

***“Forgiveness: The Real F Word—Forgive For Good.”***

[Props: park bench, dog leash.]

If you weren't here last weekend, you might be wondering why I have these two objects up here—a park bench and a leash. I told a true story about a guy who was jogging with his dog. This jogger was hot and thirsty. He jogs up to a gas station, leashes up his gigantic Doberman to a park bench while he goes inside the gas station for a Gatorade. While the dog's master is inside, the dog gets startled and makes a bee line toward a busy six-lane street dragging the park bench behind him. A heavy, metal and wood park bench!

Amazingly, the Doberman dodged the cars and he stopped just short of an SUV, but he slung this park bench into the SUV. Bam! Car parts were flying and glass was flying. Then he turned around and slung that park bench into a Volkswagen. Bam! It messed that car up too.

Last time, I said a lot of us are like that Doberman. We're leashed up to anger, resentment, and unforgiveness; and we're dragging it around from relationship to relationship. We're dragging it around in our lives, and it's causing all of this collateral damage. It's messing us up, and it's also hurting our connectivity with God himself. I challenged all of us last week to look and see who we have sitting on our bench of unforgiveness—an ex-spouse, a parent, a child, a boss, a business partner who did you dirty. I also laid out the challenge to let God unleash our unforgiveness.

Last week I wrapped up telling you how that scene ended up. The dog's master came out of the gas station and when the dog saw his master he calmed down and stopped. His master took the leash, untied it, and led the dog to safety. And that's precisely what God has been doing throughout this series. Our God, our gracious God, has been untying a lot of us. He's been unleashing unforgiveness, and he's been leading us to freedom.

Speaking of freedom, I got an email from a man in our church last week. He wrote, “Yesterday's sermon was exactly what I needed...long over due for me to come to grips with that issue.” A woman told me, “That message really spoke to me, now I just have one person on my bench, and I'm working on that too!”

Last week I talked about how unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. I don't like to do it, and you don't either. Releasing someone, forgiving someone, canceling the debt of the hurt they did to us flies in the face of our reactions. But as unnatural as it may feel to forgive those who've hurt us or people we love, Jesus commanded us to do it. To let go. To offer forgiveness. Unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural, but with God's strength we can do it and experience some amazing things; wonderful things. In fact that's what I want us to focus on today.

Let's put it this way, **[SLIDE...]** **“Unleashing unforgiveness is unbelievable!”** As we go deeper into this whole forgiveness concept we're going to see that unleashing unforgiveness is truly unbelievable. In other words, it has some unbelievable benefits. It's time to stop the blame game, the resentment game, the unforgiveness game, and cooperate with God, let him help you unleash the unforgiveness because there are some unbelievable benefits.

So let's talk about four unbelievable benefits of unleashing unforgiveness. The first unbelievable benefit is the emotional benefit **[SLIDE: “Forgiveness has emotional benefits...”]** that occurs in all of our lives when we allow God to unleash unforgiveness.

Job 5:2 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“Resentment kills a fool” (Job 5:2, NIV)**. The word “resentment” means “to think again.” It means to rehearse something. It means to turn something over and over again on the barbecue grill of our minds. And the more we do that, what happens? The more our emotions become whacked and the more miserable we become. And when I become miserable, do you know what I want to do? I want to make you miserable, too. Often that's the way we are.

But when I take a step of faith and allow God to unleash unforgiveness, when I allow God to take care of that person, when I give the situation to God, it brings emotional healing. And from your survey responses you know this. One of you said this, “When I have forgiven someone it is a weight lifted from me.” That is an emotional benefit. Another comment was this, “Forgiveness takes away tension and strain, it allows you freedom and takes away anger. The energy used to keep anger fueled can be put to better use on some other constructive emotion.” One man whose wife had left him for someone else wrote, “Forgiving leads to a sense of deep abiding peace and wholeness. The situation did not change but I changed.” One woman who was

betrayed by her husband and was able to forgive wrote, “[I feel] completely free. It took so much energy to carry the hate around with me...[when I forgave] it was like my heart had been opened again.” Unforgiveness can eat our emotions alive. But some of you have found, forgiveness can truly be liberating. Working with God, as he gives you strength to unleash that unforgiveness, can be awesome emotionally.

Another unbelievable benefit is the relational benefit **[SLIDE: “Forgiveness has relational benefits...”]** There’s a relational benefit that occurs the moment we unleash unforgiveness. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:32, **[SLIDE...] “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other. Just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32, NIV).** There’s a pretty deep concept embedded in this and other scriptures. It’s called **[SLIDE...] preemptive forgiveness.** Preemptive forgiveness begins with Jesus. He did the work before we even thought about doing our part. Jesus took the initiative. He died on the cross for my sins and your sins, and he rose again before we ever turned from our sins, before we ever did our part. He offered us forgiveness then and continues to offer it now. For me, preemptive forgiveness means that I move through life knowing that other will hurt me and the ones that I love, and knowing that I prepare myself to take a forgiving stance in all situations of life. Let’s be clear here. This doesn’t mean that I become a doormat and let people use and abuse me. It doesn’t mean that I become weak and wimpy. It doesn’t mean that I roll over in the face of pressure. No. I am to be strong in God’s strength; I’m to be stand on truth and fight for it; I’m to be wise as a serpent, and gentle as a dove. But in strength, and in power, and in wisdom I live life in an ongoing stance of forgiveness.

Jesus is challenging me as a married man, as a father, as a pastor, and as just a human being, to practice preemptive forgiveness. I should live such a life of forgiveness that I determine to forgive others **before** they hurt me! Wow! We’re not talking Christianity 101 here. We’re talking about 301 or 401. That’s tough stuff.

Preemptive forgiveness. But a lot of people say, “Well, you know what? I can’t forgive until I feel like forgiving.” Oh please! 99% of the time, I don’t feel like it. I don’t feel like releasing the person. I don’t feel like canceling the debt. So this is where it’s time to grow up. Yes, our feelings are an important part of us, but you cannot let your feelings prevent you from doing the right thing. There’s no nice way to say this. If you don’t feel like forgiving someone, so what! Do it anyway. You don’t feel like unleashing that unforgiveness, do it anyway! That’s a sign of growing up spiritually. That’s one of the things scripture is getting at when it says, **[SLIDE...] “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2, NIV).** We don’t base decisions about forgiveness on our feelings, we base them on the facts, on transformed minds. We make spiritually mature decisions with transformed minds. The need to forgive is real, no matter what I feel.

I’m pressing this point hard because all too often I hear these rationalizations from people as to why they could never forgive somebody and so often they’re just based on feelings. For some people hate becomes a hobby. It becomes a part of their identity and in the process they choose not to experience the relational benefits of forgiving the people on their bench. It’s forgiving people today that will help you love people tomorrow. It’s forgiving people today that will help us build healthy relationships in the future. One woman in the survey shared that she had been physically and mentally abused by her father as a child. She has been able to work through forgiving him and said that she no longer has to “carry all the garbage around” anymore. She also said that what she did in forgiving her father has helped her in understanding and helping others.

God wants to free you up like the man freed up the Doberman. God will lead you to safety emotionally and relationally if you’ll just trust him and allow him to do it. Because I know right now God is bringing up so many circumstances, so many situations, so many people who can identify with this. Unleashing unforgiveness is truly unbelievable.

Here’s something else about doing the preemptive work of forgiveness. Yes, we’ve got to forgive those who have hurt us, who’ve done us dirty. But we’re also called to do forgiveness work with those people **we** have hurt, **we** have damaged, **we** have done dirty. And one of the biggest venues where this occurs is in the family. Wouldn’t you say so? As a parent—hey moms and dads—how about apologizing to your kids? Try that one on. Husbands, what about apologizing to your wife? Wives, to your husbands. And doing that from your heart.

“From the heart is important.” Just saying, “I’m sorry!” is pitiful. That’s not forgiveness work. “Hey, sorry!” When I say that, I’m still in control. Or if I say, “If you took what I said wrong, hey, I’m sorry.” What is that? I’ve done that before. That’s pa-the-tic. That’s not truly apologizing or doing forgiveness work.

Here’s real forgiveness work: “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” Now I’ve made myself vulnerable. That’s what we should do when we ask for forgiveness. Maybe you’re thinking, “Well, what if they say, no?” You’ve done your part. You have done your part, and you’ve got to give that situation to God. But many here need to go and find some people and say, “I was wrong. I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Now, God is not saying we should chase down every single person we’ve hurt in our past, and carry this big bench around and drop it in their life to ruin their life. The Bible would not say that. And if you have some questions as far as who you should go to for forgiveness and when or whatever, seek Christian counseling, or talk to a trusted Christian friend about it. However, we do need to do forgiveness work. We need to do our part in the reconciliation, our part in the forgiveness, and also we need to do our part where we release the person. Relationally, great things occur, an unbelievable benefit.

And there’s a third unbelievable benefit, a physical benefit [**SLIDE: “Forgiveness has physical benefits...”**]. Isn’t that crazy? There’s a physical benefit to forgiveness. Let’s say I took this piece of paper right here, and let’s say I cut myself—a little paper cut. Although small, that paper cut, if I didn’t take care of it, could poison my entire system.

The same is true with unforgiveness. A little bit of unforgiveness can poison my entire system. As I told you last week, for a long time I dealt with this unforgiveness stuff. I was leashed up to a family that hurt me and my family. I’m telling you it does not work. It can poison your entire system. It can poison the greatness that God has for your life. That’s why Proverbs 14:30 says this about our physical bodies:

**[SLIDE...] “A heart at peace gives life to the body” (Proverbs 14:30, NIV).**

And science is backing this up. Wow! You won’t believe this. A recent study showed that giving up grudges can reduce chronic back pain. Another study found that forgiveness reduced relapses among women battling substance abuse problems. An even more intriguing project explored how just thinking about reconciliation sparks activity in a very specific part of the brain. Researchers say that this suggests that we all have a mental forgiveness center just waiting to be tapped. Wow! That’s not a news flash. The Bible’s been saying this for thousands of years.

One study at Stanford University made sure to emphasize that forgiving doesn’t mean condoning the offense, and we all know that. God is not saying when we release someone, we have to become best buddies with them. We don’t have to say, “Hey, let’s go on picnic together. Let’s go to a Chiefs game next month.” You still might not have a great vibe with the person and you may even have to part ways. But we are called to do what? Our part. It keeps going. But this Stanford study also stated that letting go of a grudge can slash one’s stress level by up to 50 percent!

Participants in that study showed improvements in energy, mood, sleep quality, and overall physical vitality. Many have lost over 60 pounds! I’m kidding. I just made that last part up to wake some of you up! But the doctor in charge of the project is quoted as saying, “Carrying around a load of bitterness and anger at how unfairly you were treated is very, very toxic.”

From our own survey one person talked about how they had to be around a family member who had hurt them, someone they had not forgiven, and how every time they had to be around this person they would get physically sick. This person wrote, “I began using the ‘Prayer of Resentment’... Basically you pray that the person you resent receives all the blessings you would want for yourself. [After about a month] I found my heart changing... I found my negative feelings had left and I could go for visits without getting ill.” Do you see the brilliance of God? Do you see how loving God is? He does not want us to live life chained and leashed up to unforgiveness. He knows that unleashing unforgiveness is unbelievable.

It’s unbelievable emotionally. It unbelievable relationally and physically. And also, fourthly, it’s unbelievable spiritually as well [**SLIDE: “Forgiveness has spiritual benefits...”**]. This points to forgiving yourself. And forgiving yourself comes directly from knowing that you are forgiven by God. Your surveys point to the fact that lots of us struggle with forgiving ourselves. And this is a spiritual issue. And it’s one that I

understand. I was a bad kid growing up. I was mean, I had no conscience, I did some vandalizing, some shoplifting, in general I hurt a lot of people as a boy. I distinctly remember one night as a boy having all this shame come crashing down on me because of some stuff I had done. And that night, as a boy about 10 years old, I wanted to die. I figured that it would be easier for everybody if I just wasn't around anymore. I had shamed myself and my family. I began thinking about how to end it all.

But somewhere in the midst of that deep shame, God broke in; God broke through. And the message was, "Aaron, I love you. I forgive you. Please forgive yourself." It took me a while, but I finally got it. God really did love me. It was when I understood that I had been forgiven by God that I could forgive myself, and then I was empowered to forgive others. And I could be free. Do you see how closely forgiveness and freedom are related? You can't have one without the other. The Bible says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV)**. Why? Because the Spirit of the Lord brings forgiveness to us. The Bible also says, **[SLIDE...]** **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1, NIV)**. We might say, "Don't let yourselves be burdened again to a **leash** of slavery." That is one powerful spiritual benefit of forgiveness. Letting God love and forgive you—he wants to. Forgiving yourself—just do it. So then you're ready, willing, and able to forgive others.

Unforgiveness doesn't work. Resentment doesn't work. Hatred doesn't work. These will not get you where you want to go. But living a life of forgiveness—one of the primary characteristics of God—has piles and piles and piles of benefits. I'll say it one more time. Unleashing, unforgiveness, is unbelievable. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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