FORGIVENESS:
WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT ISN’T, & HOW TO DO IT

Why This Topic?

• Need.
  - Forgiveness and the ability to shed hurt could easily rank as one of the top needs for church families and for individuals in churches.

• Easier said than done.
  - While forgiveness is a central concept in Christianity, it is often a difficult process that does not come easily.

• Confusion.
  - Misconceptions about forgiveness lead to confusion and feeling stuck in the forgiveness process.

• Clarity.
  - In this presentation I am going to use and define key words in order to clarify their specific meaning.

Working Definition of Forgiveness

• Forgiveness is a releasing of a debt.
• It is what one person does for another.

Christ is Our Example

• God, through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, forgives all who come to Him.
• Because He has forgiven us, we are called upon to extend forgiveness to others.
  - Ephesians 4:32, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

2 Corinthians 5:18-2
The Ministry of Reconciliation

“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation: To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”

A High Calling

• Forgiveness, as Christ modeled it, is truly a high mark that is only possible by God’s grace.
  - Luke 23:34, “Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”
  - Luke 17:3-4, “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”
**Why Would God Forgive?**

- Being forgiving is part of God’s character and nature.
- While God does not overlook sin, He is patient, gracious, merciful, and willing to forgive.
  - Daniel 9:9, “To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him.”
  - Nehemiah 9:17b, “…but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.”

**Ephesians 2:4-5**

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved).”

**Why God Wants Us to be Forgiving**

Colossians 3:12-13, “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

Matthew 5:43-47

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?”

**Vertical Forgiveness**

- God extending forgiveness to human beings because of Christ.
- This type of forgiveness has eternal implications.
  - Colossians 1:12-14, “Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:”

**Horizontal Forgiveness**

- What one human being extends to another human being; also called interpersonal forgiveness.
- God takes this type of forgiveness very seriously.
  - Matthew 6:14-15, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”
  - 1 John 4:20, “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”
Definition of Reconciliation

- Process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt.
- Reconciliation is related to forgiveness, but it is also distinct from forgiveness.
- Reconciliation’s purpose is restoration & reconnection.
  - Matthew 5:23-24, “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”

Reconciliation Cont’d

- Forgiveness (what one person extends to another) together with reconciliation (two people working together to rebuild a relationship) is a high calling and worthy goal.
- Confusing or merging forgiveness and reconciliation can hinder the whole healing process.

Is Reconciliation Always Possible?

- In some circumstances reconciliation is not always possible.
- In these cases, we must recognize that forgiveness can occur without reconciliation.
- God asks us to be responsible for our part and to not be a hindrance to the healing process.
- Romans 12:18, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”

Errors And Offenses

“Errors” and “Offenses”

- Following are several categories of issues that can cause tension and hurt in relationships.
- Knowing the difference can help you know how to gauge your response.
- In general, “Errors” call for forbearance while “offenses” are dealt with through forgiveness.
  - Colossians 3:13 “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

“Errors” and “Offenses”

1. Errors - Mistakes:
   - We all make mistakes.
   - Examples: We forget things, break things, spill things, and so on.
   - You need to be prepared for mistakes in yourself and in others.

Ephesians 4:1-3 “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called. With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love: Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
2. **Errors - Irritants:**
   - We all have them.
   - Examples: Habits, quirks, personality traits, and idiosyncrasies that one person does (usually unconsciously) that irritates another.
   - Can lead to anger, harsh words, and arguments.

3. **Errors - Poor Choices:**
   - We all make them.
   - Examples: Occasionally not getting home on time or making a bad decision on a purchase.
   - If poor choices are a repeated pattern and are severe enough, they may actually become offenses.

4. **Errors - Hurtful Omissions:**
   - They generally happen infrequently.
   - Examples: Forgetting an anniversary or not following through on things you agreed to be responsible for.
   - Lead to hurt that needs to be repaired.

5. **Errors - Hurtful Words and Actions:**
   - Sinful ways of interacting with others.
   - Examples: Yelling, harsh criticism, put-downs, and so on can lead to periods of feeling disconnected with others.
   - If this becomes a pattern, you may need help in learning how to deal with it.

6. **Offenses - Major Sin/Major Harm:**
   - These offenses strike at the very core of relationships violating trust, boundaries, emotional closeness, and spiritual connection.
   - Examples: Major offenses include adultery, addiction, abandonment, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), etc.
   - Get help!

**Common Misperceptions**

- Some people believe forgiveness must be requested before it can be granted.
- In actuality, forgiveness (you releasing your anger/hurt) can be given to someone who:
  - Is no longer living
  - Doesn’t acknowledge any harm was done
  - Is not repentant
  - Only acknowledges a portion of the severity of the transgression, etc.
- Remember that forgiveness only requires one person while reconciliation requires two cooperating parties.

**Common Misperceptions Cont’d**

- By forgiving, you are not simply “getting over it.”
  - Some of the transgressions you may have experienced are very serious and cannot be simply overlooked.
  - God does not excuse sin or deny its severity; neither should we.
  - The solution that God offers for all sins for all time is Jesus, the perfect Son of God, who died to pay the penalty for sin.
Some people incorrectly believe that forgiveness:
- Is unjust.
- Denies the seriousness of sin.
- Lets people "off the hook" too easily.
- Places too much responsibility on the victim.

Not handling reconciliation properly may lead to the all of the above.

In contrast, true forgiveness:
1. Acknowledges a wrong has occurred.
2. Recognizes that the wrong has created an obligation for repayment from the offender.
3. Recognizes that often the offender cannot provide adequate compensation for the hurt.
4. Realizes that revenge, although a natural desire, isn't a godly or healthy solution.
5. Releases the debt over the offender.

Forgiving:
- One does not completely forget an offense when forgiving.
- The often cited phrase, "Forgive and Forget" sometimes leads people to believe that forgiveness means that one will truly forget the memory.
- The phrase "forgive and forget" doesn't come from the Bible.
- Christ-like forgiveness for human beings means that we will not hold anger, bitterness, or hostility "over the person's head."
- Therefore, instead of trying to literally forget a memory, the goal is to be released from the unhealthy emotional tie it has to you.

A sincere apology means that the offender is:
1. acknowledging the wrong they have done
2. accepting responsibility for it
3. acknowledging the hurt caused
4. is willing to accept the consequences.

Forgetting: reconciliation is the process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt.
- Though forgiveness may lead to making a relationship right, it does not in and of itself, bring about reconciliation.
- Reconciliation is actually the work that both people, the offender and the offended, do together to restore a broken relationship.
What Forgiveness IS NOT Cont’d

- **Avoidance or denial:**
  - Sometimes people are so hurt by something that they quickly say, “I’ve already forgiven it.” in order to try to avoid having to feel the pain of the injury.
  - Forgiveness is not simply a way of avoiding dealing with someone or something to get around pain or conflict.
  - It is also not the same as denying we were truly hurt by someone’s words or actions.

- **Excusing the offense:**
  - Forgiveness does not give the offender the right to offend again.
  - Healthy boundaries are important so that we do not simply allow another person’s hurtful or sinful actions to continue.

- **Easy or cheap:**
  - True forgiveness is not simply a few pleasant sounding words.
  - It is hard work that involves a true and lasting change of behavior.

- **Legal Pardon:**
  - Legal term that means to release from punishment, or to not punish, for some crime or offense.
  - Even when someone is forgiven, they may receive consequences for their actions.

- **A feeling:**
  - We can’t wait to forgive until we feel like forgiving someone or are no longer feeling the effects of the offense.
  - Forgiveness is an act of obedience through which God can guide us.

- **Trusting:**
  - Trust in relationships is built and maintained over time.
  - Depending upon the seriousness of an offense, trust may be slightly diminished or even destroyed.
  - Forgiveness may lead to the process of trust being restored as part of reconciliation, but trust isn’t a prerequisite for forgiveness.
  - Trust is earned over time, and the person who committed the offense must accept that regaining trust will occur as a process over time.

- **Dependent on time:**
  - A phrase that is sometimes quoted about relationship hurts is, “time heals all wounds.” Unfortunately it isn’t true!
  - While the passage of time can sometime help us get perspective on a hurt, time itself doesn’t heal anything!
  - We could more accurately say, “Time plus forgiveness leads to the healing of wounds.”

- **A feeling:**

  “When deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive… Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”

**Mary Karen Read**
Forgiveness doesn’t happen by accident. Rather, you must make a choice to commit to the process. This process is empowered by the Holy Spirit and takes time to work through. Both parts are necessary: 1. Making a choice to forgive 2. Committing to the forgiveness process over time.

Those that need to be forgiven (including us!) don’t necessarily “deserve” forgiveness. God demonstrated the ultimate grace-giving act when he initiated the forgiveness and reconciliation process with us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). We have something in common with the person who wronged us: the same fallen nature that led to the offense is the same fallen nature we deal with in our heart.

Even if the one who caused the offense does not initiate reconciliation or admit to an error or offense, the one who has been offended must still grant forgiveness and extend it with grace in order to avoid the toxic effects of bitterness. Granting forgiveness may feel unfair; however, grace allows us to grant it to even the ones who don’t seem like they deserve it. The one who offended may not have the repentance and remorse necessary to receive the forgiveness, but that fact does not preclude the granting of forgiveness.

God offers forgiveness to everyone because of Christ’s death on the cross. Repentance is necessary in order to receive this forgiveness. Grace does not deny the seriousness of the offense. Forgiveness extended with grace both acknowledges the seriousness of the wrongdoing and releases our perceived “right” for vengeance or holding it against someone.

Forgiveness takes courage and is personally demanding. Forgiveness has emotional, relational, spiritual and physiological components. We also need to learn how to calm ourselves down instead of getting ‘worked-up’ and reactive when we are reminded of the hurts. Working through forgiveness alters the emotions tied to the transgression that occurred.
When we have been wronged or offended, we experience the hurt, loss and debt that has resulted. People often find it difficult to forgive because they want the offender to repay the debt (i.e., vengeance). Often, we want the offender to feel how bad we hurt; sometimes to a greater magnitude than could be repaid by the offender. Forgiveness is often the only way to “settle” a debt. Choosing to release a debtor from his/her debt releases us from holding on to something that could hinder our walk with the Lord (Hebrews 12:1-2). Forgiveness does not change the nature of the transgression from wrong to right; nor does it presume the transgression never occurred. Rather, instead of allowing the anger and hurt of the offense to bond us to the offender, forgiveness allows us to release and to detach from the wrong that occurred.

Adapted from Worthington

The R.E.A.C.H. Model Of Forgiveness

1. Recall the Hurt

- The first step involves acknowledging that hurt occurred.
  - The goal of this step is to accept that you have been hurt/wronged and to focus on moving forward.
  - The extremes of either denial of the pain or of obsessively replaying the event over and over in your head are not helpful.

2. Empathize

- In this step towards forgiveness, feelings such as anger or cold, detached feelings are replaced with empathy.
  - For example, try to see the scenario from the other person’s perspective.
  - Note that the more horrific the act of transgression was, the more difficult it is to show empathy.
  - When empathy is too difficult, first try sympathy. For example, you can think, “How horrible it must be to have a conscience so seared that he could have done…”
  - Another way to work through the empathy step is to remember that forgiveness is extended with grace and that we didn’t deserve forgiveness from God.

3. Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness

- Humility and gratitude are required in this step as we realize that we need and have received forgiveness.
  - Consider how you felt when you needed forgiveness.
  - How did you feel after you had done something wrong and were forgiven by God and by others?
  - Because we have received the gift of forgiveness from both God and other people, we offer forgiveness to others.
4. Commit to Forgive

- Make a firm commitment to forgive and set an Ebenezer to remember it by.
  - An Ebenezer is a marker or memorial (described in 1 Samuel 7:12) that reminds us that God has helped us to get to this point.
  - This is often most effective if you tell someone else (e.g., the person who wronged you, your spouse, a friend, a minister, etc.) about your commitment to forgive so that you can come back to this when painful memories from the past come up again.

5. Holding Onto Forgiveness

- When you occasionally remember things from past incidents that you have worked at forgiving, don’t get discouraged.
- Recommit to forgive, commit the event and the person to God, and go on.
- Having a memory if a hurtful event that sometimes comes up does not mean that you haven’t forgiven.

Un-forgiveness, Vengeance, Justice, And Consequences

- Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die. In actuality, bitterness eats away like a cancer in the person who holds it.
- Unforgiveness can lead to anxiety or even spiritual depression.
- When we refuse to forgive even though we know we have been forgiven, we hinder our relationship with God, which can lead to many forms of emotional and relational consequences.

Bitterness

- Forgiveness keeps bitterness from developing and causing more damage to a relationship and each person involved.
  - Hebrews 12:14-15, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”
  - Colossians 3:19, “Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.”

Bitterness Cont’d

- Withholding forgiveness, bearing grudges, harboring bitterness, and allowing hatred can all lead to serious consequences.
- The story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-31

Strong Warnings
“Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We are instructed by God’s Word to not be vengeful. That is, we are not to hold a desire in our hearts to see another person suffer. At the same time, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the consequences of the offense and it does not automatically free the offender from any obligations for his actions.

Consider the following descriptions of the difference between vengeance and justice…

“Unlike vengeance, justice is the payment God or others might demand from someone because of a wrong they have committed against us, against another person or group of people, or against society as a whole. While we are to avoid vengeance, we are to seek justice for those who have been wronged.”

“Vengeance is our desire for retribution against our offender; justice is the repayment another person demands from our offender; Vengeance is striving to settle the debt ourselves; justice is allowing someone else to settle the score.”

Even though we may be forgiven by God, we will still face consequences when we sin and we are still accountable to God and others for our behavior. The fact that we are covered with Christ’s robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10) does not preclude the fact that we may have to pay a fine if we get a ticket if we are speeding.

There are times when the offender does provide some payment for their wrong. Example, a drunk driver kills someone in an accident. The driver may be convicted by the law and go to jail. However, that payment does not begin to cover the losses experienced by the family members and friends of those who died. Those losses are greater than that which the transgressor could ever provide compensation. Those are the losses that are acknowledged during the forgiveness process.

“But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.”
Steps To Reconciliation

Reconciliation testifies of God’s power and of the power of unity in the Body of Christ. It strengthens the individuals involved to resist the attacks of the enemy. While reconciliation is preferable, it is not always possible. Reconciliation can only occur to the extent that the two parties agree on each of the steps towards reconciliation.

Steps to Reconciliation Cont’d

Remember, it may take time to rebuild the trust and reunite the offended with the offender. Also, the type of relationship you have with the person may change from what it was before the offense occurred. Reconciliation does not automatically mean you must become best friends with the one who offended you. Rather, it is restoring a relationship to the degree that it can be.

Step I: Repentance

The first step towards reconciliation is repentance. The offender must be willing to confess the transgression and acknowledge the pain it caused the offended. In addition, he or she must have a sincere desire to turn from the circumstances that led to the offense.

Step I: Repentance Cont’d

A person interested in reconciliation exhibits the attributes of:

1. Humility
2. Honesty
3. Accountability

Step II: Restitution

In certain cases, the offender needs to provide restitution for what he has done wrong. This process validates the sincerity of repentance. Participating in the restitution process is not for vengeance, but for justice. Vengeance demands payment while justice provides due compensation in accordance with what is deemed right and fair. Note that the Old Testament Law was very specific about restitution for wrongs.
Rehabilitation may be necessary in order for the individual to return to a better way of life. This is especially true if he or she has fallen into a pattern of unhealthy and ungodly living. Counseling, accountability, etc. This step helps provide us with assurance that the offender has truly changed. Genuine repentance is evidenced by a change in behavior.

At times, individuals struggle most with forgiving themselves even after they have repented, asked for forgiveness from God, and made appropriate confession. Even though they may know (in their heads) that God has forgiven them, they may still feel unforgiven and condemned (in their hearts).

Remember that Satan is the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10). He may attempt to accuse and condemn you even after you have received forgiveness for sin. Satan’s attempts at accusation should not be mistaken for the Holy Spirit’s conviction (i.e., true guilt). Self punishment and trying to continually “pay” for or “offer sacrifices” for what occurred doesn’t bring forgiveness.

Don’t underestimate the extent of God’s forgiveness. Read through Scriptures related to God’s forgiveness and choose to believe they are true even when your feelings don’t confirm it. 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God is able and faithful in forgiving us when we come to Him.

By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God:” Don’t underestimate the extent of God’s forgiveness.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. God is able and faithful in forgiving us when we come to Him.
**Acknowledge Imperfection**

- Accept that you are imperfect and that you will make mistakes during your life on earth.
- While each of us desires to live a life that is free from errors and offenses, we just can’t. Thankfully, we can remember that God understands.
- The words of *Psalm 103:13-14* can bring us comfort: “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.”

**Seek Help Sooner Rather Than Later**

- At times, clinical depression, perfectionism, or other emotional issues lead to issues with self-condemnation and an inability to move on.
- Talk to a family member, friend, or mentor who understands forgiveness and who can help support and pray for you as you work through this.
- Seeking advice from a minister or Christian counselor may help you discover barriers to self-forgiveness and tools to overcome them.

**Conclusion**

- Don’t stay stuck with the pain, anger, and hurt of unforgiveness.
- Seek God’s help through the Word and prayer; and don’t hesitate to seek counsel from a friend, mentor, minister, or Christian counselor if you need help working through forgiveness.
- Working through these issues will lead to healing and will provide you with an opportunity to learn more about Christ-like love and how it is lived out on a day-to-day basis.

**Helpful Resources**

**Books available through ACCFS:**

**Free Downloads from the ACCFS website:**
1. Forgiving as Christ Forgave by Elder Dan Kilgus.
3. True Guilt-False Guilt by ACCFS Staff.