

Unfinished Business

Title: Part 4 – Letting Go of What Won't Let Go of You

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Transition: Band Continues Softly

As we continue in this moment of worship and get ready for the preaching of God's Word let's pause and ask God to prepare us for what He wants to show us today. Last week, my good friend Pastor Joon was with us, and he brought an amazing message, but I felt like we still had some **unfinished business** in our Unfinished Business collection of messages. So, today I want to put a book end on what we were talking about a couple weeks ago with a message I am calling:

Letting Go of What Won't Let Go of You

Because the truth is unfinished business in the past never remains in the past. It will continue to rear its ugly head at the least appropriate times and in the most unpredictable ways. That's what we have been talking about. So, I am excited to show you how to let go of what won't let go of you today. Let's pause and ask God to speak His truth to each of us so that we can leave here differently than when we came in. Will you pray with me?

[PRAYER TIME]

Hey before you grab a seat, take 30 seconds, and say "Hi" to some people around you. Do that, tell them you are glad they sat by you. If you are joining us on our app or social channels thanks for spending some time with us and as always, let us know if we can pray for you or serve you.

So, like I said, I felt like we had some unfinished business that warranted a part 3 so here we go. If you are just jumping in with us we touched on the topic of forgiveness in the opening week. Forgiveness is not about thinking up an excuse for why people hurt us. It's not about saying, "You know, they did the best they could with what happened to them and how they grew up." Forgiveness is not any of that! In fact, if we are busy trying to explain away the pain that someone caused us then we're probably not doing the more difficult work of actually forgiving them.

So, today we're gonna take on some forgiveness myths because as long as you hang onto your hurt, you'll remain miserable and stuck in the past. And I know even talking about the dreaded "f-word" ignites a battle in your mind and heart between the desire to let go of a hurt and the desire to hang onto it. Right? Part of you wants to be free from the past—if that is even possible—and the other part of you wants to hang onto this hurt to leverage it over this person for the rest of their life.

So, honestly answer these questions. Is my life better because I'm withholding forgiveness? Do I rest easier at night because my anger smolders against somebody? And the most important question of all. Am I going to let the person who hurt me decide when I get better?

Robert Enright, a psychologist, and a professor whose work on forgiveness was groundbreaking in the 80's writes:

"It looks like you're doing all the giving and the others doing all the getting, and you're the biggest sucker the world has ever created. That's not true, because research shows that as you give these moral gifts, you are, in fact, the one who was emotionally healed."

In other words, forgiveness is not primarily for them, it's for you! When you forgive, you set the prisoner free only to discover the prisoner all along has been you.

BUT I personally believe that one of the big reasons that people don't forgive is because they just don't understand what forgiveness is or how it works. In one study that I found only 4% of the general public and only 5% of all Christians could separate fact from fiction when it comes to forgiveness. So, I want to spend the bulk of our time today dismantling forgiveness myths about what it is and how it works. AND as we talk about what it's not, we will also then understand what it is. So, here's the first myth:

Myth: Forgiveness releases offenders from consequences.

When God forgives, He removes the eternal consequences of our sin. That's what Jesus did for us on the cross. But God's forgiveness doesn't mean we won't face other consequences in this life for our sins. The Bible tells us a person reaps what they sow. You can be forgiven and still lose a job, break trust, destroy a marriage, or even go to jail. Does that make sense? Extreme example: A parent may forgive you for being inappropriate with their child, but that doesn't mean you won't do prison time or be branded a sex offender for the rest of your life. God can and will forgive you, but forgiveness does not mean that there's no civil punishment or legal consequence for an offense.

Debbie Morris is the author of a book called *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking*. She tells her experience of two men raping her and then leaving her badly beaten boyfriend for dead. In the book she says that she's forgiven the men for what they did to her, but she also says that doesn't mean that she would ever wanna see them released from prison or be allowed to be set free. She's not seeking revenge by having them stay locked up. She wants them locked up so that no one else will ever be harmed by them.

Forgiveness doesn't mean placing ourselves in harm's way all over again AND it does not necessarily remove consequence.

Rabbi Harold Kushner had a woman in his congregation come to see him. She was a single mom, divorced, working to support herself and her three young kids. She told Kushner, since my husband walked out on us, every month is a struggle just to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies while he's out there living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him? This is Rabbi Kushner's answer:

"I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman." - Harold Kushner

That's why we forgive, it is to set ourselves free. It has nothing to do with releasing an offender from the consequences of their actions. Instead, it has everything to do with being good to ourselves.

Here's the second myth that gets in the way of forgiveness:

Myth: forgiveness means to invite new injury on top of the old.

This comes from an improper reading of one of the Bible's most famous stories about forgiveness, the parable of the Prodigal Son. A lot of people miss one tiny detail at the end of Jesus story.

The Prodigal Son is about a father who had two sons and the younger one told his dad, "I want my inheritance right away. I wanna set out and make a life of my own." Shockingly the father agrees, and he sells off a large chunk of the family farm. He cashed it out in order to give it to the younger son. Well, the kid runs off and blows all of his money on wine, women, and wild living. After the money runs out, he wakes up in the gutter, realizes he's wasted his life and decides to go back home. When he does, the father welcomes him back with open arms.

Now here's where the story gets most interesting. The older brother is ticked but beneath his anger there's a fear, and this is what a lot of people miss. The older brother is afraid that he's going to be made the victim twice. Let me explain. It was painful enough when the younger brother left, it ripped the family apart. But now that his brother has returned, the elder brother fears another injury on top of everything else the family has suffered through. He fears that dad will completely forget the past inheritance arrangement. He fears that in the name of forgiveness, dad will be tempted to divide up his estate another time for the wayward brother. The younger brother had already received his inheritance in full and he spent it, every last dime. So, the older brother is afraid that forgiving his brother means inviting another loss.

So, when dad invites his elder son to join the celebration, he refuses and explodes in anger. Listen to this exchange: (Luke 15:29-31)

But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS.

Did you see it? The dad is incredibly wise, and he hears the fear beneath his son's anger. The father places his hand on his son's shoulder. He looks him in the eye, and he says, "Son, you're always with me, and all that is mine is yours." In other words, dad hasn't forgotten. He reminds his son that what's left of the estate belongs to him! Dad is not going to divide his estate again at any time in the future. The younger son has spent his inheritance and in the days of ahead, that son is going to have to come to terms with that reality. BUT this was not that day. The father instead said, "Now is the time for us to celebrate your brother's return. Today is the day to forgive your brother."

Many of us are like the older brother aren't we? We're reluctant to forgive because we fear that it lets people off the hook too easily. We're afraid that forgiving them will open us up to being hurt again. It's like wearing a kick me again sign. BUT even in this most famous forgiveness story, it reminds us that forgiven people still have to live with the reality of their choices and losses. AND forgiveness does not require you to take on even more losses on top of the losses you've already endured.

Another distortion about forgiveness is this next myth:

Myth: forgiveness requires reconciliation.

Often times we think that if I really forgive someone, then I have to invite them back into my life. But does a battered woman have to volunteer for round two? Does a betrayed husband have to take back an unfaithful wife? Do I have to go back and hang around a parent who abused me? The answer is NO!

In Romans 12 the Apostle Paul says: (v.18)

IF it is possible, AS FAR AS IT DEPENDS ON YOU, live at peace with everyone.

BUT WHY? Because restitution validates the sincerity of repentance. Restitution says, I defrauded you. Now how can I make that up to you? In 12 step recovery, they call this process making amends. When a person who wrongs you does what is necessary to right the wrong, that's restitution.

And the third component of reconciliation is *rehabilitation*.

What we want when we've been hurt is some level of assurance that we're not gonna be victimized again, right? That this person not only sees the issue but has made meaningful efforts to get help, to grow, to find out what it was in them that made them make the choices that they made. If we say "I'm sorry" but continue to behave as we have in the past, people have good reason to doubt our sincerity.

SO, does all that make sense? Forgiveness doesn't require reconciliation. There are no conditions on forgiveness but there are always conditions for a relationship to be restored, and I'll go one step farther. You can forgive someone that you feel like you can never have a relationship with again! You can forgive a person who never says they're sorry! You can forgive someone even though you may never be able to trust them again. Forgiveness has no strings attached. Reunion always has strings attached. Does that make sense?

When people say, in order to forgive someone, you have to reconcile with them, that's just not true. Another way of saying it, **we set limits on abuse, not on forgiving.**

Alright, there's one more myth about forgiveness that makes us think we can't do it, and this may be the biggest of all, and that is that:

Myth: forgiveness and forgetting are synonymous.

If you grew up in church I bet you may have heard this. It comes from a verse that tells us something about God and how He forgives sins. Look at it in Isaiah 43:25, God says:

"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."

Now, in a sense, when God forgives our sin, He doesn't remember them anymore. That's true. But does God magically forget that it happened? No, that is not what this verse is actually saying? First the way we use the word "remember" and the way the Hebrews used it are two entirely different things. When we say, "I don't remember," we use that as a synonym for, "I forgot." BUT to a Jewish person in the Old Testament, remembering was not just recalling an event from the past, but also acting upon it. In other words, remembering always involves action. It was never just passive recall of an event.

So, when the Bible says that God doesn't remember our sins, it's not saying He forgot them, it's saying instead that God doesn't bring them to mind to act upon them. And that's a huge difference because the fact is God does remember sin! He's never forgotten a thing. God knows all things, the theological term for that is omniscience. So, Isaiah is not saying God can't remember our sins, he's saying God won't remember our sins. He won't throw them back in our face. He won't hold them against us. Are you with me?

God remembers that Rahab was a harlot, and Moses was a murderer, and Abraham was a liar, and Paul killed Christians, and Peter denied His savior! He remembers our sins, but He doesn't hold them against us! Someone should "amen" that or something. Come on who is thankful that even though God remembers He doesn't hold our sins against us!

So, when people say forgive and forget, that's just insane because even God doesn't forget. You can't just erase a memory! In fact, the greater the trauma or pain, the more deeply it's implanted into your soul. Instead, forgiveness is a choice to do as God has done, to let it go and not continue to bring it up again. To stop rehearsing it in our mind and refuse to use it as a weapon against the one who hurt us.

That's what God is saying. I'll never leverage your past against you as a weapon. That's forgiveness. It's not forgetting what happened. It's letting go of it as a weapon for revenge.

Here's a better way to say this. Forgive and be wiser. It might not have the same ring to it, but we need to forgive and be wiser. We need to learn from our hurts without rehearsing them or reinforcing them. AND over time, many of the details of the hurts that have been done to you will begin to fade from your memory. The reason we remember hurts so vividly is because we've rehearsed them so often in our mind. But once you forgive something, there's no need to continue to review it. You let it go, and as a result you'll begin to lose touch with many of the details.

In other words, don't commit the details to memory, commit the lessons to memory. The lessons about protecting ourselves, setting limits on abuse, having good boundaries, paying attention to red flags. Those are all great learnings.

BUT forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiving doesn't remove our scars any more than a funeral takes away all our grief. Even after you make the choice and walk through the process of forgiveness there are times when your life is under pressure and you're gonna be reminded you have a scar and that's OK. All of us have scars on our hearts. BUT remind yourself in those times that I made a decision to let that go! I'm not bound in any way to that pain or that person! I'm free to be who God made me to be!

I'm free, but forgiveness is never easy. It's the most difficult thing in the world. Amen? So, as we wrap up, let's talk about **the pain of letting go**, and the first thing I wanna address is the problem of cheap, premature, and incomplete forgiveness. Because forgiveness is never automatic, or easy. Instead, it's costly and difficult.

AND as Christians sometimes we miss this. We've been told that to be a good Christian we have to forgive quickly and completely. *"Don't let that sun go down on your anger..."* So, we assume that's just a law of our faith, carved in stone, that forgiveness should always be immediate. BUT, shocker, the Bible doesn't say that anywhere! AND what we end up doing when we rush it is something like slapping a band aid on gunshot wound, we practice a superficial forgiveness for deep and permanent wounds. It may seem like the right thing to do, but the danger of immediate forgiveness is that it's often not real!

Forgiveness is more than merely saying the words, "I forgive you." See:

One of the biggest prerequisites for forgiving is to know exactly what you're forgiving.

The Bible often compares forgiveness with debt because that's what we're really doing in forgiveness. We're forgiving a moral debt. But here's the deal, you have to know whether or not you're forgiving a \$5 debt or a \$5,000 debt for forgiveness to be effective.

AND when we're hurting, when we're reeling from all the pain of a fresh injury we haven't had the time to truly process it. Take for example, an affair. Forgiveness is far more than just the act of adultery. I mean, that's a part of it, but there's more to it than that. If someone cheats on you, it destroys trust the very foundation of your marriage. Then consider the reality that most affairs involve friends, coworkers, or extended family which leads to a shattering of our relational network. That has to be forgiven too. In addition, there are feelings of loss of place and humiliation. It's more than just a single solitary act to forgive.

That's why I say you have to know precisely what you're forgiving, how big this sin actually is, all the ways it has affected you and taken from you, or else you'll find out that you've not really forgiven at all.

Should you forgive as quickly as possible, absolutely! But nothing is gained by saying words you don't mean! There's no spiritual value in saying words. You may even have to say to the person who hurt you, "I want to forgive you, but I need some time to process this."

But on the flip side I will say this too. You can wait too long to forgive. Rage can claim squatters' rights on your soul. You can become the pain that you feel. You can develop a relationship with your pain, and then it gets woven into your identity and at that point it becomes almost impossible to get rid of.

So, you can forgive too quickly, or you can wait too long. It's important to learn to forgive at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. Another principle to keep in mind is this:

Forgiveness is more than just a decision, it's a process.

Forgiveness is a decision followed by a process. It's not a one and done sort of thing. It's through the process of letting go over and over again that we experience the full magnitude of forgiveness. We decide to do it, and we do it as often as we need to do it.

Because if you think of forgiveness as kind of a one-time event or decision, you're gonna be very confused when those hurt feelings cycle back. When the pain resurfaces, you're gonna wonder if you truly forgave that person or not. The reality is forgiveness is a process. When it comes to forgiving deep hurts, you're gonna have to do it daily if not hourly for some time.

In fact, this is something that Jesus taught us in Mark 11:25. Jesus taught His disciples about forgiveness, and He said this:

"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

In Greek, the word FORGIVE here is a present active command, which means that it's describing a continuous or habitual action. So, when Jesus gave us a command to forgive, what He actually said was something more like, "Keep on continually forgiving..." Jesus knows the choice to forgive is something that needs to be exercised repeatedly in order for it to truly set us free.

So, every time a hurt resurfaces, we remind ourselves, "I've chosen to forgive that, they don't owe me any longer, I refuse to dwell on it another minute." Forgiveness is never gonna be something where you can just say, on this particular day, at this particular time, I forgave that person. No, you are on a journey of forgiveness! It takes as long as it takes.

BUT hear me, because forgiveness is a journey, sometimes we might need help from others to discern why a past injury is resurfacing so often. Is there a missing piece of the story, have I truly acknowledged all the fallout from this hurt, am I being honest with myself about how deeply wounding this was to me? There's no shame in getting help from a trusted source whether that be a close friend, a counselor or pastor. Hear me, if you've tried forgiving and haven't made progress alone then now is the time to seek some outside help and there is no shame in that at all.

Write this down now, forgiveness is a process so:

Repeat the process as long as it's necessary.

{CUE SOUND}

I don't know if you recognize the name Corrie Ten Boom, but she was a survivor of the Holocaust. She was also a believer, and she tells how she had forgiven a guard who had brutalized her when she was in prison in a concentration camp during World War II. BUT she just couldn't let go of the painful memory of that awful experience. Many years after the event, she was still being continually robbed of her sleep at night, thinking about what had happened to her. Corrie wrote this:

"Help finally came in the form of a Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks. This is what the pastor said, 'Up in that church tower is a bell, which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the bell ringer let's go of the rope, the bell keeps swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final ding, and then it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. We stop pulling the rope.'"

Every time you're reminded of a hurt, don't be surprised by it, the bell is slowly losing momentum! Instead use that as an opportunity to remind yourself that you chose to forgive it and it won't be long before that bell stops ringing altogether. Amen?

The final essential in releasing a painful past is:

Rely on God's strength to accomplish it.

Because the truth is you cannot make yourself forgive anyone. But here is what you can do. You can make the connection between God's forgiveness of YOU and your forgiveness of others. And through connecting those dots you can rely on His ability to work in your life to release those that have hurt you deeply.

For some of you, this is the missing piece when it comes to forgiveness. You don't know what it's like to be forgiven by God, you've never experienced what it feels like to be forgiven an unpayable debt, and so you hold onto the offense. But the Bible describes your sin and mine as exactly that, an unpayable debt! But Jesus, He came and paid the debt He did not owe. He paid it in full when He died on the cross, literally His last spoken words on the cross were tetelestai, which means it is finished, it is paid in full!

What that means for you today is there is absolutely no reason for you to continue carrying your regrets, your guilt, or your shame! He carried them on the cross so that you wouldn't have to, so that you could be set free! AND until you experience that, forgiveness will always be a challenge for you because it's hard to give grace when you've never experienced it yourself. Some of you need to surrender to Jesus and let His grace wash over your soul!

Others of you, this wound is still fresh, you're still processing it. You feel in your heart of hearts that what was done to you is something that you could never forgive. Maybe you should pray, "God make me willing *TO BE WILLING* to forgive because in myself, I have no power to change my thoughts or feelings about this person." God will always respond to honest prayer.

But some of you, you're ready to commit to the process of forgiveness. What you once thought forgiveness was, was wrong! It was a myth. You now know you can forgive someone, and they still might have to face consequences for that. You can forgive someone without inviting new injuries or new losses into your life.

