

## **“Forgiveness 101: How to Forgive”**

Luke 15:11-32

One day, Bill went to a good friend to ask that friend to hear his testimony. That’s how he’d put it in the phone call: “I want you to hear my testimony.” He didn’t say more until he got to his friend’s house, and they sat together in the bright living room on that summer day. Bill told his friend he’d been diagnosed with a brain tumor.

His friend knew that Bill and his wife Marge lived a quiet life in a quiet place on a lake. There wasn’t much “drama” there, at Bill and Marge’s. It made you feel good just to go there, to be with the two of them. Even though the tumor was pretty far advanced, Bill talked clearly. “I’m not afraid to die,” he began. “I want you to know that. And I want to tell you why. I was in the Korean War. They made me a sergeant and gave me a group of men to command. They were good guys. I loved those guys. Every one of them. Especially Sam, my best buddy. Sam was sweet and honest. He never said a hurtful word. And Sam was always there when you needed him. We made it together through some tough spots in the jungle, but the men were getting tired. They were run down with sickness, the heat.

“One day, a message came through from my commanding officer, ordering us to make an ambush the next day. I knew where we were in the jungle. I knew where the enemy was. I knew if we made that ambush, there was no chance we could succeed or get out alive. It was a suicide mission.

I argued with the commanding officer. I told him the mission would fail, and that it was a stupid idea to send us in there. I went so far as to tell him that even if he gave the order, I would refuse to lead my men into there. My commander told me I was betraying my duty as a soldier, letting personal feelings get in the way of my responsibility, that if I wasn’t going to carry out the command I wasn’t an American, I wasn’t a soldier, I wasn’t a man. I felt ashamed of myself for questioning. The next day I gave the order. We went at it. It was bad.” Bill stopped for a moment: “most of my men were killed.”

Bill hunched over and cried. “I was holding Sam in my arms when he died.”

Bill went on: “I broke down then. I wasn’t good for anything anymore. They sent me home. In my eyes, I had failed in every way. I had not done my duty. When the men were killed, I couldn’t take the pain, so I began to drink. I drank for the next 20 years. My family fell apart. My family was angry, hurt, disappointed in me. After my wife and kids left, I drank more. Slowly, I was killing myself.”

“Then, I met Marge,” Bill continued. Marge told me I was worth something, and that I was killing myself, treating myself badly. Thanks to her, I got into AA. I stopped drinking. I began to feel again – all the things I’d been burying, not thinking and feeling for all those years. I’d tried to wash them all away. But they didn’t go away – they were still there, inside of me. The people in AA and Marge just listened to me. They didn’t tell me I was right. They didn’t tell me I was wrong. They just listened.

“Then, I came to my senses, just like the Bible says. I saw the truth. Back there in Korea, I was right to have questioned my commanding officer. I was right to think the order should be disobeyed. And when I broke down because my buddies had died, I was right to cry.

“This I feel,” Bob told his friend. “That I can feel. That I can care. That I can grieve. That I can love.” That I had the courage to question. That I was willing not to obey. I’m not afraid to die, because I know what love is. I know where God is.”

[Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now,] by Rebecca Ann Parker, Skinner House, 2006.

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There is something more powerful than all the armies, all the nuclear weapons, all the computers, all the right thinking in the world. That something is forgiveness. If you choose to forgive – to forgive yourself, to forgive those who’ve hurt you, those who weren’t out to hurt you, but did, your parents, the president, the Democrats, the Republicans, your boss, your old flame, your children, and again: yourself... If you choose to forgive, you’ll have done the most powerful thing in the world. You’ll have unleashed the most powerful force there is, and it’s right inside of you.

As Brian McLaren writes in A New Kind of Christianity, “Jesus is not a prize-fighter with a commitment to make somebody bleed. Nor was Jesus a fake-me-out Jesus pretending to be a peace and love kind of guy, when he was really planning to come back and act like a proper Caesar – symbol of all the powerful at that time – a slash and burn kind of guy, brutal, torturer, determined to conquer with crushing violence. Nor is Jesus about God using violence to impose God’s will at the end...

Instead, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, not weak and defeated, but every part as powerful on Caesar and his company on larger than life steeds. Jesus’ message of forgiveness and reconciliation was conveyed in Revelation as a sword coming out of his *mouth*, and the blood on his robe was his own blood, not the blood of his enemies.”

*If you intend to forgive, expect to feel.  
Expect to feel everything: anger, shame, fear, anxiety, rage,  
desperation, sorrow, grief, pain, pain, pain.*

If there is something you have not forgiven, those are what you are holding on to. We know, based on modern medicine, that those toxic emotions are not good for your body. They’re not good for the earth, either, or for anyone on the earth. If those toxic emotions are at the heart of who we are, of what we do, of how we conquer, of how we earn our money, then they’re not good for the earth, either. Those emotions cover over one another, layer upon layer, over heart, over love...

### **How to forgive?**

Be prepared to feel. Take something in your life you have not forgiven. Take anything. Now, take some time to ask yourself how you really feel about that event, or about that person. No matter how silly it seems, take some time to really feel what you feel.

When you’ve really felt what it is you really feel, go back again and look at what you tell yourself about that event or that person. Again, be honest with yourself (this may be the hardest part!). If you feel like a five year old, and you see yourself standing in front of someone, pointing your finger and yelling, and that’s the way you always tell the story in your head, notice that.

Now, you may be ready. You may be ready to make some space for peace, for love, for letting go.

Change the story! Become the hero in the story, instead of the victim! Notice how things happened, and what happened; tell yourself, maybe for the first time, that things happened just as they were supposed to happen, no matter how awful those things may seem to you.

Become the hero of this story.

NOW, move on to the next story! We all have plenty of these stories. Change the story until you are the hero in your own story. That's when you've come to the love part, like Bill did.

### **How to Forgive:**

\*\*If you are someone who habitually comes up with the most negative scenario, then you are in need of forgiving – and forgiveness. Think of a time you felt really alive. Think how that time felt. Think how you felt in your body. Think about the way the environment looked. See the colors around you. See the sky. See who else is there with you. Take yourself back to that time.

You can do this anytime. That's a way to give yourself a break from coming up with the most negative scenario. You may see someone else taking that role, then! And when they do, you will be able to sit back, think about your own wonderful place, really be there, and you'll be able to listen to what that negative person has to say. You may even hear something useful, who knows!

\*\*Dr. Fred Luskin talks about other practical ways to forgive:

Change the channel on your inner television – change the channel to a channel with a story that allows you to be the hero instead of the victim.

Learn to go to a place – inside of you – that is a place of gratitude, beauty, love, and forgiveness. You may have several places. Then, when you decide to switch the remote control, you will have several places you can click to.

What rules do you live by that could be categorized as: “unenforceable rules?” Come on, we all have some of those! When I was young, I had a friend who was the first among us to have a child. We all noticed how careful Pat was about things, but we also all knew – if not from firsthand experience – that having things “perfect” just wasn't going to work with an infant around. It didn't take long for Pat to stop having to be careful about how perfect everything was. And it won't take long for us, either. Challenge your “unenforceable rules.” What are the rules you can't keep, and certainly no one else can keep? You might have to dig deep to discover these rules. They're not usually listed on a certain page, but all of us live – and expect others to live – according to our own set of unenforceable rules.

\*\* Close your eyes.

Bring your attention to your stomach and slowly draw in and out 2 breaths.

As you inhale, allow the air to push your belly out.

As you exhale, relax your belly so that it feels soft.

Do this for a couple of breaths.

Now, bring your mind's eye an image of someone you love, someone you cherish.

Or see yourself looking out to a beautiful place in nature.

See if you can feel your response to this image – in your heart.

Continue the belly breathing.

You will notice a peaceful, relaxed part of yourself.

Ask the peaceful part of yourself, the one who sees the beauty, the person you love,

What you can do to resolve your difficulty.

Laurens van der Post, *The Night of the New Moon*

"I thought that the only hope for the world lay in an all-embracing attitude of forgiveness of the people who had been our enemies. Forgiveness, my prison experience had taught me, was not mere religious sentimentality. It was as basic a law of the human spirit as the law of gravity. If one broke the law of gravity, one broke one's neck; if one broke this law of forgiveness one inflicted a mortal wound on one's spirit and became once again a member of the chain gang of cause and effect from which life has labored so long and so painfully to escape."