

I FORGIVE

Week #5 of the 7-Week Series, "A Year of Love"

Feb. 9, 2022

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I want you to think of something, as we begin tonight: someone, some situation, some condition that you were willing to forgive -- maybe even if you didn't want to -- that has changed your life. Or healed your life in a way that you could have never got to without forgiveness.

See, there's a human part of us that never wants to forgive. You know, CS Lewis, *"Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."* [Congregation laughs] Right? And so this is one of those spiritual ideas where, if you ask nine out of 10 people, *"Do you think forgiveness is a good idea?"* nine out of 10 people will say, *"Yes."* Do you practice it in your life, really? Then it might be, like, two or three out of 10. Because it's hard! Right? It's hard to forgive; the human part of us just doesn't want to do it.

I asked my wife earlier this week; I said, *"So what's one of the things you've forgiven in your life that's probably made the biggest difference?"* And I thought she was going to say me. [Laughs] But she didn't, thankfully! [Congregation laughs]

She said, *"It was my debt."* She said, *"There was a time in my life where I was in debt; I knew better than to get into debt, and my affirmation was, 'I forgive my debt, and my debt is forgiven of me.'" And she said, "Within an incredibly short amount of time, I was debt-free." She said, "I didn't ... I felt bad about that I know better than to get into debt, and I got into debt. And I felt that situation." And she said, "You know, and everybody I know that has used that affirmation: it's amazing how -- as we forgive ourselves for that thing: 'I forgive my debt, and my debt is forgiven of me' -- how it was just wiped away."*

See, I really believe that if we take it to its essence, forgiveness is selfish. It doesn't seem like that; it doesn't ... It feels like we're giving somebody else a gift. That we're giving them a pass. We're giving them a free chance to hurt somebody else or hurt us again. But really what forgiveness does is: it sets us free to actually experience the greater goodness of God. There's only so much goodness we can experience in the presence of resentment or upset.

And, as we forgive, it actually moves us forward. You know, this year: I've dedicated it to love. And the ideas that we've been focusing on -- not to add conflict; to open your heart; to see the greatness in others; to accept people as they are; to stay full (that we talked about last week).

And then, if we're really going to love, we have to be willing to forgive, because we "bump." You know, we bump into each other. We bump into life. We hurt each other ... even the people we love. And even the times when we don't want. It's one of those things. And we just have to forgive.

As we focus on this series, I talked about what I think are Jesus' "big three" teachings: where he talked about love; he talked about 'Don't judge'; and the third one was: when we mess up -- this is a paraphrase! When we mess up the first two, Jesus taught forgiveness.

And the whole idea is that, as we're living our spiritual life, can we love without judgment? And when we do -- when we get involved in that -- can we forgive?

You know, a dear friend of mine years ago invited me to go for coffee. And I said, *"Okay."* And we had coffee, and his wife came and his business manager. He has a business here and had a business out of state. And, as we were talking, he said, *"Okay; I have this thing. I have this problem. I have this person out of state who is the attorney general, and he is trying to destroy my business. He's interviewing my*

best customers. He's trying to find out what I did wrong, or he's trying to find dirt. And he is ... he wants to destroy me. He wants to destroy my business. He's ... He's ... not a nice guy."

That wasn't quite the word he used ... [Congregation laughs] But that was the theme.

And, you know, when you look at somebody who's really struggling, and you say, "*You know; I don't think there's a way around this but to forgive.*" You know that moment where you say the thing that causes somebody's head to almost explode off their shoulders? And it was like, "*But you don't understand! He is literally trying to destroy my business. He is ... He called the IRS on me. They are auditing my business. They're auditing me personally. This man is doing everything in his power to destroy me.*" He said, "*Richard, I have spent \$161,000 this year in legal fees.*"

And I said, "*Okay. I got it. And you've got to forgive.*"

And you could see something in him knew that he had to, and just wanted somebody else to support him. That this may have been his biggest spiritual ask ever. You know the times when life asks you to do far more than you think you're capable or you want to? And there was this ask: so you've got to forgive him.

And I remember his response, because it took everything in him. He said, "*I'm willing to be willing.*" You know that place where you're willing to be willing? And so we talked, and that was the consensus as we left that little coffee.

And when I found out, talked to him later, he said, "*Yes; the IRS came in and audited me. And, yes, it was -- in my mind -- an illegal audit. They audited me personally; they audited me professionally. And the result was that the IRS owed me another \$500,000.*" [Congregation laughs] So kind of balanced that \$161,000, right? [Congregation laughs]

And then he said, "*And they were so upset that they couldn't find anything, they went back one more year and audited me another year. And that year they found another \$250,000 that they owed me.*" Right? [Laughs] They should have quit when they were ahead! Right?

So here's the deal: I want us to really look that the human part of us doesn't want to do this. Can we just acknowledge that the human part of us does not want to forgive those "low-life dirty dogs" for whatever they've done to us. We just don't want to do it! And, yet, the spiritual part of us asks us to go beyond what we think is reasonable or appropriate. Right?

There's a line I read that said, "*It takes a strong person to say, 'I'm sorry'; it takes an even stronger person to forgive.*" Like, one of the premises that I live from is that, the more that I have, the more I need or the more I'm expected to forgive.

Like, if I have two dollars, and you owe me a hundred bucks, how easy do you think it's going to be -- if I really only have two dollars -- to forgive you if I feel like you owe me a hundred bucks? Can everybody see the problem there? Now, if I have a million dollars, and you owe me two bucks, do you think ...? Which scenario do you think it would be easier to forgive? [Congregation calls out answers] One or two? Two! Because, if I believe that I'm full; if I believe that I'm rich; if I believe that I'm blessed, it becomes easier to forgive the people around me. But if I believe that I'm a victim; if I believe that I don't have enough; if I believe what happened was unfair or unright or unjust, the human part of me gets involved in this and just doesn't want to do it. And the human part of me feels completely justified in not doing it.

Now, imagine [claps] that, at the end of service, I'm standing by the east door, and everybody who walks out I'm giving ... I've got this stack of money, and I'm just handing people dollar bills as they're leaving. Right? How many of you would take my dollar as you're leaving? How many of you would say, "*It's only a buck, Richard; I don't want your buck!*" [Congregation laughs] "*Like, can you up it? Can you give me,*

like, a five-spot or a 10-spot?" [Congregation laughs] "Have you got a hundred in there? Let me just take the whole stack." Right?

How many of us would just be grateful for the dollar or the two dollars that I was handing you and just say, "Thank you," and go to McDonald's and buy a soda or whatever you would do? A cup of coffee, whatever ... Right?

What I want you to see is that sometimes we do crazy -- I'm just going to say it -- stupid things. In the book, *The Happiness Advantage*, one of the research studies they did, they shared, was the study where they brought in two people at a time: Subject A and Subject B. To Subject A, they gave ... And they brought them in and they sat them down together. They gave Subject A 10 one-dollar bills. And they said to Subject A, in the presence of Subject B, "You can give Subject B any or all or none of that money." Okay? "But if Subject B declines the money, or doesn't take the offer, then neither one of you is going to get anything." Okay?

So here's the premise. You walk in; two people walk in. I hand Subject A \$10 -- 10 singles -- and say, "You can give Subject B anything. You can give him \$1. you can give nothing; you can give him \$10; you can give him \$5. You can give him anything you want, but if Subject B doesn't take it, neither one of you get any of the money. I take it back." Right?

Now [laughs], what I want you to see ... And what was so interesting, because this whole study was based on: will people make rational decisions in the presence of money. Right? So the whole thing was based on that. They didn't tell people why they were there.

And 80% of the people that were offered \$1 or \$2 didn't take it. They were offended; they didn't take it, because they were offended that they got \$10, and they only got \$1. They felt that it wasn't -- say it with me! It wasn't ... [Congregation: "Fair."] Fair! Fair! So, because it wasn't "fair," they passed on \$2 to make a point out of it. Right? That they would rather punish the other person than take their \$2 and leave happy. Eighty percent! Eighty percent of the people walked out with no money!

Can we all agree that \$2 is better than nothing? Like, how many of us have ever picked up a penny or a dime or a quarter on the street or the floor, right? And so, can we agree that \$2 is better than no dollars? Like, but the human ego is so committed to making sure that everything is "fair" that they would rather turn down the \$2 than allow somebody [in growly voice] to get the better of them. [Congregation laughs]

Right? And what I want you to see [laughs] is that we really are that small and that petty sometimes! That it's ... it's crazy! It's just crazy! Because the reality is that God wants to bless us. And every time our smallness wins, we're actually keeping ourselves from being blessed.

Scripture: Luke 15. It's the story of the Prodigal Son. Right? We all know it in one way or another, but I'm going to share it, because I love this little story. Okay? So Luke 15, beginning with Verse 11.

Jesus said: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the property that falls to me.' And he divided up his living between them.

"And then, not many days later, the younger son gathered up all that he'd been given, and took his journey to a far-away country, and there he squandered his property on riotous living."

I love riotous living! [Congregation laughs] How many of you, in your 20s or 30s, knew riotous living? I knew riotous living! I excelled in riotous living! Right? My college buddies, to this day, say, "Do they know what you did in college?" And I say, "Nope!" [Congregation laughs] Right? So I love this!

"... he squandered his property on riotous living.

"And he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to want. So he went and joined himself to the citizens of that country, who sent him into the fields to feed the swine. And he would have gladly fed on the pods that were given the swine, but no one offered him anything."

Alright. So in the ... I want to give you context for this. Was Jesus a Jewish teacher? Yes! Jesus was talking about it from a Jewish context. Jesus was Jewish. Take a breath; Jesus was Jewish! [Congregation laughs] Alright? I want to make sure we're very clear about that. Jesus was Jewish! Right? The whole "Christian" thing didn't even happen until after he was gone. Jesus was Jewish, right?

So the story about a rich, young man who is left feeding the swine that were considered unclean, unkosher, couldn't even eat them ... he got to the point his bottom was so deep that he was willing to eat the pods from the swine. That is the bottom of the bottom of the bottom! Right?

And then he would have gladly done it, right? And then line 17 says:

"And then he came to himself."

I love that! And then he came to himself. It was like, [hits himself in the head], *"I could have had a V-8!"* Right? [Congregation laughs]

"And then he came to himself and said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to eat and to spare, but I perish here in hunger! I will rise up and I will go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son; but treat me like one of your hired servants.' So he rose and he went to his father.

"And when he was yet a far away distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; and he ran and embraced him and kissed him.

"And his son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring me quickly the best robe and put it around him. And put rings upon his finger and shoes on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let's eat and make merry. For this son was dead and now he's alive again; he was lost and now he's been found.' And they began to make merry."

And I love this image, right? That every time we come to ourselves -- every time we see ourselves and realize that we could have better life -- God always goes more than halfway. That every time you move toward God; every time we move toward the father; every time we move toward the infinite; every time we move toward being blessed, God meets us more than halfway! That God actually wants us to be blessed!

And then the story really gets fun:

"Now the older brother was in the fields, and he came near because he heard the music. And he saw the dancing, and he called out to the servants, and he said, 'What is the meaning of this?'"

Right? I don't think that's what he said. [Congregation laughs] I don't! The only line in this story that I just, I never could get my arms around: *"What is the meaning of this?"* [Congregation laughs] Nobody would say that, right? His younger brother has already taken half of his family's estate, right? He's gone. His older brother's there, still working in the fields every day, doing all the right things. Playing the game exactly the way it's supposed to be played.

And he comes out hot and sweaty after a day of working in the fields and doing all the things he's supposed to do. And he sees a party going on in the house. I'm sure he would say, *"Wait there! What is*

thou doing partying with thy father?" [Congregation laughs] I just ... I can't get my ... Like, no adult would say that. Right? Just ... It would never come out that way, right?

"And the son said, 'What is the meaning of all this?' And the servant said, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he got home safely and sound.'

"And the older brother was angry and refused to go in. So the father actually came out to him, and entertained him. But he said to his father, 'Lo, all these many years I've served you. I've never disobeyed your commandments. Yet you've never even given me even a kid so that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours back, who has devoured all that he gave him with harlots, you kill the fatted calf for him!'

"And the father said to him, 'Son, you've always been with me, and all that I have is yours. It is fitting to make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead, and now he's alive; he was lost and now is found.'"

So what I want you to see here is: this is a dialogue of humanity. The father's kingdom is the infiniteness of God. And, no matter how much we divide the infinite ... By definition, if we divide the infinite, is it still infinite? By definition, it has to be! If it's infinite, it's infinite.

So the father's kingdom was divided in half. And the older brother had a little bit of an anger/upset going on, that the younger brother took all that he got and he went away and he spoiled it. He squandered it. He wasted it. He partied hard. And then he comes back feeling very unworthy: really in his place of deepest shame that he just blew his father's inheritance. In a place of deep shame.

And his brother wants to say to him, *"Good! You should be in shame! You should be definitely ashamed of yourself! You should be embarrassed! You shouldn't even come back here."* Right?

And the Infinite doesn't care. That, no matter how many times we divide up the Infinite, it's still infinite. And that God just loves us and just wants to wrap us up, love us, and provide us with everything we would ever want. And yet, we check to see who got what, and was it "fair"? And over and over again, we actually miss the moment of living in the infinite. Because we're spending so much time checking to see who got what.

And what I'm saying tonight is that, as we forgive, we move out of our limited point of view, and we move into a much more expanded possibility of being wildly blessed. Like, I've read literally -- maybe not all the Bible -- but I've read probably 99% of the Bible cover to cover. And not one place in the Bible does it say life is fair. Not one line does it say life is supposed to be fair.

The human part of us believes that life's supposed to be fair. God doesn't care about fairness. God wants to give you the kingdom. God wants to bless you beyond your wildest dreams. The human part of us -- our ego -- wants to check and make sure everything's fair. But God's not concerned about that; God just wants to bless you with every good thing. God doesn't check to make sure that everything lines up.

In the family I grew up with, all the Christmas presents ... We were conditioned to believe that everything was going to be fair. That everything was divided up. That however much they spent on any of us, they spent on all of us. That was the mindset. Right?

In our household ... Did you ...? Were you raised where, if you cut, the other one got to cut? Do you know what I mean by that? Like, if there was the last piece of pie or a candy bar, if there wasn't enough for everybody, whoever cut it, the other one got to pick. And my brother was 18 months younger than me, and we got very scientific when it came to the time of the cut. [Congregation laughs] And neither one of us wanted to cut, but we always wanted to be the one that got to pick! Because if that line wasn't exactly in the middle, we wanted to get the piece of pie -- or the candy bar, whatever it was -- that was the bigger slice!

And that human part of us always wants to be doing that: just keep checking to make sure that we've got the biggest slice. To make sure that we got our share. That everything's fair and right and even. And yet, over and over again, life isn't that way.

The father said, *"You've been with me always. You didn't ask for the calf. You didn't ask to party with your friends."*

And so tonight, here's the deal: I want you to really do an honest inventory on the things and the people and the situations that it's just time for you to forgive. And would you be willing to forgive every limited situation? Every painful situation? Everything that wasn't right and was unfair and unkind?

And it can be ugly; it can be terrible. Because I know that some of us have walked through some really painful, ugly, terrible things. And I know that it seems unreasonable for you to ask you to forgive. It does. It seems unreasonable. It seems like that's one step too far; that if I truly knew what you'd been through, that I wouldn't ask you to forgive. And I'm going to ask you to forgive anyway. Not because I want to minimize what you've been through, but because I want to maximize how good God is.

I want you to see that God is greater than your most painful experience. The most disturbing, ugly thing in your life: God is greater than that. And every time we forgive, we let go of our human score card, and we embrace the Infinite. That if we're going to live love in a more significant, more powerful and a greater way, there's a point where we just have to decide: are you willing to forgive?

Did you ever hear me say that the things that happened to you were alright and appropriate? No. I'm not saying that tonight. I know what a big ask I'm asking of some of you. Because some of what you've been through is just so wrong, it doesn't seem even appropriate to forgive. But God's that big. The God in your life is that big. That whatever the most inappropriate, ugly thing that happened to you ... as you forgive, you are set free. And I think it's just time.

In the world today, we can't move forward -- we truly cannot move forward -- until we're willing to forgive.

Will you take a breath with me, and let's just have a time of prayer.

And so tonight, we take a big breath. And even though we don't want to, we are willing to entertain the idea. We are willing to be willing to forgive. We are willing to be radically, wonderfully, positively blessed. That no matter what's happened to you; no matter how hard it was; no matter how ugly it was, I'm going to ask you to go the extra mile: to forgive them to heal yourself. To forgive them to move your life forward. To forgive them so that you get to move back into grace and ease. And that your life gets to be better than it's ever been before.

I forgive everyone for everything. Will you say that with me? [With congregation:] *"I forgive everyone for everything."* Including myself! That no matter what you've done; no matter what others have done to you, tonight we wipe the slate clean. We forgive everything. And we allow the grace of God to fill us and to bless us and to heal us in ways that we could never even imagine were possible.

I forgive you. I forgive you! And I forgive myself. And we are set free. In the name and through the power of the Living Christ, we give thanks. And so it is. Amen.