

### ***“Forgiveness: The Real F Word--4-D Forgiveness”***

For the last 2 weeks we've been talking about forgiveness, “the real F word.” Forgiveness is one of the central characteristics of God and one of the central principles of the Christian faith. Today, I'm talking more about your future than your past, because forgiveness is also a futuristic thing. And for our future to flourish we've got to make peace with our past.

In week one of this series, we learned that unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. We said that there's something in all of us that likes to be leashed up to unforgiveness. Someone does me dirty, someone hurts me, someone takes advantage of me, I want to get them back. I want to make them pay. I want to seek that sweet revenge. We asked ourselves this question in week one, “Who is sitting on the bench of our lives?” It may be a parent, a former boyfriend, an ex-spouse, or a business partner that ripped us off. Who is sitting on the bench of our lives? Who are we dragging around and causing all of this collateral damage with? Who are we leashed up to?

Last week, we learned that unleashing unforgiveness is unbelievable. God wants us to unleash it because it has unbelievable benefits. The upside is huge—emotionally, relationally, physically and spiritually.

Well, today, we're talking about something else. We're going to find out that **[SLIDE...] Unleashing unforgiveness is unending.** God tells me, as a Christ-follower, that I should live in a state of forgiveness. I touched on this last week. That if we choose to be Christ followers we are choosing to live life with a stance of preemptive forgiveness. We don't forgive when we feel like it...because that may never happen. We forgive because we've been forgiven by God. We live in a state of forgiveness, and that's something that I cannot do naturally, but we're going to find out in the fourth dimension that we can do it.

What do we have? Three dimensions—height, width, and depth. The fourth dimension is that supernatural dimension, the dimension that God wants us to walk in. We can only do this forgiveness work when we live our lives in the fourth dimension with God. And that is why unleashing unforgiveness is unending. Because if you've dealt with unforgiveness very much, you know that unforgiveness is unforgiving, isn't it? It'll mess you up. Unforgiveness consumes our thinking and it gives control over our lives to the person who hurt us.

Before we go any further I want to take a short trip into one of the dark places in the human mind. One of the places that is the source of a lot of unforgiveness for us individually and on much larger scales. This has come out in a number of conversations I've had recently where a question like this gets asked: “When someone has done something horrible, life-altering, catastrophic to us, isn't forgiving really being unfair? Isn't forgiving acting like nothing really happened?” **[SLIDE: “Is forgiving fair?”]** In that dark place in our minds, many of us wonder if forgiving someone who has hurt us deeply is just a weakling's way out. We wonder if it's not unfair to us because we have been hurt. And we wonder if forgiving the person who hurt us is unfair to them, because then they might be encouraged to hurt again and again.

This whole series had been focused on the belief that forgiving is the answer to healing. But I wonder if you believe that.

So let me ask this, if forgiveness **isn't** the answer, what is the alternative? If you doubt if forgiveness really is the way to peace and freedom, what is the alternative? I'll tell you. One is freezing yourself in that cruel moment in the past. It's standing still in that painful, wretched time and never stepping out of it. This means being leashed up to that moment of pain in such a way that you are shutting off the possibilities of the future. So, is that fair to yourself? Is it?

Another alternative to forgiveness is revenge. Vengeance is a passion, a white-hot desire, to get even...to give as much pain to the person who hurt you as they gave you. An eye for an eye. When we're really angry we can convince ourselves that that's fairness in it's fullest. But the problem with revenge is that it never gets what it wants. When you get on the escalator of revenge with the person who hurt you it is a descent into more pain. The escalator of revenge never stops and it never lets anybody off. Why do family feuds go on and on until everybody is dead or too old and tired to fight? Simple. No two people or families ever weigh pain on the same scale. The pain a person causes me always feels heavier to me than it feels to the person who caused it. The pain I inflict on you always feels worse to you than it seems to me.

If you hurt me and I retaliate in kind, I think I've given you what you deserve and that's all. But you'll feel different about that. And your passion for fairness will force you to retaliate, harder this time. Then it will be my turn. An eye for an eye turns into a leg for a leg, then a life for a life. Gandhi put it this way: If we all live by an eye for an eye, the whole world will be blind. The only way out is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not weakness, it is real strength. The whole theme of this series is that forgiveness has the creative power to move us away from the past moment of pain, unleash us from rehearsing that pain, and create a new situation of freedom. One author, Lewis Smedes, wrote that the alternative to forgiveness is, "in the end, a ceaseless process of self-destruction." Smedes writes, "You are not thinking clearly when you refuse to forgive on the grounds that you would not be fair to yourself. Forgiving is the *only* way to be fair to yourself. Getting even is a loser's game. It is the ultimate frustration because it leaves you with more pain than you got in the first place."

Do you know what the Bible says about our being involved in unforgiveness? It says that we are putting the leash in the devil's hands. Look at Ephesians 4:26-27, [SLIDE...] "**In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. And do not give the devil a foothold**" (Ephesians 4:26-27, NIV). Okay, here's A big question. Is it a sin to have feelings of anger? Yes or no? No! It's not a sin to be angry. God gets angry. We **should** get angry about certain things. If you don't get angry about the right stuff, you better check your EKG, man. We better get angry! We should get angry at injustice, angry at sin. As a pastor, I should get angry when someone disturbs the business of God. I should get angry when people are irreverent, when they take cell phone calls in church. I sin, though, when my anger gets the best of me, when I allow it to get into my feelings. When that happens I run the risk of sinning—I run the risk of saying something I should not say, or doing something I should not do.

So once again, being angry and having feelings of anger, that's not a sin. It's when your anger gets the best of you and it fuels these feelings and these words and actions that mess us up. So the Bible says, "In your anger, do not sin." If I allow anger to metastasize in my life, that is a sin. If I allow anger to boil up in my life, or if I Tupperware my anger, that is a sin. If I shove anger in a little container and put the top on it and put it back into the refrigerator of my life; and then two or three weeks later all of a sudden I open it up—Whoa, oh, oh, oh, the stench—that is a sin.

The middle part of the verse says, [SLIDE...] "**Do not let the sun go down while you're still angry.**" Isn't that great? I try to live by that verse. "Don't let the sun set on your anger." Janet and I try to live by that verse. We try to settle issues before the sun goes down. If we have a disagreement, or disappoint one another, or whatever, we try to settle it before the sun goes down. Now, you might still be going back and forth when the sun's coming back up, but live by this principle. I challenge you to live by this principle, to keep short accounts with God vertically and short accounts with others horizontally. Don't let it stay with you, because if we allow the sun to set too many times on our junk, on our unforgiveness and anger and resentment, then we forget the source of it and that anger then takes on a life of its own.

We forget where the leash is connected. And because of that, we think to ourselves, "Well, I'll just change environments and everything will be okay. I'll just move from this marriage to that marriage...from that friendship to this friendship...from this partnership to that partnership...from this church to another church. Or I'll move; I'll move to the mountains. Yeah. Or the seashore. Yeah. And everything will be cool."

No, it won't. You're just changing environments. That mentality would be like me doing this. It would be like me driving home after church and all of a sudden I get into a wreck. And there I am lying on the side of the road. "Oh man, my leg is cut! Oh, my leg hurts. Get me some help." Then the paramedics rush to the scene and say, "Aaron, hey man, I want to help you with your leg. I want to fix the leg." But what if I said this, "Don't touch me. Do not even think about touching my leg. If you'll take me to another place, if you'll just get me away from the crash site, my leg will be okay."

We do the same thing when it comes to unforgiveness. We say, "Well, yeah, they hurt me; but if you'll just change my environment, just get me away from the crash scene, then I'll be okay. Really, really, really, really. I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm really okay." But are you? Yes, sometimes we may need to change environments, but most of the time we need to deal with the hurt first so that we're not carrying that hurt into a

new place, so that we're not carrying unforgiveness into a new environment where it will cause more collateral damage.

Well, this verse continues. It says [SLIDE...] **"Do not let the sun go down while you're still angry. And do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26-27, NIV)**. Who gives the devil a foothold? We do. I do. You do. We do it when we harbor a hurt, anger, resentment, unforgiveness. That's what we're doing. It's that serious. I think the biggest thing that keeps most Christians from experiencing the freedom that God desires is this whole thing called unforgiveness. When we don't forgive we give Satan a foothold, an opening into our lives. And when we give him a foothold he's attached to us and then he can get a stronghold in our lives. That's when we let him control us. A stronghold is a base of enemy operations and from the stronghold, if we're not careful, he can put us in a chokehold.

It shouldn't be that way. Life is too short to live that way. Unforgiveness is unforgiving. It'll burn our lives up. We'll miss the best that God has for us. "Well, Aaron," you might be saying, "What do I need to do? Now, you've been talking about all this information concerning forgiveness, what do I need to do?" We've talked a lot about that through this series, but there are two critical things.

First [SLIDE...] **Decide to take the initiative**. Forgiveness is not a feeling, it's a choice. God gives us the grace to do it, but we have the option to make the choice to either live it out or not. The power is there. The stuff is there. We make the choice. It's your call or it's my call. Think about all those stories Jesus told, all the parables about God taking the initiative.

Do you remember the prodigal son? He took off with half the family's estate and he blew it all and had to come back home. His father took the initiative and welcomed him back home.

Do you remember in the first episode of this series I talked about the king, rolling in the serious bling-bling, who forgave his servant a 4.5 billion dollar debt? He took the initiative and said, "Debt forgiven." What was Christ saying? "Take the initiative."

Remember one time Jesus talked about a gentleman having this huge banquet, this black tie affair. And this guy who put it together went out to the highways and by-ways and found people who did not deserve to be there. He invited them to sit at the table. That's initiative.

We serve an initiative-taking God. God is all about preemptive forgiveness. Jesus did the work on the cross. He did his part long before we even thought about doing our part. As Christ-followers, that's what we're called to do. Romans 12:18 underscores this: [SLIDE...] **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18, NIV)**. As far as it depends on who? You. Live at peace with everyone. It's our choice. Ephesians 4:32 says, [SLIDE...] **"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32, NIV)**. And that's in the present tense meaning a continuous thing. Decide to take the initiative. Don't leave it up to your feelings. Decide.

The real miracle here about forgiveness is not forgetting what someone has done to us. The miracle is remembering it and **choosing** to forgive. Because when we remember it and choose to forgive, our memories can become memorials to the grace of God. And the more we make those memorials, the sooner we won't think about it as much, and we won't remember it as much. And that just continues to free us up to be the kind of people that God desires.

Another key element to living in the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension of unending forgiveness is to [SLIDE...] **Pray for those who hurt you**. You might be thinking, "No, Aaron, you did not say what I thought you just said!" Yeah, I did. I'm saying what the Bible says in Luke 6. We're to pray for our enemies. This is the tough stuff!

Well, here's what Jesus tells me to do, because after all we've got to live in the fourth dimension. In Luke 6:27-28, Jesus says, [SLIDE...] **"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28, NIV)** When I do that my whole outlook and my vibe and my opinion changes concerning them. I'm not excusing what they've done. I'm not acting like it didn't happen. But I'm praying for them. I'm giving them to God. God is going to settle the score. We don't have to worry about it. It's a huge step of faith, but as you bless your enemies, as you pray for your enemies, great things will happen.

During WWII Corrie Ten Boom and her family helped about 800 Jews escape death at the hands of the Nazi's. She and her family were dedicated followers of Christ who did everything in their power to help during that torturous time. Because of their dedication to helping people escape the Nazi's, Corrie and her family were sent to Nazi prisons. Her father died within 10 days, her nephew was killed, brother contracted tuberculosis and died shortly after the war, her sister died in prison after being beaten by a guard and getting an infection. Corrie was liberated from a Nazi concentration camp a few days after Germany was conquered. She had a deep seated hate for the Nazi's but she set out on a journey of forgiveness, teaching about forgiveness, until she came to a place where she even forgave the Nazi's who killed her family and dehumanized her life.

She believed that in forgiving she tapped into the only power that could heal the history of hurt and hate for the people of Europe. At age 53, Corrie began a world-wide ministry which took her into more than 60 countries over the next 33 years! Her simple message was, "God will give us the love to be able to forgive our enemies."

One Sunday she spoke about forgiveness in a church in Munich, Germany. The people were eager to be forgiven. After she spoke a large man walked over to her, he reached out to shake her hand saying, "Fraulein Ten Boom, I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say. But can you forgive me?" Corrie knew this man. She remembered how she was forced to take showers as a prisoner with this man, this beast looking on, leering, mocking the defenseless women. She was frozen as he stood there with his hand out. He put it closer to her.

But she couldn't forgive him and she was stunned and terrified by her own weakness. All she could do was pray silently, "Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me." And at once in some wonderful way she couldn't explain she felt forgiven. Forgiven for not forgiving! At that moment something like electricity went through her arm and into her hand and she lifted her hand to meet the hand of this former prison guard, her enemy. She took his hand in hers and shook it saying, "I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you." In her heart at that moment she freed him from his terrible past. And she freed herself from her own.

Unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. We don't like to do it, but when we do it, it's unbelievable. It has unbelievable benefits. And as a Christ-follower, it's unending. So I want to ask you, as we conclude this series, just one more question. Are you leashed up to unforgiveness? If you are, who is on the bench? Just ask God to unleash you, because he wants to. And then we all can walk in 4-D forgiveness. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're going to end giving all of us a chance to really respond, a chance to truly let God unleash us from our unforgiveness. Inside your program is a small white piece of paper. Here's what it's in there for. If there is somebody still on your bench of unforgiveness, or if somebody was on there, but you've forgiven them, but every once in a while they creep back in, or if there's somebody you've forgiven and you just want to be sure that you're done, then write their name on that piece of paper.

Nobody is going to see these, but if you're worried just write initials of that person or people. Chris is going to play some music and as soon as you're ready bring that piece of paper forward and lay on this Bible that is open to 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).** Brings the names of people still on your bench, people you're still working on forgiving, people you've forgiven and want the strength to keep that way. Bring up and lay their names on this Bible.

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