

Series: *WHEN YOU JUST CAN'T LET IT GO*—April 29, '07

**I KNOW I SHOULD FORGIVE, BUT...
Hebrews 12:14-15**

I. INTRO

- A. As I read though the questions you submitted about forgiveness, I found myself deeply, deeply moved. Moved by the pain some of you have been through. Moved by your struggle to understand *why? Why them? Why me? Why this?*
-So, I'm going to do my best to answer your questions. I went after some last week, and some will be answered in the message next week, and the one on Mother's Day when I talk about forgiving yourself!

-My goal today is to go after some of the how-to's on forgiveness—and in doing so—maybe save your life! How's that for dramatic! I'm actually not joking on that one. David Stoop, a psychologist, cites a study done by Duke University Medical School that was trying to discover the number one killer in North America—and guess what they found? When they looked at those who recovered from devastating medical conditions and those who didn't—the #1 killer, the *hidden death syndrome*, was unforgiveness.

- B. My goal is not to point or shake my finger—but help—just as I've been told to do. Listen to this writing from Hebrews:

Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many (Heb. 12:15 NLT).

-So, if you say, I know I should forgive, *but...* I'm simply going to say, "If you're ever going to forgive, you're going to have to get your big "but" out of the way! a few questions.

II. THE REALLY TOUGH ONES

- A. One person wrote to me about their decision to forgive a spouse who had deeply hurt them and the whole family. Then they said this, *Every so often, I am overwhelmed with bad, hurtful memories. They really pull me down. Since I have forgiven them, how or why do I still get these painful memories? I don't want to be bitter.*

-This person has nailed down the single greatest struggle every human has with forgiveness. Memories. Memories of happier days—good things, all in total contrast to devastating memories of things that were said and done.

-So, we say, ...But *I can't forget!* First, who says you *need* to? Forgiveness is not amnesia; it's God's gift to people who *can't* forget what happened! It's precisely when

we're remembering what's happened that we have to decide what we're going to do with our pain and anger. What forgiveness does is open the door to a future where we gradually think less and less about what happened.

1. Now, the Bible implies that **God** forgets. What does that mean? It means that He doesn't remember it **against** us. If you can remember something God has forgotten, that means you know more than He does. Can you imagine that? God looking at the world, saying, "Wow! This place is sure a mess! But for the life of Me, I can't remember how it got this way!"

-When the Bible talks about God not remembering our sin, it means that He won't drag it up and shove it in our face every time we come to him.

2. After first listing his past achievements and awards, then some of his failures, Paul, leader of the early church, wrote,

...I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us (Phil. 3:13-14 NLT) He's not saying he's forgotten about his past sin; he remembers it clearly—and lists it. Forgetting has to do with his **posture**.

-Bruxy Cavey from The Meeting House once gave a great illustration of this. When you're driving your car—you use two pieces of glass to get input. A windshield, and a rear view mirror.

The rear view mirror is there to show where you've been—and what's coming up from behind—like flashing lights. But it's **not** your focus. The size of a rear view mirror tells you that—you're **supposed** to be looking ahead, through the **bigger** piece of glass, watching where you're going! It would be really stupid to try to drive your car by looking in the rear view mirror! Unfortunately, some of us live like that—and we don't **have** to!

-Let me tell you something I've had to practice. I look at my anger and hurt from the past like mud in a glass of water. Sometimes things happen that stir the glass—and it feels like I'm right back where I used to be with all the old feelings. What I've learned to do is ask God to strain out the mud and junk—and once again, I **choose** forgiveness. I sense that the dirt at the bottom of the glass is getting thinner! I find myself thinking about it less and less.

- B. Another struggle/question people have about forgiveness. If I **forgive**, then what about justice? Last week you heard the father of the girl killed at Columbine say, about the two students who shot his daughter, "I forgave them, but I would never have **pardoned** them."

1. Here's the deal. Justice, in relationships, is **God's** business, not ours. In legal relationships, it's the law's business. In ethical issues, it's the church community's business. A passage from the Bible, Romans 12, is very clear on that.

Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord (Rom. 12:18-19 NLT).

-Whose sins did Jesus die for? Mine. Yours. **And** the people who've hurt us, betrayed us, and broken us. See our temptation is to think, "Well, Jesus

punishment was enough for **my** sins, but not quite enough for theirs—so *I* have to make them pay!”

2. Chuck Lynch, a counselor talks in his book on forgiveness about his successes and failures in helping people forgive. He says that one person had been abused by their father and wanted revenge. He said, “I’ve gotta hold onto this and not let him off the hook for what he did to me!”
-Chuck walked him on this imaginary journey through Christ’s suffering. He asks him to imagine his father as being the one who was relentlessly flogged, beaten, hit in the head with sticks and fists, spit on, and nailed to a cross where he agonized for 6 hours before dying. Chuck said, “If that had been your Dad, would that punishment have been enough for what he did to you?”
3. One author on forgiveness says that when we don’t forgive people, we have to rent them space in our minds. It’s like they’re in this little jail you and I have up there—and since they’re in our jail, we have to play. That’s a big responsibility—cause you’ve gotta think about them all the time. You don’t even get a vacation. The **real** question is--**who’s in jail?**

-When Jesus asks us to forgive—to let it go--to give up our right to get even, it’s like He’s saying, “I will take the prisoner off your hands and you can get on with your life!”

- C. Another **but** that didn’t come up specifically in your questions, but lurks in the background a lot. “I can **forgive** them, but I can’t trust them again.” And you know what? You may be precisely right in not trusting them. There’s a saying, “Trust takes a long time to earn—and you can lose it in a second.” That’s true. Loss of trust is one of the consequences of betrayal and broken promises.

1. David, one of the greatest men of the OT, goes through a crazy season of life—maybe a kind of mid-life crisis thing, where he gets the girl next door pregnant, and has her husband killed to hide this dirty little secret. And it seems like he does—until a prophet, Nathan, comes and points his finger in David’s face. David’s plea for forgiveness, written for us in Psalm 51, is one of deep repentance. And God forgives—but Nathan reminds David of the consequences. And life gets excruciating for several years.

-Friends, one of the consequences when you betray someone, hurt someone, break a promise—is lack of **trust**. Forgiveness is unconditional. Trust is **very** conditional. Trust has to be earned. And rightfully so.

2. In fact pain is intended as a reminder to be careful. You burn your hand in the fire, you tease someone’s Pit Bull, you stuff peanuts and marshmallows up your nose...there are consequences! Fire burns! Dogs bite! Emergency rooms hurt—especially when they put forceps up your nose!

-Here’s my point. Trust is **different** than forgiveness! And if someone expects your trust without being willing to earn it—that ought to send up huge warning lights.

-Having said that—to then **take** that mistrust and apply it to any and every situation indiscriminately doesn't help at all. Can I just be really, **really** honest here. Sometimes when a man or woman has been hurt really bad in a divorce, the temptation is to transfer all the hurt and mistrust to one gender in particular. Telling and re-telling all the **turkey stories**, as Karen Pascal calls them, tend to imbue the bitterness and mistrust.

-If you've been deeply hurt and betrayed, you may need some time and some professional help learning how to trust and hope again. And I would encourage you to invest deeply in that!

- D. Let me mention one more big BUT. But I just **can't!** I can't do it. One person wrote this—and my heart broke as I read it: **“How do you forgive someone who's done so much damage in your life? Left you homeless, doesn't love you, and is in someone else's arms. I'm heartbroken...I can't imagine happiness. How do I let it go?”**

-Everything in me wants to scream, **the monster doesn't deserve to be forgiven! That's AWFUL!** And yet I know for a fact that people who never **choose** to forgive and **choose** to let it go—get dragged to the bottom of this sea of bitterness. It's like being chained to the Titanic after it hit the iceberg.

-In the video last week, Rachel Scott's Dad said that he was a **really weak man**, and it was **only** through the power of Jesus Christ that he was able to forgive these guys who shot his daughter—first in the leg, asking her if she still believed in God—then in the head. If you feel really **really** weak, too weak to ever do any forgiving—then you're a great candidate for God's power. Paul, the Apostle who talked about forgetting the past—and looking forward to his calling, said “When I am weak, **then** I am strong!” In Philippians 4, he made the statement, **I can do ALL things through Christ who gives me strength!**

-Jesus is the one who asks us to forgive. When he asks—commands us—to do something, that is just as good as promising that He will give us the strength to do it. I think there are some things we would naturally hold on to for the rest of our lives, even if it rotted us from the inside out. Extreme pain naturally creates hatred and bitterness. And **that's** why we need the power of God to set us free—or we **just keep on hurting**. See what I'm saying, we not only get hurt, ripped off, betrayed, shoved out of a bed, a relationship, a home, a life—we keep dying! And Jesus promises life. Hope. It starts with a **choice**—and it **takes time**.

-And we do it imperfectly. **Very** imperfectly! But then, we parent imperfectly, we drive imperfectly, we sing imperfectly—we do **everything** imperfectly. But that doesn't stop us, right? God's the professional. We're just amateurs—and He's cool with that!

III. **BUT...HOW?**

- A. I think the biggest part of that past question was **HOW!?** It was a question that came up several times in several ways; but one person put it like this: **I understand that we need to forgive...but what I need to know is how to forgive?** Great question! I'm going to talk some—some of this will be a review--and then I'm going to give a chance for a few minutes of Q&A. Does that work for you?

-Let me start like this. Over 25 years ago, I tasted the best fudge I had ever had in my life. The woman who made it was an older woman named Lottie Lindsey. When I asked

her, she gave me the recipe for it. And I tried. It wasn't very good. So, I went over and we made fudge **together**. The next time it turned out better. So, for 25 years I've been practicing—and now I'm getting the hang of it. I've learned that if you want to do something new—ask someone who's really good to teach you! Textbooks are good—but we learn best from people.

-And my point is...? God is a professional forgiver. He thought it up—perhaps to heal the pain caused by our sin. And He's **really** good at it! Rumor has it that there's **nothing** He can't forgive. So...what does He do?

1. Well, **He starts by re-establishing the humanity of those who have sinned and hurt Him**. And he did that by stepping into our shoes; feeling our pain; eating our food, paying our taxes—living under the injustices we experience. He **felt** temptation—all of it.

-Then he took the most outrageous action of all. He was rejected, captured, tried, and crucified. He knew what it was like to die one of the most painful deaths on this planet. He was perfect, but He took **our** sin on himself—knew what it was like to feel shame, regret, horror, fear and isolation.

-The price He paid for us was infinite—and by the price He paid for us, for our sin—**He established our worth and dignity**. He made it clear that the God of the Universe thought **we** were worth saving at infinite cost to himself. He Himself paid the infinite price we could have **never** afforded. He doesn't use names like **jerk, pervert, whore, thief, gossip, liar, betrayer**—to describe us. He offers to call us his friends. Redeemed. Child of God. Heir. Beloved.

-Whenever we forgive someone—we do the same. When they first hurt us—we're angry. Furious. Hurt—and we shrink them down to the smallest nastiest name we can think of.

-When we begin to forgive—choose to forgive—we realize that Christ paid a horrible price for their sin against us. We understand that they're not pure evil—they're just a weak, fragile sinful human being—not all that different from us.

-I lived in small coal-mining towns in PA for 8 years—and when these guys came home from the mines, their faces were black with coal dust—all you could see was their eyes. But when they scrubbed it off—I could see, "Oh, that's Bill Stygers, David Bertanoli." Around here, we baptize. Dunk people in water—symbolic of forgiveness. Cause, according to God, that's what happens—it's like we're washed clean for the first time in life. It's an **amazing** experience. By the way, if you've put your faith in Jesus, but haven't been baptized, we're going to do that this summer—and you need to be in the water. Any here from last summer? But—I digress. Just **preachin' the announcements!**

-To forgive someone—you have to see them as more than what they did to you.

2. **The second thing God does when He forgives is that He surrenders his right to get even**. We all feel it, don't we? That **someone** should pay. It's only **right** that we should be able to do **something** to even up the score! **Someone** should have to experience the same pain and humiliation and sadness **we** feel.

-But to forgive, you have to give up your right to get even—believing that even if you could, it really wouldn't change anything. And God tells us, "Leave that in My Hands.

Right now all you want to do is inflict pain—I can deal with them redemptively. Will you trust Me as a just God?

3. The final stage of forgiveness is that **God revises how He feels about us**—because His Son has paid for our sin. When we come straggling in, life screwed up, resources wasted, He can truly say, "I'm *so glad* you're home!"

-Lew Smedes tells the story of woman in one of his classes at Fuller Seminary. She was quite attractive—and yet visibly handicapped—and he wondered who she was. She came up after the class and told him that she had been a Hollywood actress—but was hit and critically wounded by a drunk driver. Two weeks later when she got out of the hospital, her husband, also an actor—walked out on her. What a horrible thing to do!

-He said, "I asked her if she had forgiven him." She said, "I think I have..." "What makes you think so?" Lew asked. She said, "I find myself wishing him well." It's a sure sign that you're well on your way to forgiving someone when you can get down on your knees and pray that God will bless them—even if you only half mean it!" That's what **grace** is all about.

Justice is when you get what you deserve. Mercy means you get less than you deserve. Grace means that you get what you *don't* deserve. It's quite an achievement when mere humans like us can show grace! Actually, it shows the power of God.

- B. Another issue in the **how?** category of forgiveness: **When** should you forgive? Some of you asked the question like this: ***Is it better to forgive when you don't feel like it (i.e. right after the incident) or is it better to wait until you feel like it?***

1. From my research—let me tell you what the formula is. Are you ready? **Not too late...and not too soon!** How's that for advice? Sounds like Dr. Phil doesn't it? One of the best writers on biblical forgiveness said, "I really worry about **quick-draw** forgivers. I'll tell you why. Whenever you forgive somebody, it's because you **blame** them. If you **don't** blame them or **can't** blame somebody for something, you can't really forgive them. You have to assess the damage; feel the emotional toll it's taken.

-Sometimes people quickly forgive others—not because it's actually been processed through their heart—but to prove that they're better. "I'm a lot better than you, **dog-breath!** I forgive you—and don't you ever **forget** that I forgave you!"

-Or sometimes people forgive quickly to try to avoid the pain of being hurt, being betrayed, being broken by what someone's done. "I don't want to **feel** that pain, so I'll hurry up and forgive!" You don't forgive to avoid pain—you forgive to **heal** the pain! You have to give yourself some time to feel the pain and understand what you've lost. Remember Jesus' story about the king that I told last week? He was in the process of preparing for his April 29 tax deadline—and realized that he was missing some money, and **he knew how much!** 750,000 pounds of gold!

But when the guy asked for forgiveness, he gave up his right to get even—and wished the guy well. Let him go.

2. But you don't want to wait too long, either. If you do, all the bitterness and pain and anger will get woven right into your personality. Know what will happen? You'll pass the infection along through something we **all** about—gossip. And gossip feeds the tumor. Subtly, when we're angry and bitter want others to hate and be as angry with the person who hurt us as **we** are. That's precisely what the passage from Hebrews 12 is saying.

Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many (Hebrews 12:15 NLT).

-Bitterness is unforgiveness that's gotten contaminated and infected. You can sew wounds up—and they're sore for a while—and may even leave a scar. Infection is a whole other story. Ever met someone infected with bitterness? The pain and the self-pity and the anger leaks everywhere. Don't wait too long.

3. Something else about waiting. Don't wait for the other person to repent. If you say, "Well, I'll forgive her if she comes crawling back on her knees to me, bawling her eyes out"—what you're actually doing is putting your freedom, your future, your happiness in the hands of that person and letting **them** decide whether you'll be free or locked up in your pain.

-Don't rush—but don't wait too long. Wait until you're so tired of the pain—that you can hear Jesus' voice saying, "Forgiveness isn't an obligation—it's an **opportunity!**" There's only one way to be healed of the pain. By forgiving it. So, why don't you try it?

- C. Let me close by just saying a few more words about **how**. Again, this is kind of a review.
 1. First, you can only forgive people for what they **do**, not for who they **are**. Let me use a goofy illustration. Let's say you're watching **Animal Kingdom**, or something on the Discovery Channel. It's featuring Killer Whales. You think, "This is cool! I saw one of these at **Marineland!**" Then you watch in horror as cute little seals—you know, the ones with the big moist eyes, and whiskers and flippers—dive into the water—and this huge killer whale scoops it up in its powerful teeth-lined jaws—and **chomps** it! The water turns red.

-You stand up. Aghast! "**Shamu! How could you DO that! I hate you!**" You struggle theologically with Shamu—the **killer** whale. Well, that's what **killer** whales do. Shamu eats carp, herring—but when they're not in captivity—they eat **seals!**

-You run into a whole bunch of different people in the world. God likes variety—in case you hadn't noticed. Some people talk too loud. Some people bug you with their weird clothes, their choice of music—that they hunt, or fish, or play golf—or **watch** golf. You don't forgive people because they bug you, because they are doing better than you, because they get noticed and you don't. That's an issue of dealing with jealousy, or covetousness or impatience or racism or snobbery.

-You can only forgive people for what they **do**, not who they **are**.

2. Also, forgive **specifically**. Think specifically about what the person did who hurt you, rejected you, humiliated you, damaged your life. It's a little like getting a damage estimate on a wrecked car. You write up all the details—all the smashed parts, creases, dents, paint—and then you fix it.
 - Forgive in verbs, not in nouns. For example, for cheating you, not for being a cheat; for lying to you, not for being a liar. And remember--God can forgive wholesale because He's God. Not us. We have to forgive **retail**. That's about as much as we can handle!

3. Third, if you need to, begin by **pretending!** Choose forgiveness, the feelings will follow. There's this incredible thing about pretending something; if you pretend it often enough, you become it. You're really doing it.
 - Lewis Smedes tells the story of his youngest son getting beaten up by a policeman out in front of his house who was out to rid their little village of pot and pot users. And Lew was furious! He says, "...And I had to preach a sermon on the grace of God in beautiful downtown Burbank the next week. I told my sister-in-law about it, and I thought she would sympathize with me. She said, 'Why don't you practice what you preach?' That's a lousy thing to tell a preacher when he's hurting.
 - “Do you know what I did? I said, ‘This has got to be a crash course.’ I went into my study, got on my knees, and I said, ‘Officer Maloney, in the name of God, I forgive you.’ I didn’t mean a word of it! I said it again and again. I felt like a fool the third time. But the thirtieth time, the juices began to flow, and I began to come to my senses and see that there was a lot more here than meets the eye.
 - “The cop was trying to do his job, and it’s tough to be a cop. I began to rediscover his humanity, and I began to surrender my right to get even. I even tried to wish him well—**pretend**. I call it ‘creative hypocrisy,’ and it really is. Ordinary hypocrisy is when you pretend something you have no desire to really be. Creative hypocrisy is when you pretend to do what you really **want** to do.

4. A fourth **how** of forgiveness. Do it patiently, because forgiving is a process. As the father in the Columbine shooting said, “Forgiveness is a process...you do it over and over and over...until it **takes!**” We go through phases in forgiving. You think all the animosity and hurt is gone—and then something shakes you up, seeing the person who hurt you, hearing about them, having a similar painful experience—and all the dirt comes swirling up and the feelings come back.
 - Lewis Smedes says, “I saw that cop about a year later, and I had to [forgive him] a second time. It was **easier** the second time. Then, a couple of years later, I heard that he had gotten fired from the police department, and a little guy inside of me said, “Yes! He finally got it!”
 - See, we backslide—and we have to do it all over again. Don't think you haven't forgiven, or weren't sincere—it's just your feelings hooked up to this bungee cord—just springing back and forth when you get jostled!

5. And do it quietly—at first. Someone asked, **When you have asked God to help you forgive someone who has hurt you, is it necessary to then go to that person and actually tell them that you have forgiven them?**
 - Telling the person doesn't always work. Mainly because we're not all that talented at **telling** people in a gracious way that we've forgiven them. And they're not always anxious to hear us. Your conversation might go like this: “I just want

you to know that I forgave you.” “*Forgave me for what?*” “Well, you know—for what you did to me last month.” “*What did I do to you?*” “What did you **do**? Ahhh! Well! Let me **tell** you what you did!” Now—where do you think **that** conversation’s going?

-There will come a time when you’re ready to tell them—and when they’re ready to hear. Better hear from Jesus on that one!

6. Finally, **forgive intolerantly**. “I’m not going to put up with what you did!” This is a huge juggling act for Christ-followers. See, the anger you feel is intended to help you **do** something—apart from getting revenge. In the video last week, notice what Rachel Scott’s Dad is doing. He’s going around speaking on school violence. Parents of children killed by drunk drivers start chapters of M.A.D.D.-- Mother’s Against Drunk Driving. If you’ve been abused, your anger fire you up about that **never** happening again!

-By the way, did you know that God is forgiving, but He’s not a doormat—and he doesn’t expect us to be doormat forgivers. We come to him with our failure and sin. He says, “I forgive you. Now cut it out!”

-Now—next week I’m going to spend our whole time on apologizing, confronting, reconciling, and restoring relationships. So, hopefully I’ll be able to help answer more questions about forgiveness then. I want to hear what you’re thinking!

Question and Answer time

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. In her memoirs of a completely dysfunctional family, *The Liar’s Club*, Mary Carr tells about an uncle and aunt who lived in Texas. They apparently had a huge blow-up over how much money her aunt had spent on sugar. The uncle remained married to her—but did not speak to her for **40 years!** In fact, one day he took out a lumber saw and sawed their house exactly in half. He planked off each half, and then moved one of them, out of sight, behind a clump of pines on their acre of property. And they lived out the rest of their lives in two half-houses!

-Unforgiveness and bitterness do really strange things to our hearts. That’s why the Bible tells us to help each other so we **don’t miss grace!**

-Most people don’t need someone to fix them or tell them what they ought to do. They just need someone to walk with them. To cry with them at their loss. To remind them of God’s incredible love and forgiveness for us—and to just live in the joy of being forgiven. That God has forgiven us, no matter what we’ve done. He has somehow, under the crud, rediscovered the beauty of who we are—humans made in the image of the most amazing being in the universe. And God has surrendered every right to get even. If you’ve failed, he’s not looking for a way to nail you and make you feel bad again. And **He wishes you well! Nothing you can do could ever make him undo his forgiveness!**

-Do you know that? That the one who threw every star into space—created this universe wishes you **nothing** but the best? See, when the river of God's love and forgiveness starts flowing inside—it starts to wash the anger away—and leaves joy!

B. The first part of Heb. 12:15 says,

Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God (Hebrews 12:15 NLT). Why don't **we** become that kind of community. A community that humbly walks with each other, looks after each other—makes sure that **everyone** gets to taste the grace of God.

-Maybe you've been lucky. Maybe you've gone through life and you've never been hurt badly by anyone. But if you **have**, why don't you get out from under the shadow of it—and we'll all just hold hands and jump in God's healing stream of forgiveness together!