

Series: *I BELIEVE IN GOD, BUT...* January 22, 2012

**...BUT YOU'D BETTER NOT CROSS ME!
Matthew 5:43-48, 6:9-15, Hebrews 12:14-15**

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1. Roots are *amazing* things! A seed can be dormant—dried up—sometimes for hundreds of years. And yet, put it in some wet soil, and it will shoot out a root to draw in water and nutrients—and spread out to make sure that what it grows doesn't get blown over or have the soil washed out from underneath it! I did some basic research and found out that, under some circumstances, roots can go down 60 meters! [pic]

-And even though roots seem soft and weak—they can crack foundations, heave sidewalks and break water lines in their quest to keep the plant they're supporting alive! But, unfortunately—it's not just good things that have roots. Cancerous tumours have roots. Problems have roots. But the Bible talks about a kind of root that's *extremely* dangerous:

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. (Hebrews 12:15 NLT)

-Bitterness is relational pain that's gone inward, festered—and grown roots. See, anger and grudges, when they're buried in our hearts don't dissolve; like seeds, they grow roots. And that's why **God** forgives—and tells **us** to forgive, too. But **man** is it hard! Which, of course, is probably why we are **more** likely to say, "You'd better not cross me!" than, "I forgive you!" I'm convinced that this is where many people **believe** in God, but **live like He doesn't exist**.

2. First, let's just be clear on what Jesus, in particular, has to say about forgiveness. When Jesus speaks on forgiveness—and He does it a lot—He draws on the volumes of material in the Old Testament about how God forgives. Let me read just one for you:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:8-14 NIV)

-By the way, want to know something fascinating? The majority of the passages in the OT on forgiveness focus on how God forgives us. Guess what the NT passages focus on? Most are about **us** forgiving **others**.

-Just so you know, no other teaching in history even **begins** to compare to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. Let me give you a taste of it. First, Jesus taught that retaliation, the other option to forgiveness, is a dead end street:

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. (Matthew 5:38-41 NIV)

-See, Jesus wasn't just smart—He was **brilliant**. He alone had the ability to look back through history—**and** look ahead—and see the **immense** sadness and bloodshed in our world caused by people—nations—seeking revenge. Jesus says, "When people hassle you, surprise them. **Let it go!**"

-Jesus then resets the bar on what it means to **love**:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven...If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (Matthew 5:43-45a, 46 NIV)

-So, Jesus messes with our desire to get even, our desire to love the people we already like—and then He tells us in a very pointed way—to do the most difficult thing we will ever be called to do: **forgive**. Right in the middle of teaching his followers how to pray—Jesus hits us with it:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:12, 14-15 NIV)

- a. This is **profound!** "God, know all of those scoundrels who have hurt me, hurt people I love, stolen from me—and hurt my reputation? Forgive **me** just like I've forgive **them!**" And in case we **didn't** get it—he says, "Don't bother asking God to forgive you for your sins—if you won't forgive others for theirs! Now, does that scare anyone here besides me?"
- b. It's not like Jesus just lets it go at that. Forgiveness must have been as messy and difficult then as it is now because Jesus has to address it again. This time he tells a story—about a servant who owes a king what, in our culture, would be a billion dollars. Unpayable. When his entire life is about to be sold to cover at least part of the debt—he begs for forgiveness. And to the astonishment of *everyone* watching—the king forgives the debt, which, of course, means the *king* has to pay it.

-Well, he barely gets out of the palace when he begins to throttle someone who owes him a tiny amount in comparison—and he too begs for more time. But

instead of mercy—he throws the guy in jail—infuriating those who have been watching. The king finds out—and throws him to the jailers until he can pay every penny. Jesus says, “That’s how it will be for people who **ask** for forgiveness—but won’t **give** it!”

-Peter, trying to sound magnanimous, says, “Lord, to, like, what’s the upper limit--7 times?” Jesus said, “Uh, try 70 times 7!” In other words—keep forgiving—and never stop! Now, how many of you would be willing to say at this point, **No problem! Why, Jesus, it’s like you’ve been describing how I forgive!** Forgiveness is tough!

3. What I would like to do for the rest of our time together this morning is talk, first, about *why* God asks us to forgive—and then *how* to forgive. It’s a huge subject—and I’ll just be skimming over the top. If you have specific questions—send them to me and I’ll try to help. I have a couple of books that are excellent as well. So, if you say, I know I should forgive, **but...** you probably have some company here today.

- Someone once wrote to me about a spouse who had deeply hurt them and said: *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. Does forgiveness mean I am never haunted by the pain and memories again? If not—what am I supposed to do when they happen?*

-When we want to forgive—memories get in the way, don’t they. Memories of happier days—good things, all in stark contrast to the memories of awful things that were said and done. People say, I can **forgive...**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! Forgiveness simply opens the door to a future where we gradually think less and less about what happened.

- a. When the Bible says that God forgets—it means that He won’t dredge it up and shame us with it as leverage to get us to do what He wants. Let me be clear on what this means in our relational world. Choosing to forgive means choosing **not** to put the offense in your back pocket so you can stick a spouse, a child or a friend when you want to win an argument or shut them up. That’s **very** destructive!

-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. (Philippians 3:13 NLT)

He clearly hasn’t forgotten about his sin—because he’s just talked about 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 **big** one--the 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! In fact, you can't watch both and move forward. Remember that!

b. Let me tell you something I've had to practice. I think I've emptied out all the anger and hurt from the past. But something happens that stirs the bottom of the glass—and all this sludge comes swirling up. Then I have to use the forgiveness filter—I **choose** forgiveness. And that's important to remember—forgiveness is a **choice** we make—and keep making! Over time—I find myself thinking about it less and less.

4. Another struggle/question people have about forgiveness. If I **forgive**, then what about justice? I was watching a news program a few weeks ago that told the story of a man who was shot—like someone emptied the whole gun into him and ran over him with a car. Know who did it? His step-daughter. He apparently had raped her from the time she was about 4 years old. Some people might say, "Serves him right!" But her revenge his life—and hers, too.

a. Here's the deal. Justice, in relationships, is *God's* business, not ours. In legal relationships, it's the law's business. Romans 12 says:

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. (Romans 12:18-19 NLT)

-Whose sins did Jesus die for? Mine. Yours. **And** the sins of 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 (sigh) *I* have to make them pay!"

-One author on forgiveness says that when we don't forgive people, 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 prison warden. 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?** Jesus says, "If you want—you can turn the prisoner over to me. **I'll** watch them—**you** live!"

b. Another question that lurks in the back of our minds has to do with trust. "I can *forgive* them, but I can't trust them again." And you know what? You may be precisely right in **not** trusting them. Forgiveness is free—but trust has to be earned! Loss of trust is one of the consequences of betrayal and broken promises.

-See, pain is God's gift to help us remember to be careful. You stick 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! It hurts when

a doctor puts forceps up your nose! 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.

-Know what we sometimes do, though? We take that mistrust—which is the right instinct—and we apply it to every situation indiscriminately. That doesn't help. And the more you regurgitate all the done me wrong songs and stories of how horribly you've been treated—well that just imbeds mistrust and **bitterness** into your heart. It would be worth your while to get some professional help in learning to trust and hope again.

- c. You may be thinking, "You know, I just don't think I'm going to forgive. They don't deserve it—and I don't have the energy...or the desire. I heard a great quote: **Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die!**

-If you feel really, **really** weak, too weak to ever do any forgiving—then you're a great candidate for God's power. Jesus is the one who asks us to forgive. When he asks to do something, that is just as good as promising that He will give us the strength to do it.

Jesus promises life. Hope. It starts with a choice—and it takes time. And we do it imperfectly—like we do everything else, right?

5. I think the biggest issue I face...we face is--**HOW!?** A lot of times people who give talks...like me...are really good at helping people know what they **should** do—but not telling them **how**. So, I'm going to take a shot at that, okay?

-I've told you my fudge story, right? Almost 30 years ago, a woman named Lottie Lindsey gave me some fudge—and it was the best I'd ever had. So, I asked for the recipe. But when I made it--it didn't taste like hers! So, she invited me over one night to make fudge with her. The next time I made it—it turned out better. I've been practicing for 30 years—and I think I'm...**getting the 'hank' of it!** Textbooks are good—but we learn best by **watching** and **practicing**.

-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! Rumour has it that there's **nothing** He can't forgive. So...what does He do?

-Well, He starts by **re-establishing the humanity of those who have sinned and hurt Him**. Remember how he did that? Well, humbled himself, set aside his rights as God and become human--felt our pain; ate our food, paid our taxes and experienced our injustices and frailty.

-By **identifying** with us, see, He **established our worth and dignity**. He doesn't reduce us to names like **worm, dirt, scum or filth**--He offers to call us his friends. Redeemed. Child of God. Heir. Beloved.

- a. And that's what we have to do whenever we forgive someone. When they first hurt us—we're furious—and we shrink them down to the smallest, ugliest adjective we can think of. But when we **choose** to forgive—we realize that Christ suffered a horrible punishment for what they did. We understand that they're not pure evil—they're just weak, fragile sinful human beings—not all that different from us. To forgive someone—you have to see them as more than what they did to you.
- b. 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** needs to pay! Remember the song? **Jesus paid it all...all to HIM I owe!** Jesus paid the debt we owed—and gave up his right to get even. And, to give up your right to get even, you have to be convinced revenge won't change **anything!** God says, "Their pain will not change what happened. **Leave them in my hands!**"
- c. The final stage of forgiveness is that **God revises how He feels about us**. When we come straggling in, life screwed up, relationships torched, resources wasted, He can honestly run, hold us close, and say, "I'm *so glad* you're home!"

-Lew Smedes, one of the best authors on forgiveness I've read, 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 by a drunk driver. When she got out of the hospital, her husband, also an actor—walked out on her—because, see, she was no longer an asset—she was **damaged goods**.

-Lew 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." Smedes says, "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.

-You know the difference, don't you, between justice, mercy and grace?

Justice means you get what you deserve. Mercy means you get less than what 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!

6. But there's another issue in the **how?** category of forgiveness: *When* should you forgive? Someone once asked me: **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?**

-At the time, I did some research—and found an answer. Are you ready? **Not too soon...and not too late!** How's that for precision? Sounds like Dr. Phil doesn't it? I think it was Lewis Smedes who 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."

Like the man in Jesus' story with the immense debt. The king knew **exactly** what the guy owed him! If you've been hurt, you have to assess the damage.

- a. Now, why would someone even **want** to forgive too quickly? Well, some do it because it proves that they're **superior** to the person they're forgiving. "I'm a lot better than you, *dog-breath--scumbag!* I forgive you—and don't you ever *forget* that I forgave you!" Or sometimes people think, "I don't want to *feel* that pain of being hurt, so I'll hurry up and forgive!" But you don't forgive to get a shot of emotional morphine—you forgive to *heal* the pain! You have to give yourself time to feel the pain and understand what you've lost.
- b. But you don't want to wait too long, either. The warning of Ephesians 4 is:

Don't sin by *letting anger control you*. And don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27 NLT)

-Bitterness will become a **part** of you! See, when we're angry at someone, we want others to be angry with them too—and to feel **bad** for us. And that's exactly what Hebrews 12 is saying:

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

-Let me give you a metaphor for how bitterness works. When my Dad was about 12, he fell when he was ice-skating and cut his leg. No big deal—it healed. But under the skin was an infection that eventually went into the bone. They actually wanted to amputate his leg to save his life—but my Grandmother wouldn't let them. The infection traveled from the bone into his major organs—including his heart. He was sick for almost an entire year—and 7th grade. You can call anger and bitterness whatever you want—but it will fester in your heart and do **way** more damage than you'd ever believe. Ephesians 4 goes on to say, **Get RID of it—all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words and slander—it won't melt on it's own!**

- c. Something else; if you're planning on waiting for the **other** person to repent—to come crawling on their knees, bawling their eyes out—**Get real!** You're putting your soul into the hands of whoever walloped you 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 to be free!**"

7. Let me close by just saying a few more words about *how*. Again, this is kind of a review of things I've said before. 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 saw Shamu—at Sea World—jumping out of the water for mackerel, licking people, doing tricks. Then you watch **Blue Planet**—you watch in horror as a killer whale—just like Shamu--**eats** a baby seal—you know, with whiskers and bit moist eyes. You stand up, **Shamu! How could you do something like that!** And you struggle theologically with Shamu, the **killer whale!** Can I ever forgive Shamu? Well, duh, that's what **who** killer whales **are!** Shamu eats mackerel—because he's in captivity—but in the **real** world...let's just say those huge teeth aren't for smiling for the camera!

-Some people talk too loud. Some people chew with their mouths open; spouses watch too many chick flicks—or too much **golf on TV**. You don't forgive people because they bug you, or because they get noticed and you don't or because they're negative. You can only forgive people for what they **do**, not who they **are**.

- a. Second, forgive **specifically**. Think specifically about what the person actually **did** that hurt you so much—and forgive them for **that!** And 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**—one person, one item at a time. That's about as much as we can handle!
- b. Third, if you need to, **begin by pretending!** Choose forgiveness, the feelings will follow. Lewis Smedes tells a story about this. Apparently his youngest son was beaten up—right in front of their house--by a policeman who was trying to rid their little village of pot and pot users. Lew says, "I was **furious**...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.”

- c. A fourth *how* of forgiveness. Do it patiently, because **forgiving is a process**. Some of you may remember a girl named Rachel Scott—who was shot to death at Columbine High School. Her father, a believer in Jesus, 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 in your glass 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 forgive 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!

- d. And forgive quietly—at first. The question almost always comes up, **“So. Should I go the person and tell them that I’ve forgiven them?”**

-Telling the person doesn’t always work. Mainly because we’re not very good at doing that graciously—and they’re not always anxious to hear us. So—forgive quietly at first. There will come a time when you’re ready to tell them—and when they’re ready to hear.

- e. Finally, **forgive intolerantly**. “I’m not going to put up with what you did!” This is a huge juggling act. See, the anger you feel is intended to help you *do* something to prevent it from happening again to you—and maybe to others. God is the most gracious, forgiving person in the universe—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 love you and I forgive you. Now *cut it out!*”

8. 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!

-Now, ***that’s just weird!*** But the truth is that unforgiveness and bitterness turn us into people we would **never** recognize. It could be that this morning, you are standing at the crossroads—and you’ve got a choice, “Will I **forgive...or not?**” Jesus says, “Better forgive. It’s the only way to heal the pain you feel. It’s the only way for **you** to truly feel that **you’ve** been forgiven. To **not** forgive is to damage your heart and stunt your growth.”

-See, you and I forgive because Jesus calls us to do it; we forgive because we are followers of Jesus—and that’s what we do as people who have been forgiven **massive** debts we could never repay. Forgiving may be the most powerful thing we ever do.

-I want you to watch a video. The guy on trial here was Gary Ridgeway--known as the Green River Killer. It’s estimated that he murdered 71 women.

The victim's relatives all had a chance to vent their hurt—as he sat there stoned-faced. Most told him to burn in hell—except for one.

[Video]

-Forgiveness is **powerful**. We are called, as a community of faith—to help our world—and help each other—to find the freedom of forgiveness—so we **don't miss grace!** God has somehow, under all the crud, re-discovered the beauty of who we were made to be—and surrendered His right to get even. And now He wishes us well! When the river of God's love and forgiveness starts flowing inside—it starts to wash the anger away—and leaves joy!

-Today after the service, there will be people stationed around the auditorium—who would **love** to pray with you. If you need to do something tangible, there are pieces of paper up front—write out what's been done, and throw it away. Make a choice, ask God for help—and **keep making the choice to forgive**—because, see,

Forgiveness is setting a prisoner free—and finding out that the prisoner is YOU!
(Lewis Smedes)