
What's up, everybody? How are you doing today? It's good to see you. I want to welcome everybody at our physical locations, and those of you joining us online. As you saw from that video, we would be absolutely thrilled to be your church home wherever you may be watching from, whether you are in Indy or someplace around the world.

That's really what TPO, Traders Point Online, is all about. We've been working really hard to get that stood up on its feet over the last six months or so. You know, we were online before the pandemic happened, but we were mostly streaming live the services. Now we want to be more intentional about it.

Just so you know, it was part of our vision strategy to launch an online campus within about 18-24 months. But then the pandemic happened. Crisis is an accelerator. What was going to take us 24 months took us like two months. So, we stood that up on its feet.

Now we just want to get better at it. And so, I've got a couple of exciting things to share to you as it relates to the online campus.

First of all, you can be a part of our church family whether you can show up physically or are living in another state or another country. We are putting Growth Track fully, digitally online. Growth Track helps you take your next steps toward spiritual growth and connection. You can get in an online group, you can serve, you can give, you can be a part of the mission all digitally and online.

You know, there are really two big aspects to church involvement. One is content. We want you to have the content of God's word that you can apply to your life. But the other is connection. And with one without the other, your church experience isn't going to be as good.

In fact, I could even say that a lot of people who show up physically to church to get content never connect. And we want to help you connect. The same thing is true digitally online as well.

So, you can go to the app, the website, and get all of Growth Track digitally, wherever you are.

The second thing is, for all of our physical locations we have a campus lead, somebody who is there in person to help you in person to take your next steps toward growth. So, we've just put into a role, a brand new role for us, an online campus pastor.

I'm really excited to announce to you that Nick Durm is going to be our online campus pastor. This is a picture of his family. This is his family, his wife Allison, and their three boys.

Many of you know Nick because Nick was our Northeast pastor, one of our newest campuses that launched earlier this year. They'd only been going three or four weeks before we went into the pandemic. Nick very quickly pivoted, and he and his team started innovating ways to gather people digitally. Today he is overseeing the watch parties that are launching and continuing to innovate ways to gather people digitally.

He is going to do a good job at that. Nick is a great leader, and I'm super-proud of him and all that he is doing. So, if you know Nick or Allison reach out to them this week and give them some encouragement.

Today, we are wrapping up this three-week series of messages that we have been in since our physical gathering a couple of weeks ago. Has the series been helpful to you? I hope it has been helpful. It's been helpful for me in my own personal life.

No matter what series we're in, a couple questions we always ask of ourselves are these:

Is the content helpful and hopeful?

And, what I mean by that is I want to unpack what God's word has to say to us and apply it in such a way that if you are seasoned believer, a brand-new believer, or not yet a believer, you go, "That connects with me." You would walk away and you would go, "That was really helpful. I understood it and I know how to apply it to my life."

Also, that you would walk away and feel hopeful for the days, months, and weeks ahead because we have every reason to have hope.

That's been one of the hopes behind this series called *Behind the Mask*. The big idea, if you're just now joining us, is we've been saying that 2020 is the perfect storm for division and disunity, and I don't even need to tell you why. You already know.

Like, you've been watching the news. In fact, you're kind of sick and tired of it. And we just see all of this stuff that has been going on in the world this year.

I like how somebody described 2020. In March, we kind of heard about this virus thing. Everything needed to be shut down and locked down and we were like, "We can do this. Let's put on our running shoes. We've got to run a marathon. This will just be a few weeks."

And we got done with that leg, we came in and thought we were finished. Then somebody handed us a bike. "Oh, there is another leg of this. I didn't realize that we've got to ride several miles now. We can do that."

So, we rode the bike. We got back in. Somebody handed us a Speedo. It's a bad mental image, I know. They're like, "There is a swim to this thing."

"Oh, I didn't know I was in a triathlon. I thought it was just a marathon. I didn't train for a triathlon."

Here's the deal. It's not over yet. As a result we're all tired, weary, and worn down. So, the emotional reserves we might have in a more normal year, like they just aren't there.

We all probably have a pretty strong opinion about all kinds of things that are going on in the news right now. You probably have a pretty strong opinion about the pandemic, about mask wearing, about the election, about some of the social justice issues.

We're really well-read on it. We've done our research. We've got our perspective. It's really easy for somebody to say or post the wrong thing. It sort of offends us and sets us off, and we react by saying something that's maybe offensive to them.

We are divided and there is all this disunity in the world—2020 has become the perfect storm for division and disunity.

What we've been saying in this series is that behind the mask, and in many cases on the other side of that screen, is a real, live person created in the image of God who Jesus died for.

And, just that fact alone should cause us to treat that person with love and respect, whether or not they ever come to agree with us on any one of those issues. We should, as the big C church model a different way.

We should actually demonstrate to the rest of the watching world, "We don't have to agree on everything. Actually, we can have differences of opinion and see things differently, but we can still treat each other with kindness, love, and respect."

In fact, this is super-crucial for us to do because this was Jesus' dying prayer the night before he was arrested and crucified. He prayed that we would not have uniformity, where everybody is the same, but that we would have unity— especially in the big C church.

And unity implies diversity. Who would need unity if we were all the same? No, we're different. We see things differently. We grew up differently. And Jesus said, "You can still be unified in my name."

It is so important for us to hold onto that important truth for these two reasons we have been driving down on in this series.

The mission of the Church is far too critical!

And almost every time you hear Jesus urge us to be unified, and almost every time the New Testament authors encourage us to be unified they almost always follow by saying, "So that the world will know," or "This will prove to the world that you are my disciples, my followers." It's not how much you know, not how moral you are, not that those things are bad, but how unified you are.

The second thing, and this is what we drove down on last week:

God's plans for your future are too big for you to hold on to an offense!

And we simply said, "To be offended is human." That's normal. But, to live offended, well that's a choice. And it's holding so many of us back because when we step into the trap of offense that our enemy has sort of laid out for us, it clamps down on us and turns into bitterness.

So, last week we talked about how when the traps of offense are lined up, we need to use the Hebrew word *ábar*. We step over it, we step around it, we navigate through those traps and we don't get stuck in them—because that way we don't become bitter.

And I've had a lot of really good feedback from so many of you. One of the questions that has come to me is, "That all makes sense, but can you tell me how? Can you tell me how I can do that, how I can step over that, how I can step around the offense? Aaron, what if I step into it and I'm stuck in it? How do I get out of it?"

And that's how I want to wrap up our series today. I want to look really quickly at something a guy named Paul writes to a church in Ephesus, and he's actually encouraging them to be unified. One of the things I hope for you as you read the New Testament as we come out of this series, is that you'll see that this subject of unity just comes up a lot. The reason why is because they were people too, they had opinions too, they had interpersonal conflict too.

So, Paul is writing to them and he says this.

“Get rid,” and the idea for me is just take out the trash. Just like get rid *“of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.”* So, they had Facebook too. And he said, *“Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NLT)”*

Remember the analogy last week? Thick skin, courage like a lion, soft heart.

It's that last part there that should really be the motivation for any kind of forgiveness. As followers of Jesus, that right there should be what should set us apart from the rest of the grudge-holding world. So they would look at us and go, “How do you guys forgive like that?” And, “How do you forgive in a way that is healthy?”

If you tuned in last week, I said, “Don't just stuff it. Don't just suppress it.” That's not what I'm saying here. I'm not saying, “You just need to forgive and stuff it down real deep and kind of forget it.” That's not healthy for you or for anyone. So, how do you forgive in a healthy way?

Have you ever had something come up and you know you need to address it, but for whatever reason you choose not to? Like, I'm really, really good at procrastination. It's actually one of my spiritual gifts. I'm so good at it.

Have you ever had something come up that is a problem? Maybe it's a leaky faucet, and you're like, “That's a problem. That's on my to do list.” But it's been there for quite a while, so long so that it actually turns into a bigger problem.

The same thing with car maintenance. When I was in college I drove a Chrysler LeBaron. I was just a poor college student. I remember getting in one day after class and I started the car up. That little check engine light came on.

I don't know about you, but oftentimes I just kind of assume that's a suggestion. I was like, “Maybe I should look at it,” but I didn't want to look at it because I didn't want to know if it was going to be an expensive problem. I didn't have any money. So, I just kind of ignored it.

But I got tired of looking at it. Every time I started the car, it was like right there. I took a little piece of black electric tape—problem solved, I didn't have to look at it anymore until several weeks later I heard a pop as I was driving down the highway. I looked in the rearview mirror and all of this black smoke is billowing out the back.

Because I ignored it, I created a bigger problem. And I would say that choosing not to forgive an offense, it might sort of help in the moment, but I'm telling you it's going to create a bigger problem on down the road.

Forgiving other people can be really difficult. Can we just like be honest? Revenge, just the thought of it, you don't have to act on it, is more fun. It just is. You can say, “Amen,” to that if you want. It is. Revenge is way more fun than offering forgiveness.

It kind of reminds me of that story of that college student. She's driving a beater and going from one class to the next, and she is trying to get there. A guy runs a red light in a really expensive BMW, and just hits the side of her, totals her car. But he takes off. It's a hit-and-run. He doesn't stay to share insurance information. She didn't have enough money to replace the car.

So, for the rest of her college days she had to ride a bike or hitch a ride with friends. Just her resentment toward that guy grew and grew and grew in her heart. She didn't even know his name or how to find him.

About 12 years later, she is a successful dentist in the same town. Her three o'clock root canal showed up. Oh yeah, it's the hit-and-run guy. She told him it wasn't going to hurt, and she lied.

I don't even know if that story is true, but I like telling it. There is like something that really resonates for me in it. It kind of reminds me of something a guy named Fredrick Buechner said, "*Of all sin, resentment appears to be the most fun.*"

And I would just mark out the word appears. It is. It is the most fun. And granting forgiveness toward someone is a deeply personal thing. Perhaps right now, even as I bring up the subject of forgiveness, maybe there is a name or a face that pops into your mind. Your immediate visceral reaction is, "Oh no. Not them. Not after what they did. Not how they did it."

Or, "I've tried before. I've tried to forgive, and it didn't go well. Because, you know what? They weren't receptive. They didn't think they had done anything wrong."

Or, maybe they're not even in your life anymore. Maybe they aren't even around anymore. So, what are you supposed to do with that?

Maybe you've heard plenty of messages on the subject of forgiveness. They were nice, and maybe you even agreed with the content. But when it came to applying it to your life, something broke down.

Or, maybe you had a parent or teacher, or somebody you really respected say, "You need to forgive," but they never got around to telling you why. I think oftentimes messages on forgiveness, that's what we end up sort of leaving out—the why.

And before I kind of get into some of the emotional or spiritual reasons as to why, it's interesting that science is actually confirming that there are all kinds of health benefits to forgiveness.

In fact, studies out of John Hopkins Hospital show, get this, the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your physical health: lowering the risk of heart attack, improving cholesterol levels and sleep, reducing pain, blood pressure, anxiety, depression, and stress.

Doctor Karen Swartz said this about it:

There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed. Chronic anger puts you into fight or flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease and diabetes, among other conditions. Forgiveness, however, calms stress levels, leading to improved health.

I love it when science catches up to, and just affirms what God's word has been telling us for centuries. She goes on to talk about how people who forgive tend to live more satisfied lives than people who hold onto grudges.

Here is the deal. I don't really think I need to do much convincing for you that you need to forgive. In fact, one study actually showed this:

62% of American adults say they need to offer forgiveness to someone. (Fetzer Institute)

We just know it. We know this is holding us back to some degree. So, why is this so difficult to do?

A while back I asked my friends on Facebook that question right here:

What is the most difficult thing about forgiveness?

And the response was immediate. There were all kinds of answers. I'll just read for you a few of them.

"When they won't ask for it or apologize."

"Giving them forgiveness when they won't forgive me."

"When you forgive and forget, but the other person won't do either."

"Feeling like they somehow win if I forgive them."

"Letting go of the power you think you have over them by staying angry."

"Letting go of my pride."

"Letting go of the pain they have caused you and learning to trust them again."

"Putting up walls after I forgive. The friendship just isn't the same."

"Continuing to argue with them in my head. Here's what I would say if I hadn't already forgiven them."

And I think a guy named Peter was wrestling with some of those same objections because of the question he asked Jesus in Matthew 18. To set this up, Jesus has been doing some teaching. And in verse 15 Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you..."

Now, Jesus could have very easily said, "When," like, "When your brother sins against you," because it's a certainty in life. You've all probably heard the phrase, "The only certainties in life are death and taxes." I'd add a third one, "Death, taxes, and inter-personal conflict."

If you stay in relationship with anyone long enough, it's bound to happen. Peter's got something in his mind. He's got an example in his head when he asks Jesus this question starting in verse 21.

"Then Peter came to him and asked, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?'" Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

I love Peter so much because he answers his question with a question. He doesn't even wait for Jesus to respond. That right there shows you he is trying to impress Jesus. That right there shows you he thinks that he is going to assume what Jesus is going to say, and he's added to it.

The reason I can say that is because Peter would have grown up listening to the Jewish rabbis teach that the number of times you should forgive—they had a number, it was three. You should forgive people up to three times. That is more than fair, that is more than generous.

Now, Peter wants to know what Jesus is going to have to say. He's been hanging around Jesus long enough to know that Jesus is always kind of adding to what the Jewish Law will say. He has always proven to be more gracious.

So, Peter is thinking, "Jesus is going to say more than three. So, let me double it to six. And let me add one more, just to impress him." I think Peter is thinking Jesus is going to go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, Peter, you crazy man. Slow down, Mr. Forgiving Machine."

That's not what Jesus says. Check out Jesus' response:

"No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:22 (NLT)

Now, have you ever had one of those moments when you ask somebody a question, and they respond, they respond in a way that you didn't expect. So, you laugh, but they don't laugh back.

I think that's this moment. I think Peter laughed. I think he was like, "You've got to be kidding me, Jesus. That's a good one." And Jesus is staring at him like, "Bro, I'm not kidding."

Here is the question. Where did Jesus get that number? And did Jesus mean it literally? Like, did Jesus mean if you go one more offense past that one, then you can just sort of drop-kick them? Is that what Jesus meant? Or is Jesus using sort of a hyperbolic language here, just to kind of say you should always forgive? What's he talking about?

Now, I can't prove this. I don't exactly know what was going through Jesus' mind but I do wonder if, when Jesus responded this way, he had a guy in his mind named Lamech from Genesis 4. Now, if you don't know the story you can read it for yourself later.

But, there was this guy named Lamech who killed a man because he hurt him. Then he declared he would seek revenge up to seventy seven times against anyone who ever hurt him again. This has come to be known as the law of Lamech. And it basically states, "If somebody hurts me, I will make them pay." It's just kind of interesting, and more than coincidental that that would be the exact number Jesus would mention here to Peter.

You see, here is the deal. Revenge is not something that needs to be taught. I've got four kids at home. I've taught them all kinds of lessons. I've never had to teach them a lesson on revenge, they just automatically know how to do it. We're automatically good at it.

But we do have to be taught how to forgive. And later in Genesis 6 God expresses his grief over the way that we, as human beings, keep hurting each other. And he knew that we needed a gift that was so powerful that it can remove what is toxic in our hearts and bring restoration back to our lives and relationships.

So, Jesus answers Peter's question with a story. He always did that when he knew that it probably wouldn't connect if he just gave principles. So, he tells a story, because story is the language of the heart. Here is the story starting in verse 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. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars."

So, I want you to understand that in the original languages here, that the sum that Jesus mentioned is an astronomical amount. There is no way the servant would be able to pay.

I'm not just talking about \$1,000 or \$100,000, or even \$1,000,000. The number Jesus gives in the original languages could be compared to, if I were to say to you, he owed a gillion cabillion. If I say a gillion cabillion, that's not even a real number.

You would never go into the bank, "I would like to apply for a loan."

"How much would you like?"

"A gillion cabillion."

It's a silly number. There is no way you need a gillion cabillion, and there is no way you can pay back a gillion cabillion. And Jesus is stating this number to make the point that this was a debt the servant could have never, ever paid back even if he wanted to.

Going on in verse 25 it says this:

"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. But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.'" But, he couldn't pay it all, which is why the master did what he did next. "Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt."

The master did the only thing he could do. He released him from this debt he never could pay. And Jesus isn't just talking about interpersonal conflict now, he has switched over to how the Kingdom of God works.

He has switched over to the sin debt that you and I could never repay, even if we wanted to. And he is saying, just like that master in the parable, God our Father has released us from this debt we could never pay.

But Jesus isn't finished with the story.

"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. 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. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full."

I've just got to wonder what happened from the moment he walked out of his master's presence to the moment he bumped into this guy on the street. Had he hit his head? Had he forgotten the grace that had been given to him?

Apparently. Going on in the story and Jesus concludes:

"When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. 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. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'"

The he just goes all Godfather on him.

"Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt."

And then, perhaps one of the most sobering sentences found, I believe, in all of God's Word.

"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

Can I just say that this is one of those things you just wished Jesus wouldn't have said? Peter, could you not have asked the question?

What I would love to do is be able to say, "Hey what this really means is," or "In the Greek I found a loophole. What Jesus really meant was, 'Just give forgiveness an honest try. And if you can just try to forgive, that will be good enough.'"

I wish I could say that. But that's not what Jesus said. What he said here was much more definitive than that. So, what are we supposed to do with it?

Jesus, what he is doing here is informing you and me of the unbreakable connection between God's forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of others. While I won't explain away what Jesus said, I would like to explain what Jesus said. If I could just make it as clear as possible...

This might be the moment in the message where you've begun to drift off or check your phone, maybe you're at home right now making a smoothie in the kitchen and this is just background noise. I know you do it.

So, could you just zone in here and just pay attention to this? I want to try to explain this. What Jesus said here does not mean that we are saved by forgiving others. That would be a work. We are not saved by works, we are saved by his grace.

So, why did he say it? Well, it means that forgiveness must be a part of what it means to follow Jesus. Let me say it as plainly as I can. Forgiving others is a result of your salvation, not the means of it.

In other words, if you can't find it within yourself to forgive other people, it should at least be a heavy enough question to ask, "Did I really receive forgiveness?" Because if you did, and Scripture just teaches this over and over again, that's a heart transplant.

Could I give you an analogy here? Those of you who are gardeners, you know you can have the best quality seed, but if the soil is hard and there are no nutrients in it, you can't get a shovel into it, it doesn't matter the quality of the seed, it's never going to get into the soil.

The same thing is true with God's grace. It's a high quality seed that can get into your heart, but if your heart is hard, there is no way it's going to get in there. A refusal to forgive is a telltale sign of a hard heart.

So, when Jesus says, "God won't forgive you if you can't forgive others," he is not saying that God refuses to forgive you. He is saying your heart is in no condition to be forgiven. That it's too hard, and you've got to do some soil work in order to allow God to give you that grace that can totally transform you.

And I know this is hard. Because, right now I think there is something in all of us that as we hear this forgiveness talk, it's sort of as if we're hearing about this tall glass of water we could take a drink of. And we're out in this parched desert. But the glass of water is on the other side of this canyon. We're like, "I don't even know if I can get to that glass of water."

So, throughout all of our lives there are these various things that people have said to us or done to us that have caused tremendous amounts of pain and hurt.

Maybe for some of you, you can remember the names kids called you on the playground. Maybe they made fun of your weight or your appearance. Maybe some of you were sexually abused, and nobody ever found out. You kept it to yourself. But there is a weight to that. Maybe your ex-husband cheated on you. Maybe a business partner stole from you. Maybe somebody said something that was untrue and ruined your reputation.

And all of us, it doesn't matter who we are, we've all got these things we are sort of chained to, some offenses from the past. We can't seem to get free from them. There's this big heavy weight that now we're carrying around in our lives.

So, you drag the weight into your next marriage, and it holds you back. You drag the weight into your next place of employment, and it's hindering you. It's hindering your ability to move. It's hindering your relationships.

How do you get free from this? And the answer that Jesus teaches is forgiveness, but it's not that easy. You're like, "I've heard that before. How do I get free from this?" Well you should just forgive.

You're like, "There is something about that I don't like. I like justice. I want the other person to pay. And I want them to know what they did."

I get that, but you've still got to be free. Listen to this, the person who hurt you, they're not the one shackled, you are. And Jesus has said, "I've given you the power to be free from this." So, how do you get free?

I guess I'd begin by walking us through a few things forgiveness is not. That might help.

Forgiveness is not a feeling, but a decision.

If you wait around for the feeling to come, you'll probably never get the feeling. You've got to make the decision first, and then the feelings come. Feelings follow the decision to forgive and almost never precede it.

Forgiveness is not forgetting.

I think there have been a lot of well-meaning sermons from well-meaning pastors that have said, "You just need to forgive and forget like God forgives and forgets," and that's actually caused more hurt than it has healing.

Let me just kind of clear that up. Is God suffering from amnesia? Does God really forget? I don't think he forgets, he chooses not to hold the offense over you anymore. That's very different.

You see, forgiveness is what God gives us to say, "Listen, your past has become irrelevant to the way I now receive you." That's what forgetting means. He's not going to hold it over you anymore.

Forgiveness is not excusing.

Excusing is what you do when extenuating circumstances help us to understand the behavior. Let me give you an example. Excusing is what you do when the man is driving really reckless on the interstate, but you come to realize his wife is in labor and he's trying to get her to the hospital. "Oh, understandable, I can excuse that."

Excusing is when you're on the slopes in Colorado and somebody comes barreling through and they just take you out and break your leg. You can excuse it if it's their first time on the slopes. "They lost control. I can understand that."

But forgiveness is what's needed when there is no good reason to explain away why someone did what they did or said what they said.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.

I think that's an important point to make. Most of us are peace seekers and people pleasers, and we don't like conflict. We don't like tension. So, it's hard for us to separate forgiveness from reconciliation.

The person you need to forgive, maybe he's pressuring you to reconcile. That's not always what that means. There may be some consequences. There may be some boundaries that need to be set into place.

Listen. You can forgive him for hitting you, but that doesn't mean he should move back in. You can forgive the business partner for hurting you. It doesn't mean you should jump back into business with him again. Forgiveness requires the heart of one. Reconciliation requires the change of two.

What is the process of forgiveness? And that's the word I want to give you—it's a process. It's not like one decision you make and everything is fixed, it is a process.

Forgiveness begins when I release my quest to get even.

And we just stop having the imaginary arguments in our mind. We stop imagining him being tortured in a dark dungeon cell or getting audited by the IRS right before he goes on vacation, or she gains 50 pounds of water weight the night before her wedding. We just stop imagining all that fun stuff, because the only person it is really hurting is us. It is just hardening the heart.

I like how Max Lucado said it:

"Linger too long in the stench of your hurt, and you'll smell like the toxin you despise."

Forgiveness progresses when I release the way I currently see and feel about the other person.

So, in Jesus' parable the unmerciful servant did not see the other servant as a human being. All he saw was an unpaid debt. That's why he could act so heartless about it.

Oftentimes what happens is when we think about the person who has hurt us we dehumanize him. And we just sort of relegate him to the worst version of who he is, maybe his worst moments. And unforgiveness dehumanizes the offending party and we always see him in the worst possible light.

It reminds me of what author Anne Lamott said, "Refusing to forgive is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the other person to die."

Forgiveness matures when I release the impulse to replay the offense over and over.

Can I say this doesn't happen all at once? It doesn't happen once for all. And you might take two steps forward and one-and-a-half steps back in this whole process. It's going to be a struggle. But your heart is on the right path, it's on the trajectory where you're continuing to pray that God would soften your heart toward the other person.

I love how poet Buddy Wakefield put it, *"Forgiveness is relinquishing all hope for a better past."*

You can't change the past anyway, but you can change the future. You can change the condition of your heart. You see, the gospel message is not just that we have been forgiven, but it's that God replaced our sinful offense with the righteousness of Jesus. We've become a brand-new person.

So, can I just ask the question, "How can you forgive?" And the simple response to that is, "You can't."

Forgiveness is a miracle.

It's a miracle that begins when you receive the forgiveness that you never deserved from your heavenly Father so that you might pass it on to others. The realization is that you and I have been forgiven for a debt that we could never, ever repay—a gillion cabillion. And that should fundamentally change the condition of your heart.

There is no way for you to repair the relationship. There's no way you could repair the relationship with God. So, God did it for you. He did all the heavy lifting to release you from that debt so that you might be reconciled to him.

Jesus uttered these words on a cross, that he meant not just for the Roman soldiers who were betting for his clothes underneath his feet. He said it for you and me. "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." And he released us.

So, when I was five-years-old, one of my earliest memories, I went to a half-day preschool that actually met inside the church we attended. My preschool teacher had a son who was my age and in my class. They also went to the same church.

I remember on his birthday she told everybody she was going to take the whole class, it was a small class, out to Pizza Hut for his birthday party. We were all excited about that, looking forward to the day.

I'll never forget lunchtime on his birthday. We all went out to the parking lot and piled into the van. I'll never forget she popped her head inside and looked right at me and said, "Aaron, sweetheart, you're not going."

She had me get out of the van. I didn't know what was going on. I was too young to process it. She had me stay with one of the adult assistants. I remember standing there on the sidewalk and watching all my friends leave in the van to go to the Pizza Hut birthday party.

I didn't really understand why. My mom picked me up a little later. She was upset. And I came to find out, as I got older, that she had gotten upset with my parents about something. I didn't know what it was. She decided to un-invite me to the birthday party as a way to get back at them. I never forgot it. It's like one of my earliest memories.

I know some of you are thinking, "This explains an awful lot about you." It does. I'm still in therapy.

So, you fast forward that about 15 years. I've sort of moved on from it, not dwelling on it. But I'm in college working a part-time job as a cashier at Sam's Club. Guess who comes through my line? Yeah, Miss "you're not invited to my son's Pizza Hut birthday party" lady.

And, she didn't recognize me, but I immediately recognized her. Not only that, I recognized the scent of her perfume. All of a sudden, a memory I'd sort of forgotten and had packed away in the boxes of my heart, it got re-opened.

It was a weird feeling. I remember standing there looking at her. She had no idea who I was. I was taller than her now, and bigger than her. I could take her easily. And I'm sitting there in my mind going to these thoughts of revenge.

I'm like, "What could I do to her? I could double scan her dog food. That's what I could do. I could ask her if she's abandoned any little kids lately. I could do that." I am standing here just speechless.

Here's the thing. She was nice. She was very pleasant. And it just made me angry. And we get done and I handed her the receipt. She says, "Thank you so much." She turned around and walked away.

I got angry. Do you want to know why? I just felt stuck. It's as if the emotions of the moment rushed back to me and I stood there thinking, "Why is she so free? Doesn't she realize what she did? Doesn't she realize how she hurt people?"

I realized right then and there I was stuck to an anchor I didn't even know was there. It began to explain maybe some trust issues I had, and maybe some bitterness in my heart. It was not a fun process to realize I needed to forgive that day. I didn't even realize I needed to. But the emotions that welled up showed me that I did.

And I needed to have a funeral in my mind. I needed to separate the wrong from the person who did it and say, "You know what? I wasn't in her shoes. I don't know her perspective. I don't know why she did what she did, but I choose right now, today to assume the best in her. I forgive.

"Honestly, she may not even realize or remember that whole situation, but I do. So, I need to forgive, not because she needs it, but because I need to be released. I need to be released from it."

Which leads me to this thing I know somebody needs to hear today.

Forgiveness is remembering how Jesus forgave you and then offering that to others.

How did Jesus forgive us? What does that look like? Well, Romans 5:8 totally transformed my life:

"But God showed," God didn't just tell, God didn't just say, *"his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."*

"...while we were still sinners," that statement right there is what caused me to become a Christian. That statement right there was what changed me from being a good religious kid to, "I want to follow Jesus in relationship."

I realize he didn't wait for me to say I was sorry. I realize he didn't wait for me to be worthy of it, but while I was in the middle of my offense, while I was in the act of sin, that's when God moved first.

Whenever I ask all my Facebook friends about what's so hard about forgiving, one of them said this.

"What's so hard about forgiving is when you forgive they win," and I would very lovingly say, "No, they don't." If you forgive, Jesus wins, and one by one he begins to release you from the chains you've been shackled with maybe for years and years and years.

Maybe the offenses you live with every day that you think about all the time, and the ones you've maybe forgotten have actually impacted you more than you'd even care to admit. And when you can forgive, Jesus says it has more to do with you being free from what is holding you back than it is the other person.

So, today do you need to be free from something? Today do you need to let go of that weight you've been carrying around for far too long? Jesus wants to give that to you, and all you have to do is receive it.

Today, if you'd like to begin following Jesus, wherever you are whether it's at a physical campus or online you can simply text JESUS to 87221, and we would love to follow up with you.

At the conclusion of this series, I just want to challenge you to consider being baptized. Maybe that is something you've never done. Maybe you've believed in God for a long time. Maybe you received Jesus into your heart several years ago, but you never were baptized.

Or maybe you don't remember your baptism, or did it for the wrong reasons. Maybe today, in a chaotic year like 2020, now would be the time for you to say, "I'm all in. I want that. I want to become a new person, to die to myself in a watery grave, to be resurrected as a new creation."

So, let me pray.

Father, we come to you today. I thank you for these three weeks we've been together, both physically and online as we've walked through this series together. Father, I pray that there would be some who would experience real freedom from that which they've been shackled to for a really long time.

Father, I pray that if there is somebody here today who needs to forgive someone, whether that person wants it, needs it, or deserves it, whether that person is present in their life, or maybe they passed away a long time ago, it really has nothing to do with him. It has everything to do with the condition of our hearts and what it is you want to free us from and to experience.

Today, I pray there would be some here today who would get unshackled from that which is weighing them down. That they would be able to receive the forgiveness you give and simply offer that to others.

We ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.