can be better than 2016.

But what makes a new year better? At the start of the year, many people set a New Year's resolution – a promise to themselves to improve some aspect of their life. People promise to give up smoking, give up drinking, lose weight, gain weight, eat healthier, drink less soda, run more, get off the couch more, get a new job, get married, start dating, travel more, or visit family more. The idea behind a resolution in the new year is that engaging in this one act will make the new year better than the last. And really, resolutions are a great idea – who doesn't want to fix that one thing that would make their life that much better – that would make the new year that much better.

But setting New Year's Resolutions come with a price. Less than 45% of people who make a resolution stick with their resolution even for six months. In fact, nearly 30% give up on their resolution within the first week! In all, it's estimated that less than 10% of people who make a resolution will keep it for the full year. Not even 10%.

The price of making a resolution to start the new year is that there's an overwhelming chance you'll fail. If statistics don't lie, which we all know they do, but we'll pretend in this case they can be trusted, less than 50 people in this room even made a resolution. Perhaps the others hold on to a guilty feeling of failing to keep resolutions in the past and they don't want to set themselves up for failure again. Out of the 50 or so who set resolutions, only about 21 or 22 will even be trying to maintain that resolution come July. And less than 5 will have a chance at saying they kept their resolution all year when reflecting back on 2017 from December.

So here is where my pondering has led me: if we all enter the new year wanting it to be better than the past year, and at least a good number of us are willing to name a specific promise that can help the new year be better than the last, why do so many of us fail to hold up our end of the bargain?

I have become convinced that the number one reason new endeavors don't go as well as we hope is that our failures and disappointments from past endeavors get in our way. This is not only true about keeping resolutions in the new year, it's also true about any endeavor we may

take on. It could be a new job, a new relationship, a new contract, a new hobby, or a new commitment in the community. When we begin down a new road, when we start finding new challenges, when we enter into a new season of life, all of the baggage from our past clouds over us and chains us to the guilt of past failures, past disappointments, and past mistakes.

As we enter this new year, as we celebrate the light of God in Christ which has been born into the world in this season of Epiphany, we are going to be studying how to break free of our past. Our hope is that by becoming unchained to the guilt of former failures, mistakes, or decisions, we'll find freedom in forgiveness. We're going to be considering some of the more difficult situations that cause guilt in our lives. We're going to see what grace God offers us when we find ourselves not being perfect enough; we're going to seek Christ's grace offered in seasons of addiction; we're going to look for a word to help us move forward from broken relationships; we're going to search for a promise of God for those big mistakes we've made – for things that should have been left unsaid, or actions that should have never taken place.

As we begin today, we're going to be considering what it is we're expecting to discover in this season when we say we are "Finding Freedom in Forgiveness."

You know, when a person goes into the doctor and says they have a heart condition, the doctor starts by asking, "Where did this heart condition come from?" Now, doctors know where heart conditions come from – truly, we all know where heart conditions come from – they are the result of stress, fatty sugars, lack of exercise, cholesterol, or even smoking. The reality of heart conditions is that they don't happenstance overnight. They are the result of a lengthy season of neglect. But the doctor isn't asking what caused the heart condition so that the two of you can dwell on the past. Even in asking the questions, the doctor is already considering, 'How are we going to fix this?' What took many years to form will take many years to fix. Heart conditions don't form overnight, and they aren't fixed overnight.

The same is true for the guilt in our lives that keeps us chained to our past. What took many years to form will likely take some time to heal. But the healing never comes if we don't admit we have guilt that needs healing. In this season of becoming unchained, we're going to name that which keeps us chained down. And today we start a season of finding freedom in forgiveness with a scripture, which gives us an example of a time when Christ extended forgiveness.

This scripture is often misunderstood because we read it in the context of a 21st Century dinner party. I assure you, this is not your Christmas Dinner, or your Birthday Celebration. This is a 1st Century gathering of the religious elite. Can you imagine a more boring dinner?

A Pharisee, later named Simon, has invited Jesus over for dinner. With the two of them, we already have a rabbi and a temple leader both present for the meal. We're not told who else is with them, but the scripture makes clear that there are others present at the meal. I can only imagine, though scripture doesn't offer this to us, that the other guests are also Bible-thumping

Jewish elite – that’s the community the Pharisees associated with most often. Again, said sarcastically, it sounds like a great dinner party to crash.

The set-up of the room is not at all like you’ll find today in our modern American society. They weren’t sitting at a grand ballroom table – they weren’t even sitting up at a table. The dinner parties of the 1st Century were enjoyed while reclined on the floor. There were likely a few throw pillows for them to rest their arms and sides, but they were lounging around a low-set table dining just inches off the floor.

Jesus is there in the room, laid out on his side enjoying his dinner, and a woman in the city – who we are told is a sinner – has come into the room. A couple things to note here: she’s called a sinner, and she’s a woman from the city. Not explicitly named, but given the comparison to other women we meet in the scriptural texts, it’s safe to understand her as a woman of the night, not just a woman in the city. She has found her way undetected to Jesus’ feet and is now weeping, bathing Jesus’ feet with her tears and drying the wet feet with her hair.

This scene is really disturbingly intimate. Just think about it. Remember, we’re talking 1st Century Jewish society – women never uncovered their hair before strangers.ⁱ Uncovering one’s hair was an act of intimacy. Nevertheless, she’s touching a stranger’s feet, another huge faux pas in the society. She’s not only let her hair down, but she’s wetting his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. And she goes on, she kisses his feet – an act of great intimacy – and she’s anointing his feet with an alabaster jar of ointment.

The only thing more awkward than her acts of intimacy towards Jesus is that Jesus doesn’t seem to care – he doesn’t say anything; he just lets her continue on.

The rabbi, the teacher, Jesus? He says nothing. The Pharisee? Simon? We shouldn’t be too surprised, but when he notices, he has something to say. Only, he doesn’t say it out loud. He’s judging both Jesus and the woman in one under breath conversation. “If he were a prophet,” Simon says, speaking to himself about Jesus, “he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him.”

First – if you ever thought it strange the woman came into the home, Simon’s thoughts should put that shock to rest. Even Simon doesn’t seem bothered that the woman has come into his home. What he’s shocked about is that Jesus doesn’t seem to mind this woman, a sinner, touching him.

Jesus responds as only Jesus can. Jesus’ response to Simon’s thoughts speaks directly against Simon’s belief that Jesus wasn’t a prophet. Jesus even knowing Simon’s thoughts makes it clear he is a prophet.ⁱⁱ As Jesus does, when teaching faithful living, he offers a parable: “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. When they could not pay him, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which one will love him more?”

Simon, thinking himself to be a proud Biblical scholar, knows the right answer. Yet, his answer seems to indicate he knows he's walking into Jesus' trap. Simon says, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." There's hesitancy in his answer. Jesus confirms his answer, and then reverts back from the parable to the situation at hand.

"Do you see this woman?" Jesus asked. "I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet – but she has washed and dried them with her tears and her hair. ... You didn't even offer me the customary welcome with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet. ... You didn't offer me the appropriate anointing with oil, yet she's anointed my feet with an expensive bottle of ointment."

Jesus calls him out – chastises him in his own home not only for his failure to be a good host, but also for his failure to understand the actions of the woman.

Jesus forgives the woman her sins – saying to Simon, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

Her acts of love – her extending hospitality – her behavior is that of a person who has been forgiven. Yes, her sins were great – the scriptures make that clear – and like the man forgiven the greater debt in the parable, her response to God's forgiveness made tangibly known in the presence of Christ, leads her to the feet of Christ where she weeps and anoints the feet of the Messiah.

But friends, here is the trap Simon falls into that we are called to avoid to find freedom in forgiveness. The woman, a great sinner, turns to love when she experiences forgiveness. Simon fell into the trap; sure, he acknowledged for Jesus that of course the man who had been forgiven the greater debt would be more thankful. But his failure is to not recognize the woman's actions as the result of forgiveness – he decides to judge the woman for her past – not her present.

We fall into the same trap when we start to judge Simon? Do we not find ourselves being posed the same questions by Christ?

"When you know yourself to be forgiven, you don't have time for judgment anymore. All you can do is be grateful; indeed, manifest that gratitude by forgiving others."ⁱⁱⁱ The woman – forgiven by the love of God in Christ – had no other response than to pour out her love to the one who made forgiveness possible.

"When you forgive others, something rather amazing happens. Because through your offer of forgiveness you release a hold not only on the other person, but also on the grudge you were holding, on the hunger for delicious judgment that you'd been harboring and on a life dominated by the past. ... When you've been forgiven, all that's left is gratitude. And when you forgive others, all that's left is freedom and possibility."^{iv}

Forgiveness, fundamentally, is like the relieving of a large debt. We all carry the weight of guilt and judgment – of ourselves and of others – and the forgiveness of God not only frees us of us that weight, it encourages us to extend that forgiveness to others.

Forgiveness isn't the same thing as forgetfulness or foolishness, but it is giving yourself the freedom to receive from God and to not be controlled by another. The woman could have sat in her tears weeping because of her past sin, called out and judged by Simon. She could have judged him, or even further judged herself. But the forgiveness she received of God frees her from any of that possible judgment, to be thankful for the gracious gift of Christ's love.

So today, as we start the new year off with a quest to be unchained from our guilt and disappointments of the past, I invite you to know that the forgiveness God gives us is not something that invites us to judge the lack of forgiveness exhibited by others. The forgiveness of God, offered to us in the teaching example of Christ, is extended that we may be freed of the power and hold of judgment on our lives, that in our new found freedom, we may also extend forgiveness to others, that we may all live and share in the grace of God, the love of Christ, free from the power and chains of sin and guilt.

ⁱ Lucy Lind Hogan. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved January 4, 2017

ⁱⁱ Justó Gonzalez. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net Retrieved, January 4, 2017

^{iv} Ibid.