

“MODEL FORGIVENESS”
Remove The Obstacles Series #4
Matthew 18:21-35 March 17, 2021

Bruce Shelley tells “the parable ... of an old dog that fell into a farmer's well. After assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the dog but decided that neither the dog nor the well were worth the trouble of saving. Instead he planned to bury the old dog in the well and put him out of his misery.

“When the farmer began shoveling, initially the old dog was hysterical. But as the farmer continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, a thought struck him. It dawned on him that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back he should shake it off and step up. This he did blow after blow. ‘Shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up!’ he repeated to encourage himself.

“No matter how painful the blows or how distressing the situation seemed, the old dog fought panic and just kept shaking it off and stepping up! It was not long before the dog, **battered and exhausted**, stepped triumphantly over the wall of that well. What seemed as though it would bury him actually benefited him—all because of the way he handled his adversity.

“If we face our problems and respond to them positively, refusing to give in to **panic, bitterness**, or **self-pity**, the adversities that come along to bury us usually have within them the potential to bless us! Forgiveness, faith, prayer, praise, and hope are some of the biblical ways to shake it off and step up out of the wells in which we find ourselves.”¹ Tonight I want to focus on forgiveness being a key way to remove the obstacles that come between us and others, and between us and God.

How many of you have ever felt like someone was out to bury you - one who was jealous of your abilities, trying to make you look bad so that they can step into your position after having gotten you out of the way. We’ve seen that in our study of the first 6 chapters of Daniel.

People can do a lot of things to try to bury us. Sometimes it’s with harsh or abusive words. Sometimes it’s with disrespectful actions. Sometimes it’s through law suits, or legal proceedings.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publications, 2002] pg. 205)

Sometimes it's through governmental dictates or laws. Sometimes it's through isolation. Sometimes it's in persecution. Sometimes it's in unreasonable demands. Sometimes it's in taking your job away. And sometimes it's in violent actions against us. There are so many ways that people use to try to bury others, deeming us unworthy to work with or spend the time and energy to resolve conflicts between us.

But how do we respond to those conditions of attempted burial? **What do we do** with folks who are adamant about putting us down 6 feet under and are actively trying to fill in the hole with stuff to put us out of their misery? Do we get angry? Do we retaliate in the same way against them? Do we hire a lawyer to protect ourselves? Do we rally a group of like-minded folks around us for protection? Do we contact our senator or congress representatives to go to bat for us? Do we call the governor's office to complain? Do we get bitter and hold a grudge against that person, thereby eliminating any kind of reconciliation? Do we protest against "injustices" or even riot to show our unhappiness? We're seeing a whole range of responses today, and while some are productive, many are not.

That's the issue that Peter brings before Jesus, "*Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?*" (Matt. 18:21). According to the guidelines of the Law in Jesus' day, the stipulation was that a person was to be forgiven three times and then that would be enough. Sort of a "three strikes and you're out" mindset. If a person didn't get the hint for the need to change after three times, then retaliation was permissible.

Jesus had just told the disciples how to rectify troubles between others. He had given them steps to address the sin that happens in our lives, so that when strife happens between us, we might seek to bring a solution to the problem (See Matthew 18:15-20). So, listening to what Jesus said, Peter thought he was being very generous about offering another four more chances for the person to understand the need for change in their life before it was right to take other means necessary to deal with the offences against him. Peter offered seven times for sin to happen against us, and we forgive them, before we retaliate against their sin toward us. He thought that seven times for the same offense was more than adequate to forgive someone before we begin to protect ourselves in order to keep from becoming

buried by the other person. Peter wanted a static number as he considered Jesus' steps toward reconciliation; would seven times work before he could "take the law into his own hands" and remedy the situation?

But Jesus comes out with an overwhelming declaration, "*No, not seven times...but seventy times seven...*" (Matt. 18:22). Whoa! 490 times? In essence, Jesus was telling Peter, "Whenever someone tries to bury you, shake it off and step up! Shake off the insult, the offense, the cruelty, the injustice, and step up, realizing that what others mean to do to us to bury us are opportunities for us to trust in God so that He can bless us and give us the endurance we need, so that eventually we can step out of the wells and find freedom again. Jesus is saying that forgiveness is absolutely essential in the process of shaking it off and stepping up. Sure, we confront the person, but then we forgive them.

But an important question we have to consider is "Have there ever been times **when we** have been the one **doing the burying**?" This is a little harder for us to consider, but whether we realize it or not, there are times when we are the ones doing the shoveling onto a person's life, burying **them**. The way we speak to another, the way we treat someone who is different than we are, the things we do to others, either on purpose or accidentally, can act in such a way as to provide another shovelful of dirt on top of them. And we're not the only one contributing to the burying of a person. Many contribute, even their one shovel full, and a person can find themselves becoming buried alive under the work of others. It can be so easy for anger and revenge to result from the process of being shoveled onto.

Jesus says, "Forgive them! Shake it off and step up to higher ground so that we can make our way out of that well of death that comes from bitterness, hatred, anger, retaliation, and revenge. If we're the ones doing the shoveling, ask for forgiveness! If we're being shoveled upon, forgive them!

But to help us remember our responsibility to provide forgiveness to others, Jesus gave us an example to consider about our own forgiveness and the role we have in forgiving others. That's the parable of the **unforgiving servant**. **God** has forgiven us of the massive amount of our own sin, so He expects us to do the same with those who sin against us. Why should God forgive us so great a debt **of**

our own sin if we refuse to turn around and forgive those around us, even if they are trying to bury us?

It shouldn't take us too long to see what the world would be like without forgiveness. If we were to hang onto all the hurt and pain and anxiety and strife and sorrow and anger that we have in our lives, we would probably be joining a few riots ourselves. But because forgiveness is available, and many times active in the life of a person, civility and peace are a result. **Instead of** demanding vengeance, which really is an act of burying another person, we are to demonstrate the difference that forgiveness has to offer.

How many relationships could we rebuild with those we've just written off if we were to forgive them? How much stronger would our relationship be with our spouse if we would offer forgiveness when the dirt hits us? How much more delightful would our relationship be with a child, or with our parent, if forgiveness would be practiced like Jesus has called us to do? 490 times for the same thing!

Let me give you an example. A husband drove the car differently than what the wife expected should be done, especially when he drove **her car**. He shifted from reverse to drive before the car was fully stopped while going backwards. He got too close to the car in front of him when he came to a stop light. He waited too long before applying the brakes while coming up to a stop sign. All of these things bothered the wife tremendously, and she let him know what she expected, Every Time He Did Something "Wrong!" Needless to say, the husband got upset with the wife about always nagging him about his driving, and the wife got upset about the husband always driving so hard and recklessly. So whenever he did something "wrong" she criticized and complained about it, and at the mention of one thing or the other being done "wrong" he would blow up at her for being so condescending and critical. What to do? They both felt dirt being shoveled onto them, but both were guilty of shoveling dirt onto the other. **They both needed to change**, but how to do it without losing the fight?

Finally, they talked about it, he trying to reassure her about his love for her and how he wanted the best for her car and her safety when they drove together, AND she expressing her love for him and sharing how it scared her when certain things took place. Together they were able to understand each

other and began to see the need for changes in their traveling together. They were able to reconcile their differences in driving expectations and techniques and still have love and respect for each other. Instead of shoveling more dirt on the other in the attempt to bury the other, forgiveness and love were given to shake off the differences and step up to higher ground for freedom in their relationship.

Now, that is a mild situation compared to some, but nonetheless an important one. If we can begin to forgive the small things that cause us differences, we can begin to reconcile the larger things that are harder and more complicated. The goal is to find peace and freedom from the wells we find ourselves in.

Now, there may be times when you feel like God is the One who wants to bury you. So much stuff is happening that is out of your control and yet affecting your life, and you ask, “God, why is all of this stuff happening to me? Why aren’t you protecting me?” And while it may be true that you are undergoing a lot, God is trying to remove the obstacles in your relationship with Him by inviting you to trust in Him during the difficult “well times” you are going through. He asks you to practice forgiveness.

You see, in order to bring about forgiveness of **your** sins, He has to bury you so that once all those sins and offenses are paid for, He can resurrect you into a new life. He’s done that through Jesus Christ. But you have to be willing to then forgive others, just as He has forgiven you. How are others going to find the forgiveness of the Lord if we don’t show them forgiveness from us? If we model forgiveness in our own lives, we reveal the love of God for the world, and demonstrate the difference that forgiveness makes. Jesus modeled forgiveness for us, so we are to model it for those around us.

Let’s pray. Father, it is so easy for us to go with the flow of our world and hold onto hurt and anger and resentment and revenge when something is done against us. But that only leads to further hurt and anger and resentment and revenge, and the cycle continues. Instead, help us follow Jesus’ example so that we might forgive others, shake off the offense and step up to show forgiveness, even to the ones shoveling dirt onto us. Help us in Jesus’ Name we pray. AMEN.