

Fil-Am Community Church

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“Learning to Forgive”

It's two days before Christmas and in a little town in Kentucky 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 the car being driven by 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 Tom 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 talked about how he cried day and night because of what he had done. 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 series on "How to Connect with God". First, we said that prayer and fasting can help you to make that vital connection with God. Then, last week, Pastor Dave talked about dwelling in God's Word as a way of tuning in to God. Today, we're going to look at still another way in which we can make that connection with God. We are looking at what is perhaps the most challenging way because it really does affect ourselves, others, and our relationship with God. I'm talking about 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 word that stings, it's not easy to let 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. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15, *"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

Now, I'm not going to talk about the theological implications of this, but I think it's clear what Jesus says. The Father will not forgive if we don't

forgive. That sounds pretty serious. This morning, let me talk about what the Bible says about forgiveness and how we can learn to forgive.

Now, before we actually look at what the Bible says, I've prepared a little quiz for you to take. True or false.

1. A person should not be forgiven until they ask for it.
2. Forgiveness includes restoring trust and reuniting a relationship immediately.
3. You haven't really forgiven until you've forgotten the offense.

If you study the Bible and you study what Jesus says, you'll discover that all three of those statements are false. We're going to talk today about what true forgiveness is. And before we talk about what it is, we have to talk about what it is not. Three things forgiveness is not.

1. It is not conditional. In other words, it's not based on somebody else's response. Real forgiveness is unconditional. It's not based on some promise that they'll never do it again. If you say to someone "I'll forgive you if..." that's not forgiveness. That's called bargaining. Genuine forgiveness is unconditional.

What if Jesus had said when He prayed, "Father forgive them if they ask for it." The truth is nobody had asked for it when Jesus prayed on the cross. "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.*" (Luke 23:34) Genuine forgiveness is unconditional. It is offered whether or not it's asked for.

2. It is not resuming a relationship without changes. This is one of the most misunderstood concepts about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same as restoring a relationship. Some of you are afraid to forgive because you're afraid you're going to have to go back with that person. Or

you have to be goody-goody with that person again. And you'll have to be their best friend again or you'll have to remarry them or whatever.

No, restoring relationship and forgiveness are two different things, the Bible teaches. Forgiveness is instant. Trust must be built over a long period of time. The Bible says that those are two different things. Forgiveness takes care of the damage done. It just lets the person off the hook. You let them go – scot-free. But it doesn't guarantee that the relationship will be restored. Those are two different issues.

Forgiveness is your part in reconciliation, when you forgive the offender who's hurt you. But for a relationship to be restored, the offender has to do three other things that are totally unrelated to forgiveness.

One, demonstrate genuine repentance. They have to show that they're genuinely sorry before the relationship can be rebuilt. Genuine repentance, and that means a change in their lifestyle.

Two, they have to make restitution whenever possible for the damage done.

Three, the offender must rebuild your trust by proving they have changed over time.

Those are totally different from forgiveness. If somebody repeatedly wrongs you over and over – let's say somebody in your family or work or a former friend or a former spouse – somebody who repeatedly offends you over and over and over. You're obligated by God to forgive that person over and over and over. But you are not obligated to trust that person or instantly restore the relationship.

Do you understand the difference between trust and forgiveness? It takes more than forgiveness to build a relationship. It takes trust. And

trust is built over time. They say, “But wait! You’ve forgiven me. Can’t we just go back to the way things were?” No. Trust must be rebuilt.

So forgiveness starts by making a choice. You forgive because it depends on you not the other person. And it’s not resuming a relationship automatically. It’s not saying, “OK, everything’s back to normal” because it takes time to build trust.

3. It is not forgetting what happened. The Bible says forgiveness is not forgetting what happened. Some of you have been afraid to forgive somebody who hurt you in your life because you don’t want to forget it. You’ve all heard the cliché “Forgive and forget”. Isn’t that nice? It sounds so sweet! Forgive and forget. The only problem is it’s impossible to do. It’s impossible. It’s foolish and illogical.

In the first place, it’s impossible to try to forget something. You can’t try to forget anything. When you’re trying to forget something, what are you focusing on? The very thing you want to forget. And whatever you focus on, you tend to move toward.

The fact is, your brain stores every single memory you’ve ever had. Doctors, brain surgeons, scientists know that if they were to open up your brain and take a probe and stimulate a certain part, they can bring back every single memory you’ve ever had in vivid color. Your brain does not forget anything.

It can be pushed down from trauma. It can be repressed. It can be put in the deep recesses of your mind. But your brain doesn’t really ever forget anything. In fact, the only way to forget something is to replace it. You can’t try to forget anything. You have to try to put something in its place.

I want to say, though, is that there’s something better than forgetting. This will take you to a new level of spiritual maturity. There’s something

better than forgetting. It's remembering but realizing how God can bring good even out of bad.

Romans 8:28 talks about how all things are not good – in fact, there's a lot of bad in the world. But all things work together for good. This is the difference between forgetting and letting go. You remember it, but you let it go. The Bible talks about letting go of the pain, letting go of the hurt, letting go of the resentment, letting go of the bitterness, not holding on to it. But that's not forgetting. Because you never will forget. In fact, the more painful something has happened in your life, the more likely it is that you're going to remember it.

Some people think, "When am I going to get to the point spiritually where I forget all those hurts?" You're not going to get there. The key is not forgetting.

The key is learning to see it through the lens of grace and through the lens of God's sovereignty and through the lens of how God can turn even bad things into good in your life if you'll trust Him and you learn to respond in the right way. So it's not forgetting what's happened.

If forgiveness is none of those things, what is real forgiveness? Real forgiveness involves three steps.

1. Real forgiveness is relinquishing my right to get even.

This is the heart of real forgiveness. You don't seek revenge. The Bible says it like this in Romans 12:19 (NLT), "*Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the LORD.*"

You say, "If I give up my right to get even with somebody who's hurt me, that's unfair." You're right. It's unfair. Whoever said forgiveness is fair?

Was it fair for Jesus Christ to forgive everything you've ever done wrong and let you go scot-free? Was that fair? No.

The truth is, we always want justice for everybody else, but we all want forgiveness for ourselves. When it comes to somebody else, it's not fair. But we don't want God to be *fair* to us, though. We want God to be *gracious* to us. The Bible says I relinquish my right to get even.

The truth is that life is not fair. And forgiveness is not fair. It's called grace, and God has shown it to you. But the Bible does say this. One day, God is going to have the last word. One day, God is going to settle the score. One day, God is going to right the wrong. One day, God is going to balance the ledger. So you let God settle the score. You forgive so there can be peace in your heart and you can get on with your life, and you leave the justice part to God. Who can do a better job of justice? Who can do a better job of getting even? You or God?

Who has more ways at His disposal of righting wrongs, you or God? The starting point is to relinquish my right to get even.

If you don't do this, you will fall into the trap of bitterness. We have talked about this so many times, but let's review it again. Resentment and bitterness are worthless tools. They're worthless emotions. In fact, they are the most unhealthy emotions, doctors tell us. They will eat you alive like cancer. All the resentment you've got, all the bitterness toward people who have hurt you in your past, it isn't going to change the past.

No matter how much you resent it, it's not going to change the past. All that resentment and all that bitterness and all those grudges you've held are not going to change the future. You cannot change your past with your resentment. All you can do is mess up today. And who do you mess up? You. Many times people hold resentment in their hearts and the other

people are totally unaware of it. They're going along their merry way, having fun, enjoying life, getting on with the future. And you're the one who's stuck in the past.

When you hold on to resentment, you allow people to continue to hurt you today. And that's not smart. In fact, it's quite dumb. The people in your past are past. They cannot continue to hurt you unless you choose to hold on to the hurt. Why would you do that? Why would you hold on to a hurt that can neither be changed nor controlled? All you're doing is making yourself miserable.

So you relinquish your right to get even. The Bible says this in Hebrews 12:15 (Phillips), *"Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace which God gives. For if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit which is not only bad in itself but it can also poison the lives of many others."* And resentment can be passed on from generation to generation to generation. You don't just make yourself miserable when you're bitter.

You make everybody else around you miserable too. It is a worthless emotion. So, I relinquish my right to get even.

2. Responding to evil with good.

The Bible says in Luke 6:27-28, *"Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you."* Look at those three verbs – "do good," "bless," and "pray for." That's part of forgiveness. You return good for evil.

How do you know when you've genuinely forgiven somebody?

You can pray for God to bless them. You can pray for God to bless their lives. You also understand their hurt. You start seeing their hurt. Hurt people hurt people. When people are hurting inside, they take it out on

others. That parent who hurt you a lot, they were hurting a lot. They were hurting in all kinds of ways. When you learn to forgive, you can not only see your own hurt, but you see their hurt, too. Then you start to understand why they acted in such evil or selfish or hurtful or abusive ways. You can pray for them and pray for God to bless them.

You say, “But you don’t know how they’ve hurt me.” No, I don’t. And I’m sorry for every hurt in this room. But I do know this: You’re never going to get on with your life unless you let it go. Unless you forgive and let it go. Not forget. But relinquish my right to get even and respond to evil with good.

How can I do that? There’s only one possible way. You have to be filled with the love of God. You have to be filled with the love of Jesus Christ. Because the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 13:5, that love “... *keeps no record of wrongs.*”

I experienced this myself many years ago. I was in Japan attending a computer training with another Filipino. This guy is a good guy except for his attitude. Let’s just say that he had an attitude. I wanted to avoid him but I couldn’t because we went to the same training room and were assigned to seat together. As weeks passed, my dislike for him grew more and more. I prayed to God to take away the bitterness but it was still there. So, one night I decided to read 1 Corinthians 13 and meditated on it. God gave me his peace. But the next day when I saw him, I wanted to avoid him again. So, that night, I went back to 1 Corinthians 13. And God gave me his peace again. And this went on for several weeks until I decided to talk to him and our relationship improved after that.

When I’m keeping record of wrong, I’m being unloving. On the other hand, when I let it go and I bless those who hurt me, then that means I’m

filled with love. You say, “I can’t do that!” You’re right. You can’t. That’s why you need Jesus Christ. There’s no way you can have that kind of love on your own. Only the love of God inside of you – filling you – can give you that kind of love.

There’s no way you can do it on your own. You have to have Jesus Christ giving you the day-by-day love to forgive.

The third is the hardest of all. I relinquish my right to get even, I respond to evil with good and

3. I repeat this process as long as necessary.

Forgiveness is never or rarely a one-time shot. It’s rarely a one-time event. Forgiveness goes on and on and on. How often do I have to do this? How often do I have to keep releasing my right to get even? How often do I have to keep blessing them when they do evil?

Until the pain stops. Until you stop feeling the hurt. And then you’ll know you’ve forgiven them. *“Peter asked Jesus, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’ ‘No,’ Jesus replied. ‘Seventy times seven.’”*

What’s going on here? Peter thought he was being pretty magnanimous. In Jewish law, you had to forgive a person three times. And after you’d forgiven them three times, that was it. You didn’t have to forgive them any more.

So Peter asked, “How often do I have to forgive somebody who hurts me? How often do I have to forgive my brother?” It may have been his real brother. How often? He’s thinking, “The law says three times. How about if I double it, and add in one for good measure. Seven times?”

And Jesus says, “Wrong! You’re not even close! How about seventy times seven.” He’s saying “To infinity and beyond! You just keep on doing

it. You just keep on forgiving. How do you know that you've let it go? You just keep on doing it until the pain stops. Every time you remember that hurt, you make a willful choice in your mind and say, "God, they really hurt me." You don't minimize the hurt and say it wasn't a big deal. It was a big deal, and that's why you still remember it. "God, they hurt me, and it still hurts.

But I am choosing, because I want to be filled with love and not resentment, I am choosing to give up my right to get even, to seek revenge, to wish bad on that person.

I am choosing to bless them who hurt me. God, I pray You'll bless their life. Not because they deserve it. They don't. I don't deserve Your blessing either, God. But I pray that You'd show grace to them like You've shown to me." You keep on doing it until you know you've released them.

There's a line in a song that says, "We can't just trust our feelings. We have to stand in the Lord." That's the only way you're going to get past this forgiveness barrier. You say, "I don't feel like forgiving." Who does? Nobody ever *feels* like forgiving. You do it because it's the right thing to do, and you do it to get on with your life. We have to stand in the Lord.

VIDEO

What is the secret of genuine forgiveness? Remember how much I've been forgiven. That's the secret. Remember how much I've been forgiven by God. I remember what it cost Jesus Christ to forgive me. All the things I've done.

I'm not spotless. I'm not blameless. I've hurt a lot of people in my life. And so have you. Colossians 3:13 says, "*Remember the Lord forgave you so you must forgive others.*" God has forgiven you, so He expects you to forgive those who have hurt you.

It also says in *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ, God forgave you.”* You were forgiven, not because you deserve it. Not because you earned it. Not because you balance it out with good works. Not because you promised never to sin again. But because you have put your faith in Jesus Christ. You’ve accepted His salvation. Jesus Christ is your savior.

What does that mean – to make Jesus Christ my savior? It means I accept His forgiveness for all I’ve done. And I am forgiven. Not because I’ve worked for it. Not because my good works are more than my bad works or the good things I’ve done are better than the bad things I’ve done in life. It’s because I’m *in Christ*. That’s the only way you get God’s forgiveness. You need to remember that.

Our last verse says, *“You were dead because of your sins ... Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross.”*

Friends, if God kept a record of our wrongs, can we stand before him? We are all dead, with no hope of being made alive, eternally condemned to hell. But God’s grace and love is so great that he came in the person of Jesus Christ to die for our sins. And forgave us our sins. He wiped the slate clean. All you need to do is accept his forgiveness for your sins and he will receive you into his kingdom.