

## **Finding Freedom in Forgiveness**

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As we took off a month, one of the things that I remember most, we had a wonderful wedding and for those of you who got to attend, thank you. One of the most memorable experiences was the beach side service that I expected about twenty people to show up at and we had about 125 on the beach and it was eight o'clock in the morning which, I didn't even want to be there, so it was pretty incredible and we had a wonderful time there. Before that week, one of the things I was doing was preparing sermons. I try to do that in the summer, I take off a week and just start looking at what God wants me to share with you as a group and what God is laying on my heart to bring us to the point that God wants us to be at and as I began to study and pray and seek God I was looking at about three months worth of sermons that we could grow together. Here's the thing about being the senior pastor of a church...I was gone a month and you have such an incredible staff that it just didn't matter. The people that filled the pulpit did a great job; everything was taken care of and let me tell you that is a blessing and it's incredible. It didn't used to be like that. It's wonderful to be able to have that freedom and have the staff that you have around us. We have people now that take care of administration and they pay the bills, they take care of the nursery and do the children and youth programs and take care of the grounds, but my job basically really hasn't changed that much, even though I've had a lot of things taken away... the primary task for the pastor is to lead you spiritually into maturity. To help you become that fully devoted follower that we talk about. To help you take those steps to become who God wants you to be and as I was praying that I began to ask God how we measure that, how do we know where we are spiritually. It's a lot easier when I was a Pharisee. Back when I was a Pharisee and I followed all the Baptists laws and rules not even in the bible, it was a lot easier to know where you were spiritually. Let me explain that...as I grew up and I accepted Christ and I got into the church, the Baptist church took me in and loved me, taught me everything as I studied the word of God, the Baptist doctrine and the word of God fit perfectly and I just accepted the whole thing hook, line and sinker and it fit into my personality because they had so many rules and I just love rules. So even though as I read the New Testament and I read about grace and mercy and all these things, when I'm studying in college and people are telling me the things that we do as Christian people, man it was great and it was easy when I became pastor because I had this pyramid of things that I could measure you on and as I looked at your life I could tell if you were spiritually mature or not. So when I first started preaching I could measure everyone up and know where you were and here's how you did it. On this side you had a list of things you don't do and as you grew closer to God the list got bigger and so down here it was I don't drink, that was important. I don't smoke, I don't cuss, I don't listen to secular music and secular music is any music that is not on KLTU, I don't listen to country, which who can, I don't listen to rock, I don't listen to anything to anything unless it says something about God and then it went from there to not watching R rated movies, I don't dance, I don't play cards. I mean we had a whole list and I could just look at you and know where you were spiritually based on where you fell on this list. If you came into the parking lot listening to 92.5 you needed prayer. If you told me about the last movie that you had watched and I knew it had a R rating, you had some room to grow so I could look at that on this side and we had a list

of do's and if you would do these things you were spiritually mature. If you came to church on Sunday morning, attended Sunday school, came to church Sunday night, came on Wednesday night and then the real godly spiritual people came on Tuesday night to go visit people that didn't want you to visit them. You gave to the church, you participated in VBS and you did all of these things and I could look at your life and I could measure you up on this pyramid and go, this is where you are. You Sunday morning people, just right above pagans, I prayed for you and tried to get you to move up that ladder. But then as God began to break into my life and actually as I started needing more grace and I started seeing the mistakes in my life and the things where I didn't measure up to my own pyramid, as I caught myself listening to Led Zeppelin and ACDC and really enjoying it and as I caught myself laughing at movies that were totally inappropriate and a preacher had no business laughing at, I had to start accepting grace. I started looking at the word of God and seeing, wait a minute...this pyramid that I have built in spiritual maturity is the same pyramid the Pharisees built that Jesus condemned and it started making sense as I looked at this pyramid because there were some people at the top of this pyramid and they were the meanest people I had ever met and the church was full of them, I mean the church was full of people who did all the things they were supposed to and didn't do all the things they weren't supposed to do, but you never saw the love of God in them at all because all they did was judge people and criticize and they climbed up on the top of that pyramid and they looked down their nose at all those people under them just like I said a while ago, you Sunday morning people, you poor pagans, I love you to death, I hope you find God. I mean, it was wonderful to stand up there in that view and look down on everyone until you fell from the pyramid and needed grace. And I started looking at what grace was about, I started realizing how hard it is to measure spiritual maturity because you see, if it's not on a list of do's and don'ts, what is it? If it's not on a list of the things you do or don't do, what is spiritual maturity because here's a person who did everything right but had no love of God and here's a person who did a lot of things that I thought were questionable, but they loved God and they gave to the poor and they lived out the scripture and they brought people to Jesus and they brought them to church and cared for them and I thought how do you define spiritual maturity. How do you find it, what do you do? And so as I began to pray and ask God what do you need our church to hear, I know it's not standing up and trying to put law back into your life. It's not standing up and asking you to follow this rule and this rule and that rule. It's more of standing up and trying to convince you that we have an unbelievable God that loves you with all of his heart and loves you exactly how you are and loves you so much that he wants to wrap his arms around you and then you finally fall so much in love with him that you find maturity because you just don't want to do anything that dishonors this wonderful God that has given you life. I want you to see that and as we go through, I'm going to tell you this doesn't happen to me, but as I spent the afternoon one day planning sermons and year of sermons came to me all the way through next June and I looked at that and thought, God you're kidding me! That didn't happen, but it did and it's some from the Old Testament and the New Testament and it's got eschatology in it, theology, which you don't care about those words but I went to seminary, I have to do those. It was everything I need in a preaching plan to know that you're getting all of the bible and not just parts of it, know that you're not just getting the surface of what God has for you but know that you are going deep into the word and as I looked at all this, I said God, what are you doing and he told me trying to build a church. I'm trying to build a group of people who can impact their community. I'm trying to build a group of people where people will find grace and love and not be caught up in the law and caught up in rules and not be caught

up in the way they look on the outside but on the inside they have fallen in love with God with all of their heart, all of their soul and all of their strength and it makes a difference in their life.

So for the next few weeks we're going to be studying Exodus, the story of moving from slavery to freedom. I thought this was a great time to begin because we just celebrated the freedom of our nation. I tell you, some of us take that freedom for granted. We live in an incredible country. We live in the greatest country that has ever come to be in the entire history of the world. America is the greatest place that has ever existed. Now, don't get confused, I'm not saying that we're godly because we're far from it. In fact, we're a very ungodly nation but we are good nation that does good things but we are not godly but the good things we do are incredible and there has never been another nation that has ever existed that did the things that we do. Ladies and gentlemen please don't take your freedom for granted. Today you'll drive home and the wars not in your yard, there are not terrorists standing at HEB trying to blow you up because of your beliefs. I want you to know that we live in a great place. We live in a place that you can go to the faucet in your kitchen, turn on the tap and have clean water, now 90 percent of the world longs for clean water the number one cause of death in all those nations is drinking unclean water. I don't want you to forget how fortunate we are in the United States. In fact, we're so fortunate that we don't even drink water out of the sink, because it's not clean enough for us. Now the world would kill for that water but it's not clean enough. I knew we had a problem when we went to get my son a drink from the faucet and I poured the water into the glass from under the faucet and he turned his nose up at me and said eeeew, I'm not drinking that water! Excuse me? I used to drink from the hose. Remember you had to turn it on and let the hot water come out first so you didn't burn yourself and then you drank and you were glad for it. That's dog water! Dog water!! Because we give the dogs that water, I'm too good to drink the water out of the faucet. I want it out of the refrigerator. Now, I'm mean enough that I want to explain to him that that thing was hooked up the same faucet and the water went...but I didn't. Why argue with a seven year old, I just gave up. But, what a great freedom; what a great place to live and listen, the government, full of idiots, that's the only way I know how to put it. We do crazy stuff and it's not about being democratic or republican, they're all pretty much idiots. It's just the way it is, we do stupid things as a country, but it is the greatest place in the world to live and we need to be happy because we have a freedom. We also have a freedom in Christ and just like we don't see the freedom in America as something to hold on to, we don't see the freedom in Christ for what it means. See, Jesus came to set you free but most of us are living in bondage. Most of us, even though God has set you free, July 5<sup>th</sup> on Sunday morning there's not a lot of lost people here. I mean I know most of you have given your life to Jesus because if you were lost you'd still be home in bed. If I was lost, I'd still be in bed! But I want you know today even though you have experienced the taste of God, you still hold yourself in bondage. You choose it. So today we're going to talk about the first step in releasing that bondage and the whole month we're going to talk about how to move from slavery into freedom but today I wanted to start with the biggest step, the thing that locks most of us up and folks that's forgiveness. Giving forgiveness, not receiving forgiveness, most of us are good at receiving forgiveness. Most of us are good at going to God and saying God I've sinned, please forgive me and then we're excited that God forgives us and we move on with our life but we're not real good at giving forgiveness. For those of us who are holding grudges, for those of us who are holding resentment, for those of us that are holding bitterness in our hearts, we cannot be free to live the way

that God wants us to live until we learn to let go and forgive. Now there's a lot of faulty thinking about what forgiveness is and so today we want to talk about forgiveness, what it is and what it isn't. I want to give you a little test. That ought to wake you up. What I decided on the fourth of July and I told this group over here is when I'm preaching and you're tired and you don't really engage that much, you kind of sit there and I don't know that you're really listening. And so I decided I would preach the longest sermon I would ever preach. I have a stool and I am going to sit here and I have eight pages of notes and I am just going to go by them painstakingly slow. I'm just going to go as slow as I can to make sure that you get the point, or I will make a deal with you...you listen, you nod your head and not this kind of nodding, you nod your head and I will go through this information that can set you free and I just want to emphasize, it's one of the most important things you'll ever do is give forgiveness.

First of all, what's forgiveness? Let's take a test. True or false...a person should not be forgiven until they ask for it. Man, good answer. See, a lot of us shouldn't give forgiveness unless they ask us. Why should I forgive them, they don't want forgiveness because they haven't asked for forgiveness. Until they ask for forgiveness, I'm not going to forgive them. I'm going to hold it in my heart until they ask me to forgive them. But that's not what the bible says. Jesus when he was being hung on the cross didn't say Father, forgive them as soon as they ask, he said Father forgive them because they don't know what they're doing. Now, in humanity we think we should forgive somebody when they deserve it, when they come and ask for it or we do conditions to our forgiveness. Have you ever said this? I forgive if...I'll forgive if you promise never to do it again. That's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is unconditional and forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person so today I want you to hold on to the fact that you can offer forgiveness if the other person doesn't even want it, and even if the other person doesn't even ask for it. You can forgive them no matter what and it's your job to forgive them. Even if they don't deserve it or even if they don't ask, you give it to them unconditionally. Second question...forgiveness includes minimizing the offense and the pain that was caused. In other words, when someone asks for forgiveness you simply say no big deal. True or false? False, but don't we all do it? When someone says, Gee, I'm sorry, don't we normally say it's no big deal or don't we say its okay it wasn't that bad. That's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is not minimizing the pain that someone has caused you. Forgiveness is not pretending that everything's okay. I've had people tell me that their parents have hurt them badly and they say it's not a big deal. Yes, it is. It's a huge deal and forgiveness is not minimizing what happened in your life. Forgiveness is saying you know what? It really did hurt me, but I'm going to let it go. It really did make me have pain but I'm going to let it go. I read a report that some Taliban said that America should get over September 11<sup>th</sup>, we should get over it. That more of them had died than were killed in that attack. Really, it's not a big deal since more people have died on your side than our side we should let it go, we should minimize it? No, you don't minimize the pain to forgive. Three...forgiveness includes restoring trust and reuniting a relationship. True or false? Not so sure about that one were you? Forgiveness includes restoring trust and reuniting a relationship. False, you do not have to restore a relationship to forgive. That's one of the most misunderstood concepts of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same as restoring a relationship. And some of you are afraid to forgive because you don't want to restore the relationship. You're afraid to forgive because you don't want to be best friends with that person anymore. Some of you are afraid to forgive because you don't want to get remarried to that person, you're done with that and you think that if you offer

forgiveness you've got to be back in that relationship and that is not a true statement. Listen, renewing a relationship is different than forgiving. Forgiving takes care of what has happened in the past, but if the relationship is renewed it takes something in the future and that's on the part of the person who's offended. If they want to restore the relationship, trust must be built up over a long period of time. See we think we let people off the hook and we do. You let them go and let them get away but the relationship does not have to be restored. Forgiveness is part of reconciliation. You can forgive the offender but then it's up to the offender to do three things. If they want to restore a relationship first they need to demonstrate genuine repentance. Now it's not about forgiving them, if you want the relationship to be renewed they have to have genuine repentance. They have to say I'm sorry and mean it. The second step is they need to make restitution if they have damaged you in any way; they need to make up for that. And then number three...the offender must rebuild trust by proving they've changed over time. See, I'm not asking you to forgive and go back into a bad situation, that's just dumb. I have instances where there is an abusive husband, an alcoholic and he hurt his family and his family finally had enough of it and they said we're tired of you hurting us so get out. Then the next day he'd come to the door and say I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry and she'd say I forgive you and he'd say can I come home now? No you can't come home! Forgiveness is the past but you have to build trust back up to prove to this person that you have truly changed before the relationship can go back to what it's supposed to be. Let me tell you, if your best friend hurt you and you have forgiven them, that's fine, you don't have to be best friends anymore, unless they choose to rebuild that relationship and that's fine, but you don't have to. You can forgive someone and not have anything to do with them. It's not based on that. Number four...you haven't really forgiven until you've forgotten the offense, true or false? Wait a minute, what about forgive and forget? You've heard that right? You're really over it when you forget right? Wrong. In fact, you're never going to forget the pain that people have caused you. There is no way to do that. Today, you can't forget things and the more you try to forget things, the more you get focused on them. Have you noticed that? Let me tell you something, I've had people tell me I don't want to be like my mom, I don't want to be like my mom and they focus on so much like not being like their mom, guess what? They are just like their mom. Because what you focus on, and if you focus on I'm going to forget that hurt, I'm going to forget that hurt, you stay paralyzed in that hurt. Listen, it's not about forgetting it. That's one of those things about spiritual maturity I was telling you about. Spiritual maturity is not forgetting that you've been hurt, it's letting go. It's not forgetting it, it's letting go of it. Letting go of the pain, letting go of the bitterness, letting go, it's not forgetting and every time it comes to your heart and every time it comes to your head it's the ability to go to God and say I have forgiven them and God I want you to bless them and God I know you're going to make something good out of this bad situation. And every time it comes up in your heart, you've got to go to God and know that God promises this. Listen I can't explain this, God says that every bad situation that happens in your life, I'm going to somehow use it for good. Are you kidding me? So I was sexual abused as a child, my wife left me, my child was killed in a tragic accident, God, you're really going to make something good out of all that? It's hard to comprehend but that's what it says in Romans 8:28, God takes all the bad things in your life and he works them together till something good comes out of it. That's what forgiveness is about, trusting God with your hurt, not trying to pretend it's not there, just letting go. Fifth question...and you've probably already caught on that all these are false so you can act real smart when I say this. Just say false. When I see someone else hurt, it's my duty to forgive the offender. False, it's a big fad in America

right now, big fad. A senator stood up publically forgave Osama Bin Laden for the terrorist attack; you know what the problem with that is? He didn't have any family in that building. He didn't have a right to forgive him. There was a story out of Kentucky where three girls were killed in a school shooting and the next day before those girls were even buried, these families were mourning and hurting and the next day the news media showed these signs of people who probably thought they were being Christ like and these people were holding signs saying we forgive you Mike. What?! These families are dealing with the loss of their daughter and you're going to offer forgiveness? That's not your place. What if today, someone raped and killed your daughter and I walked into the prison and I said, hey you're forgiven? That's not your place. We don't forgive people who haven't hurt us and only the people who have been hurt can offer forgiveness so don't go forgiving people who have hurt other people. If someone robs my house, don't offer forgiveness, you didn't lose anything. I'm the one who needs to offer forgiveness. You want to offer forgiveness, buy my stuff and put it back in my house and then you can offer forgiveness because you're out something. Don't get caught up in that. Forgive those who have hurt you.

Now, we've talked about what it isn't; let's talk a little bit about what it is. First of all you need to understand there are three steps to forgiveness. The first step is this; real forgiveness is relinquishing my right to get even. Real forgiveness is me relinquishing my right to get even. We all want to get even; we all want to get back at people who've hurt us. The bible says that love keeps no record of wrongs but guess what we do? We record every one of them. We keep it all in our heart and we save them up and so if somebody hurts us then guess what? We dump it back on them. Had a guy tell me one time that every time he and his wife get into a fight she gets historical. I said, you mean hysterical? He said, no, historical, she brings up everything I've ever done wrong. Listen, forgiveness is relinquishing your right to get back at that person. It's relinquishing your right to get even. The bible says in Romans 12:19 "Never avenge yourselves, leave that to God for he said that he will repay those who deserve it." He'll repay. But I know some of you are thinking but if I give up my right to get even with someone who's hurt me, that's not fair, I deserve that right. You're right, it's not fair. Giving forgiveness is not fair. Let me tell you what else is not fair, the fact that I keep sinning and God keeps forgiving me and in fact it cost him his sons life to forgive me. That's not fair. Forgiveness is not fair, you're right, but it's what God is calling you to do. Give up paying someone back evil for evil. I get a lot of questions about the Old Testament where it says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. People always question that and man that sounds harsh and mean. Listen, that was written to a group of people as grace because I'm going to be honest with you, you stab me in my eye, I'm not going to step back and go that really hurt, give me your eye. What am I going to do? I'm going to do my best to kill you because you hurt me and I'm not going to repay you what's fair, I'm going to take it a step further so when God said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, he was trying to pull back people from getting revenge. And then Jesus, like he always does, takes the Old Testament concept and adds love and grace to it and says listen, I don't even want to ask you for an eye. Just forgive, let it go. Don't repay evil for evil, relinquish your right. The bible says "Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace that God gives, for if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit." Let me tell you something, when you hold on to resentment and bitterness in your life the only person you're hurting is yourself. Those emotions will destroy you and you can ask even a medical professional will tell you the two worst things that you can

hold on to is resentment and bitterness, it will kill you from the inside out. I see people, and it breaks my heart, because you're getting ate up, you're getting destroyed and you're life is horrible and the person that hurt you is having the time of his life. There out on the lake having a wonderful day and you're eaten up so I want you to let it go.

The second step in forgiveness is to respond to evil with good. In Luke 6:27, 28, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you." Wow, how do you know when you've genuinely forgiven somebody? Do you know how you know you've really forgiven somebody? You pray for God to bless them. Man, when I came across this in the bible, it really made me mad. I didn't like this verse because I'm reading this verse saying wait a minute God, okay...I've forgiven them and I'm going to let vengeance be yours, so I'm going to turn my head and I want you to tear them up. I want their life to be miserable, go get 'um, sic 'um! And then I'd read verses that said don't watch and see what is happening to them because if you look and you get happy, God will stop punishing them. So I'm like, I don't want to see, I don't want to see, you just get 'um good God, they hurt me, go get 'um. Then I came across this verse, and it really bothered me because it said listen, this is how you know you really forgiven somebody, you pray for God to bless them just like you want him to bless you. That's not fair. God you're right, it's not fair that you keep forgiving me either. Okay God I'll forgive them and God I want you to bless their life just like I'm asking you to bless my life. I want you to bless their family just like I'm asking you to bless my family. I'm asking you to bless their finances just like I'm asking you to bless my finances. That's how you know that you've truly forgiven someone when you can pray the same blessings on them as you can pray for yourself. Folks, that's freedom. I know you're sitting out there and you're saying you don't know how they hurt me. You're right, I don't and I feel sorry for every hurt in this room but I do know this, you're never going to get on with your life unless you let it go. Unless you forgive and let it go, not forget but you've got to give up your right to get even and you've got to repay evil with good. How can you do that? There is only one possible way; you let the love of God fill up your life. You let the love of God come in and you let the love of God give you a peace that you do not understand. You need to have Jesus in your heart.

The third step, I repeat this process as often as necessary. I wish forgiveness was a onetime thing, I really do. I wish you could just forgive somebody and then never think about that again, but that doesn't happen. In fact, forgiveness goes on and on and on and each time the thought comes back into your heart you have to forgive again and again and again and you have to keep offering forgiveness until you finally reached a point in your life that it hurts no more or you finally reach a point in your life that you don't want revenge. You've finally reached a point in your life that you've truly let it go and then you can stop and I can't tell you when that's going to happen. I love the story of Peter. Peter came to Jesus one time and asked a question he knew the answer to, how many times do you forgive a brother? Now, he knew that three was the right answer and those of you who don't know Jewish law, three is the right answer. After you forgive them three times, you're done; you never have to forgive them again. That's it. So, Peter asked the question and knew the answer was three, but he thought to himself Jesus is always going further than the law. Jesus is always offering grace and so three times two is six, but seven is a perfect number. I'm going to get some points, seven. Jesus goes, nope, seventy times seven. You need to keep the process going as long as it takes to get all of that out of you. To let it all out, to get

rid of it and to let the love of God fill your life. Today I'm asking some of you the hardest thing that love ever has to do and that's forgive. Listen, I'm not asking you to forgive because the person deserves it, I'm not asking you to forgive because the person needs it. I'm asking you because Jesus forgave you and you need to forgive for your own heart to you to take those steps to be released from the slavery, to be released from bondage, you have to forgive. Let me tell you something; don't wait till you feel like it because nobody ever feels like forgiving. It's the right thing to do and today you need to start that process. Colossians 3:13 "Remember the Lord forgave you so you must forgive others. Be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other just as Christ God forgave you." I have no doubt that many of you are carrying deep wounds today and you've been hurt by other people and I am sorry from the bottom of my heart, I am sorry but for your best interest and your spiritual maturity you have got to let go and you've got to remember that God has forgiven you and you can never forgive anybody more than God's forgiven you. Remember the Lord's Prayer? Father, forgive us as we have forgiven others, what if God only forgave you at the same level that you forgave? You'd be in trouble. Bitterness will make you miserable. It doesn't work and remember forgiveness is a two way street and you're going to need forgiveness so I ask you to give it today.