

“CHOOSING A LIFE THAT MATTERS - OBEY GOD, NOT YOUR FEELINGS”

I Corinthians 9:24-27, Ephesians 4:30-32, John 14:15-21

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“Rev. Walter H. Everett answered the phone, unprepared for the words he heard: ‘Scott was murdered last night.’ Walter’s anger toward his son’s killer raged through him like a violent riptide, growing even worse when a plea bargain resulted in a reduced sentence for the attacker. He explains it this way: *“My rage was affecting my entire life. ‘How am I going to let go of this anger?’ I wondered. The answer came the first time I saw Mike, almost a year after Scott’s death. Mike stood in court prior to his sentencing and said he was truly sorry for what he had done.*

“Three-and-a-half weeks later, on the first anniversary of Scott’s death, I wrote to Mike. I told him about my anger and asked some pointed questions. Then I wrote, ‘Having said all that, I want to thank you for what you said in court, and as hard as these words are for me to write, I forgive you.’ I wrote of God’s love in Christ and invited Mike to write to me if he wished.

“Three weeks later his letter arrived. He said that when he had read my letter he couldn’t believe it. No one had ever said to him, ‘I forgive you.’ That night he had knelt beside his bunk and prayed for, and received, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

“Additional correspondence led to regular visits during which we spoke often of Mike’s (and my) growing relationship with Christ. Later I spoke on Mike’s behalf before a parole board, and he was given an early release. In November 1994, I was the officiating minister at his wedding. When asked about his early release, Mike says, ‘It felt good, but I was already out of prison. God had set me free when I asked for His forgiveness.’

“Can I truly forgive? I had wondered if it were possible. But I’ve discovered the

meaning of the Apostle Paul's words: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.'"¹

Walter Everett could have easily held onto his feelings of anger and hatred and never forgiven Mike of the horrible wrong that he did to his family. He could have followed his feelings and done everything he could have to make Mike's life miserable, getting revenge on him for killing his son, Scott. Walter could have easily have trusted his feelings and remained miserable himself for the rest of his life, or until he forgave Mike of the murder.

But Walter knew of the words in I Corinthians 9:24-27. **(READ I Corinthians 9:24-27)** How could he teach others to forgive as God forgives us if he wasn't able to forgive Mike? How could he be the pastor of the Good News of Jesus Christ and share the goodness of God's forgiveness, when he trusted his own feelings more than he trusted in God's grace? How could he model forgiveness unless he first obeyed God and forgave Mike?

Rev. Everett obeyed God's command to forgive, humbled himself to the love of God for all of us and brought his feelings and emotions under control, "...to keep [himself] from being disqualified after having called others to the contest" (I Cor. 9:27). He submitted his feelings to the love of God and obeyed God's call for us to be forgiving, even as He is forgiving.

Each of us has this same question put to us, too. How can we help others learn of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ for us if we follow our feelings instead of obeying God in forgiving others? It is vital that we don't let our loss and our emotions keep us from the courageous obedience that enables us to forgive others in word and in deed.

We see that same thought in the lesson of Ephesians 4:30-32. **(READ Ephesians 4:30-32)** Hateful feelings bring about unresolved issues that turn into bitterness, passion, and anger. These lead us to shouting and insults and even more hateful thoughts and actions. When forgiveness is not offered and we rely upon our feelings, we begin down a very slippery slope that leads us into destruction. Obeying our feelings only get us into trouble, or causes our bodies

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000] pg. 315

to have problems, all because we do not eliminate the stress that those feelings create. Ulcers, heart attack, high blood pressure, and a host of other conditions can be related to us relying upon our feelings rather than obeying God and practicing forgiveness.

That's the importance of Ephesians 4:32 which says, "*Instead, be kind and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ.*" Think about it this way; If God had acted on emotion rather than out of grace, when people put Jesus to death on the cross, rather than forgiving them, Jesus could have wiped them out right there. The people at Mt. Calvary would have been toast. And for all those who don't accept Jesus as our Savior, if God didn't have love and forgiveness for them, **we'd all be toast!** But because God's gift of Salvation in Jesus Christ brought us forgiveness of our sins, even when we were enemies, God's love for us brought forgiveness.

Paul puts it very nicely in Romans 4:15, "*For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life!*" Reconciliation demands forgiveness.

And God invites us to be a part of that reconciliation, by us forgiving those who do wrong to us. Rather than basing our lives upon our feelings, thereby seeking revenge on that person who wrongs us, we are called by God through Jesus to forgive others just as we are forgiven by Him. "Only forgiveness, followed by compassion, [can] heal and restore. [We must] choose obedience" to God and forgive.] "Far too many of us live on the level of our feelings. Invariably we allow feelings to control our lives. When we feel slighted, we sulk. When we feel wronged, we take revenge. When we feel lonely, we binge. If we fail to check our feelings against the truth of God's Word, they can take up permanent residency. When this happens, our outlook on life becomes distorted and toxic, and we may end up doing things we would never have imagined. Our feelings mislead us because we don't fully understand them. It is important then, that we identify our misconceptions so that our feelings become subject to

truth.”²

#1. The first misconception is **Faith is just a feeling**. When Hurricane Florence came ashore in South Carolina, many people gave up their faith because of their feelings. The vast flooding that has occurred has brought numerous deaths, and people have lost everything they owned; homes, belongings, personal keepsakes, historical records, pets and loved ones. People lost their faith because they were relying upon feelings to guide their faith. When the world turns up-side-down on us, **what we see** is not supposed to influence our faith in God. But so many people put their faith in just what they see, that when feelings become who we are, our lives are based only on those feelings, not on our faith in God through Jesus Christ.

#2. The second misconception about feelings is **Love is just a feeling**. We live in a society that is highly romanticized, focusing only on feelings. When married couples just use their feelings to guide their marriage, the marriage runs dry pretty quickly. When love is based upon feelings, divorce happens pretty quickly, because the couple no longer see love because the feelings aren't there. No, love, self-giving love, is not based upon feelings but upon a life-long commitment that a man makes with his wife and a woman makes with her husband. It means keeping the promise to love, respect, and cherish the other even if we don't feel like it!

Now that's not to say that marriage should be without romance. Marriages that keep that spark of romance in it tend to be more lively and vibrant, but we cannot rely solely on romance to keep the marriage together. **Commitment is what holds marriages together**. Sometimes it is the romance that destroys it, however, if we are only relying upon the feelings to keep us engaged in that relationship. Love in marriage is much more than just feelings. It is consistently giving yourself to the one you have made the promises to spend the rest of your life together.

#3. The third misconception we have is that **Forgiveness is just a feeling**. As we saw in the opening story, Rev. Everett forgave Mike, even when he didn't feel like it. Many folks

² (Dennis Rainey, *Choosing A Life That Matters*, [Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2017] pg. 83-4)

believe that forgiveness only comes when we feel like it. “However, forgiveness is a choice to obey the commands of Scripture: ‘*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*’ (Ephesians 4:32). When we forgive, we choose to give up the right to punish another. We choose to no longer hold on to or rehearse the hurt caused by the offense, and we choose to relinquish any right to retaliate, even if friends try to persuade us to get even.”³ Forgiveness happens when we obey God’s commands to follow His example of releasing others from the penalty of sin that has been committed against Him. **Forgiveness has nothing to do with feelings – it is a choice we make** to obey God rather than our feelings.

But obeying God’s commands demands courage on our parts. It demands that we give up our own self-seeking, giving up our dependence on feelings guiding our way, giving up our personal desires and giving up our lusts in order that we might take up the promise of the cross of Jesus Christ. All our emotions must be subject to the power of Jesus’ love shown on the cross. We cannot demonstrate ourselves as Christians without our own “*taking up our cross and following Him*” (Matthew 16:24). We must surrender our feelings and surrender to the Gospel of Jesus.

So our obedience to following God takes faithfulness on our part. This means that we become life-long followers of Him, diligently seeking to trust Him and serve Him, even if it means suffering great things in our lives. God uses the wickedness of this world to draw us closer to Him, if we are faithful to follow Him in all our ways. “By walking with God moment by moment, living in the light of what you know to be right and doing those things that please God, your life will matter. Each act of obedience [to Him] will move you in the direction of holiness.” And God calls each of us to be holy even as He is holy (Leviticus 19:2, I Peter 1:15-16).

Chuck Colson makes a great statement in his Book *Loving God*. He says, “Loving God –

³ (Dennis Rainey, *Choosing a Life That Matters*, pg. 86)

really loving Him – means living out His commands no matter what the cost.”⁴ This demands faithfulness that we obey God and not our feelings. It means a lifetime commitment to following God’s commands and serving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It means constant commitment to our God who loves us enough to send us help to live for Him in a way that pleases Him. And we hear that in our Gospel lesson today of John 14:15-21. Listen to how our faithfulness pleases God. (READ John 14:15-21)

Let me ask you these questions. “Do you want to know God more? Do you want to experience more of Him? Do you want to have a fuller understanding of God’s ways and purposes? Do you want settled peace, stronger faith, and uncorrupted courage? Then you must come to Him through the door of obedience. Daily. Moment by moment. It is a lifetime journey and an adventure of immense proportions and privilege.” So I ask you to consider this.

“Never underestimate the significance of even the smallest act of obedience – or disobedience. Heed the words of C.S. Lewis:

“Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.

“You have no idea what you’re opening yourself up to when you let your appetites have their way. Perhaps it’s time to do what’s right. Perhaps it’s time to obey God.”⁵

It starts right here, today, this very moment. You decide to commit yourself to following God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and God supplies you with the Holy Spirit to

⁴ (Ibid., pg. 88)

⁵ (Dennis Rainey, *Choosing a Life That Matters*, pg. 889-90)

guide you in all your ways. You give each moment to obeying God's commands and He begins to make Himself known to you so that you can follow Him better. You dedicate time and energy into reading God's Word so that you know what it is He expects of you. You obey God in all your decisions, no matter what others tell you and you will never stand alone. If it's just you and God standing together, you are in the majority! You commit yourself to love Jesus and follow His commands for your life, and you begin to see the difference it makes in your life, your family's life, and the lives of those around you. If you decide today to follow God's way, even to the point of abandoning your feelings, you will notice a huge difference in your life, and God will enable you to be able to do so much more than you ever thought possible.

Jesus says it clearly, *"Whoever accepts My commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me. My Father will love whoever loves me; I too will love [them] and reveal myself to [them]."* (John 14:21) As you seek to know God and obey His commands, He will reveal Himself to you to encourage you and build into you and use you to bring glory to Him. But it takes obedience! It takes faithful commitment to follow Him each and every day, every hour and every minute, building one act of faithfulness upon another so that you may victoriously live a life that matters.

It all means making a choice today to follow the Lord Jesus so that God's Holy Spirit can begin His work in you to strengthen you and give you the courage you need to forgive others for the hurt they've handed you. This act of obedience, forgiving others, affects so much, not only in your life, but also in the life of the one you forgive.

Obey God, not your feelings, all in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.