

“Forgiveness: The Real F Word—Collateral Damage”

True story: A guy, who happened to be a pastor, is at a gas station filling up his car. He sees this other guy jogging, and he had this long leash, and on the end of the leash was this monstrous Doberman. He's minding his own business and watches the guy and his dog cross a very busy six lane road. The guy with the dog jogs up to the gas station, obviously hot, thirsty, tired. He's heading inside for drink.

He took the leash, sort of like this one, and tied it to a bench by the front door of the gas station. A bench like this one. Wood, metal, anchored to the concrete. The Doberman was left tied to the bench while the guy went inside to buy something.

The dog was perfectly content for a minute or so, and then something happened. All of a sudden, for some reason, this dog got startled and just took off running. The Doberman took off with such force, with such torque, that he ripped the bench off the bolts that held it to the concrete. And the dog is now running toward that busy six-lane street dragging this park bench behind him. Sparks were flying, heads were turning. Everybody's thinking, "What's going to happen to this dog...and what's going to happen to that bench?" The dog is heading right into the street.

People watch as cars screech to a stop. The dog runs towards an SUV that was turning left, the dog stops short of the SUV...but the bench doesn't! It swings into the SUV. BAAM! Parts were flying. Then the dog turns and runs the other way...towards a Volkswagen Beetle. This car is also turning left, but the dog stops short of that, and swings the bench—BAAM!—into the Volkswagen.

Everybody at the gas station pumping gas is frozen watching this scene! They're in shock not knowing what to do! The manager of the gas station hears, and sees, what's going on. He comes out to chase the dog. The dog's master comes out spilling Gatorade everywhere trying to catch the dog. It was a real show stopper! Can you picture it?

Well, when it comes to today's subject matter, forgiveness, a lot of us are a lot like that Doberman. A lot of us are leashed up to anger, resentment, and unforgiveness. We may or may not realize it, but we are dragging this around through life, and it's causing some serious collateral damage in our relationships. It's damaging ourselves, and more importantly, it's smashing up the potential that God wants us to live out in this one and only life. So I've got to ask: Do you have some unforgiveness in your life?

We sent out an email survey last week asking you about some of the things that have happened to you in life that you find hard to forgive. There was a lot of pain in the responses. You brought up things like infidelity, sexual abuse as children, abandonment, being ripped off by a business partner, and more. As I read these it broke my heart because the wounds were so deep. And these are all hard to forgive.

You see, this affects so many of our lives, and in so many different ways. So we're going to go deep over the next few weeks on this. Not only does unforgiveness affect so many of our lives, but it has a lot to do with our relationship with God. Forgiveness is a big, big, concept. It's a life-changing principle, and it's the real F-word.

One concept I want us to get our brains around today is that unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. Bottom line? I don't like to do it, and you don't either. When someone hurts me, when someone damages me, when someone says something against me, my reaction is to hold a grudge or lash out at them. And when someone tells me that I should forgive them, I should release them? Man, I don't like that. That flies in the face of that revenge instinct. And those feelings get magnified when the hurt is directed at a family member, instead of me. That came up on almost every single response in our survey. You said over and over and over again that the hardest thing to forgive, if you could even do it, was some act of violence against a family member. I would guess that 99% of us struggle with forgiving someone, and when we choose not to forgive, we end up dragging around some pretty heavy baggage.

So, think about something as I talk over the next several moments. Who is sitting on your bench? There are people there. People who hurt you, who hurt someone you love. Who is sitting on your bench? Could it be an ex-spouse, a parent, a coach, someone who did something to you that no one really knows about except that person, yourself, and God? Maybe someone did you dirty in the business world or has said

some hurtful things to you at your school. Who is sitting on your bench? One person, two, does your unforgiveness bench look like this? **[PICTURE: Filled Park Bench].**

You might be saying, “Well, Aaron, this person on my bench, man, they died about a decade ago.” They can still be on that bench. Who is it for you?

Do you realize when we harbor unforgiveness we’re saying to the person who hurt us, “Okay, you control my life. I’m the X-Box. You’ve got the controls. You control my life. You hurt me. Because I don’t forgive you, you control me. You ruined my life. You keep me from all this potential.” That’s what we’re saying.

I’ve lived that way before, and it’s no way to live. Years and years ago a family really hurt me. And for years after that I was leashed up to unforgiveness. I’d replay the conversations over and over again in my mind. I’d rehearse my responses and think of different responses—things I wished I’d said. I wrote things down that I wanted to send to them, and never did. I talked to Janet about it, I talked to friends about it. For years I could not let it go.” I let their hurt, control me for years. All that wasted energy, time, concentration.

For months I’ve been having computer trouble at home. The thing was just running so slow. Everything took so long to load, and process. Every time I wanted to print something it took 5 minutes to even start up. It was driving me and Janet batty. So I asked a friend who knows about these things to come and take a look at it and he found that there was a little program running that was monopolizing the CPU--that’s the brain of the computer. This little program was something that was installed with an old keyboard that I wasn’t even using anymore, but it was slogging down my computer’s brain until it just about could not function. But my friend found that little program, deleted it and my computer could think again. It could process other things. It could do what it was meant to do.

Unforgiveness clogs up our minds, takes huge amounts of our life potential, our brain potential, and ties it up. **But it doesn’t have to be that way.** In fact, God’s made it pretty clear that living with unforgiveness goes against his will and his plan.

Let’s take a look at a story that Jesus told in Matthew 18. Follow along in the Bible there on the chair in front of you or in your Bibles, turn to Matthew 18. Jesus had been talking about this whole subject. He’d been talking about what we should do when someone has sinned against us. Simon Peter listened to Jesus talk and it sure does seem like he was dealing with a similar circumstance in his own life. Obviously, someone had done him dirty. And he was thinking about all this stuff, so he was all ears. He started asking Jesus these questions. And Simon Peter made some serious assumptions, some assumptions about forgiveness that were wrong, some assumptions that we all have made.

So check out his question that he asked Jesus in Matthew 18:21, **[SLIDE...]** **“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’” (Matthew 18:21).** Look at tone of that question. Simon Peter is trying to show off because rabbis, the religious leaders of that day, taught that if you forgave someone three times, that was monster forgiveness. And here’s Simon Peter coming along, “Hey, Jesus, you know, I am a disciple. I’m a spiritual stud. How many times should I forgive someone who hurts me? Seven times?” Like “Jesus, isn’t that incredible? I’m the man! I mean, isn’t that phenomenal?”

Simon Peter was muddy about forgiveness. Because forgiveness is more for the one who has been offended than the one who has carried out the offense. See, a lot of us think forgiveness is more for the person that hurt us. No, no. Forgiveness is more for us. They might not even know what they’ve done or how they’ve damaged us.

No, no. It helps us more than the people who’ve hurt us. Cindi Broaddus said that forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves. But Simon Peter didn’t get it. So Jesus, when he answered his question, tells one of his classic stories.

Let me paraphrase the story Jesus told. He said, “Okay, Simon Peter, let’s say, for example, there’s this wealthy king, this guy who is rolling in the bling-bling. And let’s say he was going through all of his accounts and decided that he was going to call in all of the people that owed him money. And let’s say this wealthy king discovered a servant who owed him a lot of money.”

Now if you take the amount of money this servant owed this king and put it into today's money, this servant in this story owed the king \$4.5 billion. That's a lot of money. That's a lot of paper even for The Donald [Trump]. \$4.5 billion—greater than Israel's total GNP at the time. So this king called this man into his palatial office and said, "It's time to settle up, your account is way past due. Show me the money," is what he said.

And you know what the servant did? Look at Matthew 18:26-27. Back then you couldn't file Chapter 11 or Chapter 13. You were in serious trouble if you couldn't pay up. It says, **[SLIDE...]** **"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything'" (Matthew 18:26, NIV).** The servant was saying to the king, "I mean, I promise you I'm good for it. I know I owe you a few billion, but man, just be patient." He's making a promise that he could not possibly hope to fulfill.

Now this king could have thrown this guy to the torturers. He could have put him and his whole family on the auction blocks. He could have done all that stuff, but this king does something that is crazy. He does something more than just give the guy time to pay it back. Check him out in verse 27, **[SLIDE...]** **"The servant's master took pity on him and canceled the debt and let him go."** Can you imagine owing \$4.5 billion but your lender says, "Hey, man, don't worry about it. No big deal. I forgive you the debt." How would you feel? I know how I would feel. "Puh! I'm a forgiven guy. The debts been canceled? This is outrageous! This is off the hook. I mean, wow! 4.5 billion...Woo, woo!"

Here's the point Jesus was trying to make to Simon Peter: When someone has hurt us, when someone has trashed us, when someone has taken advantage of us, it's like a debt has been created. We think, "The hurt me. They owe me. They need to pay." A debt has been created. Remember that. Just think about that because the story continues.

The story says that after this guy had been forgiven \$4.5 billion, he searched for a guy that owed him some money--100 denarii to be exact. In today's money it was about \$900! He found this guy and started choking him. "Give me my \$900. Give me my money!" The guy couldn't pay it, so this forgiven servant threw the guy in prison. Well, the king rolling in the bling-bling heard about this and he was not happy.

Let's pick it up Matthew 18:32-34, **[SLIDE...]** **"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured."**

Do you see the irony? The king delivered the servant from prison, and now the servant has put himself back in prison! Whoa! But the same is true in your life and mine. We've been delivered as Christ-followers. We've been set free. All of us have sinned. Sin makes us unholy, and unholy people cannot stand before a holy God. But through Jesus' crucifixion we've been forgiven. He paid what we owed. The debt's been taken care of. But when we harbor unforgiveness we're putting ourselves back in prison, back into the condition that we used to be in before we understood and appropriated the forgiveness and the debt-canceling power of Jesus Christ.

And this look at this next verse. And honestly, if Christians could pick and choose what to leave in and take out of the Bible, they'd take this one out. They'd delete this one for sure. Or use the whiteout. It's so convicting. Verse 35.... Here's how Jesus summarized this story. **[SLIDE...]** **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).** And I'm sure at this point, Simon Peter goes, "Man, why did I bring this subject up?" You know what I'm saying?

Here's what the Bible is saying—it's so plain—"If we harbor unforgiveness toward others, if we are leashed up to the resentment and the animosity and the pain, we're putting ourselves back in the prison of our sins." In other words, we choose to live a life of torture. The Bible says that. I wish it was not in here. But that's what it said. Can you imagine trying to run a few miles while you are leashed up to a bench with four or five or six or seven people on it? That's the picture.

But God expects us to freely give forgiveness because he is forgiving us. We messed up, we dropped the ball, we caused this cosmic chasm between ourselves and God because of our sin. Yet, God took the initiative. God did the work of forgiveness and gives us the potential to be reconciled back to him. It's powerful stuff.

Well Simon Peter is on the forgiveness bandwagon and says, “Is seven times enough?” Jesus’ response in Matthew 18:22, is, “No, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” This is just an illustration of--over and over and over again—so many times that you can’t count. Jesus is saying that forgiveness should be a habit, a lifestyle of what you do.

Some of you are going, “Well, Aaron, now you don’t realize what’s happened to me, man. You don’t realize what my father did. You don’t realize what my mother did. You don’t realize what my uncle did or my friend or whoever. You don’t realize what that coach said to me. I mean, my husband is saying this and my wife.... For me to, like, forgive them would be to minimize what they did to me. I’m not going to let them off that easy. I’m going to make them pay. I’m going to make them suffer.”

Forgiving is not minimizing what they did. It’s being honest about it and then letting God deal with it. God tells us to cancel the debt, to forgive them. We’re not minimizing that. We’re freeing ourselves up. We’re giving ourselves a gift that money can’t buy. Forgiveness—“give” is in the word. We give ourselves this ultimate gift. And also we’re giving the other person who hurt us a gift. We’re giving them room to change.

The Lord’s Prayer is the model prayer. Jesus taught us how to pray. He taught his disciples to pray. He said, “This is how you pray....” Now, one of the statements in The Lord’s Prayer is about confession. It says we should confess our sins to the Father. I love that. Jesus said in Matthew 6:12, [SLIDE...] **“Forgive us our debts.”**

Let me stop there. I’m great at that. I’m great at hitting my knees and saying, “God, forgive me of my sins.” But it’s this next two-letter word in that verse that messes us up: “as.” Uh-oh! I wish that word was not in the Lord’s Prayer. “Forgive us our debts AS we also have forgiven our debtors.” Whew! Well, it’s easy. I mean, if I can understand it, so can you. If God’s forgiven me, which he has, then I should rush to forgive others.

I see now. The Master, the King, that’s God. And the servant who’s been greatly forgiven is you and me. What are we going to do? Are we going to leash ourselves up to anger and resentment and animosity? Or are we going to say, “God, unleash my unforgiveness.”

You see, this whole unforgiveness thing is difficult because we like to hold onto it and feed it. But God says, “I want you, by my power and my grace, to do something that swims against the current of your instincts, that flies in the face of everything you want to do naturally.” God wants to release all of us so we can discover the totality and the freedom and the joy and this all comprehensive love that he has for all of us. He wants us to be out of the prison of our debt, he wants us to stop choosing to torture ourselves by dragging around the unforgiveness bench. What’s stopping you? What’s stopping me?

You might be saying to yourself, “Well okay, Aaron. You know, you kind of left me hanging about the Doberman. What happened? Did the dog get hit?” Well, the owner of the gas station ran out into the busy street. The master ran out too. And when this Doberman saw his master, it was amazing. He kind of just chilled for a second, and the master grabbed the leash, and simply untied it from the shattered remains of the bench. The owner of the gas station took the tattered bench, and he threw it in the dumpster. And the master of the Doberman led him to safety. (You’ve got to wonder what in the world these people told their insurance companies! But that’s another story.)

That picture, though, is what God wants to do throughout this series in your life and in mine. He wants to bring to our minds those names, those faces, those scenarios of situations that we’re holding on to. And if we’ll just stop in our tracks and look to him, our Master, by his grace and power, will untie and unleash us and lead us to safety. That is the real F word—forgiveness. That’s God’s desire for my life and yours, why, because he so many things he wants to do through us and in us, but unforgiveness puts us back in prison. In fact, forgiveness is God’s command if we choose to follow Jesus Christ. So let’s do it; let’s unleash our unforgiveness. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Ed Young, Sr. Pastor of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, TX, for his inspiration and resources for this message.