

Three Little Words (Or 2^{1/2})

COMMUNION

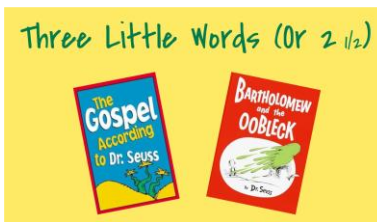
August 3, 2025

Matthew 23:11-12

¹¹ But the one who is greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.

Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁴ “If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.”



In the popular sitcom, *Happy Days*, there is a classic scene that involves “the Fonz.” He was the essence of cool and self-confidence. In one episode, Fonz makes a mistake and really struggles to admit it. His first attempt was, “I was wr...” and then it became “I was wro....” Eventually he gets out, “I was wrong.” In this week’s Dr. Seuss book, *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, the same is true for King Derwin of the kingdom of Didd. Even after recognizing that he was at fault for the horrible green oobleck that paralyzed his kingdom, the king struggles mightily to admit his fault. When we consider our world today, we realize that the king is far from alone. Many in our world today, including us, can struggle saying, “I am sorry.” These three (or 2 ½) little words can be amongst the hardest words to say. As we prepare to delve into the concepts of contentment and forgiveness today, let us pray...

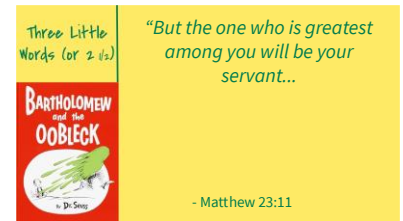
As *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* begins, the king is bored with the usual weather. It is always rain in the spring, sunshine in the summer, fog in the fall, and snow in the winter. Derwin decides that he wants something new from the sky and nothing will stop him.

Bartholomew the page tries to dissuade the king, reminding him that the rain, sunshine, fog, and snow are always and have always been what the sky provides. These things are what the earth needs, after all. The king will not be dissuaded. He summons the magicians, against the agitated protests of Bartholomew. As the story unfolds, the king's lack of contentment brings disastrous results to his small kingdom.

At one point in my life, I was a lot like the king. Maybe you were too. Or maybe you know a person or two who is like this today. For a season it always seemed like the grass was a little greener over there or that my newest, shiniest toy was not the newest or shiniest for very long. This lack of contentment brought a great deal of discontent to my life. I was always striving for the next thing, always chasing after something better. Unfortunately, I hurt some people in my life, and I neglected others in these pursuits and chasing afters. Only when I learned a few things about myself and about my faith did my discontent begin to change.

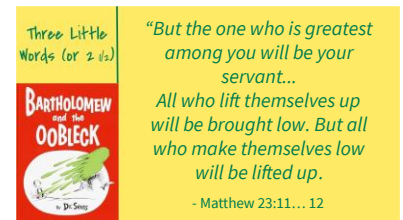
This must have been the case in Jesus' day too. Turn with me to Matthew 23 as we look at how the desire to be recognized, to achieve, to raise oneself up was a problem then too. As chapter 23 opens, Jesus takes aim at *"the legal experts and Pharisees."* These religious leaders do teach many good things, but they do not practice any of them. And they are *"unwilling to lift a finger"* to help the common people in living out their faith. Instead, *"Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others."* This was one of King Derwin's problems too. He wanted to be THE king who was able to control the sky. The legal experts and the Pharisees dress in ways to get noticed, they sit in important places to be recognized, they love to be called "Rabbi" and to be greeted with honor. The legal experts and the Pharisees were all about being set apart from all others, about being better than everyone else.

Jesus warns against this arrogance and pride, reminding the religious experts and his disciples and followers that they all have but one teacher, God in Christ, and that they are all brothers and sisters, equals in the family of God. It is from this place of spiritual equality that Jesus says, *“But the one who is greatest among you will be your servant.”* This is how Jesus demonstrated his equality with others – he served them. And this is how Jesus lived out God’s command to love, especially amongst the least of these. This group – the least of these – would’ve been the group that the legal experts and Pharisees avoided and ignored the most. When I was in that season of life, pursuing and chasing after the things of this world, this was the group easiest to run over and easiest to ignore.



Jesus then gives this stark reminder in verse 12: *“All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.”* In the text, these words were aimed at the

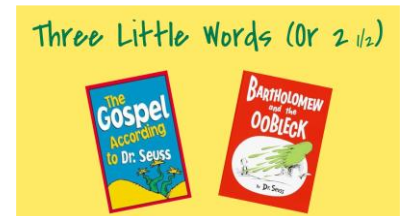
religious experts. They were once aimed at my heart. And every now and again, the Holy Spirit echoes them again in my heart. Perhaps you have heard these words speaking truth into your life before as well. And maybe, just maybe, you know someone today who needs to hear these words, perhaps for the first time, perhaps as a reminder.



Jesus not only spoke these words, but he also modeled them. His choices of who to hang out with, of who to engage in conversation with, of who to offer physical touch to, of who to lift up in parables and stories – in all of these ways and more Jesus modeled and recognized humble service to others. Jesus also called it out when his disciples were not following his example. He corrected them sharply when they wanted to have seats of power in heaven or when they discussed who was the greatest of the twelve, calling them back to humility.

Humility can be a hard virtue to live out faithfully. It requires us to think less of self and more of others. It requires us to subject our wants and desires to the needs of others. Humility requires that we surrender our will to the will of God. In our current time, we do not see a lot of public figures modeling humility. In Jesus' time, outside of Jesus and his closest followers, I don't think many public figures modeled humility. In our fictional children's book, it was only Bartholomew the page that modeled humility. For the page and for Jesus, their humble attitude does call others to a posture of humility. I believe that it can do the same for us. When we make the effort to live humbly, we can make an impact on those around us.

Sadly, though, too many of our relationships and too many of the situations in our lives and world are negatively affected by the two opposites of humility: pride and arrogance. These two attitudes create challenging dynamics in our personal and intrapersonal relationships. Many a conflict remains unresolved because pride and arrogance prevent even the first steps towards reconciliation or compromise or restoration. One of the keys to resolution is often engaging in forgiveness. Humility is a necessary ingredient for forgiveness, in more than one way. And forgiveness begins with these three (or 2 ½) little words.

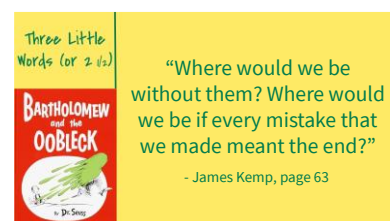


In *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, it was pride and arrogance that led to the oobleck coming and paralyzing King Derwin's kingdom. It was the wise and humble page Bartholomew who told the king that he could end the whole disaster by saying two and a half simple words. But the king can't do it. He is too mighty, too proud to admit that he was wrong. Now, the physical act of saying the words is easy. It takes almost no time at all. The words are easy to pronounce. But these words, by their very nature, are hard because they are self-effacing.

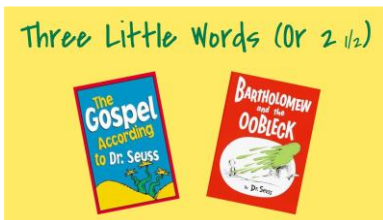
The person who says them and means them has placed himself or herself in a position of vulnerability and humility. It is only when Bartholomew looks the mighty king in the eye, reminds him that he and everyone else in the kingdom is up to their chins in oobleck, and then says, “And if you won’t even say you’re sorry, you’re no sort of king at all!” This prods King Derwin to acknowledge that Bartholomew is right. It prods the king to sob and to say those little words, “I’m sorry.” With these words, the sunshine comes out, melts the oobleck away in no time, and all is well in the kingdom. Suddenly, rain, sun, fog, and snow don’t seem so bad at all. Contentment finally comes to the kingdom of Didd.

In the scriptures we find character after character who is like King Derwin. While one might think that the Bible is full of good people, that is just not the reality or even the norm. In the Bible we find person after person who lusted for power, who made bad decisions, who had serious errors in judgment, who gave in to temptation, who let pride or arrogance control their words and actions. We find Adam, David, Moses, Jacob, and Paul – just to name a few. All of these, like Derwin and like the Fonz, all had to come to a point where they had to summon the humility and the courage to say, “I’m sorry” to God and/or to others. Whether they were a mighty king or a peasant, it did not matter. The words had to be said.

Once the words were said, power was released. These words, once spoken, saved and healed marriages, friendships, families, and even nations. The words, “I’m sorry,” hold power because of what they represent: a turnaround, a new direction, a change of heart, a realization, recognition of sorrow, regret, compassion. These words signify new life, new hope, a fresh start. To illustrate their power, James Kemp asks these questions on page 63 of *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, “Where would we be without them?”

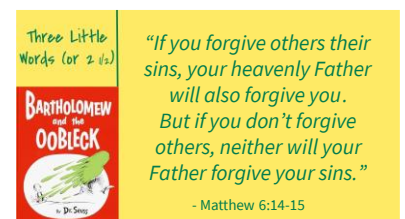


Where would we be if every mistake that we made meant the end?” Imagine for a moment, that if every time we hurt another person, there was no way to get past the hurt and to move on? We’d either have a new best friend or a new spouse or significant other every day or sooner or we would all be very lonely people. Viewed this way we can see and understand how the words “I’m sorry” are wonderful words of life. And those of us who cannot say these words, well, we are missing out on the key to overcoming our shortcomings and failures – our sinful nature – in order to live anew.

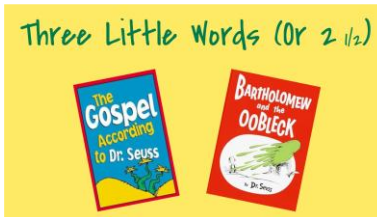
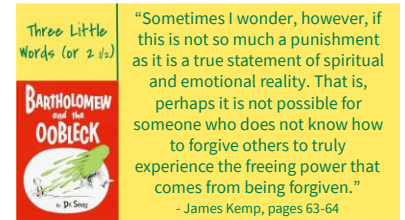


While these words are powerful, their fullest power lies with the one who is hearing these words. Yes, it can be hard to say these words, but it can be even harder to truly receive them and then to say, “I forgive you.” The sad truth is, without forgiveness, “I’m sorry” remains suspended, hanging in the air, waiting for a response that initiates healing and reconciliation, restoration and wholeness. To dive a little deeper into this idea, please turn with me to Matthew 6, where Jesus talks about forgiveness in verses 14 and 15.

Jesus speaks about forgiveness and forgiving in perhaps the most recognizable instance when he teaches the disciples to pray. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus is clear that we need to be people who both seek and are willing to offer forgiveness. In chapter 6 of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus speaks to “why” we are to practice both giving and receiving forgiveness. In verses 14 and 15 he says, *“If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.”* At first glance, this verse seems to imply that choosing to not forgive others will lead to God not forgiving us when we sin – a sort of divine punishment, if you will.



In *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*, James Kemp offers these thoughts on pages 63-64, “Sometimes I wonder, however, if this is not so much a punishment as it is a true statement of spiritual and emotional reality. That is, perhaps it is not possible for someone who does not know how to forgive others to truly experience the freeing power that comes from being forgiven.” After all, in offering forgiveness we not only free others, but we also free ourselves to renew a relationship, to restore a partnership, to reconcile something else that was broken. If practicing saying “I’m sorry” requires practice and spiritual maturity, then saying “I forgive you” takes even more practice and maturity.



There is also a cost to not being able to completely and unconditionally give and receive forgiveness. This is how God forgives you and me: completely and unconditionally. Perhaps you have heard the phrase, “I can forgive, but I can never forget.” When we are honest, this is really code for “I have not forgiven you.” If we are at this place in our hearts, then perhaps have not experienced the full freeing power of forgiveness that God in Christ offers us. Perhaps our spiritual maturity is not quite what we thought it was. The reality is that when we say, “I can forgive, but I can never forget,” we are living in that past hurt, unable to let it go, unable to move on, unable to really offer renewal, restoration, or reconciliation. Truth be told, I, maybe like many of you, am a work in progress in terms of how forgiveness is offered.

In our Wesleyan tradition, we are on a path called “sanctification.” It is the process of being made like Christ. In this life, this is a goal that we will not achieve. We will never be perfect. We know that within each of us is good and evil, light and dark. We know all too well that our attitudes, thoughts, words, and behaviors are anything but perfect.

Yet as Methodists, we are nonetheless seekers of what Wesley called “perfection” or spiritual maturity. As we seek for this ideal place of heart and mind, as we strive to be like Jesus, we are being shaped and formed by the author of perfection, by Christ Jesus. Because of this, we do not strive alone. In this striving, in this battle, the words “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” need to be at the forefront in our hearts and minds. In these words we find the power to restore, to redeem, to reconcile what has been damaged, broken, harmed. As we seek to become more and more like Christ, may we become well-versed in speaking these three (or 2 ½) little words that lead to new life. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS - Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you most desperately sought forgiveness? How did receiving this impact or change you and/or your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where in your world does forgiveness need to be experienced? How can you be a part of this process? Spend some time praying over this situation.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 7:1-6. What does this passage add to your ideas or thoughts about the practices of giving and receiving forgiveness?