

CHALLENGE OF FORGIVENESS

It's two days before Christmas and Tommy Pigage was at a party getting drunk. When he left the party, he decided to drive. And as he was driving, he blacked out and while he was at the wheel, he hit 18 year old, Ted Morris, head on, killing the only child of Frank and Elizabeth Morris. Recalls Elizabeth Morris, "I intended to hate the man forever." When Elizabeth and her husband first saw Tommy in court, the devout Christians were surprised at the intensity of their hatred. Says Elizabeth, "Tommy was walking and breathing and my son was dead. And it was so unfair. I wanted him dead, too." When Tommy pleaded not guilty their resentment deepened. Tommy was charged with murder but the charge was reduced to manslaughter. He was required to spend only every other weekend in jail and participate in Mothers Against Drunk Driving programs for high school students. Elizabeth went herself to go hear Tommy talk at the MADD program with the intention of confronting him. But she wasn't prepared for what she heard. "I thought he would be excusing himself, but instead, he talked about the anguish he felt. He even called himself murderer." After that Elizabeth went to see Tommy in jail. "My son's life had been destroyed", she said, "but it seemed Tommy could still be helped." In an extraordinary act of forgiveness the couple befriended the man who killed their only son. Tommy began to go to the Morrises' church and spend every Wednesday and Sunday with them.

He even became a follower of Jesus and was baptized. “Ted, my son, would have wanted it this way.” Elizabeth said, “He would not have wanted us to go on hating. The hatred was eating at me like cancer. Now I can be happy and I can really live again.”

Today, we are continuing with our teaching series on the New Testament Challenge. We are looking at what is perhaps the most difficult challenge that we can face in life. That is, “The Challenge of Forgiveness”. Let’s be honest, it’s not easy to let go when someone hurts us. Whether it’s a big hurt, like someone being responsible for the death of our own son, or whether it’s something small like a co-worker saying a hurtful or harsh words that sting, and we are not able to let that go. Forgiving someone is hard, but the Bible says, it’s necessary. Because when we finally let go, when we finally forgive those who have hurt us, we open up our lives to God’s best for our lives. To God’s best plan and God’s blessing for us.

If you have your message notes, I want you to go ahead and pull those out. I want you to look at the passage at the top. It’s from Matthew 18, and it’s the story when one of Jesus’ disciples comes to Jesus and asks Him a question about forgiveness. And this is what happens in Matthew 18. It says, *“Then Peter came to Him, and asked, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’ ‘No,’ Jesus replied, ‘Seventy times seven.’”*

Now, by anyone's standard, Peter thought he was being very gracious in offering to forgive someone who wronged him seven times. But Jesus, as He so often did, brought humility to the questioner when He responds, "No, Peter, not seven times but seventy times seven." That's 490 times. Now, I know that there are a lot of you here who are thinking to yourself—490 times, there would never be any occasion for me to forgive someone that many times. Jesus' point here isn't that there is anything significant about forgiving anybody 490 times. What He's saying here is that God wants our forgiveness to be limitless, that we should always forgive and we should forgive in every circumstance. Now, if you think that this sounds like a difficult task, it is. In fact, it is humanly impossible. But if you want to live the life that God wants us to live, if you want to get the most out of our lives then we have to learn to forgive the people who hurt us. We have to learn to let go of our hurts, whether they are big hurts or whether they are small hurts. And we should forgive because it is the right and godly thing to do. We should forgive because it frees the other person, but we should forgive, also, because it frees us as well. Now, if you will look in your notes, you will notice that there are at least three misconceptions about what forgiveness really is. A lot of times we get things confused. In your outline, you'll see three things that Forgiveness is not. I want you to write these down. The first one is this:

1. Forgive others is not justifying their actions. It's not justifying their actions. A lot of times we think—I'm not going to forgive someone because by forgiving them I am telling them that what they did was okay and that they can continue doing that. But understand, forgiveness isn't saying—you're wrong and I'm right. All forgiveness is letting go of the hurt that was associated with it. Letting that person off the hook for being guilty. That's what forgiveness is.

2. Forgive others is not confronting them personally. It's not confronting them personally. This is an important point. To forgive someone does not require meeting with them and talking with them face to face. Sometimes it's not a good thing. There are times when the hurt has been so severe or when that person is so obstinate that you don't have to confront them or talk with them face to face to forgive them. Because it can turn to another confrontation like the other person says, "I need to forgive you, not you to forgive me." Forgiveness isn't confronting them personally. And then finally . . .

3. Forgive others is not trusting them again automatically. It's not trusting them again automatically. I have said this before. Don't mistake forgiveness with trust. Yes, you should forgive everyone who hurts you. You should forgive instantly. You shouldn't hold grudges. But there is a difference between forgiving someone and putting yourself in a situation where they can hurt you again.

Sometimes, you forgive someone and then you get out of that relationship and you get away from them. That's the difference between forgiveness and trust. So forgive freely, but be careful, be wise when it comes to trust.

So, that's what forgiveness is not. And for the rest of our time today, I want us to talk about what forgiveness really is. I want us to talk about how we can release the baggage of hurt and the regret that sometimes we hold onto and carry around. So take your message notes, open up to the inside, Four New Testament Steps to Forgive Others. Here's the first one.

1. Remember how much I have been forgiven. Remember how much I have been forgiven. You see, it's not just that forgiveness is difficult. Forgiveness is so unnatural when we have been hurt. You see, our natural reaction when someone hurts us is to do what? To get revenge. To get back at them. To hurt them in the same way as they have hurt us. It's not natural for us to respond with forgiveness. So how do we learn to let go? Well, here's the truth. It's impossible to give forgiveness until you have first experienced forgiveness yourself. Because it's forgiven people who forgive people. You see, the Bible tells us, that God offers us unconditional forgiveness for every wrong that we have ever committed. The Bible says that everyone of us has sinned. Everyone of us has disappointed God. When we know what God wants us to do, and then we turn our back on God and go a different direction, that's sin.

And sin is like building a wall between us and God. Every sin in our life is like a brick in the wall, and it builds a barrier between us and God. Because of our sin, we don't experience God's peace, His power, or His presence in our life. But even more significant than that, our sin also separates us from God for eternity. It prevents us from spending eternity with God in Heaven. But the Bible also tells us, instead of holding on to that grudge, and instead of letting our sin separate us from God forever, that God loved us so much that He took all of the mistakes that we had ever committed, and He took all of the mistakes that we will ever commit and He forgave them. He let them go. He forgot them, as if they had never happened. But God offers us free, unconditional forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

Look at our next passage from Colossians 2:13-14. Here Paul writes, he says, "*He has forgiven all your sins. He has utterly wiped out the evidence of broken commandments, which always hung over our heads and has completely annulled it by nailing it to the cross.*" Because you see, our sins stood between us and God. They prevented us from experiencing God's peace, power and presence in our life. They prevented us from spending eternity with God in Heaven. But on the cross, Jesus settled the debt that we owed God for our sin. He took the punishment for our sin on the cross so that we could receive God's complete forgiveness and when we accept Jesus into our lives, those sins are completely wiped away, as if they had never happened.

Now, all we have to do is come to God and ask him to come into our lives, and when He does, He completely wipes away all those sins, He forgives them and completely lets them go. I John 1:9 says this, *“But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.”* You see, being a Christian has absolutely nothing to do with being perfect, or being right. Being a Christian has nothing to do with even being a good person, or doing good things. Being a Christian is all about being forgiven. It’s about living without guilt, living without regret, living with a certainty in life that I will be spending eternity with God in Heaven, not because I’m perfect, not because I’m a good person, not because I’m better than everyone else, but because I am forgiven by God. Listen, today, if you have never taken that step to receive God’s forgiveness into your life, I hope before you leave today that you will make that decision, that you will pray that prayer and that you will ask God to come into your life and wipe all of that clean, and completely remove all of the regret and guilt off of your shoulders.

Now, when we fully realize and understand the scope of God’s forgiveness for us, we can’t help but be grateful. When we are forgiven and the guilt is removed and we can experience God in our life, and our eternity is secure, we can’t help but be grateful. And it’s through that gratefulness that we have the ability to forgive others who have hurt us.

God forgives us so that we can forgive others. That's the first step of forgiveness. Remember how much I have been forgiven. That leads us to the second step, and it's this:

2. Release the other person. Release the other person. What does release mean? Release means to set free. That's what forgiveness really is. Making it your resolve to no longer hold onto bitterness or the resentment. To stop re-running the tapes of the incident over and over and over again in your mind. To fully release the other person. Now, I admit that it is hard to release someone who has hurt us. And one of the reasons is, our ego makes a strong case against them. Our ego will build up a case against the person who has hurt us and it will tell us all the reasons why they were wrong and we were right. All the reasons why they were unjustified in hurting us and we were right in defending ourselves. And your ego will ruin your life if you will let it.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 18, and it's in your notes, but I will give you a little background. He says, there is a king and a servant of the king owes the king a tremendous amount of money, and he will never be able to repay it. And the servant comes before the king, before he is thrown into prison and begs for forgiveness. And the king forgives all of his debt completely. Well, the servant has been forgiven and then he walks out and another servant comes to him who owes him just a little bit and he also begs for forgiveness.

But the servant who has been forgiven instead of forgiving the other servant has him thrown into prison and the king hears about this. This is what see happens in Matthew 18. It says, “Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said. ‘You evil servant. I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sends the man to prison until he had paid every penny. That’s what my Heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart.””

What Jesus is saying here is that unforgiveness in our hearts, it’s not that it hurts the other person, it hurts us. Unforgiveness in our hearts blocks God’s blessing and God’s forgiveness from coming into our lives. According to Jesus, choosing not to forgive someone puts me in a prison that hurts my relationship with God and it causes stress, and it damages me all the way around. You see, the only way out, the only key to this prison that we put ourselves in, is to let go and release the other person. So, how do we do that? How do I release someone? Here are four important truths about releasing someone. I want you to write these down. Here’s the first one:

a. When I release someone, I forgive instantly. I forgive instantly. With forgiveness, there is no wait period. The minute you feel resentment. The minute you feel bitterness, the minute you feel unforgiveness, you deal with it and you

forgive them right then. I want you to turn to the person who is sitting next to you and say—do it now. Don’t wait to forgive, do it now. The second thing about releasing someone is . . .

b. Forgive completely. Forgive completely. That means, we don’t play it over and over again in our minds. You have to understand, when God forgives us, it is complete. It’s absolute. He forgives as if it never happened. God doesn’t hold on to it so that He can throw it back in our face. It’s gone. And God wants us to forgive others in the same way that we have been forgiven. Forgive completely. Then the third thing in releasing someone, means . . .

c. Forgive freely. And here’s the catch. The catch is there is no catch. When you are forgiving someone, there can be no catch. You can’t say—I’m going to forgive this person, if they apologize first. I’m going to forgive this person if they admit that they were wrong. I’m going to forgive this person if they at least look at little bit guilty. If you wait for those things, you will never forgive, because those things aren’t going to happen. You can’t wait on someone before you forgive them, you have to forgive them first in your heart. There is no catch. Turn to the person next to you and say—there is no catch. With forgiveness there is no catch. Finally, releasing someone means . . .

d. To forgive repeatedly. Forgive repeatedly. You see, God doesn’t put any limits on His forgiveness of you and me.

And so, we shouldn't put limits on our forgiveness of others either. Listen, if someone keeps hurting you over and over and over again, you need to remove yourself from that situation. But you never should put yourself in a situation where you say—I can't forgive you again. Always forgive. Forgive repeatedly without limits, and you will be like God. Don't hurt yourself by not letting go.

The third step of forgiving others is this—

3. Reestablish the relationship. Reestablish the relationship. Some of you go, “What?” Yes, you heard me right. Reestablish the relationship. But, but notice, it says in parentheses, as much as possible. We reestablish the broken relationship as much as possible. Put simply, forgiveness does not necessitate that you reestablish the relationship with the person who hurt you. There are times that you should not do that. Specifically, there are times and instances of abuse of such severe hurt, that to go back there would bring up such pain that you just shouldn't do it. And there are times when the other person has been hurt as well, and they are obstinate, and they don't want to have anything to do with you. And in those instances, it's okay to not reestablish relationships. It's okay just to walk away.

The Bible does say to reconcile the broken relationships in your life whenever possible and whenever it makes sense. Romans 12:18 says, *“Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.”* Underline that last part—as much as possible. How do you know when you should try to reconcile the relationship?

Now, it can be difficult to know, but in most instances, when you have an ongoing relationship with someone, when it's a family member, or a friend, we should do everything that we can to reconcile that relationship. I think this is especially true when it comes to broken marriages. But when you are trying to decide, ask yourself three questions—(1) would reconciling this relationship improve my life, or would it actually hurt me (2) The second question to ask is would reconciling this relationship improve the other person's life? Would it make them feel better? Or would it just be putting salt in the wound? But if it would benefit them, then we should do everything we can to reconcile. (3) Then the third question to ask is, would reconciling this relationship improve my relationship with my family, my friends, with other co-workers? In doing this, would it improve relationships that are around me? If so, I should do everything I can to reconcile. So, do your best to reestablish broken relationships when possible, and that leads us to the final step of

4. Recognize God's purpose in the process. Recognize God's ultimate purpose in the forgiveness process. Now, you need to understand that when we decide that we are not going to forgive, we are going to hold onto the hurt, that we circumvent God's best plan for our life. You see, His main purpose for us, in forgiving others, is that we might experience freedom in our life. God wants us to have freedom. Freedom from our past. Freedom from regret.

Freedom from the person who hurt us. God wants us to have freedom from resentment and bitterness. And when there is unforgiveness in our lives, it's like we lock ourselves in the prison of our own making. And we have the key to let ourselves out, but we choose not to use it. And we endure the pain, and we endure the hurt because we won't forgive. Look at what II Corinthians 13:7 says. It says, "*Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*"

What this verse means is that in the areas of your life where there is resentment, where there is hurt, where there is unforgiveness, the Holy Spirit is not in those areas. You have built up this wall so that God's presence, His power and His peace cannot be in those areas of your life. You have the key to let go of it, and through forgiveness you can let go of it and let God come in and heal the hurt, but the hurt will never be healed, because you won't let God in. The areas of your life where you do have freedom, God's presence is there, but in the areas where there is no freedom, where there is unforgiveness, you have locked God out and that is a shame because you are holding that back.

So, looking at your life, are there areas of hurt and bitterness which are obvious that God's presence isn't there? Is there a person that you haven't let go? Is there a pain that you are still holding on tightly to, and you haven't given it over to God and you have kept God out of that area because you are unwilling to forgive?

If you have that in your life, let God in and let it go and in doing so you will free yourself and you will allow God's presence, power and peace, to enter your life. I want to ask you, what do you need to do in response to what the New Testament has to say about forgiveness? What do you need to do in response to today's message? I hope it's not nothing. I hope you aren't sitting there and saying—I'm going to do nothing in response to what I have heard today.

I know that there are a lot of us here that are holding onto resentment. Holding onto hurt. Holding onto anger in our life against someone or something that happened to us. And because of that we aren't experiencing the life that God wants us to experience. What are you going to do in response to God's word in this area of forgiveness? Decide to settle it today.