

FORGIVENESS!

Raised for Victory:

Matthew 6:1-15, 1 John 1:5-2:2

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Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

They're not cockleburs. They're sandburs. The little seeds with prickly spines attach themselves to everything and then poke, prick and sting. One day Sammy the lamb ran through a field of them. The burs covered his wool. When Sammy returned to the flock and rubbed against other sheep, they'd cry and began to butt him. Sammy would hurt bad, but he wouldn't understand why the other sheep made such a fuss. When the shepherd tried to remove his sandburs, Sammy ran away. It hurt too much. He ran through another field of burs and found another flock. However, sheep from the new flock revolted when Sammy brushed them. The burs tore at them and they grunted and kicked. Once again, Sammy suffered acute pain as the spines of burs dug in. A second shepherd tried to remove the burs, but Sammy got away. Sammy found more "hostile flocks" and escaped more "hurtful shepherds." Sammy felt cursed. He felt he was everyone's scapegoat, an outcast. He was a very lonely lamb.

Over the years, I've tried to help a lot of Sammy the Lambs. Some cases are extreme. I've watched at least four Samuel the Lambs die tragic deaths. I know three Samantha the Lambs who are still estranged from their families. In each of their cases, they hurt so badly that they could not imagine the pain they were causing others. I remember one Samantha refused to see a counselor any more. She told me one day, "All the counselor tells me is that this pain I feel is my problem."

Truthfully, all of us sin and hurt others; and all of us, on occasion, get hurt and withdraw from others. We all have some trouble discerning when the two are related. When is my sin involved in the hurt I receive from others? When am I the one with sandburs? When is my hurt rooted in my own speech and actions? When is it only the fault of others? When is the single cause of my hurt the sandbur someone else carries? When we really get hurt, it is difficult to be honest.

Jesus came to make you victorious over sin and all it does. He came to make you victorious over guilt, fear, discouragement, depression, anger, resentment, addiction, judgment, all the consequences of sin whether it is committed by you or against you, and he came to make you victorious over sin itself. Speaking of us as sheep, Jesus said:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10, NIV)

Through Jesus, God raises us for victory. God nurtures, teaches and disciplines us to triumph over sin and its consequences. We can only have life “to the full,” as Jesus promises, if we triumph over sin. Through Jesus, we become the workmanship of almighty God the Creator of heaven and earth. How does this happen?

We establish a personal relationship with God through forgiveness offered by Jesus. In forgiveness we experience God’s love. In forgiveness the sandburs are discovered and removed. Consequently, we can approach God and others without getting kicked because of the burs. As we experience love, our trust grows. Love grows trust. Fear and resentment hinder our trust. Forgiveness eliminates fear and resentment so that we fully love and receive love.

The most famous teaching of Jesus was given one day as he sat on a mountainside. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon focused on the great love and power of God

available to people. It addressed how God is ***the source*** for our needs and ***the one*** to seek. In the sixth chapter of Matthew, he addressed our unbelief when he said:

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. (Matthew 6:1, NIV)

Jesus confronted the people with how they hedge their bets with God. Rather than focusing exclusively on the pleasure of God, they work, give, pray and fast for the possible praise and reward of others. Consequently, their acts of faith are tinged with unbelief. They're looking to other sources. Jesus focuses on God's loving provision in response to prayer, and provides us a model for prayer, The Lord's Prayer. He then comments on one statement in the prayer: ***"forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us."*** He declares:

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15, NLT)

In a world of sandburs and sin, forgiveness is the touch of love. It actually is the economy of love. What I mean is that forgiveness is the way we relate to one another if we walk in the love and forgiveness of God. It's our currency, our exchanges with one another. We spurn love when we refuse forgiveness. We reject love when we withhold forgiveness from ourselves and others. We opt out of God's way, God's truth and God's life.

I have duct tape. On TV I've seen people bound in duct tape. Does it work? Suppose we wrap this volunteer's wrists, one time in duct tape. Let's say this is one layer of sin and hurt. What happens? With real effort the person can break free. Now let's try seven times. There are now seven layers of sin and hurt. Wow, this looks as good as a chain. It looks impossible to break. Now, let's take a scissor and cut the tape (try this with a chain). Wow, freeing someone

from duct-tape bondage is that easy. We love and free bound people when we forgive them. However, they feel no love or freedom until they receive the forgiveness.

One time, I visited the farm of my wife's uncle. He had me pull up an electric fence all day long. The cattle were in heavily grazed pasture with the grass eaten down. I opened up to them lush tall green grass. Not a single cow moved to the new pasture. They all stayed behind a fence that was no longer there. I never saw them move. I imagine that eventually one broke the imaginary barrier; and then upon the example of the one, another did until the entire herd entered the new pasture. Do you know that is how it happens with sheep and people.

When people talk about being born again, they are speaking of the moment they had the faith to enter and enjoy the new pasture, to open their arms from the cut duct tape, to stand and have the burs removed from their fleece, to receive their forgiveness and new identity in Christ. In the song *Amazing Grace*, it is "the hour I first believed."

However, the love of forgiveness is not a one-time event. A lot of burs get attached to our fleece. In 1 John the Bible teaches that we saints still sin. We still have burs. We still cause hurt and our guilty before God of harming his children. However, we change as identify those burs, confess them and welcome forgiveness. The Bible says:

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:7, NIV)

If we truly walk in the light, the truth of God's forgiving, transforming love in Jesus, we will get close to one another, and the burs will come out. We won't just be freed of guilt; the burs will be removed. We feast and grow in love and trust. We don't just grow by apologizing and confessing. We grow by receiving and believing and giving forgiveness. Have you given thanks for your forgiveness? Have you thanked those who forgave you? Have you honored

their love? Are you withholding your love from someone? Are you refusing to forgive? Choose to believe in your forgiveness and choose then to give it.