

SERMON – 10/05/08

“THE F-WORD: Forgiving Yourself”

Anthony deMello, in his book *Taking Flight*, tells the story about an old woman from a village in the country who was said to have been receiving divine apparitions.

- The local priest was skeptical to say the least.
 - He demanded proof that she was, indeed, communicating with the Almighty.
 - “When God next appears to you, ask Him to tell you my sins, which are known to Him alone. That should be evidence enough.”
- The woman returned a month later, and the priest asked her if God had appeared to her again.
 - “He had,” she said.
 - “And what did He say?”
 - “He said, ‘Tell your priest I’ve forgotten his sins!’”
- deMello finishes his story with this question: Could it be that all of the horrible things you’ve done have been forgiven by everyone – except you?

Welcome to the 5th and final week in our sermon series entitled, “The F-Word: Wrestling with Forgiveness.”

- And the question we have before us today is the same question Anthony deMello asks.
 - Could it be that all of the horrible things you’ve done have been forgiven by everyone – except you?
 - Today we’ll be wrestling with the topic of what it means to forgive ourselves.
 - Of all the weeks in our series, it could very well be that THIS one is the one that more of us need to hear!?!
- As I’ve mentioned throughout this series, two authors have been especially helpful to me in my study & preparation: Lewis Smedes & R.T. Kendall.
 - This week a lot of my notes come from Kendall’s book *How to Forgive Ourselves Totally*.

How many of us here have ever said or thought, “I know God forgives me, but I cannot forgive myself”?

- Whether it's a time in our past that we let someone else down...
 - Or we gave up too soon on some endeavor...
 - It could have been failing in business... or dropping out of school...
 - Maybe we injured ourselves through carelessness...
 - Wasted years with the wrong company...
 - Gave advice that was completely wrong...
 - Or lied to our best friend...
 - Perhaps we fell into sexual sin...
 - Or feel plagued by having had an abortion...
 - We may have been unfaithful in our marriage...
 - Sentenced to prison for a crime...
 - Abused or neglected our children...
 - Ruined another person's career...
 - Lost money through lack of wisdom...
 - Struggled with an addiction...
 - Maybe we failed to respond to God's call on our lives...
 - Or waited too long for reconciliation with another...
- The list could go on and on... because we all have been both hurt by others... and have hurt others...
 - Along the way, most of us have in some way let ourselves down...
 - And today we have to ask, in the process, have we truly forgiven ourselves?
- R.T. Kendall says that truly forgiving ourselves is accepting God's forgiveness of all our past sins and failures so completely that we equally let ourselves off the hook for our pasts as God Himself has done.
 - We begin with the understanding that there is nothing that cannot be forgiven by God... if we humbly repent & ask forgiveness. NOTHING!
 - Once forgiven, God has promised never to condemn us...
 - "Tell your priest I've forgotten his sins," we're reminded...
 - So if God, the Author & Creator of all life... the Supreme Being in all the Universe... if God can forgive us... then who are we to deny ourselves that same forgiveness?
 - Who are we to judge & condemn what God has already wiped clean?

- “But you don’t know what I’ve done, Pastor Jim! I deserve to feel guilty! It would be wrong for me to feel good about my past. What I did was bad. I deserve some kind of punishment!”
 - That may very well be true.
 - In fact, many of us could probably say that very same thing.
 - But that’s what’s so amazing about God’s love, grace & forgiveness... WE DON’T DESERVE IT!
 - It’s a gift! It’s extravagant love poured out again & again to us...
- Forgiving ourselves is not a denial of our sinful past... nor is it refusing to look at the bad things we’ve done.
 - It means we have to stop punishing ourselves with guilt over something that God has already forgiven!
 - (Of course, that takes for granted that we have asked forgiveness from the LORD... if that’s not the case, then we should immediately fall on our knees and do just that... and the Bible assures us that God will forgive... anything!)
- When we forgive ourselves, as God desires that we do... we bring an inner peace & freedom from the bondage of guilt...
 - We’re able to love others more...
 - To have better mental, emotional & spiritual health...
 - And are better able to fulfill all that God has in store for us!

One of the most helpful insights that Dr. Kendall put forth in his book was the difference between true guilt & false guilt...

- A 13 year-old girl scout, when asked how she sold 11,200 boxes of cookies... said, “You have to look people in the eye and make them feel guilty.”
 - That’s a great example of **false guilt**... otherwise known as “pseudo-guilt.”
 - False guilt is a sense of shame in our hearts that God did not put there.
 - For example...
 - Eating in an expensive restaurant & feeling guilty for spending so much...
 - Feeling guilty about not doing housework at the end of the day, when instead you relax & watch a movie, or work on a craft/hobby...

- Feeling guilty after having bought a new exercise machine, but never actually getting around to using it...
- False guilt is guilt that's still very much real... and painful... but it's not from God (and may not have a bit of sin involved)... In fact, it can be quite torturous.
 - A man backs out of his garage, doesn't see his 2-year old son in the driveway, & runs over the child, who dies within minutes. This father will blame himself forever, but he did not mean to do what he did. It was not a sin, but pseudoguilt.
 - A lady puts on the brakes of her car too late, then skids into another lane & has a head-on collision. 4 people in the other car die from the accident. She will be found guilty of careless driving in court, but she didn't mean to hurt anybody, neither did she sin against God. Pseudoguilt will bother her from then on.
 - A young man is ordered to shoot & kill in war; he cannot get over the guilt of taking other people's lives. This is pseudoguilt.
 - A young lady is raped shortly after getting off the bus at night; she blames herself that she was not more watchful. Another case of pseudoguilt.
 - A nurse was late in arriving at a home where she was to give the patient an injection that might have saved the patient's life; the patient died moments before the nurse arrived. The nurse was riddled with guilt for years... pseudoguilt.
 - **None of these examples are offenses towards God.** No sin was involved, though these people understandably experienced tremendous guilt. But they're all examples of FALSE GUILT, no matter how real & horrible it's felt.
 - Might some of the guilt you feel today, really be false guilt?
- TRUE GUILT... is "a valid sense of shame for having sinned against God... & (here's the key) have not accepted God's forgiveness."
 - We feel this kind of guilt when we're actually guilty of something!
 - God holds us responsible for our sins... and much of the time, our conscience reminds us when we're out of step with God's design.
 - All of us have sinned & fallen short of the Glory of God, says Romans 3:23...
 - The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts and convicts us when we've done or said something out of line with what God intends for us...
 - The key to understanding & experiencing true guilt is a good relationship with God...

- Hebrews 12:6 reminds us that “the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.”
- When you feel true guilt, instead of getting upset... or repressing or ignoring it... rejoice! You’re loved by God! And you have a chance to make a change in your life!!
- But God doesn’t intend for us to experience true guilt for long. Once we feel it, we should confess it to God... so God can forgive it. Then we simply accept the forgiveness & move on.
- Whether it’s due to true guilt or false guilt, when we fail to forgive ourselves, part of us blames another part of us... and we feel split inside!
 - Lewis Smedes says it’s like we’re “ripped apart inside, and forgiving ourselves is the only way to heal the split.”

Simon Peter is a great help to us, when it comes to the subject of forgiving oneself.

- He was a fisherman when Jesus called him to follow... and early on, Jesus gave Peter the nickname of “The Rock” (this was way before Dwayne Johnson, by the way!).
 - Jesus promised that one day He’d build His church upon Peter.
- Jesus loved hanging out with Peter... in fact, Peter was one of the inner-core of disciples that Jesus took with him on special events... like the transfiguration trip up a mountain!
- Peter was one who spoke his mind...
 - One day Jesus was asking his disciples what others thought about him. And when he asked them, what THEY thought, Peter replied, “You are the Messiah! The Son of the Living God!”
 - Jesus was very proud of Peter that day...
- But another day, not too long afterwards, when Jesus was trying to teach the disciples about his upcoming arrest, death & resurrection, Peter actually rebuked Jesus!
 - “May it never happen, Lord!” he said.
 - Jesus had to rebuke Peter’s rebuke... reminding him to seek the things of God, not his own interests.
- When Jesus was gathered in that upper room for the Last Supper... he told the disciples again what he was about to face... and that they’d all abandon him.

- Peter vowed right then & there to never do such a thing. "I'd lay down my life for you," he told Jesus.
- "No. In fact, you'll betray me tonight, Peter. Tonight."

A few years ago, Mel Gibson made an incredible movie called "The Passion of the Christ."

- It's an extremely graphic retelling of the crucifixion of Jesus. And the entire movie was filmed in Hebrew, Aramaic & Latin languages!
 - In this scene we're about to watch, Jesus has already been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane...
 - Peter has followed Jesus at a distance... and now watches among the crowds at the High Priest's residence.
 - Jesus is in the hands of the Jewish leaders... and they're not treating him very well at all.
- Let me warn you that some of what you're about to see might be disturbing... but it's all recorded in scripture!
 - Let's watch how Peter's evening plays out...

Here he was... one of Jesus' closest friends... one who had spent the last 3 years of his life walking & talking with Jesus – following him everywhere...

- And Peter, after having promised to stick with Jesus no matter what any of the other disciples did... this same Peter denied that he even knew the man.
 - Can you imagine the pain of the guilt in Peter's heart?
- On Easter morning, when the women went to the tomb & found it empty... the angels gave them a message from Jesus to take back to Peter and the rest of the disciples...
 - Why address Peter by name? I think because Jesus knew he'd still be beating himself up over his denial!
- In the Gospel of John, after his resurrection from the dead, but before he ascended into heaven, Jesus met the disciples once again by the Lakeshore...
 - Peter & Co. had been fishing all night... and had caught nothing!
 - After a quick fishing tip, Jesus served breakfast to the disciples.

- It was while they were eating breakfast together that Jesus asked Peter this question:
 - “*‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ (Peter) said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’” (John 21:15)*
- Having just received an answer, Jesus asks Peter a second time if he loved him... and again Peter responded affirmatively... followed by Jesus’ command to “tend” his sheep!
- (v.17ff.) “*(Jesus) said to him a third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because (Jesus) said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And (Peter) said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”*
- I don’t think it was a coincidence that Jesus asked Peter the same question 3x...
- I think it was Jesus’ way of telling Peter that he’d been forgiven... once for each of the three times he denied Jesus!
- You see, Jesus knew that Peter was “The Rock,” remember? The rock on which Jesus was going to build his church!
 - It would do Peter no good to wallow in his guilt & feel depressed about the way he’d treated Jesus in his hour of need...
 - So instead, he made sure that Peter knew he was forgiven by him...
 - Now all Peter had to do was forgive himself.
 - Did he? The bible doesn’t specifically say...
- However, the next time we hear from Peter is in the book of Acts...
 - The disciples come out of hiding to start sharing the good news of Jesus with the world.
 - And guess who the first preacher was among the 11? Yep, Peter!
 - Peter preached a 27-verse sermon... that brought over 3,000 people to believe in Jesus that very day!
 - At the end of that sermon, Peter says this, “*Repent & be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.*” (Acts 2:38-39)
- Three thousand people gave their hearts to Christ that afternoon...
 - All because of Peter... the one who had denied knowing him just a few days before...
 - I believe that Peter had forgiven himself when he preached this sermon.

- How else could God have used him to do such an amazing thing?
- When we're forgiven (and when we forgive ourselves), God is able to use us to the full potential He created us to have!

Still having a hard time forgiving yourself? Remember these words from Romans 8:28... *"All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose."*

- Is there something from your past that you've been carrying around for so long?
 - Some guilt weighs heavy on your heart?
- In just a moment we're going to listen to a song called "At the Foot of the Cross."
 - If you need to forgive yourself for something, I'd like you to come forward...
 - Come forward and stand or kneel here at the front... stay as short or as long as you need... Just come!
 - Symbolically bringing your burdens to lay at the foot of the cross...
- If you've confessed your sin to Christ, know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you've been forgiven!
 - Now all that's left is to forgive yourself...
 - And who are you to refuse something that God has granted?!
 - Come forward and be healed...
 - AMEN.