

THE NECESSITY OF FORGIVENESS



Today I want us to hear from God about a subject that is absolutely critical to our personal and corporate spiritual lives. First I want to thank Pastor José for being here and for preaching what I heard was a great message about deacons and serving. Three weeks ago, we considered prayer (and I am praying that you will not forget and join in (Wed. nights and 1st Sunday eve)).

Prayer puts us in contact with the power of God to change us, our church and our world.

One of the areas that the God of Prayer will certainly affect to change in our lives, we will look at from the Bible today. It's a God-thing. It's one of the most God-like things we ever going to do, and we get to do it over and over.

I. TWO UNDENIABLE FACTS...

First let me establish 2 undeniable facts....

1. We all make mistakes. We all sin. I sin. You sin. Everybody does. WHO AGREES??? I don't bat 1000. I don't measure up to God's standard. I don't even measure up to my own standards. I disappoint myself a lot of the times."
2. So because we're all imperfect, it's a fact in life that you're going to hurt other people and other people are going to hurt you in life. It's unavoidable. Sometimes unintentionally and sometimes intentionally, but you're going to be hurt. You're going to be hurt in life, that's a fact. And you are going to hurt others. WHO AGREES?

Those are unchangeable facts. So the fact that you get hurt is nearly not so important as *what do you do with that hurt?* What you do with it is more important than the hurt. Are you going to allow it to make you bitter, angry, resentful, and carry a grudge? Or is it going to make you better?

Now let me clarify something: Anger is not always wrong. Resentment and bitterness are always wrong. When I see injustice in the world, I better get angry. Sometimes anger is a result of love. If you hurt my kids, I get angry. That's a legitimate anger. In fact, the Bible says, "*Be angry and sin not.*" In other words, there is a way to get angry and not sin. But resentment is always wrong. It's when you pile

up anger in your heart. It's *frozen anger*. Does anybody know what that is....?

Turn to **Psalm 73:21-22** and notice what the Bible says, *²¹When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, ²²I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.* In other words, I didn't think straight and I started doing senseless, self-defeating behavior. God says, "I don't want you to do that."

We do not hurt the other person with our resentment. We hurt ourselves. And so we get tied up in a knot because we hold it in, or sometimes, we express it in the wrong way and we do something really stupid and dumb. The most foolish things that you will ever do in your life will probably be done in revenge or in retaliation or in resentment.

So we are warned, once again in Hebrews....

Hebrews 12:15 *¹⁵See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.* "

II. THE NECESSITY OF FORGIVENESS

So what's the antidote? The antidote to resentment is FORGIVENESS. Consider this quote from a wise person,

"We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. And we are most like God when we forgive."

Do you agree? Forgiveness is at the center of God's dealings with us humans. It is what the Cross is all about. Unfortunately I think we are more earthly and "human-like" in our dealings with others than we are Godlike. Yet God wants us to become like him, so today I want to talk about the Necessity of Forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS builds relationships just like resentment tears them down. And if you're going to have a long-term, lasting marriage that lasts your entire life, you're going to need massive doses of forgiveness, massive doses of forgiveness.

Colossians 3:13, would you read this verse aloud with me? **Colossians 3:13** *¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

Now, why should I forgive other people? Well,

there are three reasons: First, resentment doesn't work. You're only hurting yourself with your anger. Second, you have been forgiven by God. And we just read that he now expects us to forgive others. And third, you're going to need more forgiveness in the future and so you better offer it to others.

But today I want to tell you a true story that I hope will motivate you to let go of your fear of forgiving. Two weeks ago, if you were here, you saw a video clip about Gracia and Martin Burhnam. As missionaries in the Philippines, they were captured by the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic terrorist group. For over a year they were dragged through the jungles and endured gun battles, sickness, starvation before the Philippine army battled with the terrorists, to rescue them. But during the rescue, all three of the captives were shot, and Martin and another man were killed in the rescue. Gracia alone survived of the captives.

Gracia spoke here a month or so ago, and some of you came on Sunday night to hear what she said. Today I am going to read some from a book she wrote, entitled, "To Fly Again." It's a part about her struggle with resentment, anger and bitterness and her lessons on the necessity to forgive...

I was furious. We were on a hilltop taking a rest, and Musab—who always made me mad—was going through his backpack, trying to lighten it...

As Musab pawed through his belongings that day, Martin sat nearby, a chain on his wrist. Musab carried the loose end of the chain to make double sure that Martin didn't try to escape, even though it was obvious he would never leave me behind, and the two of us weren't fast enough to outrun these young warriors, for sure.

Suddenly Musab picked up a bag of rice and swung it toward Martin. "Here—you carry this," he blurted. He could not have cared less that my husband was already hauling close to fifty pounds of gear...

I just fumed inside. How unfair this was. My husband was already strained to the limit, he was losing weight, and these people were systematically grinding him right into the ground.

My mental state was (already) affected by (several things). ...At that time I had diarrhea, and there was no place to go in private, or means for cleaning up afterward. And we could see no end to our misery. Already we'd gotten our hopes up for release a couple of times, only to be disappointed.

When the rest of the group was out of earshot, I let loose my rage. "Someday that man is going to burn in hell," I told Martin, "and I hope I'm there to see it."

Martin sighed as he looked at me through tired eyes. "Oh, Gracia," he replied, "someday that man *is* going to burn in hell if he doesn't change. But you don't want to be there to see it. Can you imagine the horror of being judged for eternity?"

No, of course not. I knew better than to revel in the thought of another human being's torment. But my emotions had gotten the better of me before Martin gently corrected me.

It was close to Christmas, and the guys were being rowdy. They were laughing at us and making cracks, such as, "I bet you wish you were going to be home for Christmas—*Ha ha ha*."

Again I murmured to Martin, "Well, God will make all of this right someday. I hope that guy *really* suffers."

"Yes, he will," my husband replied thoughtfully. "And if anything, that should really burden our hearts for him, rather than make us happy."

I turned away and bit my lip in contemplation. Anger in the face of trauma is understandable. But that doesn't make it productive. I found that as long as I blamed the Abu Sayyaf for our situation, my heart remained in turmoil. I blamed the terrorists; I blamed the Philippine military for their ineptness; I blamed the American government for not waving some magic wand to free us; I even blamed God because . . . well, he's in control of everything, isn't he?

Something inside us all yearns for justice and gets upset when life shows its unfair side. As Martin and I squatted around the cooking fire waiting for our portion, we would carefully watch the server pile rice on other plates but then give us only two-thirds of a cupful. I wanted to scream.

Slowly I began to realize that my resentment wasn't serving any useful purpose. The alternative, of course, was to forgive, even without the benefit of an apology from the offender. I could *choose* to forgive, all by myself.

AND, as I forgave, the anger cooled down and the hurt went away.

But then a new day would dawn, and a new injustice would erupt. I would be faced with a fresh need to forgive. Any hope in a once-for-all absolution for the Abu Sayyaf was quickly disproved. This was a conscious decision I would have to make and remake as time went by.

In fact, it became a pattern. And therein lay a path back to self-control and composure.

I did not pray, "God, help me forgive Musab." To do so would have been to dodge my own responsibility. The Lord's Prayer says that "*we* forgive those who have sinned against us" (Luke 11:4, italics added). The task was squarely mine, although once I chose to obey, God certainly gave me the strength to do so.

I don't think any of us can come up with a harder

situation than this, do you? But as Gracia discovered, it did not give her an excuse not to forgive. And the only one who was being hurt by not forgiving was herself. God tells us to forgive others because he loves us.

Later I will read some more from the same chapter, but let's talk about this some more. Let's define it.

Let me explain what forgiveness is NOT. Forgiveness is not denial and making excuses; and so for that person who hurt you, they hurt you and it was real. Forgiveness is not minimizing the hurt. It hurt. Forgiveness is not justifying it, saying it was no big deal. It was a big deal. Forgiveness is not saying it wasn't wrong. It was wrong.

So what is forgiveness? *FORGIVENESS IS surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me.* Forgiveness is letting go of the pain and letting go of my right to get even.

Why would anybody do that? For your own sake. Because you are living in misery the longer you hold it on.

Because bitterness is its own prison. Step in and look at the prisoners. Victims are chained to the walls. Victims of betrayal. Victims of abuse.

You can choose, like many, to chain yourself to your hurt.... Or you can choose, like some, like Gracia, to put away your hurts before they become hates....

How does God deal with your bitter heart? He reminds you that what you have is more important than what you don't have. You still have your relationship with God. No one can take that.

You are hurting yourself, and God says, "You've got to let it go. You've got to let it go." Forgiveness is the only way to get on with your life. Do they deserve it? No. Did YOU deserve to be forgiven by God? No. But God did it anyway out of his grace and kindness.

Now that I am back in America rearing three teenagers, I have daily opportunity to practice what I learned in the jungle. The offenses are not nearly so heinous, of course. But my anger must still be defused. When one of my kids says something unkind to me or someone makes a wisecrack about a decision I've made, I have to remind myself that I can forgive this person just as I forgave the Abu Sayyaf.

In fact, sometimes it is a bigger struggle to forgive little things than big ones.

Whenever you are hurt or wronged, your first inclination

may be to lash back. Even if you thwart that urge, you may still cling to bitterness and resentment. In such a time, it's not hard to find someone who will sympathize and reinforce the anger. You say to your friend, "You know, so-and-so really did me dirty."

And your friend replies, "Yes, they sure did, and you didn't deserve that at all. I don't blame you for being upset. I'd be mad, too."

It feels good to hear, but it only serves to churn the spirit. It doesn't help the cause of restoration.

We must be careful to understand what God says about forgiveness in his Word.

Sometimes we Christians question whether we should forgive everyone of everything, especially when the offender hasn't repented and sought forgiveness. We can clear this up when we understand forgiveness as having two parts. In the fullest sense, forgiveness has two parts. The two basic meanings of forgive are to remit the guilt and to relinquish resentment. Only God can remit guilt.

God's love is unlimited, for everyone. But God's full forgiveness, where he removes the guilt of sin, is strictly limited to those who repent.

In the sense of remitting guilt, God does not forgive the majority of humankind because they have not repented. However, in the sense of relinquishing resentment, God forgives everyone. (On the cross, Jesus said, "*Father forgive them, they know not what they do.*") He never for a moment feels bitterness or ill-will against anyone....

There surely are some people in your life who have hurt you badly and have not sought forgiveness from you, or from God. *They may never*, and sadly they will suffer from that decision. But that is not what is in question here. The question is YOUR heart. Your spirit.

Does forgiveness cancel the debt? Sometimes. When there is confession and repentance. Does forgiveness let go of the resentment? Always.

I had been home from captivity about six months when the phone rang one day, and a man with a Filipino accent said, "Hello, my name is Captain Oliver Almonarez. I was the captain of the Scout Rangers who talked to you at the top of the hill."

I was amazed. "Oh! Yes, I remember you," I said. On the day Martin died, this was the fellow (in charge) who had come over to apologize while I was waiting for the evacuation helicopter.

"I'm in Chicago visiting relatives, and I just wanted to

call and wish you a merry Christmas."

"Well, that's very nice of you," I said. I waited to see what he would say next. "After all three hostages got shot that day," he continued, "everyone was so angry with me. My superior officer yelled at me. My family, my friends, the other men in the unit—everybody was mad at me. No one had a kind word for me. I was in a bad way.

"Then the next Monday, when you were at the Manila airport ready to fly to America, you gave your comment to the media. You talked about your love for the Philippines, and that you were leaving a piece of your heart behind. You even thanked us in the military for trying to rescue you.

"When we all saw that you weren't angry ... then people weren't angry with me anymore. I just wanted to thank you for what you said that day."

...I had never thought about my public comments having a ripple effect in someone else's life. But, in fact, they set a new tone for what had been ugly up to that point.

[...A year later, Captain Almonarez called again to say he was back in Chicago for another family gathering. He really wanted to meet with me.

So the day came when I laid eyes again on the man whose troops had stormed the hillside that rainy afternoon, their bullets killing Martin and another hostage.

He walked into the room. What he mainly wanted to tell me was that he was sorry the rescue had gone awry.

...When I stood up to shake his hand and say good-bye, I realized once again that forgiveness is a choice. Had his bullet possibly struck and killed my husband? There is no way to know, and what good would it serve to know? (I had learned, it is) Far better to forgive and move on.

If every time our anger flairs, we choose to forgive, eventually we will find—that we are not angry anymore. We are free to focus on the future with hope and peace.]

CONCLUSION

God wants to start something totally new in your life today, and for some of you, it starts with opening up your life to Jesus Christ and letting him fill you with his love on a moment-by-moment basis. Let's bow our heads.

As we close, let me ask you a very personal questions Who do you need to forgive? Who do you need let go of the pain and let go of your right to get even? Will you do it? Will you let go of all the excuses and justifications for not doing so. None of

them will stand before God. He's already made that clear.

You know, the antidote to resentment and anger and bitterness is **found in a relationship to Jesus Christ**. You get that relationship lined up, all your other ones will fall into place. You need to allow Jesus Christ to be the Lord, the manager, the boss of your life. Let him fill you with his love and you'll start to have great relationships with other people.

So pray this prayer, in your heart, "*Dear Jesus, You've seen every relationship I've ever had, the good, the bad and the ugly. And you know how resentment and unforgiveness messes them up. I admit that I need your help, Jesus, in my life and in my relationships. So as much as I understand, I ask you Jesus to come into my life and live through me, and put your love in me. I want that fresh start that you offer. In your name I pray, Amen.*"

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Suddenly Musab picked up a bag of rice and swung it toward Martin. "Here—you carry this," he blurted. He could not have cared less that my husband was already hauling close to fifty pounds of gear, including M60 mortar shells that never seemed to get used.

I just fumed inside. How unfair this was. My husband was already strained to the limit, he was losing weight, and these people were systematically grinding him right into the ground.

My mental state was affected by the fact that at that time I had diarrhea, and there was no place to go in private, or means for cleaning up afterward. We could see no end to our misery. Already we'd gotten our hopes up for release a couple of times, only to be disappointed.

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Later that night, we talked further. It was close to Christmas, and the guys were being rowdy. They were laughing at us and making cracks, such as, "I bet you wish you were going to be home for Christmas—*Ha ha ha*."

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waving some magic wand to free us; I even blamed God because . . . well, he's in control of everything, isn't he?

Something inside us all yearns for justice and gets upset when life shows its unfair side. As Martin and I squatted around the cooking fire waiting for our portion, we would carefully watch the server pile rice on other plates but then give us only two-thirds of a cupful, solely because we were non-Filipino and non-Muslim. I wanted to scream.

Slowly I began to realize that my resentment wasn't serving any useful purpose. The alternative, of course, was to forgive, even without the benefit of an apology from the offender. I could *choose* to forgive, all by myself.

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In fact, it became a pattern. And therein lay a path back to self-control and composure.

I did not pray, "God, help me forgive Musab." To do so would have been to dodge my own responsibility. The Lord's Prayer says that "*we* forgive those who have sinned against us" (Luke 11:4, italics added). It is not something I could pass along to a Higher, More Mellow Power. The task was squarely mine, although once I chose to obey, God certainly gave me the strength to do so.

And, of course, there is a consequence in all this. Said Jesus: "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" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Now that I am back in America rearing three teenagers, I have daily opportunity to practice what I learned in the jungle. The offenses are not nearly so heinous, of course. But my anger must still be defused. When one of my kids says something unkind to me or someone makes a wisecrack about a decision I've made, I have to remind myself that I can forgive this person just as I forgave the Abu Sayyaf.

In fact, sometimes it is a bigger struggle to forgive little things than big ones. If one of my kids forgets his assignment to take the trash out to the curb on Monday morning, I have a choice to make: Am I going to fume about this for hours, or am I going to forgive my child for being imperfect?

Obviously, I have to haul out the trash either way. But on the inside, I say, I think *just forgive Zachary* in my heart. It's an act of my will.

That doesn't mean I won't mention the incident when he

gets home from school. But the tone of the words will be more constructive than accusatory.

Whenever you are hurt or wronged, your first inclination may be to lash back. Even if you thwart that urge, you may still cling to bitterness and resentment. In such a time, it's not hard to find someone who will sympathize and reinforce the anger.

You say to your friend, "You know, so-and-so really did me dirty."

And your friend replies, "Yes, they sure did, and you didn't deserve that at all. I don't blame you for being upset. I'd be mad, too."

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"I'm in Chicago visiting relatives, and I just wanted to call and wish you a merry Christmas."

"Well, that's very nice of you," I said. *I* waited to see what he would say next.

"After all three hostages got shot that day," he continued, "everyone was so angry with me. My superior officer yelled at me. My family, my friends, the other guys in the unit—everybody was mad at me. No one had a kind word for me. I was in a bad way."

"Then the next Monday, when you were at the Manila airport ready to fly to America, you gave your little comment to the media. You talked about your love for the Philippines, and that you were leaving a piece of your heart behind. You even thanked us in the military for trying to rescue you."

"When we all saw that you weren't angry ... then people weren't angry with me' anymore. I just wanted to thank you for what you said that day."

I replied, "Well, the Lord works in people's hearts. You're very welcome."

I had never thought about my public comments having a ripple effect in someone else's life. But, in fact, they set a new tone for what had been ugly up to that point.

A year later, Captain Almonarez called again to say he was back in Chicago for another family gathering. He really wanted to meet with me, he said. A friend of his would even drive him the seven hundred miles to Kansas!

"Oh, surely you don't want to do that," I replied. "As it

so happens, I'm going to Chicago soon to speak to my book publisher's staff." We arranged to meet at Tyndale's offices.

The day came when I laid eyes again on the man whose troops had stormed the hillside that rainy afternoon, killing Martin as well as Ediborah Yap, another hostage. He walked into the room, the same broad-shouldered man about thirty years old with the handsome face and shaved head that I remembered. What he mainly wanted to tell me was that he was sorry the rescue had gone awry.

He explained his side of the story, which was that the Scout Rangers had lived in the jungle for a year and endured many hardships themselves. It certainly had not been a lark. He claimed that the American FBI had finally been able to get a cooperative courier to give Sabaya, the Abu Sayyafs spokesperson and negotiator, a new backpack---into which they had sewn a homing device. This told the officials our general vicinity and enabled them to start tracking us.

I didn't spend a lot of time or energy trying to analyze his details, sorting out the what-ifs. I just listened to his story. It turned out the captain was a committed Christian. On the island of Iloilo where he grew up, he had become a believer at a Bible Baptist youth meeting.

When I stood up to shake his hand and say good-bye, I realized once again that forgiveness is a choice. Had his bullet possibly struck my husband? There is no way to know, and what good would it serve to know? Far better to forgive and move on.

If every time our anger flairs we choose to forgive, eventually we will find-that we are not angry anymore. We are free to focus on the future with hope and peace. As Jesus put it in Luke 6:45, "A good person produces good deeds from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil deeds from an evil heart. Whatever is in your heart determines what you say." If the heart is rid of its anger, the outflow can be pure.

Forgive Everyone of Everything?

In his excellent work, *The Two Sides of Forgiveness*, Robertson McQuilkin questions the common conventional wisdom that we should forgive everyone of everything. He writes:

God's love is unlimited, for everyone. Ours ought to be. But God's forgiveness is strictly limited to those who repent. Confusion and guilt overwhelm

many of God’s people who demand that we do what God does not do—pardon everyone for everything.

We can justify this distinction by returning to the two basic meanings of forgive: to remit the guilt and to relinquish resentment. In the sense of remitting guilt, God, in love, forgives a specified few and, in love, does not forgive the majority of humankind. In the sense of relinquishing resentment, however, God forgives everyone. He never for a moment felt bitterness or ill-will against anyone....

Love should also shape the way we relate to people, whether friend or enemy. Does love cancel the debt? Sometimes. Does love let go of the resentment? Always.*

1

WE ARE MOST LIKE BEASTS when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive.

—William Arthur Ward, *Thoughts of a Christian Optimist*

FORGIVENESS IS surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me.

— Archibald Hart, quoted in James Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough*

2

ONCE PRESIDENT LINCOLN was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, “I will treat them as if they had never been away.”

—William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*

3

* McQuilkin, *The Two Sides of Forgiveness*, (2–3).

¹Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (317). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

²Swindoll, C. R. (2000, c1998). *The tale of the tardy oxcart and 1501 other stories* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Swindoll leadership library. Nashville: Word Publishers.

It is indeed amazing that in as fundamentally irreligious a culture as ours, the sense of guilt should be so widespread and deeply-rooted as it is.—Erich Fromm, psychologist

• When I bring my sins to the Lord Jesus He casts them into the depths of the sea—forgiven and forgotten. He also puts up a sign, “No Fishing Allowed!”—Corrie ten Boom*

• The word “grace” is a kind of shorthand for the whole sum of unmerited blessings which come to men through Jesus Christ.—Alexander Maclaren

4

Bitterness is its own prison.

The sides are slippery with resentment. A floor of muddy anger stills the feet. The stench of betrayal

³Swindoll, C. R. (2000, c1998). *The tale of the tardy oxcart and 1501 other stories* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Swindoll leadership library. Nashville: Word Publishers.

* Corrie ten Boom, *Not Good if Detached* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1957), 19.

⁴Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (363). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

fills the air and stings the eyes. A cloud of self-pity blocks the view of the tiny exit above.

Step in and look at the prisoners. Victims are chained to the walls. Victims of betrayal. Victims of abuse.

The dungeon, deep and dark, is beckoning you to enter.... You can, you know. You've experienced enough hurt....

You can choose, like many, to chain yourself to your hurt.... Or you can choose, like some, to put away your hurts before they become hates....

How does God deal with your bitter heart? He reminds you that what you have is more important than what you don't have. You still have your relationship with God. No one can take that.

HE STILL MOVES STONES

INSPIRATIONAL PROMISES

5

⁵Lucado, M., & Gibbs, T. A. (2001, 1996). *God's inspirational promises* (91). Nashville, TN: J. Countryman.

He that carries [bitterness] to bed with him will find the devil creep between the sheets.—Rev. William Secker*

- Wouldn't our enemies rub their hands with glee if they knew that our hate for them was exhausting us, making us tired and nervous, ruining our looks, giving us heart trouble, and probably shortening our lives?—Dale Carnegie*

- No matter how long you nurse a grudge, it won't get better.—Anonymous

6

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.—C. S. Lewis⁷

* William Secker, *The Nonsuch Professor In His Meridian Splendor* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899), 150.

* Dale Carnegie, *How To Stop Worrying and Start Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948), 102.

⁶Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (68). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁷Morgan, R. J. (2000). *Nelson's complete book of stories, illustrations, and quotes* (electronic ed.) (312). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.