

**Series: WHEN YOU JUST CAN'T LET IT GO!—April 15, '07**

**THE BIG PICTURE...THE MAIN PROBLEM**  
**Matthew 6:12, 14; Luke 15**

**I. INTRO**

- A. We have an evil vacuum hose on our sweeper that I swear gets clogged once a week. You can always tell. The engine's screaming—sounding like it's doing a **magnificent** job. But there's no suction. So, it's time to pull out our handy-dandy sewer snake! Yes, it works for vacuum hose clogs, too! The clog is usually made up of hay from the guinea pig and hair from the dog. Clogs of any kind are messy. Clog a drain, and you can mess up your whole house!
1. Of course, the worst, most dangerous clogs are in the heart. My family is prone to that. At 63, my Dad had to have 4 clogged arteries dealt with. They couldn't use a sewer snake; they had to pry open his chest and sew arteries on the outside of his heart to get around them. But that and a number of other procedures kept him alive for 17 more years.
  2. In this series of messages, I want to talk about another kind of clog—but a clog that affects every heart on this planet. It's when our memory is clogged with the pain of people who've done us wrong.  
 -Imagine for just a minute what it would be like if you could just totally forget painful things. Pray a simple prayer and—like a sewer snake of the soul—there's a giant sucking soul, a **ka-thunk!**—and the worst memories of cruel things done to us are gone!  
 -But it doesn't happen that way. Lewis Smedes says that one of God's jokes on humans is our ability to remember the past in intricate detail—with no power to undo it!
  3. The only way to deal with these awful things that clog your memories and mine is a surgical procedure called—**forgiveness.**
- B. Truth is, some of you have had awful things done to you. Unfair personal injuries intentionally inflicted on you by someone who deeply hurt you—maybe in ways that totally altered your life. And they've never apologized or made **any** moves that even suggest that they know...or care...what they've done. And you may be thinking inside right this very moment, "I don't **want** to forgive them; I **can't** forgive them...and therefore I **won't** forgive them. What I simply want is **justice!** Isn't God supposed to be a God of justice?"
1. In this four-part series, I want to dig into the very core of forgiveness as the Bible talks about it. I'll tell you why. It's because forgiveness is one of the **best** gifts God gives to humans, and forgiving others is one of the **best** gifts we can give to ourselves!
  2. If forgiveness is going to work, there are some things we need to know about it. Things like: "What makes forgiveness work? What's the first step toward forgiveness? And why **should** I forgive?  
 -I think we need to know **what** to forgive and what **not** to forgive. And when the time is **right** to forgive.  
 -Oh, and does forgiveness mean that I let someone back into my heart again?
  3. So, are you ready to take this journey with me? It could change your life; I mean, it could **totally** set you free—unchain you from a past that's been hurting you for **years!**

## II. FROM 30,000 FEET

- A. Now, I'd like to start from a very broad perspective—and narrow it down. One of the greatest truths about us is that we were created in the image of God—and we were created to live in community with God, with all of creation and with each other.
- Want to know what the meaning of life is? It's about **relationships**. Relationships are not just the DNA of the universe—relationships are the **only** thing that lasts. The reason you and I are here is not for accumulating stuff or accomplishing goals—we are here for a relationship with God and with others.
1. When you and I reach the end of our lives, it will not primarily be my accomplishments and awards that bring me joy and meaning. If we are filled with either joy or regret, it will most likely be over our relationships; whether they are whole or not; the things that we did or said—or left undone or unsaid. Relationships are why we are here.
    - The Bible teaches that God is a relational God—that He **is** Love! In the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, He has lived in loving, unbroken community for all eternity. God's plan for you and me is that we live in relational wholeness with Him and each other—and that we bring as many people as possible along with us.
  2. So, what's the problem? Why aren't we just floating along on this cloud of loving relationship with God and others? Why do things seem so screwed up? Why do relationships create so much pain?
    - a. When God made us—we were created perfect—and actually designed to live in a perfect world with no famines, typhoons, or tsunamis. And since the Bible says that the first two people were naked and unashamed—winter must've been a product of the Fall!
    - b. If we were created to live in a perfect world, we weren't created to experience the deep relational pain that comes when others fail us, stick us, and betray us.
    - c. In short, we were created to raised by perfect parents, have perfect friends and not only **have** the perfect spouse, but **be** the perfect spouse—and raise perfect kids! Perfect relationships in a perfect world. How far are we from **that!**
  3. The record tells us that we only experienced a taste of perfection—before we exchanged it for doing our own thing. We wanted power—and our rebellion knocked **everything** out of whack. And so now, we are born into brokenness, into dysfunction, and into hurt. -We are hurt...and then **we** hurt people because **we're** in pain. It's this cycle of victims and victimization—and it has so thoroughly penetrated our world that it's hard to know where it even started. We are **victims** who **victimize**.
    - Here's the deal. We are instinctively and unavoidably *drawn* toward and *hurt most* by the same thing. Relationships. Sometimes we don't even know it, but we **crave** a relationship with our Creator, and with those He has created. **And** it's **relationships** that hurt us in the deepest and most profound ways. We get hurt, so we move away—but **that** creates pain because our hearts tells us we **need** it. So we move back and forth—forth and back. Now, how many of you would say that's a somewhat accurate picture?
- B. Here's the question. How do you deal with the pain that relationships cause? When people **hurt** you? Our instincts lead us to respond in one of four ways. See where you find yourself here.

1. The first thing most people do is **ruminates**; run the scenario of what happened through their mind time after time—thinking about what they should've done, coming up with revenge fantasies—all kinds of stuff. Run the tape, rewind, run it again, rewind...over and over.
    - To be honest, the theme of this process ranges from wishing good things--all the way down to Dirty Harry thoughts. I'm a little ashamed to admit this, but I sometimes find the Dirty Harry approach appealing. .
    - There's one Dirty Harry scene that has penetrated pretty far into our culture. Right at the beginning of the movie, **Sudden Impact**, Clint chases down some "perp"—and finally has him on the ground, with the bead from his .44 magnum on the guy's head. Dirty Harry uses a phrase that begins with the word "Go.." See if you remember it, "Go....ahead! Make my day!" I'm going to arrest you—but if you move, I will take great pleasure in splattering you all over the sidewalk!
    - See, the deal is--we want revenge! We want to see the **bad** people punished. And a bad person is...? Well, anyone who hurts **me!**
  2. The second possible response is—to match the "R's"—**revenge**. I don't get mad. Not at all. I get **even!** Some day, at the moment you **least** expect it—I will be there—and I will get you!
  3. The third possible scenario is something called **repression**. A number of years ago, I was preparing some chicken to cook—and I had all this leftover "chicken stuff"--fat and skin. So, I stuffed it into this jar and screwed the lid on tight. I didn't think about the science—heat + time + decay = gases. I got a frantic call from Lori telling me that all this chicken stuff had blown out of the jar all over the garbage can--and **I** needed to come home and clean up a mess. I asked, "Well, did **you** eat any of the chicken I prepared...?" Actually, I just went home and did my job.
    - Anyone here ever been with someone you **know** is ticked off—and you say, "Are you okay?" "Oh, I'm **fine.**" We live in denial—as this stuff rots and produces a problem in our hearts.
  4. There's one more option—and it's the one God offers. Forgiveness. Jesus taught that **forgiveness** is the key to making relationships work—and making life work.
- C. If you and I are ever going to forgive, we need to know what it is—and how we go about it. Just for fun, I did a word search on it in the Old and New Testaments, and it's used 114 times. 53 in the OT, and 61 in the NT—which is a third of the size. It's interesting that **forgiveness** in the OT is almost exclusively something God does—He forgives our sins. Then you hit the New Testament, and the very first mention of forgiveness, in the Lord's prayer, says; **...And forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us (Matt. 6:12 NLT).**
- And then Jesus adds this footnote: **If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matt. 6:14-15 NLT).** Just so you're clear, Jesus is **not** saying, "Forgiveness is one option you should consider."
1. Let's define forgiveness: So, what does it **mean?** Well, in short, **forgiveness is the choice to set aside the debt of someone's wrongdoing against you, or the cancellation of a relational debt.**
    - We've just gone through Good Friday and Easter. Some of Jesus' last words in the process of his execution were, "Father, **forgive them** because they don't know what they're doing" and **It is finished**, which could also be translated **paid in full.**

- Anyone know **whose** debt He paid? The massive debt to God and others of my sin and rebellion—and yours. Paid in full.
2. Here's the deal. If I wrong you, I am indebted to you. Pure justice, *quid pro quo*, tooth for tooth, says that you get to do the same wrong to **me**. But when you forgive me, you remove or cancel the debt. There are two basic words for **forgive** in the Bible—in Hebrew or Greek. One means to **send away** or **carry away**; the other means to **pardon** or cancel the debt. Another word for **forgive** that Paul, a N.T. writer, uses is **grace**. I want to **grace** you! In other words, do the same for you that Jesus did for us all.
  3. People have some false notions about what forgiveness is—and get stuck.
    - a. For example, some think, “Well, if I forgive that person, doesn't that mean I'm inviting them to wallop me again? That I put myself back in their line of fire and say, “Go ahead. Shoot me again!” In short—no!
    - b. Some think, “If I forgive them, am I not implying that what they did to me wasn't really all that bad—no big deal?” Again—No!
    - c. Sometimes people think, “Well, if they stole my car, and I forgive them—doesn't that imply that I shouldn't press charges or take what they've done through the justice system? Again—NO!
    - d. And sometimes people think that forgiveness means reunion. That when you forgive someone, you have to let them back into your home, your business, or your bed. Again, **NO!** Forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration are all different. We'll talk more about that in this series.
  4. Lewis Smede's says that even though no two situations are the same, there are three stages to forgiveness. I'm just going to lay these out—and then they'll get fleshed out through the whole series.
    - First, to forgive, it has to be a **person not an institution**. Does the name Timothy McVeigh mean anything to you? He was outraged at the FBI because of the fiasco with the Branch Davidians. Problem: how do you **forgive** the FBI? His solution was to blow up a bunch of people he didn't know—including a whole nursery school.
    - Second, the hurt has to be **personal and intentional**. Someone pulls out in front of you, and you slide your brand new Lexus into a pole. You may be really angry and frustrated—but this isn't something forgiveness can heal.
    - And **it has to be deep**; something someone's **done**, not who they **are**. Remember the church-lady down in Texas who took out a contract to have a woman killed because of competition between their daughters over a cheerleading position? That **sounds** bizarre—but jealousy creates unbelievable hatred. Someone has the body, the job, the voice, the inheritance **you** want but can't have—and you've got a huge wad of hatred in you that's killing you! Can I just be brutally honest? This stuff isn't someone else's problem, it's **ours!** Sometimes we need to just grow up. Sometimes we need to chill out, or confess our jealousy or our envy.
    - a. But when it's personal, deep and intentional, we need to forgive. And the first stage we **have** to get through is re-establishing—or re-discovering the humanity of the person who hurt us.
      - See, when someone really wounds us, our tendency is to simply shrink them to what they've done to us. Their existence is summarize by words like, **Liar. Cheat. Idiot. Jerk. Ex. Judas**. And we can't see beyond the wrong. Sometimes it's a matter of trying to understand why they are the

way they are. Sometimes, for this step, you have to just ask, “God—help me see them through **your** eyes.

-Forgiving isn’t a matter of **feelings**. It’s a choice of the will. When we choose to forgive, we begin to see people “through a lens that’s not smudged by hate.” (Smedes) We begin to see them as a mixture, really, of bad **and** good. Part mean—but part decent; part lie and part truth.

-It doesn’t mean you jump right back into the relationship—you just begin to realize that they’re more like you than you thought. And maybe there’s a reason why you once loved them and trusted them.

- b. The second stage of forgiveness is giving up your right to get even. When you’re fresh from being betrayed or humiliated—you **long** for the rotten scab who did it get whacked! Feel at **least** as much pain as you did! Die poor, diseased, alone, tortured and wretched as we spit on their grave! **Yes! YESSS!**

-But releasing someone from their debt is just that. It’s CHOOSING to personally let it go. Lew Smedes uses a great example. What if a rich uncle willed to you a monster of a mansion? What if the foundation and walls were cracked by earthquakes—and the property was wracked by debt and unpaid taxes--and you couldn’t afford to either fix it or tear it down? That is a true snapshot of what it means to let go of your right to get even! It’s no bargain! Let it go!”

- c. The final stage of forgiveness is revising your feelings about the person who wronged you. That’s the goal—and it takes **time**. You probably won’t become best friends—but you can, in a grumbling sort of way at first, eventually wish them well. And then you’re free!

### III. FORGIVENESS AIN’T NATURAL!

- A. In our world, there are a lot of excuses/reasons people give as to why what Jesus said and God expects on forgiveness are totally unreasonable and out of touch with the real world. It **ain’t nat’ral!** And I’d have to say, it doesn’t **feel** natural, but the alternative is far worse.

-Do any research on all the teachers, sages and founders of religions throughout history, and it becomes clear that Jesus totally stands alone—**way** out there—in his teaching on forgiveness. Jesus’ teaching is radical. He teaches that forgiveness is absolutely essential to **all** relationships—including our relationship with God.

-Jesus knew we’d struggle with it, so He paints an unforgettable picture of what radical forgiveness looks like. I’m going to read it and then make a few comments on it—and we’re done. Okay? The story, is one many of you know. It’s been called, “The prodigal son,” but the title is misleading. It’s really about an incredible Dad with **two** lost sons. Well, let me just read it.

**Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home**

to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.” So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming.

Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’ The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’ His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found (Luke 15:11-32 NLT)!’”

1. To understand this story, you have to understand *why* Jesus told it. Let me read *why* directly from the text: **Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them (Luke 15:1-2 NLT)!** Jesus was specifically addressing their self-righteousness. Jesus purposely goes *way* over the top with what both the son and the Dad did.
  - In fact, as Jesus told about this rascal son, there would’ve been gasps about his outrageous behavior from the people listening. In that culture, the family was the core of Jewish life—and the Dad was the heartbeat of the whole thing. There wouldn’t be words bad enough to describe this son’s self-centeredness and betrayal. When he asked for his inheritance it was the equivalent of saying, “Dad, I *actually* wish you were already dead—but since you aren’t, I want the money now!” He was a traitor to his Dad, his family, his country, his God, and anyone who knew him.
2. Of course, he loses all his money. Not in a bad business deal—you know, where he was trying to make it big in pigs in the far country—but in a wild lifestyle. And when the money was gone, so were his friends.
  - There’s something about this story that I never noticed before; even this son’s decision to repent and come home is not, “Wow! I’ve hurt God, made a mess, and humiliated my Dad in front of all his friends!” It’s more like, “Hmmm. My life isn’t working for me; all the money’s gone and I’m not getting fed. If I go home—I’ll at *least* get fed! Dad’s servants do better than this!” Any repentance seems half-hearted at best.
  - And yet when he gets home—the Father lavishes grace on him. He gives him shoes and a robe—which slaves didn’t wear in that culture. His servant days were

over! Then he gives him the family **ring!** This was a huge deal! He was restored to his previous status. Restored to the family! And then the Dad throws this huge party—and apparently invites the whole county to come. Again, people listening to this story would've been flabbergasted. "The **Dad's** gone crazy too! What's this guy **thinking?**"

-There's a **take-away** on this. You may see yourself in the younger brother and feel, "I've pretty much taken everything God has given me and blown it—and treated Him as if he were dead." And you need to know that His love for you—and the forgiveness He offers is outrageous. Lavish. There's no category you can put it into on this planet. His focus this morning is not on your sin and how destructive it was. It's not even on how thorough your repentance is. It's on **you!** You are the focus of his love—and when **anyone** makes **any** move toward Him, toward home, toward sanity, He's **all over it!** It's crazy love. Nuts! It doesn't make any sense in our world.

-As a footnote, this **isn't** a story about parenting. These sons weren't kids, anyway; they were adults. Sometimes, to help kids most, there needs to be tough love. Jesus was intending to shock us with the fact that the Father is way more gracious and loving and forgiving than **anyone** could imagine!

3. But the older brother has a **big** problem with all this. The older brother has no idea that his kid brother is even home until he walks home, tired and dirty from working the fields, and hears the throb of the music and smells the roast beef cooking. And then he's really, **really** angry. When you **think** about it—you can understand why he feels ripped off. He's been the faithful one. He's stayed and worked the fields. He never asked for his inheritance—or even a party. He's never even outwardly challenged his Dad.

-And he can't **stand** the apparent injustice of forgiveness. And from everything I can gather—when the Father reinstates the younger son who's blown his inheritance, the implication is that the inheritance may one day be halved **again.**

-And **this** older brother's reaction to the Father's outrageous grace and forgiveness is the whole point of Jesus' story. Any guesses as to who he represents? The religious establishment. **That's** who this story was for. Here's the take-away, if you find yourself a little more like them. Jesus was saying, "Know the people you see as screw-ups, losers and sinners? They're inside enjoying the party. You, in your absolute commitment to justice—'you sin, you pay'—are standing **outside!** And you're going to have to work through your resentment and unforgiveness if you want to come in."

4. Know what this story is calling us to be like? Not just the repentant younger son; certainly not the older brother. Our calling is to be like this outrageously gracious, forgiving Father. To have the kind of heart that says, **I'm so GLAD you're back!** And that is a **tall** calling. It's tough. We're satisfied with a little above average—but not Jesus. Listen:

**You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate (Luke 6:36 NLT).**

-So, how do you feel about **that!**

5. It's tragic that the biblically informed people—poster-kids for religious behavior—finish **standing outside** of God's forgiveness. Jesus pleaded with them to come in. They didn't receive forgiveness—not because it wasn't available to them, but because they didn't think they needed it!

- B. To someone looking at how God forgives and asks us to forgive—the question would be asked, “So, what about a person’s accountability for their actions? Shouldn’t there be some responsibility on their part before forgiveness is granted?” Well, Jesus seems to teach that **no one** gets what they deserve! And that’s **good** news! See, our deal is that we want others to experience vengeance—to **get theirs**. The truth is, if we did a thorough and honest scan of our past, we **really** don’t want what **we** deserve!”
- One of the comments that people sometimes have when they encounter this whole issue of forgiveness is that it’s not **natural** and it’s not **fair**. Like the older brother—forgiveness totally ignores the moral instinct we have for fairness. It glosses over evil! Minimizes it. It makes believe that horrible things didn’t really happen.
1. Let me say some things about forgiveness to respond to that. These come from Lew Smedes book, **The Art of Forgiveness**. We’ll be dealing with some of these issues in more detail in the next three messages.
    - a. First, forgiving someone does **not** mean that you tolerate or ignore the wrong the person did. In fact, you have to actually **blame** someone and hold them accountable to forgive them.
    - b. Second, forgiving does **not** mean forgetting what happened.
    - c. Third, forgiving does **not** mean that we excuse someone’s wrong—or make what they did to us less evil than what it was.
    - d. Fourth, forgiving someone does not mean that justice for what they did—or consequences are totally ignored and set aside.
    - e. Fifth, forgiving does not mean that we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again.

-Forgiving is something you take care of in the interior of your heart for your own good so you can move on. It’s where you choose to cancel someone’s debt—and leave them in much bigger hands than yours. And forgiveness is **different** than reconciliation. It takes one to forgive—and it’s unconditional. Reconciliation is conditional—and it takes **two** to do it. We’ll talk more about that in the next three weeks.
  2. Some would actually go so far to say that forgiveness isn’t fair—especially to the person who’s been hurt. So—what’s fair? For a person who’s already been hurt to carry the unfair pain of what was done for the rest of their lives?
 

**Unforgiveness perpetuates** the unfairness.

-First, no one can get really get even. Think about Dirty Harry. “Go ahead! Make my day!” How, exactly, would it make Dirty Harry’s day if he shot the guy in the head? Some of the biggest tragedies on our planet are the result of people trying to “get even.” The carnage of the tribes and races and gangs—even couples—who have done that is sickening. And stupid. It will eat up your life and spit it out.
  3. Many of you are familiar with the history of Nelson Mandela. He experienced **huge** injustice—and spent 27 years in prison for trying to end the racism of apartheid. When he was elected to power in South Africa in 1990—he decided that **reconciliation**, not **retaliation** was the right path. How many of you think that his forgiveness was **unfair**? Did he violate human nature? No, when he surrendered his right to get even—he was able to move on and create a better, fairer society out of the pain and hurt and unfairness he experienced. Now he is celebrated worldwide. Forgiveness is humanity at it’s noblest and at it’s **best!**
- Forgiveness is the only kind of surgery that offers you the chance of a full recovery when you’ve been deeply and unfairly hurt. And the person you are being most fair to when you do it is **you!**

#### IV. A RADICAL COMMUNITY OF FORGIVENESS!

- A. Some of you this morning may find yourself in the position of the Kid brother. Things have been pretty wild—and you’ve lost some time and wasted some life. God, the most gracious Being in the universe’s focus—is not on your sin or failure—but you. He’s the God of the second chance. And maybe today is your day to come home.
- B. You may be actually more like the older brother—and forgiveness and grace and second chances seem too soft. It doesn’t feel fair to **you!** God invites you to the party. But you have to leave your out of joint nose, your pride, outside. It’s up to you. I’d suggest that you join the party!
- C. But my guess is that most of us have been hurt. Some deeply and irreparably—and personally. Someone you once loved and chose as a friend or a companion knifed you. And the hatred is almost as deep as the love was. And the word **forgiveness** makes you want to throw up. Hang on—and just ask God to start the process—to help you even **want** to be free.  
-We’ll help. I’ve been hurt pretty deeply—in fact a lot of people have here. I think forgiveness happens best when we help each other. When we don’t have play games, smile and say, “I’m fine!” Where we can be hurt—but **move on**. And be this community of people who, **together**, do the hard work of giving the best gift we’ve received. Forgiveness. How about it?