

LOVED UP!

The Key to Loving More

Sunday 8th August 2021

Tell joke of flying in a plane over Fife.

Anthony Ray Hinton was poor and black when he was convicted in 1985 of two murders he hadn't committed. He spent the next 30 years trapped in solitary confinement in a tiny cell on death row, having to watch as one-by-one – his fellow prisoners were taken past him to the execution room. Anthony says:

I was 29 and mowing the lawn at my mother's house in Birmingham, [Alabama](#), on a hot day in July 1985 when I looked up and saw two police officers. When my mom saw the handcuffs, she screamed. They asked me whether I owned a firearm, and I said no. They asked if my mother owned one, and I said yes. I asked the detective 50 times why I was being arrested. Eventually, he told me I was being arrested for a robbery. I told him, "You have the wrong man." He said, "I don't care whether you did it or not. You will be convicted." https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/21/28-years-on-death-row?CMP=edit_2221

Anthony Ray Hinton walked out of the Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham, Alabama, a free man for the first time in 30 years at 9:30 a.m. on Friday, April 3, 2015. One of the longest serving death row prisoners in Alabama history and among the longest serving condemned prisoners to be freed

https://youtu.be/HbMjJX_az3I

Here is a part of his book called : "The Sun Does Shine" by Anthony Ray Hinton.

Anthony after his arrest decided not to speak to anyone initially and it lasted for around 3 years. He said: "I didn't say a word. I wasn't going to speak to them or to anyone ever again. When no one believes a word you say, the best thing to do is stop talking."

This would all change on a certain evening 3 years into his sentence:

"It had to be well after midnight when I heard the first sob. There were always men yelling and moaning and crying—every single night. But it had been strangely quiet for about twenty minutes, so when I heard the noise, it jolted me. I had gotten used to tuning out the endless sounds of pain on death row. It was just background noise and not any of my business. But then I heard that first sob. It was a sound low and guttural, almost more growl than cry. Then a guard walked past my cell door. I could see the silhouette of his legs from the light in the corridor. There was another sob and a catch, like someone was trying to hold it in. The sound was close to me. It had to be the guy next to me or one cell over. I couldn't tell. The sobbing got a bit louder, and I tried to tune it out, go back to McGregor and Reggie and Perhacs and Judge Garrett.

“Oh my God ... please help me. I can’t take it. I just can’t take it anymore.” I snapped out of my imaginings and listened to the man crying. He didn’t say anything else, but the sobbing was deeper. Heavier. Did he really believe God was going to help him? There was no God in this place. There was no choice but to take it until you couldn’t take it anymore or they killed you. God may sit high, but he wasn’t looking low. He didn’t see us here. There was no light in this dark place, so there was no God and no help and no hope. I said all this in my head, but I couldn’t drown out the sound of his crying.

“Oh God. Help me, God ...” The crying was intermittent now, and I realized I was holding my breath when it stopped and waiting for it to start again. I didn’t know which was worse—the crying or the silence. Men killed themselves all the time in this prison. I went back to pacing. This wasn’t any of my business. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

...The man started crying again, and I realized that I was crying too. I sat down on the edge of the bed, and I wept silently for a man I didn’t even know, who was most likely a killer, but who also wept in the dark, all alone, in a cage, in Atmore, Alabama. You didn’t have to be on death row to feel all alone, and I knew there were people all over the world, at this exact moment, sitting on the edge of their beds and crying. Most days it seemed like there was more sadness than sense in the world. I sat there for a few more minutes, listening to the other man crying.

What if this man killed himself tonight and I did nothing? Wouldn’t that be a choice? I was on death row not by my own choice, but I had made the choice to spend the last three years thinking about killing McGregor and thinking about killing myself. Despair was a choice. Hatred was a choice. Anger was a choice. I still had choices, and that knowledge rocked me.

I may not have had as many Lester had, but I still had some choices. I could choose to give up or to hang on. Hope was a choice. Faith was a choice. And more than anything else, love was a choice. Compassion was a choice. “Hey!” I walked up to my cell door and yelled toward the crying man. “Are you all right over there?” There was nothing but silence. Maybe I was too late.” We will hear more of this story later.

Anthony discovered, as an innocent man on death row in Alabama, that even in the darkest prison, even in deepest suffering, even in the greatest of pain and loneliness that he still had choices and no-one could take that from him. He said: “Despair was a choice. Hatred was a choice. Anger was a choice. I still had choices, and that knowledge rocked me.

I may not have had as many Lester had, but I still had some choices. I could choose to give up or to hang on. Hope was a choice. Faith was a choice. And more than anything else, love was a choice. Compassion was a choice.”

Today, you may be suffering like Anthony in a dark prison. Maybe you are there innocently, unfairly and unjustly like Anthony. Or you may be there by poor choices you have made yourself. Either way, what no-one can take from you is the fact you still have the ability to make choices and no-one can take that from you. You can choose to give up or hang on. You can choose hope. You can choose faith. You can choose Jesus. And more than

anything else you can choose love. Love and compassion is a choice. The question is how can you grow in love and compassion?

How do I grow in my love for God and people? The key to the Christian life is love. Loving God and loving people. If I can grow more in love I will stay on the narrow and safe path and live a life that pleases God and blesses others. But what is the key to growing in love? Jesus gives us a powerful insight into this answer recorded by Luke in Luke chapter 7.

Luk 7:36-50 (NLT) One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. **37** When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. **38** Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them. **39** When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!" **40** Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you." "Go ahead, Teacher," Simon replied. **41** Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. **42** But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?" **43** Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt." "That's right," Jesus said. **44** Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. **45** You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. **46** You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. **47** "I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." **48** Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." **49** The men at the table said among themselves, "Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?" **50** And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

I would like us to focus on Jesus' words this morning which says in v47:

But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.

Now love is a huge deal in the kingdom of God. In fact Jesus pointed out when asked by a lawyer which is the greatest commandment in the law?

Mat 22:37-40

(37) And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

(38) This is the great and first commandment.

(39) And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

(40) On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

When asked what is the greatest Commandment Jesus gives 2 and they both centre around love. Love God and your neighbour. Jesus said the 2nd commandment is like it. The 2nd command is equally as great or important as the first. It is like it in importance, significance and magnitude.

Jesus corrects the false assumption. There wasn't one greatest commandment. There were two. The next thing Jesus says is mind blowing when you think about it. He says these 2 laws sum up all the Jewish Scriptures.

"On these 2 commandments depend all the law and the Prophets."

The law and the Prophets is another way of saying all the Jewish Scriptures. So according to Jesus, their entire Bible, so to speak, could be summarised by these 2 commands.

What does it look like to love God? "Love your neighbour" Love for God is best demonstrated by loving your neighbour.

I say all this to show that LOVE is a huge deal for Jesus and Jesus' followers. Our greatest commandment is LOVE. LOVE GOD and LOVE your neighbour. In fact we could say Christianity is all about LOVE. Loving God and Loving people. Do that and you fulfil all the commandments of God. If we want to follow Jesus' example and be more like Jesus we need to LOVE more. If we want to grow spiritually we need to grow in LOVE. In fact Paul teaches in 1 Cor.13:2.

"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

Tying these 2 teachings together then we can say:

1. Love is what the Christian faith is all about and to grow in my faith I need to grow in LOVE. Love for God and Love for people.
2. Jesus said that a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.

Let's focus on that for a moment. The key to the Christian faith is love. And the measure of my love is determined by how forgiven I am. If I am forgiven little, I will love little. If I am forgiven much I will love much.

Now what Jesus is not saying is: Go out and sin more, so you can be forgiven more so you can love more.

No, no, no. Jesus wants us to sin less because he knows how much it hurts us, others and God and that is not loving.

The question to ask yourself is how much have you been forgiven? Much or little? How much is your debt before God? How much debt does God forgive you of? Remember, if I am forgiven little I will love little. If my debt that was cleared was small my gratitude and love will be small. If my debt that was cleared was huge, my gratitude and love will be huge.

These verses help us understand it from God's point of view:

Jas 2:10 (NIV)

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."

In the parable in Luke 7 Jesus says: "A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. **42 But neither of them could repay him,** so he kindly forgave them both, **canceling their debts.**" The key here is neither could repay the debt. So both were in the same boat. One person's debt was much larger than the others but neither could afford to repay it. Both were sunk. But both debts were forgiven and cancelled.

You and I or the punter on the street may think we are not that bad. That our debt to God is pretty small. We are reasonably good people. We are certainly not the worst there is. But that is viewing it from man's perspective. And you and I are not going to be judged by man's standards but by a perfect holy God's standards. And by those standards each of us have fallen way, way short. I think if we really thought about it we are all forgiven much. We all had a massive debt before God that we could never afford to pay.

I may not have murdered someone or robbed a bank but in God's eyes my thoughts, attitudes and actions or even lack of action are enough to separate me from God for all eternity. All of us have fallen short. Way short. All of us have sinned much. And all of us had a huge debt we could not pay. All of us were in the same boat. All of us are forgiven much. All of us have a massive debt that has can be forgiven if we come to Jesus. Simon the Pharisee was self-righteous and thought his debt was small and the sinner woman's debt was massive. What Simon failed to realise was his debt was just as massive. He could not repay it either. Because Simon thought he was pretty good in his own standards and his debt pretty small – His love/mercy/compassion was also small.

So here's a massive key to your measure of love for God and Jesus.

Focus on His forgiveness and how much He has forgiven you daily and your little love will grow. Your love for God and people grows as your awareness of His grace and forgiveness grows. It causes your humility to grow, your gratitude to grow and your love for Him and others to grow. And as you focus on His kindness, love and grace it creates in you the desire to turn your life around, to stop doing the harmful stuff and release the goodness he has placed in each of you.

So preach the gospel to yourself every day. Every time you fail and mess up, confess your sin. Ask for forgiveness. Ask the Spirit to change you from the inside out. Ask for His grace and power to changed and be transformed. Ask for the fruit of the Spirit to give you what you need to change.

But then focus on how much He has forgiven you. Thank Him for the blood He shed on the Cross so you could be forgiven. Thank Him for taking your punishment on the Cross. Thank Him for dying in your place. Thank Him that you are forgiven. See the size of your debt that

has been cleared. Overflow in gratitude for your forgiveness and as you focus on His kindness and forgiveness your love for Him and others will grow. He who is forgiven little loves little. She who is forgiven much loves much. The women who washed Jesus' feet knew how much she was forgiven and look at her love:

Luke 7: 37 When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. **38** Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them."

Preach the gospel to yourself every day. Confess your sins and receive his forgiveness every day. Focus on what He has done for you every day. Thank him every day and speak the truth of these verses over yourself every day:

- **Psa 103:12 (NLT)** He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.
- **Col 2:13 (NLT)** You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.
- **Rom 8:37 (NIV)** No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
- **2Co 5:21 (NIV)** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
- **Rom 8:1 (NIV)** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

Receive His love and forgiveness daily. Meditate on His love for you and learn to receive it. As you realise you have been forgiven much, your love for Him will increase and your love and compassion for others will grow.

Let's continue with the story from Anthony Ray Hinton:

"Hey, you okay?" I asked again. "No," he finally answered. "Is something wrong? Do you need me to call for an officer or something?" "No, he just left." "Okay, then." I stood at the bars. I didn't know what to say or what to do. It was weird to hear my own voice on the row. I only spoke during visits. I wondered if the man was as surprised as I was to hear me speak. I guess he didn't want to talk about it. I started to walk back to my bed, but then I thought about what he had been saying when he was sobbing. Please help me. I can't take it anymore. I walked back up to the door.

"Hey, man. Whatever it is, it's going to be all right. It's going to be okay." I waited. It had to be another five minutes before he spoke. "I just ... I just got word ... that my mom died."

I could hear him trying to hold back the tears as he talked. I can't describe exactly what it is to have your heart break open, but in that moment, my heart broke wide open and I wasn't a convicted killer on death row; I was Anthony Ray Hinton from Praco. I was my mama's son. "I'm sorry, man. I really am." He didn't say anything back, and then I heard a guy yell from

down below me, "Sorry for your loss." And then another from the left side of me yelled, "Sorry, man. Rest in peace." Nobody else was talking before that, but they had been listening too. How could you not hear him crying? I didn't have to think about people all around the world sitting on the edge of their beds and crying when there were almost two hundred men all around me who didn't sleep, just like me. Who were in fear just like me. Who wept just like all of us. Who felt alone and afraid and without hope. I had a choice to reach out to these men or to stay in the dark alone. I walked over to my bed and got on my hands and knees. I reached my arm under the bed and felt around through the dust and dirt until the tips of my fingers brushed against my Bible. It had been under there for too long. This man had lost his mom, but I still had mine, and she wouldn't care for my Bible to be collecting filth.

Even here, I could still be me. I walked back up to the cell door. "Listen!" I yelled. "God may sit high, but he looks low. He's looking down here in the pit. He's sitting high, but he's looking low. You've got to believe it." I had to believe it too. I heard an "Amen!" from somewhere on the row. "It's a hard loss to bear. But your mom's looking down on you too." "I know. Thanks." I asked him to tell me about his mom and listened for the next two hours as he told story after story. His mom seemed a lot like my mom. Tough, but full of love. He finished telling a story about her making a dress for his sister out of a tablecloth and two silk pillowcases just so she could go to a school dance in a new dress. "It was beautiful," he said. "My sister looked better than any other girl at that dance because my mom worked hard. She always found a way, man. She always found a way." He started crying again, but softer than he had at the beginning of the night. I wondered why is it that the cries of another human being—whether it's a baby or a woman in grief or a man in pain—can touch us in ways we don't expect. I wasn't expecting to have my heart break that night. I wasn't expecting to end three years of silence. It was a revelation to realize that I wasn't the only man on death row. I was born with the same gift from God we are all born with—the impulse to reach out and lessen the suffering of another human being. It was a gift, and we each had a choice whether to use this gift or not.

I didn't know his story or what he had done or anything about him that made him different from me—, I didn't know if he was black or white. But on the row, I realized, it didn't matter. When you are trying to survive, the superficial things don't matter anymore. When you are hanging at the end of your rope, does it really matter what color the hand is that reaches up to help you? What I knew was that he loved his mother just like I loved my mother. I could understand his pain. "I'm sorry you lost your mom, but man, you got to look at this a different way. Now you have someone in heaven who's going to argue your case before God." It was silent for a few moments, and then the most amazing thing happened. On a dark night, in what must surely be the most desolate and dehumanizing place on earth, a man laughed. A real laugh. And with that laughter, I realized that the State of Alabama could steal my future and my freedom, but they couldn't steal my soul or my humanity. And they most certainly couldn't steal my sense of humor. I missed my family. I missed Lester. But sometimes you have to make family where you find family, or you die in isolation. I wasn't ready to die. I wasn't going to make it that easy on them. I was going to find another way to do my time. Whatever time I had left. Everything, I realized, is a choice. And spending your days waiting to die is no way to live.

Hinton, Anthony Ray. *The Sun Does Shine* (pp. 152-161). Ebury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Anthony Ray Hinton was sitting on death row. But he realised that even in the darkest prison God may sit high but he looks low and can see you no matter how low you are in life right now. He said "I was born with the same gift from God we are all born with—the impulse to reach out and lessen the suffering of another human being. It was a gift, and we each had a choice whether to use this gift or not." Anthony chose love and compassion in His darkness to bring light into the darkness. God wants to so saturate you with His love and forgiveness and grace because he has a mission and purpose for you also. He created you as His image bearer to be a light in the darkness and release his love, mercy and justice into the world. When you make the choice to use your gift – the impulse to reach out and lessen the suffering of another human being – you let your light shine in the darkest of places. That's how his kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven when his will is done on earth by you. But it's a choice you can choose to make or not.

Following Jesus is about loving Father and his children. As you and I remember daily how much we have been forgiven it will increase our humility, gratitude, love for God and love and compassion for others. A person who has been forgiven much, will love much and be a source of His light and love to those around us in great darkness.

Let's pray.