

Monday, March 13 - Read Psalm 130:1-8. This psalmist knew the awful sense of despair that comes when we realize we've completely failed to be the good person we want to be. He described it as crying out to God "from the depths," pleading for God's mercy. But it was not a hopeless cry. The psalm repeated (for emphasis) the image of watchmen waiting in the darkness for the first gleam of morning light. That was how eagerly the psalmist waited for God's mercy—and he trusted that God's forgiveness was just as dependable as each day's dawn. Verse 3 said, "If you kept track of sins, Lord—my Lord, who would stand a chance?" Have you ever pictured God as meticulously keeping track of all your sins? Compare Psalm 103:10, 12: "He doesn't deal with us according to our sin.... As far as east is from west—that's how far God has removed our sin from us." What do these poetic images tell you about how profoundly God longs to forgive you? Verse 7 said, "Faithful love is with the Lord...great redemption is with our God!" Have you ever received or given "partial" forgiveness (which is the best we broken humans can do at times), the sort that never lets the other person forget they blew it, and holds a small grievance in reserve? What does it mean to you that God offers "great redemption" for all of your brokenness?

Tuesday, March 14 - Read 1 Isaiah 55:1-9. Forgiveness is not first and foremost a human impulse, a sociological way to get along. Living surrounded by cultures in which "revenge" was the dominant way of handling failures and conflicts, the prophet Isaiah pointed out that forgiveness is not "natural" to us at all. But, he added, God is "generous with forgiveness" precisely because God's ways are higher than ours. The Bible's teaching about forgiveness always starts with the fact that all of us, in our brokenness, do things that hurt others, ourselves and God. We need forgiveness. How clearly do you sense that, in relation to God and to others, you are, in Isaiah's imagery, "thirsty" and have "no money"? From whom, besides God, do you need forgiveness? Whether in global politics, business and legal settings, or even in family or community disputes, people sometimes view forgiveness as a sign of "weakness." How do you react inwardly when Isaiah says God's mercy and pardon are a "higher" way than the usual human response? Think about a time when someone forgave you. Did it make you think less or more of the person who forgave you?

Wednesday, March 15- Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-11. After a time of tension, the apostle Paul told Christians in Corinth that "godly sadness," which led to positive change, was not like "sorrow under the influence of the world," which left people stuck in guilt feelings that led to death. Christian counselor Bruce Narramore wrote about the difference Paul described: "Guilt feelings are punitive. Constructive sorrow is loving. In psychological guilt we take the initiative to punish ourselves. In constructive sorrow we respond because God has taken the initiative." What positive results did Paul list as coming from "godly sorrow" in verses 9 and 10, results that move beyond feeling guilty or sad? In what ways do those steps lead toward positive outcomes, toward genuine change for the better? When have you seen this process operate in your life or the life of someone close to you? "Sorrow under the influence of the world" (today we might call it "psychological guilt") means punishing ourselves by hanging onto feelings of guilt and shame. How can these feelings keep us from taking positive steps toward healing? When might we need the spiritual discipline of counseling to help us recognize and live beyond that destructive kind of sorrow? In what ways, physical and spiritual, was Paul right in saying that this kind of sorrow brings death?

Thursday, March 16 - Read Luke 7:36-50. Jesus was famous (or, in some circles, infamous) for forgiving. In this story, his Pharisee host Simon saw only the woman's shameful past, but Jesus said her "many sins" were forgiven. It's too often true that self-righteous people, like Simon, want people who have done wrong to live in shame and disgrace for the rest of their life. But not Jesus—he saw Simon (who felt no need for forgiveness) as in much greater spiritual danger than the woman grateful for forgiveness. Freedom from her guilt before God also gave this woman freedom from feelings of shame before others. If not, she would not have been able to act out her gratitude in such a bold act of love to Jesus. Have you ever had a time when you felt "ashamed to show your face"? How can opening your life to God's love and forgiveness set you free to live more fully? We know Jesus is the "good guy" in the story, but if we're honest, most of us "get" Simon's reaction. "If Jesus knew about her past," he thought, "he couldn't possibly accept her presence." Who are you more like: the woman whose many sins Jesus forgave, or the Pharisee who thought he was much better than "her kind"? How does that affect your relationships with others and with God?

Friday, March 17 - Read 1 John 1:5-2:2.

John said, "If we claim 'We don't have any sin,' we deceive ourselves." Sometimes inner blindness, fear or stubborn pride makes us deny that we need mercy. But when we assess ourselves as honestly as possible, and confess the broken, sinful places in our lives, John assured us that forgiveness is always there. Jesus, he said, "is God's way of dealing with our sins." Many of us struggle with a sense that, "I can never forgive myself for _____." John echoed his master Jesus in teaching that God is willing to forgive anything we're willing to acknowledge as needing forgiveness. If our hearts condemn us, he said, we must trust God rather than our feelings (1 John 3:19-20). Where do you need to trust, to rest in God's forgiveness today? Christian apologist C. S. Lewis wrote, "What we call 'asking God's forgiveness' very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses." If every problem is someone else's fault, if we are always sure we did nothing very wrong, something may be blinding us. Have you ever seen someone else miss out on God's forgiveness (or missed out yourself) because of reluctance to admit the need for forgiveness?