

I also need to acknowledge that I am going to come at this from a Christian perspective today. If you are still exploring God and faith I think there are lots of things that will apply to your life, but I am coming at this today as someone who believes I have already been forgiven by God because of His Son Jesus who died on the cross to pay the price for my sin.

I say that because this issue of unforgiveness points out a hypocrisy in my life. There is an irony to my own struggle with forgiveness. As Christians, we have been saved by grace. We have been offered forgiveness freely by Jesus. When I least deserve it, God forgave. Yet most of us fail to forgive our friends, our parents, our siblings, and we definitely struggle to forgive our spouses, right?

So as a Jesus follower there is this tension that I live with. I know I am in constant need of forgiveness, and I know I am supposed to forgive others, but I still wrestle with doing that in my relationships and especially with Cheryl.

The good news is we are not the first community of faith to struggle with forgiveness. In the book of John, a group of religious people catch a woman in the act of adultery. This was against the law at the time, punishable by death. These religious people though had no intention of forgiving her. They have no compassion. They have no desire to dispense grace, they want condemnation. So, they bring her out into the middle of the street and throw her at the feet of Jesus trying to put Him in a no-win situation so they can kill Him too. With stones in their hands, they wait for permission to bypass forgiveness and dispense justice.

Here is how Jesus responds. John chapter 8:

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

That is a great passage isn't it? But when I read that, I think... what about her husband? See, the religious leaders didn't have the right to stone her. They were trying to trip up Jesus. There was only one person that could give these guys permission to kill her, and that was her husband, the one she was cheating on. Legally, I know this is hard to imagine today, but legally 2,000 years ago you had the right to stone your wife if she was caught cheating.

So, this highlights the tension today. What do you do when you have the right to throw the stone? What do you do when you have the right for justice? We know the "Christian thing" to do from Jesus example here. But some of you have been deeply hurt and it's not that simple. You've got this stone in your hand, and you know that you're not supposed to throw it, but can't drop it either!

So, through the years you begin to collect all the stones from the hurts, the disappointments, the wounds... From your childhood, from college, from your marriage, from a failed marriage, these stones are weighing you down robbing your relationships from the freedom that comes through forgiveness. I'm a Christian so I can't throw it, but I also can't let it go.

One of the most common questions I get whenever I talk with people going through some relational landmines is how do I forgive someone for this? How do I forgive him for doing this? How do I forgive and trust her after this? How do I not only *NOT* throw the stone, but also let go of this?

So, here's what I want to do. I want to introduce you to a cycle that I think we get caught in many times in marriage and relationships, but first I want to throw something out there. This might make things a little

tense, but I want all of us to at least consider if there is any truth to this. If you can get past the emotion of this statement I believe it is a gateway to forgiveness. So here it is, are you ready:

Chances are you had forgiveness issues long before the offense you now find impossible to forgive.

To keep you from throwing things at me just write that down in your notes... Chances are you had forgiveness issues long before the offense you now find impossible to forgive. Before your spouse did whatever big thing they did, chances are you already had forgiveness issues with them. You had been collecting a bunch of small stones before you ever had the killer stone in your hand.

I think it looks something like this, copy this down in your notes with me:

[CYCLE: WOUND > GRIEF > ANGER > BITTERNESS]

I'll explain this cycle as we go, but let's just throw out an example here. Let's say you got married, and like we talked about in the first few weeks, somewhere along the way you dumped off this giant bag of dreams and wishes and desires at the feet of your spouse as expectations. And let's say one of those was having kids right away. You guys didn't get married until, let's say, you were in your late 20's or early 30's so as a woman you kind of hear the tick tock of the clock. But let's say your husband was focused on making money and providing the life you guys always dreamed of while you were dating. So, he works all the time. Sun up to sun down he is gone. And every time you talk about maybe starting a family he is just opposed to it right now and it causes a big fight. He says, "Look there is no way we can afford this, maybe in a few years..." Let's say this goes on and on until you are like 34 or 35, and when you guys finally start trying nothing happens, for like a year nothing happens. In this pretend scenario let's also say after a year or two of trying your husband says he wants out, or maybe you learn he has been having an affair. You are of course devastated and angry and rightly so! You come to church looking for help and you are like, "How in the world could I ever forgive him for this!" You are asking all these questions and feeling all these emotions and justifiably so!

SO, let's take the statement I just made (**chances are you had forgiveness issues long before the offense you now find impossible to forgive**) and let's look at it through this lens. Where does the work of forgiveness really have to start? Not with the affair, right? Where does the work of forgiveness really have to start? You wanted to have kids! And because that never happened, every year that went by, you experienced:

{ON BOARD: GRIEF}

Yes, he wounded you when he cheated on you. Yes, he wounded you when he left. But the wound began when you couldn't have babies and every year that went by you experienced grief.

You know the type of sadness that takes your breath away. I don't know what this was for you in your relationship, maybe you had to move a lot in the early years of your marriage. Maybe it was something to do with kids or even a miscarriage. Maybe it had to do with your sex life and it not being anything like you thought it was going to be. Maybe you guys fight a lot and he or she says things that cut you to your soul. Maybe things have grown so cold that you don't even know if they love you anymore. I don't know what it is for you BUT I want us all to hear this.

Often times as Christians we rob ourselves the right to grieve because we think if we feel a deep sadness that somehow we lack faith, or we are not being forgiving, or it means we are selfish or something like that. But hear me, experiencing grief provides a pathway to begin the healing process.

Maybe this is where you find yourself this morning? Your wound is fresh, and your sadness is crippling. AND it is OK to let yourself grieve. It's OK to do to a dark place for a while where you don't really want to hear their encouraging Bible verse or positive cliché. Because what many of us do is we take all that sadness and stuff it deep down, and every time it happens again or comes up again, we take all that stuffed sadness and let it turn into:

{ON BOARD: ANGER}

What happens to grief that has not been dealt with or that's just been stuffed down? It turns into anger doesn't it? This describes some of your marriages! It's just angry. We all know this feeling. We are both just angry and we don't know what to do with it. You are angry that you have been wounded but not sure what to do next.

A lot like grief we fear that if we become angry somehow we are sinning. But anger is a gift from God! Anger is what causes us to take action! Anger is what motivates us to take a different course of action. The cross roads is what action we take because of this anger. This right here is where we can:

[BREAK CYCLE]

Break the cycle and begin the work of healing - OR - we just let the cycle continue on to:

{ON BOARD: BITTERNESS}

This is where all those little stones we've been carrying become this killer stone of resentment. When you hold onto bitterness it skews and distorts every aspect of your relationship. This becomes your weapon now to fight and always be right! Every conversation, every decision, every argument you use this as your ammunition to always be right. We leverage bitterness, "Oh really, you don't think I am right, what about this, exit A!"

AND on and on the cycle goes. This is what unforgiveness looks like and if we are honest with ourselves this morning; this is an exhausting place to live! Don't raise your hands, but I wonder how many of you are exhausted this morning from holding onto bitterness and resentment? How many of you is that exactly how you would describe your marriage, it is exhausting...

This is why I say chances are you had forgiveness issues long before the offense you now find impossible to forgive. This cycle might describe the first 5 or 10 years of your marriage *before* the big thing you think destroyed it, or at least destroyed it as you knew it. The more one person walks in bitterness and resentment, the more the other person walks on eggshells.

So, what you have is one spouse that is withholding their heart because they are so bitter and so resentful, and you have the other person that is just trying to get through the day or the week without an argument. They are doing whatever they can to not make waves. The result, this is huge, the result is neither person is being fully known in the marriage.

In other words:

Where resentment lives, intimacy begins to die.

Where resentment lives, intimacy begins to die. Intimacy simply means being fully know, it's "into me see." That's why sexual intimacy doesn't necessarily mean you are being intimate. BUT this is the result of carrying bitterness in your heart, intimacy begins to die. One person is withholding themselves because of

bitterness and the other doesn't let themselves be known because they are just trying to avoid anything that might cause another fight and the marriage grows colder and colder.

Jesus knew we would struggle with resentment, with this cycle. He knew it would have to be a choice to offer forgiveness. He knew it would be a choice we might have to make daily! Look at this passage in Matthew 18.

21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" 22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

What we are going to see is that Jesus tells Peter to forgive 70x7 not because it is some kind of spiritual favor for the other person, but because this cycle has such a grip on our:

[DRAW: Heart]

Heart! Jesus knew these wounds run so deep, that we would need to forgive 70x7 for our OWN healing! So, what is your wound? What keeps you up at night? What wound do you find yourself filtering your life through?

Let's go back to our little scenario from before. Let's say you spent the first 5 or 6 years of your marriage repeating this cycle because he wouldn't let you have kids. And then he goes and walks out on you or cheats on you, and suddenly your quest to be right all the time was proven true! You won! Everyone sees him for who he really is now. But you don't feel very victorious do you? There is no healing in that is there?

That is because bitterness and resentment have a way of disguising themselves as self-protection. We use our stones of bitterness to build walls that keep us from getting hurt again. But those walls of protection also become a prison that keeps you from the healing and freedom that God longs for you. That's what unforgiveness looks like.

BUT what about forgiveness? What does that look like? Because if you are married, you are going to get wounded. I said in week one, I have brought Cheryl some of her greatest joys in life, but I have also caused her some of her deepest pain. So, with forgiveness you are still going to get wounded. You will still feel grief. Grieving is essential to start the healing process AND anger is what propels you to take action.

But here is where most of us get stuck. There is this huge crossroads that many of us feel lost in. I know there are some of you who are here today who want to forgive but don't know how too. I know that there are others of you who are afraid that if you offer forgiveness it will give that person permission to hurt you all over again. So, many times we choose bitterness. We have just talked about that. But other times we choose:

[DRAW: BLINDNESS]

Sometimes we believe that if we ignore our need to forgive that somehow our wound will heal on its own. After all time does what... but it doesn't does it? So, we convinced ourselves that if we get that promotion, or the new house, or the better house, when we have kids, we believe these mile stones and achievements will heal our wound. So, we lay down our rock for a while but when we realize that none of these things provided the healing we thought they would, bitterness and resentment set in. **Blindness is just delayed bitterness!** Anger delayed is just:

[DRAW: RESENTMENT]

In marriage we see this play out in like 5 to 7 years where our blindness is no longer effective. So, we grab our stones and choose to live in this cycle all over again.

SO, what other choice do we have? Jesus says to forgive, but what does forgiveness even look like? How do we not be bitter or blind? The third option we can choose is:

[DRAW: BROKENNESS]

We get wounded, we grieve, we get angry and then choose brokenness. Brokenness is a complete surrender to God. **{WHITE FLAG}** God I surrender my wound, I surrender my pain, my anger, I surrender my right to get even, I surrender my embarrassment, I surrender all of it. I am broken before you. But it's through this brokenness that we find a God who can put the pieces back together and bring real healing.

I can't tell you how to be broken though. I can't give you step one do this, step two do this and then you will be broken. Forgiveness is a process. It's kind of like an onion, I have said this before, you peel back a layer and think, "I have finally forgiven this person, I am healed." Then you discover there is another layer God wants to pull back and bring even more healing to. Forgiveness is a decision, followed by a process.

That's why I don't want you to be shocked or surprised if you get to the place where you are dealing with a lot of the same emotion and anger again. Maybe that's you today. You know the pain of feeling like you have offered forgiveness but healing never followed. You offered forgiveness but the response was not what you were thinking it would be, or there was no response at all. So, you are almost angry at God now because you did the right thing, you forgave, you didn't throw the stone.

There's a famous story Jesus told to make a point in Matthew 18 after Peter asks Jesus how many times you have to forgive someone. Maybe you have heard this, but I want to put a little different spin on this today. Jesus tells Peter not 7 times, but 70×7 and then tells this: (Matt 18:23-33)

²³ "Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. ²⁶ "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' ²⁷ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. ²⁸ "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. ³¹ "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. ³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'"

Now for most of us we read this passage and immediately realize who the bad guy is. And, maybe for you, you read that, after forgiving your spouse as best you know how, and you kind of see yourself as the King because you offered forgiveness.

AND because of the way they responded or didn't respond now you are angry all over again, and not only are you angry at them, you are kind of angry at God now. *God you have no idea what is like to be betrayed by a loved one, a close friend! God you have no idea what it's like to suffer the consequences of someone else's choice when I did nothing wrong! God you have no idea what is like to be used, abused, lied to...*

But in the midst of that I want you to hear what God whispers back if you will be broken before Him. "I do know what that is like. My Son Jesus knows what it's like to be betrayed by someone He loved. He knows what is like to suffer the consequences when He did nothing wrong. He knows your pain!"

Write this down, what God wants to teach us through our brokenness is:

It's only true forgiveness when you forgive regardless of their response.

See sometimes we can identify with the King in Jesus story, but most of the time we are the unforgiving servant who extends forgiveness only if we receive the response we are looking for. Jesus on the other hand, loved you enough that He laid down His life to pay for your forgiveness *before* you ever felt sorry for your sins. He owed us nothing but yet He gave up everything!

God's command for you to forgive is not about your spouse and the wound they caused you. Instead, through brokenness you are saying God I lay it all before you...I give you my pain, I give you my bitterness, I give you my heavy stones and it doesn't matter what they say or do, this isn't about them. With that kind of surrender comes healing in a way that only Jesus can bring.

With that healing comes freedom. Freedom to live a life without the stones that weigh you down and rob you of love and joy. In marriage we are going to have pain, and we are going to grieve, and we are going to get angry, that's unavoidable. But through brokenness before God, we don't have to let that rob us of our intimacy in marriage. That's what forgiveness is all about.

So, three words of caution or clarification and we are done. I feel like this would be incomplete not to mention these three things. As you walk through the process of forgiveness remember:

Forgiveness is free but trust is earned.

So often I think we confuse forgiveness with trust. We are called to forgive unconditionally, but there are times when trust will have to be re-earned. Maybe that is where you are today. You don't have to trust today. But will you drop the stone in your marriage? Are you willing to let go and be broken before God? Will you forgive your husband? Will you forgive your wife? You don't have to say you trust their motives. But will you forgive them even if you don't trust them?

Here's another one:

Forgiveness doesn't excuse their behavior; rather it prevents their behavior from destroying my heart.

Many of us this morning have this feeling that if we forgive we are justifying their choice to hurt us. If you forgive your ex-wife you are saying that it was okay for her to cheat on you.

BUT the truth is you've learned to live with your resentment. You've found your identity in your bitterness. Maybe for some of you, your spouse has done nothing to deserve resentment, but you have brought loads of it into your marriage because you were abused or betrayed or lied to in a different relationship. AND the resentment you live with is destroying your marriage.

Anne Lamont says that: *"Resentment is drinking poison expecting the other person to die."* If you choose to drop your stone this morning, you aren't excusing their behavior; you are preventing their behavior from destroying your heart.

One more:

Offering forgiveness doesn't mean they win; it means Christ wins.

For some of you, you have fought your whole life to be right. You don't think your husband respects you. You don't feel like your wife believes in you. So, this resentment you hold onto is your way of being right, having the upper hand. You are terrified if you forgive, then you will be admitting defeat.

But the truth is that there is a part of your heart you are not just withholding from the person you can't forgive. You are withholding that part of your heart from God. He longs to heal you! He longs to free you! He longs to form you and shape you into the person you were created to be! When you forgive, they don't...Christ wins! He wins another part of your heart!

So, who do you need to forgive today? Who do you need to take your stone to and say, "I've been waiting years to throw this at you, but today I drop it?" Your wife? Your husband? An ex-spouse. A past relationship where there was abuse?

Brokenness leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness leads to healing. And healing leads to freedom. Brokenness leads to forgiveness. Forgiveness leads to healing. And healing leads to freedom. Let's ask God to set us free right now, would you pray with me?