

## Training Session 23 - Practical Necessities: Forgiveness

### Objective

Learn to walk in the freedom of ongoing forgiveness.

### Key Scripture

Matthew 18:21-35

### Introduction to Forgiveness

In the past two training sessions, we looked at the principles needed to resolve conflict in a Christ-centered fashion. In doing so, we touched on forgiveness, which is at the heart of resolving conflict. In this session we're going to dive deeper into the waters of forgiveness because without real and ongoing forgiveness, conflict resolution will ring hollow (at best).

Sadly, we all have relationships that go sideways and it is hard to figure out how in the world they ended up that way, which is why this is a practical necessity for all of us. In many cases, forgiveness may have been offered (by mouthing "I forgive you"), but forgiveness hasn't been activated and applied in a way that has cleared the air. If we're honest, nothing has changed other than the empty words of forgiveness offered. Now we're going to look at the Biblical principles of forgiveness that will enable us to clear the air in relationships and move forward with unencumbered freedom and joy.

### Inspiration: Forgiveness is possible, no matter how deep the hurt

As we begin, let me share with you three inspiring stories of forgiveness to help you see that forgiveness is indeed possible, even in the most egregious cases of harm. Why? Because I want you to see that no matter how hurt you are, forgiveness is possible through the power Christ offers to forgive. You most likely feel like you don't have it in you to forgive the person who hurt you (or in some cases yourself), but Jesus does and He stands at the ready to give us everything we need to walk in ongoing forgiveness. Let me introduce you to three friends I can't wait to meet one day in heaven.

You may know or have heard of Louis Zamperini, whose story was told in the bestselling book and film entitled, *Unbroken*. Louis was relentlessly tortured by a Japanese prison guard known as The Bird. When I read the book, I found myself thinking that the Bird's personal mission in life was to make Louie's life as miserable as possible. The level of torture and physical harm the Bird inflicted on Louie was nothing short of sadistic. It almost broke Louis while he was imprisoned, and even drove him to life-threatening addictions and horrific nightmares after being set free. After repeated alcoholic rages, one night he woke up and almost choked the life out of his wife, thinking she was the Bird, causing her to leave Louie to protect herself and the children.

Shortly thereafter, he and his wife attended a Billy Graham crusade and experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Out of the forgiveness he received, Billy Graham helped Zamperini forgive his captors and his nightmares ceased. Graham then helped Zamperini launch a lifelong ministry on forgiveness. Louie himself visited many of the guards from his POW days with one message: forgiveness. God forgave them, and so did he, and some of his former captors began to take hold of, by faith, the forgiveness that Jesus (and Louie) offered to them. Louie pursued the Bird, but the Bird refused to see him, so he sent him a letter with this message: you're forgiven and you're loved. "Love has replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, 'Forgive your enemies and pray for them.' As you probably know, I returned to Japan in 1952 and was graciously allowed to address all the Japanese war criminals at Sugamo Prison...At that moment, like the others, I also forgave you and now would hope that you would also become a Christian. Louie's life is a living example that forgiveness and freedom go hand in hand. Both are possible, for any of us.

Now, meet a lesser known figure. Chris Carrier was kidnapped by David McAllister when he was 10. McAllister stabbed him with ice picks, shot him in the temple, burned him with cigarettes, then left him as alligator food in the Florida everglades. Carrier was missing for 6 days, lying seemingly lifeless in the Everglades. Eventually, he was rescued by a passing driver. Permanently blinded in his left eye, Carrier couldn't identify his attacker, and McAllister went free for decades until, as a feeble old man in a nursing home, guilt and grief got the best of him, leading him to confess. When Carrier was informed of the confession, Carrier, he went to meet McAllister in the nursing home. "We wanted to offer him hope...It was about grace and mercy. I told him what he meant for evil God turned into a wonderful blessing."

Carrier continued to meet with him over the next few weeks and noticed McAllister starting to change. "This was a man who was hard and callused but he started to smile and he was in good spirits. We saw the Lord restore life to a man and make him new...I asked him if he wanted to know the Lord." Then, one Sunday morning on one of their visits, McAllister accepted Christ. Shortly after coming to know the grace and forgiveness of Carrier and, more importantly, Jesus, McAllister died in his sleep and went home to be with Jesus. Carrier said, "I can't wait to see him again someday." What a picture of forgiveness. They were no longer enemies, but beloved friends. McAllister and the past have absolutely no hold over Carrier. He is free and can't wait to see the man who tried to rob him of life!

Finally, meet Corrie Ten Boom. She was imprisoned for aiding and abetting Jews in Nazi Germany. She watched her beloved sister and father die at the hands of the brutal treatment by the Nazi concentration camp guards. She herself was stripped naked, mocked, and treated horrendously by the guards, yet made it out alive and full of joy and hope in Christ.

After being set free, she travelled the world speaking about overcoming the atrocities of the concentration camp, and here is what she stated, "It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, a former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

“He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. ‘How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.’ He said, ‘To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!’ His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

“Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I prayed, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

“As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

What we’re talking about today—forgiveness—is possible because Christ will supply you everything you need to forgive yourself and others. As Corrie put it, He gives the command and supplies the love. He never commands us to do things He won’t Himself empower us to do. Our role is simply to move forward in His forgiveness with ourselves and others, trusting that His love will come and will overcome.

### **Forgiveness Principle #1: You have a choice**

You have a choice to make every single time you are wronged. Think about the last time someone really hurt you. I am talking about a deep, intentional wound. At that moment you had two options: vengeance or forgiveness. If you chose vengeance, then you figured out a way to make their life miserable. You slandered them. You talked about them behind their backs, to their face, on Facebook, or whenever an opportunity presented itself. You vented. You made it very clear to them, “I am going to ruin you just like you ruined me. I want you to feel the pain you caused me.” Many times, the final act of vengeance comes through cutting them out of your life, which is nothing short of a vengeful way of saying, “You are no longer worth having a relationship with. Goodbye.”

Vengeance, however, is both Biblically problematic and relationally poisoning. Biblically, God says (on repeat), “Vengeance is mine,” not yours (Romans 12:19; Deuteronomy 32:35; Hebrews 10:30). Vengeance is not our role, but God is also protecting us from ingesting its poison. Think about it. When you seek vengeance, you feel momentarily better, but you become hardened and bitter in the process. There is a reason why we say to our children, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” The reason is that the evil done against you is now returning to them, which means the evil has worked its way inside of you and is coming from your poisoned heart. You’re no longer a victim; you have now committed the same crime.

Worse yet, you are now a prisoner of the person who wronged you. They carry the keys to your freedom. Remember the story of Louis Zamperini. Before the gospel of Jesus set him free, he

chose vengeance on the Bird. His biographer writes, “*The Bird had taken his dignity and left him feeling humiliated, ashamed, and powerless, and Louie believed that only the Bird could restore him, by suffering and dying in the grip of his hands. A once singularly hopeful man now believed that his only hope lay in murder. The paradox of vengefulness is that it makes men dependent upon those who have harmed them, believing that their release from pain will come only when they make their tormentors suffer. In seeking the Bird’s death to free himself, Louie had chained himself, once again, to his tyrant. During the war, the Bird had been unwilling to let go of Louie; after the war, Louie was unable to let go of the Bird*”. Tragically, many of us, like Louie, chain ourselves to our tormentors, thinking that somehow freedom lies on the other side of their pain, and in doing so willingly cede them power to continue tormenting us.

There is a film which accurately captures this dynamic of forgiveness versus vengeance called *The Interpreter*. Nicole Kidman plays the lead, as a woman whose family was killed by an evil dictator in Africa named Edmond Zuwani. She states, “Everyone who loses someone wants revenge, on God, if they can’t find someone else. In Africa, in Motobo, the Ku believe that the only way to end grief is to save a life. If someone is murdered, a year of mourning ends with a ritual that we call the drowning mantra. At dawn, the killer is put in a boat, and bound, so that he can’t swim. He is then pushed overboard, and the family of the dead has to make a choice; they can let him drown or swim out to save him. The Ku believe that if the family lets the killer drown, they’ll have justice, but spend the rest of their lives in mourning. But, if they save him, and admit that life isn’t always just, that very act can take away their sorrow. Vengeance is a lazy form of grief.”

The family who has been wronged has a choice—they can seek vengeance and let this guy drown, and if your system of justice is balanced by an eye for an eye, or in this case, a death for a death, then justice is achieved. But, Kidman says, the Africans know that you may have “justice, but spend the rest of your lives in mourning,” because you have now just committed another wrong; the evil they perpetrated comes inside of you and it will lead to a life worthy of mourning. But, she says, there is another option. The family who has been wronged has the option of swimming out and saving the very person who murdered their family member.

This is the point that the film makes so well: forgiveness doesn’t just happen by saying, “I forgive you.” Forgiveness means telling someone, “I’m not going to make you pay for what you’ve done because I will suffer myself.” To forgive someone means you will have to suffer, greatly. In the movie, it means the wronged party swims out and saves the life of the one who took the life of their loved one. Can you imagine how emotionally difficult this would be? It would involve incredible emotional suffering.

Such is the way forward with forgiveness in all of our broken relationships: it hurts. My friend put it this way, “Forgiveness, when it is real, is one of the hardest things you’ll ever do in your life, which should cause you to wonder if you have ever done it all. Forgiveness is a death and it feels like death—a death to your rights.” What rights? We give up the right to use what they did to us against them in any form or fashion. This doesn’t mean there are no consequences (legal, financial, etc.), but it does mean we won’t use this vengefully against them.

Surely this is one aspect of what Jesus was getting at when He called us to pick up our cross and die (Luke 9:23). Forgiveness can feel like a daily death to our right to use what was done to us against the person who did it. Yet by making this courageous decision to choose what feels like death, forgiveness is born, and, as Kidman says, you won't spend the rest of your life in mourning, full of bitterness and rage. Supernaturally, new resurrection life emerges, but only if we have the courage to first die. If there is no death, then there is no resurrection and no new life. As Paul said, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 4:10-11).

### **Forgiveness Principle #2: It (often) takes time plus God's grace**

In my marriage with Bradford, we have a commitment that we will *always* forgive one another. This does not mean, however, that forgiveness is always offered *instantaneously*. Often, it takes **time plus grace**. One of the world's great lies is that time heals everything. It doesn't. We all know people who have just grown more bitter and angry and cynical over time. Time doesn't heal everything, but time plus grace can. Time plus the healing power of God's grace can heal any wound, no matter how deep.

Let me illustrate. When we lived in San Diego, we drove to Los Angeles and took my adopted son's birth mother out to lunch. We had a great (and emotional) lunch, followed by eight intense hours with an adoption agency for another adoption. At 9pm, I was exhausted and emotionally drained, but Bradford was still churning out a letter to Ford's birthmother. Callously, I said, "Babe, wrap it up. Sometimes you get a little wordy." I tried to catch the words before they went into her ears, but they slipped off my tongue and through my fingers too quickly. The damage was already done.

In knee jerk fashion, I blurted out, "I'm so sorry. That was stupid. Will you forgive me?" She looked at me and said, "I'm going to forgive you, **but not yet**." I smiled, knowing she just spoke truth in the most loving way possible. This truth principle--that **forgiveness isn't optional, but it can be delayed**—has become a mainstay in our home. When wronged, our common phrase is now, "I will forgive you, but not yet. Right now I am hurt and angry and not ready to pay the debt you just created."

Think of Joseph. He wasn't ready to forgive his brothers when he was down in the pit they threw him into, nor was he ready initially when they made their way to Egypt to buy grain. Time and God's grace enabled him to proclaim, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). With uncontrollable tears, he could now embrace his brothers who sold him into slavery and offer forgiveness. Thankfully, time plus God's grace can heal all wounds!

### **Forgiveness Principle #3: Forgiveness is an ongoing choice**

Forgiveness is born when we make the courageous choice to die to ourselves and what feels like our right to seek vengeance. But forgiveness must be nurtured and cultivated to grow to maturity, like a newborn child,. Forgiveness can (and will) die prematurely, just like newborn babies, if we don't make the ongoing choice to walk in forgiveness.

When Jesus called us to pick up our cross and die to ourselves, he said do it daily (Luke 9:23). Not annually, but daily. One aspect of daily death comes in daily choosing forgiveness. Daily dying to the desire to hold the wrong over their heads.

How many times? What if the moron keeps doing it? Surely there is there a limit to forgiveness? Thankfully Peter asked this question for us when Jesus was teaching on forgiveness. Excuse me, Jesus, “How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21).

In fact, Peter was being extremely generous by the standards of his peers, who followed rabbinical standards of the day which taught that forgiveness wasn't required after the third offense. In Peter's mind, he doubled the cultural standard of generosity (with 6) and threw a plus one on top. Jesus responds, “No, not seven times but seventy times seven!” (Matthew 18:22). 490 times! Jesus chose 7, the Biblical number of perfection or fullness, and multiplied it to perfection on steroids (70), so that we end up with a number (490) that is so high no one could possibly keep track of the number of times they have forgiven someone.

Besides, if you are keeping track, you have completely missed Jesus' point, which is for us to forgive without limits. As followers of Jesus, forgiveness is what we do and it is who we are: we forgive as we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). We're a forgiven people, and out of God's limitless forgiveness to us, we freely forgive others without limits.

Think about the implications of limitless forgiveness. For instance, once you forgive someone (or yourself), you then have to choose forgiveness every single time you remember what you did or what they did. That is why forgiveness is so challenging because we don't have delete buttons in our brains. Every time we remember the wrong that was done to us, we have to choose forgiveness and it feels like choosing death, again. If we continue to bring it up and hold it against the wrongdoer or ourselves, then we haven't forgiven them or ourselves. We're determined to make them pay or to make ourselves pay. Instead, ongoing forgiveness means eliminating the phrase, “See, I told you so. Here you go again. Just like you did when....”

Michael Jordan wisely pointed this out about his good friend, Tiger Woods, when he stated, “The thing about T-Dub (Tiger), *he cannot erase*. That's what he really wants. He wants to erase the things that happened.”

If we're honest, we're all like Tiger, We wish we could erase certain things we've done or that were done to us. We can't, and we can't stop them from coming into our minds. So what do we do when the hurt we caused (or someone caused to us) comes to mind? We *choose* to walk in forgiveness. We choose forgiveness, again, and again, and again. We relentlessly choose not to hold it against them (or ourselves) in any way. Am I saying there are no consequences? Absolutely not. Consequences remain, but condemnation is gone (Romans 8:1). Forever!

#### **Forgiveness Principle #4: Pay the debt and clear the books**

In order to make this more concrete, let's put it in economic terms. When Jesus speaks about forgiveness, He often casts it in economic terms. Consider how He teaches us to pray, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). In effect, Jesus is saying, "If you want to understand forgiveness, put it in economic terms. You have a debt. God paid it. Now, go and do the same with others. When they wrong you, it will be as if they now owe you money. Pay their debt for them. Clear the books."

To emphasize His point, Jesus tells a story about an unmerciful servant who, despite having his debt paid by the master, refused to pay the debts of others and clear the books (Matthew 18:21-35). He (wrongly) held their debts over their heads.

For example, if you have a mortgage on a home, then you owe a debt to the holder of your note. If you can't pay the debt, then somebody has to pay it. The options are either you, the lender, or the federal government, but someone must pay the debt—it doesn't just disappear into thin air. Someone must absorb it. Someone must suffer the loss. If the lender forgives the loan, it means they are absorbing the loss financially. They have chosen to pay the debt.

If you owe the debt, the bank says, "The loan is forgiven. We have cleared the books." It is futile to try collect on a loan that has already been paid off in the financial world, yet we do it all the time in relationships. Marriage after marriage and relationship after relationship continue to suffer from attempting to collect debts that have already been forgiven.

C.S. Lewis put it this way, "I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says 'Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.' But excusing says 'I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame.' If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites." If there is no sin, then a religion that spends so much of its air time on resourcing forgiveness becomes largely unintelligible. As Lewis eloquently states, the goal isn't to excuse the past but to forgive the past!

#### **Forgiveness Principle #5: God cleared the books**

As we are about to see, the same relational dynamics that apply in our human relationships apply in our relationship with God. When all the sin of the human race is pooled together, is it any wonder that God's suffering would be as great as it is? When you consider all the wrongs that we collectively as human beings have committed against Him you realize just how much He had to suffer for us. Murder, treason, character defamation, stealing, self-righteousness, pride, anger—you name it, we have done it to God. And remember, the greater the offense, the greater the suffering required to forgive. This is why Jesus had to die.

Herein lies the answer to a question a college student once asked me, “I know I’m not perfect, but why can’t God just say, ‘I forgive you.’ I just don’t see why the cross is necessary.” Answer: the cross is necessary because God made a willful choice to forgive us, knowing that His suffering would be far greater than any suffering imaginable. On the cross, you have the ultimate suffering for the ultimate forgiveness. Tim Keller said it well, “The currency of forgiveness is blood, sweat, tears, and thorns.” God could no more say, “I forgive you,” than a bank could use those words for someone who has failed to pay their loan if the bank wasn’t willing to suffer the loss.

Thankfully, God was willing to suffer to pay our debt. He took on flesh “to give his life as a ransom,” (Mark 10:45) and in doing so cleared the books on our sin “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12). Grace wrote a check works could never have cashed and with this grace in hand He calls us we to go and do likewise. Let’s not be people who sit around talking about forgiveness. In the words of one of the most famous and ubiquitous marketing campaigns of all time, “Just do it!”

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Who is one person in your life you need to forgive? Discuss your plan to offer forgiveness and if you aren’t yet ready to clear the books and offer forgiveness, then have your group pray for you.
2. Read Mark 18:21-35. What is the point Jesus is making by saying we are to forgive 490 times (7x70)? What are the challenges in pulling this off?
3. When you are wronged, you can choose vengeance or forgiveness. Describe the downside of choosing vengeance. Provide an example from your life.
4. Using financial terms, how would you define forgiveness? How do you clear the books in relationships where you continue to remember what they did (or what you did)?
5. Describe an example in your life where you said, “I forgive you, but not yet.”
6. Respond to the statement, “I know I’m not perfect, but why can’t God just say, ‘I forgive you.’ I just don’t see why the cross is necessary.”