

SIGNS OF SURRENDER

Monday – Responding to God’s Gift

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 3:2).

Have you ever had the horrible experience of accidentally turning on to a one-way street? You wonder why people are pointing at you and looking so irritated, and then you suddenly realize you’re heading in the wrong direction. The quicker you get off that road the better, both for you and everybody else! Or, perhaps you’re driving along and GPS lets you know you’d better turn around!

In the passage above, these are words of John the Baptist, as He prepared the way for Jesus to emerge in public ministry. The word “repent” or “repentance” conjures up images of hell, fire and brimstone preaching. However, the word repentance in the Bible literally means to change your mind or change your direction. Repentance is more than “feeling sorry” or being ashamed. It’s a recognition that you’re going in the wrong direction and you need to get back on the right path.

Being a Christ follower involves submitting to the Lordship of Christ and joining ourselves to some other believers who are learning to live a new life in a new way.

Unfortunately, many people have been affected by a false gospel. It’s a gospel which says: Come to Jesus and get wealth and prosperity and everything you’ve ever wanted! But the Bible says something different than that: It’s come to Jesus and give your whole life to Him.

Becoming a Christian is more than making an intellectual assent to the principles of Christianity — it’s a change of ownership. It’s a change of management where Christ is exalted to the highest place. And two things happen: *We give up our wrongs*, by turning away from everything that’s sinful and displeasing to the Lord. But we have to take a step further than that — we have to *give up our rights*.

In becoming a Christian, we have to give up the right of self-determination. We have to give up the right to live life on our own terms and create our own morality. Through repentance *we turn away from our sin* and through faith *we turn toward* God, trusting Him with each aspect of our lives.

Repentance and faith go hand in hand. In repentance, we agree with God that we are sinners. In faith, we agree with God that He loves us, and through Jesus Christ our salvation is complete. True repentance always leads to the joy of being rightly related to God. There is no greater satisfaction than that!

Reflection:

When it comes to being fully surrendered, what’s holding you back?

What would it take for God to be number 1 in your life?

Tuesday – Embracing Jesus as King

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23).

It was common in Judaism to think of God's kingdom in terms of the restoration and exaltation of the nation of Israel, but in the New Testament there is a bigger picture laid out of God's supremacy over all the earth. His kingdom involves all people and all nations, both Jews and Gentiles alike.

The Kingdom of God was also the central message of Jesus and the early church (Mark 1:14-15, Acts 3:19). In fact, Jesus initiated a divine rescue mission. His goal was to seek and save the lost (Matthew 10:6; 15:24; Luke 19:10; Mark 2:17; Luke 15:7). Jesus saw His ministry as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For in Jesus Christ, God invaded human history, bringing salvation and triumphing over evil. Our Lord also revealed that one day His kingdom would come in fullness, in the Age to come, and there will be a redeemed community of people who love God supremely, free from the grip of Satan and evil (Matthew 25:41; Matthew 13:36-43).

Jesus taught His followers to pray for God's kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10). How we need to seek the Lord and allow Him to rule over our lives on a daily basis! For He is raising up a community of believers who are uncompromising in their faith and wholly dedicated to Him. From the very beginning of time, the Lord has always wanted to have a people on the earth who submit to His leadership, who love each other, and who are a true reflection of what He is like. His goal is to raise up an alternative society, a holy people, who demonstrate the beauty and benefit of living under His rule.

You could say that we're living between the times. The old Age goes on, but there is a new Age coming where heaven will descend to earth and all will be made new (Revelation 21:2-3). Today, God is reaching out to us in love and we must make a choice: Will we submit to Jesus now, and live under His kingdom rule, or will we go our own way?

As Christ followers, our highest allegiance must always be to God and to His Kingdom. Let us pray for the government and be good citizens, but in the end, we must put our hope in the Lord and arrange our lives around His priorities. There is no higher purpose for us to fulfill!

Reflection:

Have you surrendered yourself to Jesus the King?

What changes would be necessary for you to align yourself with the lifestyle and priorities of God's Kingdom?

Wednesday – Confessing Known Sin

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:16).

How can someone become free from besetting sins and become more like Christ? In the above passage, Paul the apostle doesn't tell them to occasionally pray and access the Spirit's help. He doesn't say that all you need is weekly church attendance to maintain your spiritual vitality. He tells them to live by the Spirit — it's a moment-by-moment relationship.

The scripture makes it clear that we've all inherited a nature that's bent toward sin. And sin is basically an attitude of rebellion toward God, where we choose to live on our terms, even when it comes into conflict with what He wants for our lives. The sin nature is also called "the flesh" in some Bible translations and it can be defined as "all the evil that people are capable of doing, when left to their own devices, or apart from the intervention of God's grace in their lives."

Although it is still quite possible to react out of our sin nature, from the moment Christ comes into our hearts, we're not obligated to sin anymore — we've got the power to change. So, as Christians, we have *the ability* to sin, but we don't have *the obligation* to sin any longer, because we've received a new nature that's fashioned after the image of Christ and we now have the Holy Spirit to empower us.

Second Corinthians 5:17 states, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* In union with Jesus, we become new creations, sons and daughters of God Himself, adopted into His family! When Christ lives inside, we begin to show the "family traits" that one would expect from a child of God: righteousness, holiness, peace, love, etc.

What should we do if we mess up? First John 1:9 states: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* God is absolutely trustworthy, so when He says we have forgiveness and eternal life by believing in Him, we can count on it! But we're also told to confess our sins, whenever they occur. The word "confess" means to agree with God or to say the same thing that He says about our spiritual condition.

The good news is: When we give our lives to Christ, God gives us His Spirit to dwell in us as a pledge of His love. And He doesn't expect us to live the Christian life all alone. The Holy Spirit is our "Helper" (John 14:26), and the Scripture teaches us that when the Spirit enters our lives, He strengthens us spiritually, purifies our hearts, and enables us to make right choices (Galatians 5:16-18).

Reflection:

What would help you recognize sin in your life, whenever it occurs?

Do you have the assurance of your forgiveness and eternal salvation?

Thursday – Be Filled with the Spirit

Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you (Ephesians 5:18, NLT).

In this passage, Paul the apostle is writing to some believers in the city of Ephesus. Drunkenness was very common in that locality and it was a serious temptation for Christians in that day. Paul said it will ruin your life! Paul is contrasting the state of being drunk/or under the influence of alcohol, with the kind of all-consuming influence the Spirit of God wants to have in our lives.

When people are drunk it affects their moods and emotions. It alters their thinking and their decision-making ability and it affects their behavior. If they're filled with anger, then anger controls their lives. If individuals are filled with love, then love influences all they do. If we're filled with the Holy Spirit, then the Lord will be the dominant influence in our thoughts and behaviors.

To explain it another way, when we pray to receive Christ as Lord and Savior, the Spirit of God immediately comes to live within us (Romans 8:9). However, it's one thing to *have the Holy Spirit* and quite another for *the Spirit to have us!* He wants to have us – all of us!

Paul is not saying to “fill yourself” with the Spirit. He says, “be filled,” which reminds us that the filling of the Spirit is the work of God, not people. The Holy Spirit is ready to fill us right now, but we must be willing to make ourselves available to Him. Literally, Paul is saying, “Keep on being filled with the Spirit,” or more technically, “Allow yourselves to continuously be filled with the Spirit. Being Spirit-filled means you're living under the influence of the Spirit, not just for one moment, but day by day.

The central issue here is one of cooperation and the question is: Am I going to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and let Him lead me or am I going to keep on doing things my own way? So many of us struggle at precisely this point; we persist in our rebellion and self-centeredness because we're afraid to surrender everything to the Lord and entrust it all to Him. The Bible makes it clear that every person who has received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior needs to pray for the fullness of the Spirit.

We can't always control the outward events that occur but we can choose to cling to God and respond in a Christ-like way when the Spirit is in control. Don't be afraid to allow the Spirit of God to consume you, to saturate your entire being. What's holding you back? The filling of the Spirit is not primarily an emotional experience and it's certainly not reserved for a few super-Christians. It's a vital part of the normal Christian life!

Reflection:

How can you yield yourself to the empowering of God's Spirit each day?

Is your life exemplifying the fruit and gifts of God's Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Cor. 12-14)

Friday – Taking Up Your Cross

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23).

The call to follow Christ is one of the main things that separates Christianity from all the other religions. In other world religions, you're called to embrace a set of beliefs or standards that were set down by the founder. In Christianity, the main focus is committing yourself to an ongoing relationship with a person.

When you become a Christian, there are a set of teachings to believe, but the heart and soul of Christianity is getting to know a person who loves you and who wants to become intimately involved with your life. That person is the Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus is saying that if you want to follow me, you've got to do it on my terms and not your terms! He's reminding us that there are times when our desires will come into conflict with what God desires. And when that happens, we need to say "no" to ourselves and "yes" to what God wants for our lives.

In the first century, whenever you saw a man carrying a cross, he was on his way to die. In fact, crucifixion was the most painful and degrading form of capital punishment in the ancient world. The cross was a person's appointed place of death.

So, what is the cross you have to carry? It's not your job, our spouse, a mean teacher at school, or your mother in law. And it's not a financial shortage or a health problem. *The cross is the point at which your will and God's will cross.* Every day, we're faced with all kinds of choices, whether we're going to do things our way or God's way. In fact, when Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane, just before he died, he prayed to God and said, *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me (Matthew 26:39).*

The cup was a picture of His suffering on the cross, but then our Lord went on to say, *Yet not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39).* When Jesus said those words, He was choosing the way of the cross, fully knowing that the way of the cross would cost Him everything!

Every day we're faced with choices of whether we're going to go God's way or our way. And, like Jesus, we need to say, "Lord, it's not my will, but yours be done!"

Reflection:

Are there sin patterns in your life that need to be addressed?

Are you able to pause and pray and access God's power to enable you to overcome temptation?

Saturday/Sunday – Demonstrating Faith Publicly

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

Baptism can be defined as an outward expression of an inward faith and it's supposed to occur after you make a decision to follow Christ. Jesus was baptized and he expects His followers to do the same.

When two people get married, they get up in front of others to publicly state their devotion and loyalty to each other. In that sense, baptism is like a wedding ceremony, except in this case, we're expressing our love for the Lord. Baptism says to the world, "I'm not ashamed to go public with my faith." Paul the apostle said, *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).*

Christ died, was buried, and was then resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Baptism by immersion (where someone's entire body is lowered under the water) is an important visual demonstration of our union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. When we go under the water, we're saying goodbye to our old life. It's like conducting a funeral service for our sinful self. We're declaring that our sin nature is now buried and when we arise from the water it's a picture of a brand-new life, where we're cleansed and forgiven.

Some people think that they're not good enough to be baptized. They think they have to wait until they've achieved a certain level of morality before they take that step. However, baptism is not a merit badge for successful living. In the early church, it was expected that people would be baptized as soon as they professed their faith in Jesus. In other words, there's no reason to wait!

Some will ask, isn't the reality that I was baptized as a baby good enough? The fact that you were baptized as a baby is a wonderful thing to celebrate — it was a declaration of your parent's faith. You should honor your parents for wanting to raise you in the Christian faith! But you are not a baby anymore; it's time for you to give expression to your own faith. A public declaration of faith, followed by baptism is what Jesus asks us to do to declare our allegiance to Him. What's holding you back?

Reflection:

Have you ever been afraid to go public with your faith?

Do you regularly pray for boldness to stand up for Jesus?

TAKING A STEP

Every day we're faced with choices, will we go God's way or our own? Set aside an hour this week to sit quietly before God, and ask Him if there are any areas of your life that are not fully surrendered. Is there a need for confession? Repentance and faith? Putting Jesus first? Write down any changes that come to mind.

Prayerfully examine the following areas:

- Relationships (e.g., friendships, work, marriage, kids, parents, siblings, neighbors, dating, etc.)
- Work
- Money/Finances
- Devotional life
- Church involvement
- Hobbies
- Time Expenditure

Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you and rely on His power every day to change you from the inside out. **Share your insights with a trusted friend this week and spend some time praying for each other!**

FROM BROKENNESS TO HEALING

Monday – God’s Love and Our Identity

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

The Biblical view of people acknowledges our sinfulness and our failures, but it doesn’t demean our deepest significance as men and women uniquely created by God and the special objects of His love. Physical appearance, productivity, and personal relationships can all contribute to our self-esteem, but the source of true significance in life is being rightly related to Jesus Christ our Lord. According to God’s word, you don’t have to search for significance any longer. You are significant! You are worthwhile! You’re greatly loved and highly valued by God!

Even if no one else on this planet believes in us, cheers for us, or appreciates us, we can still feel good about ourselves, because the One who knows the most, God Himself, loves us just the way we are. We can base our self-esteem on the changing values and standards of our society and never really be secure and satisfied, or we can base our self-esteem on the fact of God’s unchanging love. Isn’t that the kind of love our hearts long for? Somebody to love us just the way we are, with no strings attached, with a love that is not dependent on our performance, production, or looks.

The good news is, through Jesus Christ, we can be delivered from both guilt and shame. Guilt is an awareness of wrongdoing and it says, “I made a mistake.” Shame goes even deeper, claiming, “I am a mistake.” Guilt says, “I have done something wrong.” In contrast, shame says, “My whole personhood is wrong!” Guilt says, “I have failed.” Shame says, “I am a failure. People who struggle with shame issues have a distorted sense of worth or identity.

Cars, houses, money, prestige, position, power, will never be enough to satisfy us at the core of our being! In Jesus Christ, we see the ultimate love story, where God intervenes in history to bring the human race to Himself. In Him we have a solid foundation for living, and a source of self-esteem that can never be taken away!

It’s foolish to base our identity on something we can lose! When we place our faith in Jesus and our identity becomes firmly rooted in a relationship with Him, there is a new confidence, peace, and security for living. We no longer define ourselves by the words of others, by past experiences, or by expectations for the future. God’s evaluation of us becomes more important than any other!

Reflection:

What are some ways you can replace negative, lustful, and worldly thoughts with God’s truth? Why do we hesitate to believe what God says about us in His word?

Tuesday – Dealing with Dysfunctions

I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.²⁰ When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness (Romans 6:19-20).

With a holy God as our standard, and His Word as the source of truth, if our behavior doesn't line up with His revealed will, we must be willing to admit the error of our ways and label our behavior as "sin." Paul says, sin leads to slavery, and when someone is enslaved, they lose the freedom to do what they want; they're bound by the will of another.

Take some time to think about the consequences of sin that have occurred and allow yourself to feel the pain of those actions. Have you sacrificed your reputation and credibility because of numerous lies to cover your tracks? Has your health be affected? What relationships have been damaged? What doorways to the devil have been opened up? What toll on your self-esteem has occurred?

In the language of psychology, dysfunctional behavior is often described as defense mechanisms or coping methods. Without God in our lives, turning to worldly substitutes is a very normal thing to do! But when we recognize the emptiness of worldly things and we turn our lives over to Jesus Christ, we start realizing that the painkillers and pleasure seeking we turn to is often a substitute for dependence on God.

Dysfunctional behavior occurs when we seek to kill pain and gain pleasure without any reliance on God, and by engaging in activities that He forbids. Some of those behaviors may initially seem beneficial and many are even applauded in our society, but when examined in light of biblical truth, we can see how harmful they are.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge dysfunctional and sinful behavior, and address the underlying issues that fuel it. We have to be willing to turn away from sin, fully knowing that the absence of these coping methods usually leaves a void, and the pain inside will continue to cry out for attention. The heartache doesn't immediately go away! It may, in fact, seem worse until we've walked through all the steps of healing.

At our Heritage facility, we are blessed to have Pathways Counseling Center and groups like DivorceCare, GriefShare, and AA can help people receive healing from past hurts. Transformational Healing Groups also position people for a powerful encounter with Christ in the places of their deepest pain and greatest dysfunction.

Reflection:

What has sin cost you, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically?

Wednesday - The Impact of Emotions

Pour your heart out to God, for he is a safe place for you (Psalm 62:8).

Some of us grew up in homes where emotions were freely expressed, even feelings like anger, frustration, and sadness. In other families, the kids were always expected to stuff their feelings and go along with whatever the parents wanted. In other words, it wasn't safe to open up and let your emotions come out.

As Christ followers, our faith as Christians should not be based on feelings. We shouldn't be ruled by our emotions, but we shouldn't totally suppress our feelings either. Feeling and thinking always go together; they're inseparable aspects of our humanity!

Of course, emotions like love, peace, joy and happiness are universally valued as beneficial to our lives. They make us feel healthier! But what about anger, sorrow, frustration, anxiety, and fear? How could those things ever be beneficial? Isn't it true that those emotions are a sign of weakness, immaturity, or instability?

Consider this: True moral guilt helps us recognize there is sin in our lives that needs to be addressed. Fear can alert us to danger. Times of grief, if handled properly, can tenderize our hearts so that we become more compassionate, able to empathize with others who go through similar things. Although anger can be harmful in many ways, it can also provide emotional energy to do something about injustice.

Emotions are not right or wrong in and of themselves. Technically, they're neutral. They're like windows to our heart that connect our inner and outer world together. Our emotions need to be acknowledged, prayed about, and processed to learn what we can from our experiences.

Furthermore, we have to be aware of the emotional triggers that cause us to stumble into sin. Since emotions drive dysfunctional behavior, it's important for us to be aware of what we're feeling and how it impacts us. Painful emotions are like the warning light on the dashboard of a car. If one of those lights comes on, you don't just take a hammer and smash the little icon to make the problem go away. No, the dashboard display is an indicator that something else is occurring and you need to take a deeper look.

Reflection: Take some time to prayerfully consider three core emotions and how you typically react to them. Jot down some of the healthy or unhealthy behaviors that occur when these feelings are present. Can you identify any sinful behaviors that you turn to either to kill pain or make yourself feel better?

- Fear –
- Anger –
- Worry (you feel stressed out) –

Thursday – Overcoming Shame

What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:21-23).

In this passage, Paul challenges the Roman believers to acknowledge the things they're now ashamed of. Sandra Wilson defines shame in this way: *"...a soul-deep sense that there is something uniquely wrong with me that is not wrong with you or anyone else in the world. Because I am not perfect and problem free, I feel hopelessly, disgustingly different and worth less than other people. I view myself as literally worthless. It isn't that I make a mistake when I make a mistake; I am a mistake when I make a mistake. This is shame's message."* (Healing Care Groups, Participant's Guide, Terry Wardle, p. 5-9)

You could say that guilt is an awareness of wrongdoing. In contrast, people who struggle with shame issues have a distorted sense of worth or identity. Guilt says, "I made a mistake." Shame goes even deeper, claiming, "I am a mistake." Guilt says, "I have done something wrong." In contrast, shame says, "My whole personhood is wrong!" Guilt says, "I have failed." Shame says, "I am a failure. I'm always botching things up! It would be easier on everyone else if I weren't around!"

We deal with guilt by *receiving the forgiveness* of God provided by Jesus when He went to the cross. We deal with shame by *recognizing who we are in Christ* and by *refusing to blame yourself* for the sins of others.

The beliefs that fuel a deep sense of shame need to be examined and replaced:

Shame-based belief: "I must have done something to deserve this abuse." *Better response:* "My neighbor was a sinful man — he never should have touched me in a sexual way."

Shame-based belief: "This mistreatment wouldn't have happened if I'd been a better person!" *Better response:* "I am not responsible for the actions of others."

Shame leads to a loss of identity. We should never base our identity on anything we can lose! Cars, houses, money, prestige, position, power, will never be enough to satisfy us at the core of our being! In Jesus Christ, we see the ultimate love story, where God intervenes in history to bring the human race to Himself. In Him we have a solid foundation for living, and a source of self-esteem that can never be taken away!

Reflection:

What steps have you taken to address guilt and shame in your life?

Friday – Getting Through Grief

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief (Psalm 31:9).

Grieving, for example, has all kinds of emotions associated with it: sadness, anger, depression and sometimes even guilt. When grieving, it is normal to feel a full range of emotions. More than just *moaning* about our losses we need to *mourn* these hurtful events.

Sixty years ago, industrialists thought they could just bury toxic waste and it would go away. But we've since learned that it doesn't go away. It makes trouble. It leaks into the water table, contaminates crops and kills animals.

Buried grief does the same thing. It doesn't just go away. It leaks into our emotions. It distorts our perceptions of life and it taints our relationships.

It's easy to let the trials and trauma of the past define us, to rob us of our sense of identity as a child of God, and to rob us of joy. Many of us choose to anesthetize our pain by turning to unhealthy, unproductive or even sinful solutions. And, millions are bound up with ongoing depression because of a reservoir of sadness and ungrieved losses that remains buried within. Dr. Terry Wardle has aptly said: Every loss in life demands an appropriate season of grieving.

Tragically, many people think that painful emotions will go away in time if we simply ignore them or keep them buried below the surface. They may also seem surprised when the stress of holding it all together causes a breakdown in health or those underlying feelings come out in periodic outbursts of frustration or anger. There is a healthier way!

The truth is, grief needs to come up and out, and the best place to take it is to the Lord. In fact, the all-knowing God is already aware of what we're thinking and feeling, and He wants us to draw near and pour out our hearts to Him. He is not turned off by our weakness and will never turn us away when we present our need. Also, it doesn't do us any good to hide or pretend to be something we're not. Emotions are given to us by God Himself and they're a vital part of our humanity.

Thankfully, when our hearts are hurting, we have a God who understands and He makes it possible for us to meet Him in the midst of our pain. As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 1:3, *He is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles!*

Reflection:

What kind of events have occurred in your life that perhaps you've failed to grieve?
How has your ongoing grief affected your journey through life?

Friday – The Truth Sets Us Free

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32).

Jesus didn't just come *to reveal* the truth. He claimed *to be* the truth, and when we obey His teaching, it brings wholeness and true freedom. Simply put, lies lead to bondage; the truth sets us free. We must make a choice; will we put our confidence in the prevailing message of society or the powerful, life-changing gospel of Christ? Consider the following messages:

I must have what others have to be happy. Coveting is a trap that will always make us miserable.

I must be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in every area of life. The problem is, it's unrealistic to be good at everything. Each of us has certain God-give talents and gifts and it's not healthy to compare ourselves with others.

To be content in life, I must be loved by significant others and liked by all people. It would be awesome to be loved by every family member and liked by everyone else, but with that mentality, we'll regularly be disappointed. The reason for that is simple: We live in a fallen world and there is always the risk of interacting with people who don't treat us very well. Even our Lord Jesus Christ could not please everybody – He didn't even try to!

My true value as an individual depends on what others think of me. If this is what you truly believe, then you'll always ride the roller coaster of public opinion. People will often like us **if** we agree with them and go along with their wishes, but the moment we refuse to cooperate, their attitude sours. Our true friends value us for who we are!

If someone is unhappy or if something bad happens, it must be my fault. If you were the center of the universe and had complete control, perhaps the above statement would be true. But you're not! The Bible makes it clear that a lot of bad stuff occurs just because we live in a messed-up world. Furthermore, we should never blame ourselves for the sins of others.

What we believe is very important because what we think affects the way we feel and the way we feel affects the way we act. Romans 12:2 says that we're transformed by the renewing our minds. The Lord wants to free us from the lies of this world and the lies of the devil and replace them with the liberating, life-giving truth that's found in Jesus Christ. God wants to set us free from wrong views about Him and wrong views about ourselves, based on the guilt and shame of our past.

Reflection:

Has your life been impacted by believing the bolded statements mentioned above?
Are there any other lies you've believed?

Saturday/Sunday – The Freedom of Forgiveness

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

If God forgave you to the same extent that you forgive others, would that be a blessing for you, or would that be a problem? Because we have been the recipients of God's incredible mercy and love, He asks us to show that same mercy to others. One of the main earmarks of being in a right relationship with God is having a forgiving spirit toward others.

Jesus is kind and compassionate and He understands our pain. He knows what it's like to be rejected and abused, even by the ones you love. Even as the Roman soldiers were nailing Him to the cross and the religious leaders were laughing and mocking Him, Jesus said: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" (Luke 23:34) Jesus didn't wait for these people to ask for forgiveness. He didn't wait for His suffering to end and for the painful memories to be erased. He granted them forgiveness in a unilateral way. He took the initiative to forgive His enemies right in midst of the painful ordeal.

But what is forgiveness? It's the decision that I make to quit hurting you for hurting me. It's the willingness to let go of any resentment or bitterness, because you know you're not the ultimate Judge. Only God is qualified to judge the thoughts and intentions of a person's heart.

The Bible instructs us to forgive former bosses, co-workers, spouses, friends, etc., and we're to forgive them to the same extent that God has forgiven us, which is totally and completely. Forgiveness, however, *does not mean* that the trust is regained or that the relationship is restored. But it *does mean* that we're trusting God to be their Judge and we're choosing not to retaliate.

Forgiveness doesn't automatically mean that the memory is erased or that the pain will immediately go away. People often say that if you really forgive someone, then you have to forget about what happened. However, it is not realistic to expect people to forget painful events. Instead, through forgiveness, you no longer feel compelled to use that memory against someone else. Or, to say it another way, *the memory remains, but the desire to retaliate leaves!*

Bitterness keeps you emotionally attached to people. As Christ followers, when we refuse to forgive, what we're really saying is this, that *holding onto* your hurt is more important to you than *going on* with your relationship with God. Not only does the Lord want to comfort you, as you grieve the losses of your past, He will give you the grace to let go of your bitterness and the wisdom to choose the best course of action in all your relationships.

Reflection:

What is your response to those who have hurt you?
Is there anyone you need to forgive?

TAKING A STEP

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? ³ Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; ⁴ my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. ⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶ I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me (Psalm 13:1-6).

Psalm 13 is one of many psalms of lament in the Bible and the typical pattern is for the writer to freely express his feelings of frustration to the Lord, followed by words of thanksgiving for God's faithful provision. You could say, the Psalms teach us how to express our true feelings, which is a good thing to do!

Jesus himself said, in Matthew 5:4, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."* We need to come to Him and invite Him into the painful memories of the past and receive the comfort and healing that only He can give. Bring your sadness to the Lord and trust him to heal your hurting heart. Christianity is a relationship with a loving God who wants to be involved in our lives. He understands our true feelings and is waiting for us to draw near.

Psalm 34:18 states: *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* Open up your heart and pour out your feelings to the Lord. Don't sanitize it, organize it or edit it. In the Bible laments were written during times of hurt, alienation, suffering, and loss, giving voice to doubts, rage, and despair. Laments provide a language for pain, so that the reality of a loss and the pain of that loss can effectively be addressed. A prayer of lament is born from a heart of emotion, and it's directed toward the One who understands and cares.

It's important to be honest with God about what we're feeling. Stuffing pain inside is not healthy. Sadness and grief has to come up and out to the Lord. Biblical laments are real and raw in their expression of emotion, but they always end with words of praise and adoration, expressing a firm trust in the Lord. This week, take some time to write out a lament. Ask the Holy Spirit, "Help me to see if I've been holding my pain inside?" **Write out a lament using the following guide:**

1. Describe to the Lord the **details of what happened** to you.
2. Tell Him **how you felt** while this was happening to you.
3. Tell Him **what you believed** as a result of this happening (re. God, yourself, others, and life).
4. Tell Him **how you reacted** as a result of this happening.
5. End with words of **affirmation and confidence** in God.

Lament Psalms: 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42, 43, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 71, 77, 86, 88, 90, 94, 102, 109, 120, 123, 126, 129, 130, 140, 141, 142, and 143.