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**Sunday 6 September to Sunday 13 September**

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Sunday 6 September 2020

# Rules or opportunities?

by Pastor Chris Mann

**Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:20).**

Read Matthew 18:15–20

Have you ever been overwhelmed by a list of jobs, chores, or instructions? I know I have. Life can sometimes do that. And sometimes, reading the Bible does that to me, too.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve sat through sermons and Bible studies where the pastor or leader has given a list of instructions for how to live a godly life, and at the end of it, I feel anything but godly. And this week’s set of passages have instruction after instruction, but in them, we will find grace, hope, and a pathway forward.

And, in my life as a pastor, I’m also aware of having done the same to people who have heard me preach or lead a study.

The passage that we’ve read today has a lot in it, and ironically enough, seems to get used sometimes by us Christians as a weapon when we point out someone’s fault. People say, ‘Aha! I have caught you in a sin! Now, Jesus compels me to tell you!’

For this reason, I like to think of Jesus and how he related to sinners. Most often, it was with gentleness, humility, respect, and grace, but at the same time, with the necessary firmness required. That, of course, is how he deals with me.

And so, it helps me to remember that when I think of someone else’s sin against me – if they belong to God, if they are baptised, if they believe, if they follow – then Jesus is present with them. That person is holy. And if I want to talk with them about sin, I’m moving towards a holy, grace-filled and restorative moment.

And that changes my perspective.

No longer is this passage a play-by-play rule book, but it is Jesus giving us an opportunity to give and receive grace as children of God.

**Heavenly Father, help me to see you in my brother or sister who sins against me and help me to look for holy moments with them. In Jesus name, Amen.**

Monday 7 September 2020

# The damage of lies

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘Then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party’ (Deuteronomy 19:19a).**

Read Deuteronomy 19:14–21

Lying. Does it ever do any good? Don’t answer that.

My first reading of the passage today really jolted me. It rocked my poor, sensitive, western ears! ‘Purge the evil! Show no pity!’

Such things sound very harsh to me. And then I remember how angry I get whenever:

* my children lie, getting one of their siblings into trouble (and themselves out of trouble)
* a criminal lies about something they did
* a politician or businessperson is found to be corrupt.

Rarely, however, am I this angry when I lie, which is interesting, in and of itself.

God really doesn’t want people to lie – especially when it comes to crime. And he doesn’t want it to happen because he wants us to be safe with each other, to protect each other, to care for each other – and that can’t happen when we lie about each other. Lies destroy families, churches, whole communities, and even countries.

I admit, reading passages like this can be shocking to me. But it is wonderful to know that God is willing to go to great lengths to keep people safe from the destructive power of lies. May we also be willing to take hard ­– but good ­– steps to keep people safe from destructive lies as well.

***Heavenly Father, please keep me safe from the power of lies. Help me to avoid lying and help me to honour people with my words. Help me to work to protect the truth and use it to serve others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Tuesday 8 September 2020

# Love like Jesus

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matthew 5:44).**

Read Matthew 5:38–48

What’s the thing I love most about following Jesus? That there is no-one else like him.

What’s the thing I find hardest about following Jesus? That there is no-one else like him.

No-one else loves us as Jesus loves us – unconditionally, graciously, constantly.

But then Jesus goes and asks me, asks us, to do the same – to love unconditionally, graciously, constantly. It’s why we can say both ‘I am simply a forgiven sinner’ and ‘I shine Christ’s light into the darkness’.

We are called to be in the world, but not of the world, to be salt, light, and a city on a hill. And if you ever want to stand out, if you ever want to be remarkable, if you ever want to have everyone look at you, then there is simply one thing to do: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

It’s what Jesus did when he went to the cross. And it is Jesus, in us, who helps us do it. And it is because we are God’s children that we can do it. Let’s love our enemies, as hard as it may be, just as Christ loves us.

***Heavenly Father, I find it hard to love my enemies. It’s hard enough sometimes to love my own family, friends, and others. Yet, you call me to follow you, to do what you do, to live how you lived – and still live. You ask me to do it because you have made me in your image, placed Christ in me, and given me your Holy Spirit. Help me to live according to who I truly am – as your child. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

Wednesday 9 September 2020

# Children, sin and regret

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire’ (Matthew 18:8b).**

Read Matthew 18:6–10

Regret.

Is it part of your life? It’s part of mine. There are things I wish I had not done, people I wish I had not hurt, and lives I wish I had not damaged.

And while I know that I am forgiven, and in many cases, relationships are fully restored, healthy, healed, and whole, that doesn’t change the fact that something happened that should not have happened.

Sometimes people have said to me, ‘I live life with no regrets’. For some of them, because I know people close to them, I’ve thought to myself, ‘There are people who love you who wish you had some regrets’. I’ve seen the power of regret and how a lack of it can cause people to keep on harming others.

Harming people is wrong, bad, sinful, evil.

Doing things that cause little ones – children – to stumble and turn from God is in that category. I don’t have to name what they might be. Jesus gives us enough imagery in this passage.

May we all work for the protection and the blessing of children, whenever we encounter them.

***Saviour Jesus, you tell us just how important children are to you. Help us to value children like you do – keeping them safe, praying for them, and blessing them. Amen.***

Thursday 10 September 2020

# Forgive and forget? Forgive and forgive!

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them’ (Luke 17:4).**

Read Luke 17:1–4

Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive. Rebuke, repent, forgive.

I hope you got tired of reading that. I sure got tired of typing it. You may say, ‘Why didn’t he just copy and paste?’ Well, it’s like this:

Forgiveness, human relationships, sin – while it is the same in some senses, in other ways, it is different. It is always difficult. It is always exhausting. And when a sin comes up again and again, it is worse again.

Yet the disposition of God toward each of us is one of ongoing forgiveness. He rebukes our sin, we repent, and he forgives.

It’s like God knows that most of the time, change is not easy, simple, or straightforward, especially when it is habitual sin – and he chooses to love us anyway!

Of course, God does know this!

Do you know someone who commits the same sin, over and over again, and never seems to change? Of course!

Did you also know that there is someone, a friend, family member, loved one of yours, who thinks of you when asked that same question?

We all have things we are wrestling with, sins we can’t seem to defeat, and issues we can’t seem to resolve.

Praise God that he forgives us and we can go again with fresh mercy and grace! Praise God that we can do the same for others.

***Lord Jesus, thank you for your continual forgiveness of us. Help us to live the same way for others. Amen.***

Friday 11 September 2020

# Levelling up our words

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs’ (Ephesians 4:29).**

Read Ephesians 4:25–32

I don’t know about you, but I have often misread parts of the Bible, reading over a slab of text and missing what is really going on.

The verse above is one of those parts I’ve often misread.

I once watched a sermon online where the preacher was sharing about how we communicate with each other to build each other up, and something she said grabbed my attention.

She said, ‘So often we think that the goal is to just not say bad things. And that’s good, but that’s not what Paul says, and we discover that it isn’t enough – it doesn’t produce the relationships we want. And so, we start saying nice things, kind things – but often we fall into the trap of saying the kind of things we want to hear – not what they want to hear. So, we get frustrated and annoyed. But what Paul is saying’, she exhorted, ‘is that we are to consider our words for what builds up that person, in their life, according to what they need – that is what benefits them’.

She had an amazing point – and it has changed how I communicate. I hope her words do the same for you.

***Lord God, help us to speak words that build up our hearers – not just avoiding unwholesome talk, but words that build up those who need it, words that edify, and words that grow people. Help us to truly know and love those we talk with so that we know the right things to say by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.***

Saturday 12 September 2020

# Our God of grace

by Pastor Chris Mann

**‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Psalm 103:8).**

Read Psalm 103:(1–7),8–13

If you have read the devotions all week this week, then well done and congratulations. It’s been a heavy week, with strong words from Jesus and strong words of living. I hope you have received grace among the instructions for living, and have seen clear direction for how to follow Jesus.

I’m forever glad that God is so gracious and generous that he gave us Jesus. I’m also glad that he gives instructions as to how to live.

As a father, I can only imagine what things would be like for my kids if I never gave them any instructions and just left them to figure out everything on their own – how to get dressed, eat, talk, read, write, interact with others and more. It might be funny for a while watching a toddler try and get their head through an armhole, but in the end, everyone loses.

So is our God with us, teaching us how to live, but giving us grace, mercy, and compassion as we get things wrong, and learn to go again.

May you live a life following Jesus, receiving his grace, and passing it on, just as he has taught us.

**Heavenly Father, thank you for your grace, your compassion, and your love. Help me to live this way in the world. Amen.**

Sunday 13 September 2020

# Pay it forward!

by Sal Huckel

**‘When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that happened’ (Matthew 18:31).**

Get set for a wild ride of forgiveness, grace and mercy this week as we tackle some challenging lectionary scriptures on these themes. Pray for discernment and new insights as we read together.

Read Matthew 18:21–35

This passage is about God’s grace and forgiveness freely given to us, even though we have our own account with him that rightly should be settled, and is, by Jesus on the cross. Whatever way you do the maths, this kind of forgiveness feels too hard. Many modern-day messages say it’s okay to cut people off when they wrong us, and it’s perhaps easier to do that than ever before.

Today let’s consider the different ‘players’ or roles in the story. We have Peter asking the question. Is he wondering how long it is before he can be let off the hook, forgiving the same person time and time again? Are we?

We also have the king, settling accounts between his servants and offering grace and forgiveness for a sizeable debt. We can easily see God in this story, doing so with our own accounts with him. The unmerciful servant himself is forgiven a large debt, but rather than ‘paying it forward’ or passing that forgiveness on, he seizes his debtor for a much lesser amount.

But why are the ‘other servants’ here? They don’t seem essential to the plot. But Jesus’ words are never wasted! The servants witness the generosity and forgiveness of the master and the subsequent injustice. The servants petition for justice and the master acts. How can we put ourselves in their place once we have considered our own accounts? What are we witnessing? Just as in the reconciliation procedures in the previous passage (verses 15–20), the body is called in. Are you witnessing injustice and unforgiveness that may need to involve your action – naming it, praying to God for justice, and doing more than simply looking on?

**Lord, help me to keep a short account with you and with others. Remind me to pass on the forgiveness I receive from you as we pray so familiarly. Help me to discern the right approach where I witness a lack of mercy and forgiveness in others, and to bring it before you in prayer. In Jesus’ name, Amen.**