Forgiveness: A Grace-Filled Obligation of Spiritual Transformation

Michael J. Wilkins

Announcer:

Well, we want to just take a moment to pray. And again what- what we want to encourage you to do is to just open to the ministry of the Spirit. He is our teacher. And so as Dr. Wilkins is teaching, to have one ear attend to what he's saying and one ear attend to the Spirit that He would teach whatever is going on in our life. What I'd like you to do, just for the next minute, literally take a minute, I want you to just introduce yourself to the person next to you. And- and without ask- taking prayer requests just then pray for one another that God would open their heart during this time. And I'll bring us back in close ok? So introduce yourself and pray. Our Heavenly Father, we come to You and we- we open our hearts. You, who are the searcher of hearts, who know all things. We know from the Scripture that Your spirit was praying for us, all last night, all today, today, even now with utterances too deep for words. And we know that in Your great council all things work together for good. And so we trust that, Lord, in Your providence and Your sovereignty, You've brought us here that we might hear Your word, that we might open our heart to Your spirit. To open yourself to the truth about forgiveness. Lord, clutch over our hearts and the heart of our speaker. We bless you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, tonight I want to introduce our speaker Dr. Mike Wilkins. He has a Bachelor's degree from Biola years ago and uh in psychology right? And then he came in to Talbot and did his Master's of Divinity and finished his PH. D. at Fuller School of Theology in New Testament studies. Mike has been here- how many years now teaching? - 23 years full time and teaching New
Testament, started undergraduate and now at the seminary. And most important he is my Dean. And so I want to look good tonight. But we really, we ask God's blessing on him as he teaches us about forgiveness. Let's welcome Mike Wilkins.

Michael J. Wilkins:

Great to be with you tonight. Great to be in this lineup of people. God's really blessed you and I know you've been a blessing to them. What I was thinking is that how many of you worked all day? Yeah. You're tired. Uh- So what I did is I put together a PowerPoint and I don't normally do this but I figure, you know, if you've been working all day you need something other than- to look at than my mug. So we'll just follow along and let you see where my thoughts go tonight. The thoughts are very personal. At the same time they're very biblical because we're going to deal with a particular text of Scripture and I trust that they are formational, that what we see in Scripture, what we see in- in my life and what you look into in your own life would continue to form you into the image of Christ. So that's- that's really what we're all about tonight. It's a privilege for me to be involved with this um- this series.

The passage that we're going to deal with tonight is Matthew chapter 18. We're going to turn there a little bit later on. I'll give you some preliminary mark-remarks and then we'll go and look at that passage. It's one of the most comforting passages Scripture, and yet at the same time, it's one of the most convicting passages of Scripture because it touches on this theme tonight that is the very center of our relationship with God and with each other. It's a theme that every single person here has and will have to deal with our entire lives. It's not just something that we've maybe dealt with in the past but it's something that you and I are probably, this very evening,
dealing with. And we have dealt with in the past and we will deal with this in the future. I'll illustrate that by asking a couple of questions. How many of you in here have ever been wronged by somebody else? Raise your hand.

There's probably not a hand that's down. OK. Each one of us have been wronged. We might even look around the room, and we might see some people here. John mentions that I'm one of the Deans. I'm sure that I have wronged him at some particular times in the past. And then there'll be repentance tonight. But let's reverse that for a moment. How many of you even once in your lifetime have wronged another person? There you go. Boy, this lady was ready to go with that. Okay? Okay.

We have at even looking around. We might consider that there have been people in this room who have wronged us, John. So that there are reciprocal relationships that go on in even a room like this. They can range from someone hurting your feelings, someone gossiping about you, or it can be more severe. Some of you may have been abused as a child. Some of you may have been falsely accused of an indiscretion that even perhaps has led to you being fired from your job. What do we do when we're wrong? That's a key element for us to consider tonight. What do we do when we have been wronged? What do we do when we have wronged other people?

My mother passed away this last month. She was 80 years old. She had lived a very full life. For the last three to four years, she had struggled with cancer. And as I have thought about her over the last few weeks, I've- I've allowed myself to reflect upon her life and to every Sun-, she lived in Portland and every Sunday my wife and I would call her and we had this ongoing relationship.
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I remember one of the most important things about my mom is when I was in Vietnam; I went there when I was 19 years old and just a--just a kid who didn't know anything; I was scared but I was too cocky to know it or to show it. And my mom wrote me every single day while I was there. That was before e-mail, before electronic anything, she hand wrote a letter and sent me a letter every single day that I was in Vietnam. And it was- it was-, it wasn't too impressive to me at 19. I just thought, well, of course moms do that, until I got a little older. But also even there, we would be out in the field for three, four, five, up to 24 days at a time, and they would have to bring mail out to us and there'd be mail call and everybody's eagerly waiting, there were many people who didn't get anything, but my mom she wrote me every day that I was there.

As she neared the end, it was amazing to watch her almost let go of her life because she knew that her time was coming. She knew that it was the Lord's timing for her to go. She was ready, she was prepared as a strong Christian woman. She was a very bright woman. She was really a beautiful woman. It's interesting to go back and find pictures. We've gone through all of her materials and to find these pictures when she was 16, 18, 22 years old. My- my daughters who are grown women now with their own children look at this and "that's Grandma?!" I mean, they only knew her as, you know, a hundred and fifty years old but she was a beautiful woman and she loved to laugh.

My older brother who was just quite the card himself, he had learned the trick when we were growing up that whenever we got in trouble, he'd just get her to laugh, and then she'd forget why we're in trouble. So it really worked well over the years. But my mom also had a very tough life. She was only three years old when her mother died. Her mother was only 31 years old and she
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died of tuberculosis. My mother's father was having an affair. And now just reali- I'd never even know his name, but my mother's father, my grandfather, was having an affair with another woman at the time and he abandoned my mother to be raised by other family members. And thank God my- my mother's aunt stepped in and raised her. My mother was then diagnosed as having tuberculosis, and she spent most of her childhood from the age of 3 up through the age of 16 in Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Most of that in a full body cast because she had a very rare form of tuberculosis of the bone.

She had two failed marriages and her third was unhappy. Her first two marriages failed when her husbands walked out on her, leaving her with three little boys, and I was one of those. My real father left six months before I was born. And my mom was- was left with a 2 year old and with me on the way. Her eldest son, my brother Bill, in his 20s became a homosexual and died of AIDS. And she watched her son die a most horrible death in the early days of that-, of that epidemic. A few months before my mother died, my wife and I flew up to Portland. We'd never heard her tell her whole story. And we spent a weekend with her and we just asked her- her story, and we took notes and we got all the pictures out and we tried to piece together her life. We're in the process now of putting it down on paper so that our family can know a little bit about this woman that really didn't talk a whole lot about herself.

We also asked her to share with us her life's most important lessons. Much of what I just shared with you I had never heard until she told us her story. And some of her life's lessons I'll never forget. She said "Don't let life make you bitter." She said "You can always find a little good in everyone." She said "Learn to laugh at yourself."
The first one is the one that really stands out the most to me now. "Don't let life make you bitter." This is a woman who had experienced a lot of wrong. Abandonment, abuse, disease, death, and I haven't told you- I haven't told you a lot of the worst. It's really not fair to do so. And she said that one of her life's most important lessons was "don't let life make you bitter."

The important thing for me to keep in mind with my mother is that that's the lesson that she told at the end of her life. At the end of her life lessons. There were many times when she was bitter. There were many times when she did strike back. There were many times when she did want others to pay for hurting her so badly. But at the end of her life she could say "Don't let life make you bitter." So how do you and I, who have been wronged and we have wronged others. How do you and I respond when we have been deeply hurt? Some of us with huge issues. All of us with others that are maybe not so huge. How do we, we respond when somebody hurt our feelings or demeaned us in public?

I remember speaking right here in this chapel some 20 years ago and speaking with a nationally known person, and as I kind of bantered with him, he publicly put me down. I guess I haven't forgotten that. How do we respond when somebody demeans us? When you've been criticized, perhaps even rightly. How do we take it? Many of us, even to this very day, walk around with hurt from some past incident. My first reaction, most of my life, has been to strike back. Even to take others down with me for daring to wound me. And then on other occasions when I know that I was at least partially to blame, I didn't make the issue known. And so I lived with the hurt. And on other occasions when we have been hurt in secret. It becomes so much more dangerous
to bring it out in the open. So we close it off into our own heart, and our heart becomes hardened. When you have been hurt, it is possible to have your bitterness and anger become as deep as you're hurt. And have your bitterness eat you up. And that can happen even among good Christians because you and I, as we sit here this evening, walk around with a lot of baggage.

Our theme this evening is an all-together different way than my normal way of striking back. It's the way of the Kingdom. It's the way of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not just a state of mind. It's not just an emotion. Forgiveness, forgiving others requires hard work that involves every aspect of our being. To forgive is to release a person from the wrong that they have done to us, for the purpose of re-establishing our relationship in a healthy way. Every single one of us is involved in this issue because every single one of us has sinned and has offended our Holy God. We need forgiveness in order to establish a healthy relationship with God. Every one of us has been offended, and our reaction will indicate whether or not we have our relationship restored with that person in a healthy way. Every one of us has offended others, and relationships with others are in jeopardy. So forgiveness is, in a very real way, forgiveness is a crucial key to our personal formation and the health of our communities because unless we forgive and are forgiven, we develop a hard heart, and then bitterness and alienation grows. And when alienation grows, it affects the health of our communities.

So our passage this evening gets at the heart of the issue, which is one of the most important elements of the Christian life. And unless we attend to this issue intentionally, on a daily basis, meaningful relationships with God and others are in jeopardy. Now we're going to explore this for the next hour or so or a little less than that but we'll continue in just a little bit after the break
and we're going to be very focused after the break to see how it fits into an intentional formation. We want to explore the issues this hour. Our passage is in Matthew chapter 18 verses 21-35, and the passage can be broken down into two major sections. The first section illustrates a typically human way of dealing with people who have offended us, and this is in Chapter 18 verses 21-22. The second section is very different because it's here where Jesus gives a parable to show God's way of dealing with people who have offended us. Both involve forgiveness but one is a human kind and the other is a Kingdom kind. It's God's kind of forgiveness.

The first kind is found in Matthew chapter 18. Matthew chapter 18 is where we find a human kind of forgiveness. It's found in Peter's interaction with Jesus. Look at chapter 21, this follows, as you might suspect, verse twenty but in verses 15 through 20, the situation has been disciplined within the church. A brother who has sinned and Jesus gives a way of dealing with sin so that there would be repentance, reconciliation, and then there would be forgiveness. And then my man steps up, Peter, in verse 21, and he says to Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter is very insightful here, and is really quite generous but this is actually the kind of forgiveness that I call a performance driven requirement. Forgiveness in the Old Testament comes from the God of grace. There is forgiveness and there is grace throughout the Old Testament. That's the basis of our relationship with God. But God is also a God of justice, the same God of grace who forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin, is also the God who does not leave the wicked unpunished-, unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sins of their fathers to the third and fourth generation.
In the everyday world, persons can get caught up in a regular pattern of sinning and seeking restoration. And God says here, "Enough! Enough for the person who is playing a wicked game with Him. He says, "Enough with that person. There will be judgment." Later, Judaism recognizes the same kind of incident where repeat offenders may not really be repenting at all. Later Judaism drew the line at how many times a person could seek restoration and forgiveness. One passage in the Talmud says "if a man commits a transgression, the first and second and third time he is forgiven; the fourth time he is not." In another case, it is even less forgiving. If a man said "I will sin and repent and sin again and repent." He will be given no chance to repent.

Peter's question appears to be following in that line, wondering how many times he should forgive the person who has repeatedly sinned against him. His offer to forgive the person seven times is hugely generous, reflecting a desire for completeness that the number seven usually evokes. But Peter wonders when will it come to an end. When will it be that that person who sins and repents and sins and repents and sins and repent finally enough is enough. Jesus has a response to that in verse 22, an astonishing response is that Peter must forgive not the generous number of seven but to forgive without counting. "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times," or seventy times seven.

Jesus is saying the number doesn't matter. Peter and the rest of the disciples are to continue to forgive without keeping count. Forgiveness is not to be based on mere generosity. The teaching within Judaism that three times was enough to show our forgiving spirit didn't go even as far as Peter did. Peter was being extraordinarily generous by more than doubling that. But Peter really is wanting a time of retribution. It's like Peter's saying "I'll forgive but I want to
make sure that at some point this person is going to pay for his sin. Once I've forgiven enough then it is payback time."

Have you ever felt that way? Some of you lived that way. Some of you may be in a home where you live that way. Or you help guide people through a situation in life where they are living that way, where they had been sinned against over and over and over and they want to say when is enough? Peter is waiting for a time of retribution. So Jesus now shows a very different way in the parable of the unforgiving and unmerciful servant. It's the kind of forgiveness that Jesus here speaks about. That is a Kingdom kind of forgiveness. It's God's kind of forgiveness, and it's the kind of forgiveness that I call a grace filled obligation.

Introducing the parable in the same way that he did the parables of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples what forgiveness is like for those who have encountered the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has come announcing repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And as people repent and they enter into the kingdom of heaven, there will be a kind of forgiveness that characterizes the Kingdom of God that has never been known on Earth.

He says, therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The very first servant appears and this is a- an interesting person and there is an ominous note that is sounded, where the king wants to settle accounts. He sets the stage for what is owed the king, and the amount owed the king by this person is incomprehensible. The servant must have been a very important and successful individual because he owed the king ten
thousand talents, verse 24. A silver talent was worth approximately the equivalent of in our dollars today 247,000,200 dollars. Altogether, the man owed at least two and a half billion dollars. That is the Enron of the first century.

The intentional exaggeration or hype- hyperbole of the parable is dramatic. Since a man was not able to pay such an astronomical figure, he and his family are sold to repay the debt, implying that the king was selling them into slavery. The practice, it was common in the ancient world. Debtors were often forced to sell their children as slaves or their children were sleep- seized as slaves by the creditor, and that slavery was more of a punishment than it was as payback.

Now I have- I have two granddaughters now and they're worth at least a billion dollars apiece but that still doesn't get me out of that hole. So notice what happens in verse 26: The servant makes a ridiculous request, suggesting that with just a bit of patience he could repay the debt. His overwhelming plight evokes pity from the king, and prompts him to give to his servant what he did not deserve, what he could not possibly- possibly accomplish. He cancelled the debt and released him.

Those hearing the parable would have thought back to when Jesus talked about forgiveness that was to characterize the kingdom of heaven; that was to characterize the church as you know it today. This first scene is a powerful display of the forgiveness that God, who alone is king, displays toward those who have offended Him. And just to think about it for a moment, let's just take a moment with this. Uh-. It's uh- because he is my student I can do this.
(to an audience member) How old are ya? (inaudible student speaking) 24 years old. Okay. And this is your wife? (inaudible) Okay. Good. This is a brilliant student in my exegesis class, had him this morning. 24 years old; uh how many sins have you committed today? (inaudible) Any guess? A good even number of 10. Okay. Anybody here a math kind of a person? If you are, follow us with this. Okay. He's committed 10 today. If he then does that for his entire 24th year. How many sins does it have to be he commits in this one year of his twenty four years? How many? Add them all up. Thirty six thousand. Okay. Thirty six, so you've got it. Okay. How many has he committed in his 24 years? About ten- up till birth. I mean, you know, any of you have children that lie? Did you ever teach them how to lie? When did they start lying? Since they could talk. Yeah. Hahahahaha. So how many sins would that be in his life? 24- Eighty seven thousand six hundred. OK. So that's how many sins he has committed in his life. What if he lives to-, I'm 57 lives, to that many? How many sins does he owe? We're getting up in the millions now right? OK. Think about this entire room.

We have maybe what, 200 people in here? We have too many-, 200 people and we take that as an average and any of you ever sin more than 10 times in a day? What did Jesus do for us in the cross? That's what He did for us on the cross. And what He did for us on the cross is that every sin that you and I committed has to be paid for with what? A life. That's why only He, as the God-man, could atone for not only his sins, that number that he has, but for my sins, for all of our sins and for how many billions of people on the face of the earth today, that's what Jesus did. That's why He had a broken heart on the cross, as a Son of God who died for you and for me. That's the scene of this first parable. A powerful display of the forgiveness of God, who alone is king, toward those who have offended Him.
The second scene provides a conspicuous contrast. In the second scene the servant, this is verses 28-30, who had been forgiven the unthinkable amount of ten thousand talents, found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii; using the same figures, this guy owed him about 4000 dollars. A pittance in comparison to the billions that he had owed. But the one who had been forgiven so much, did not respond with the same pity but rather the opposite. He grabbed him, verse 28, and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. Notice, the second servant pleads with the almost identical actions and words that the first servant had used when he had begged for leniency from the king. But instead of reacting with the same compassion and grace that he had experienced, the first servant delivers physical punch-punishment by choking him, and instead of sending him into slavery, threw him into the debtors' prison and even more severe punishment that had been threatened by the king, which made repaying the debt impossible.

But, second servant can't-, first servant can't get away with this. The first servant punishment is now in hand. He is called wicked by the king in verse 32, and the lesson is revealed at verse 33 in the king's words; "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

The mercy and the benevolence of the master's treatment of the first servant should have so impacted his life.

If you and I look at our sins on an everyday basis and we count those sins up and we count them up over our lifetime, what should it cause us to do when we look deeply into the face of Jesus? To recognize that there is absolutely nothing that you and I could do, and when we are so
overwhelmingly struck by the way in which it is just been dismissed. But dismissed by the blood of Jesus. What will you and I do when people wrong us? Now this first servant will receive the punishment that he deserved in the first place. He is handed over to the torturers, which indicates those jailers in a debtors' prison who not only guarded against escape but who inflicted torture on inmates. And since it would be impossible for the servant to repay the vast amounts, the scene in verse 34 concludes with a grim certainty that he will experience that punishment forever. And at verse 34, it's a scene that we like to avoid. But it's a scene of eternal punishment. So the core of the meaning of the parable is found in the final verse. Verse 35, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

I remember the first time I ever taught this passage in a class and I was undergrad, it was-, taught adjunct for years and I was right out of seminary. I didn't know anything myself and I was teaching through this passage, and I had a young lady come after me after class and she was just in tears. I mean she just was in tears. Is this is what's going to happen to me because I have so much against people who have hurt me. This is not a scene of work's righteousness; that is not what Jesus is saying. We don't go around and try to forgive people in order to earn God's forgiveness. Rather this takes us to the core, the central principle of Kingdom life. Forgiveness is a supernatural impulse from a transformed heart. It is a supernatural impulse from a transformed heart.

You cannot stop forgiving. You have been made to forgive in the image of Christ, and you have to do something to stop forgiving. God cannot, He cannot do anything but forgive. And that's who you and I are now as we have been born again by the Spirit of God, regenerated in the
image of Christ. A person who has truly experienced the mercy and grace of God by responding to the presence of the Kingdom of God will be transformed into Jesus' disciple, which in a most fundamental way means to experience a transformed heart that produces a changed life that gives the same mercy and grace that he or she has received from God. That transformation will be evident in the words of an-, and actions of a disciple's life. That's what Jesus is getting to. He's nearing the end of His earthly ministry and He is saying the kingdom is-, of God is not just a nice thought, and it isn't a conquering king in a political or military sense. It's an operation in the heart of people. And the church that will come will be characterized by forgiveness.

So the first servant, therefore, in many ways, is an example of a person who has never truly received God's forgiveness. That's the point. Jesus is saying unless your heart is different, you will continue to not forgive. And the point of the first servant is that he has never truly received God's forgiveness. A person who has not truly experienced and appropriated the grace and mercy of God will not experience His forgiveness. He will, like the first servant, accept the personal benefits but it will be only superficial. It will not penetrate to his hard and wicked heart to produce transformation. Such a person has not received God's forgiveness, and therefore will experience eternal condemnation for his or her sins. Jesus' disciples will be living demonstrations of forgiveness because we have experienced God's grace and mercy, and in so doing we have experienced His forgiveness.

So each one of us has been wronged, and each one of us has wronged others. Jesus-, the way of the kingdom of God is to forgive. But how? Let's give a few points here. Four important points I would suggest. In the first place: forgiveness comes from being forgiven. When we experience
God's mercy and grace, we can then give mercy and grace to others by forgiving them. Perhaps
the Kingdom value that is the most difficult for the world to comprehend is a kind of forgiveness
that Jesus articulates in this discourse. It's not a conditional acceptance but an unqualified
removal of all that we hold against others.

At least one reason why the world cannot really understand this value is that hurt is very real in
offended relationships. And when we have been hurt we don't want to hurt or-, be hurt again, and
we oftentimes want to hurt back. We won't allow ourselves to be used. We want to get even with
those who have abused us. If we do forgive others, it's often conditionally based upon the actions
of the one that we are forgiving, like Peter. But what Jesus shows is this then when,-, when we
experience God's unqualified forgiveness, we will influence all that-, it will influence all that we
are. It will influence every single relationship that you and I have. Mercy experience will
produce mercy demonstrated. As we stated here, mercy is not giving to a person what he or she
deserves, while Grace is giving to a person what she or he doesn't deserve.

And when you and I have experienced what Jesus says here, when you and I have experienced
God's mercy and grace, as He says in this passage. Look back at verse 33, 32, the Lord
summoned him and said to him "you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you
besought me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?"
The non-Christian world has rejected the mercy of God. And that is why there will be conditions
upon acceptance. But you and I in the church is characterized by the mercy and the grace of God
are a forgiving community, it's a community that will forgive because we have so deeply entered
in God's mercy. So that mercy and grace experienced will produce mercy and grace demonstrated.

Second point I would suggest is that forgiveness comes from a changed heart. And this perhaps is one of the most significant features for us to focus upon tonight. Forgiveness comes from the changed heart. So the place to start and the place to grow every day is in our heart. To experience the saving grace of the Gospel the Kingdom is to experience a transformed heart. And it's Jesus' kind of heart, which continually gives to others for their benefit. On a day to day basis, when we walk with Jesus and experience His presence, His forgiveness of even the little daily ways in which others have offended us, His forgiveness of our own offenses allows us to forgive others with His forgiveness. It's the kind of thing that we enter into on a daily basis. That is why we are to forgive; We're to ask for forgiveness and we are to forgive on a daily basis, not because we're looking once again to have our salvation restored but to walk in the very reality of the fact that you and I have a different kind of a heart. It's a heart that has been touched by God's forgiveness. We don't often-, well maybe we do. Some of us do, some of us don't. I often don't live in the reality of that. To live in the reality that my heart is a very very different heart than it was 36 years ago. This New Year's Eve. It's a very different kind of a heart.

But the reality oftentimes is that what prohibits our forgiving others is when we harden our heart. That's when I get into trouble. When we harden our heart is when we will not forgive. And we harden our heart in two particular ways. One, when we sin against God or His people we harden our heart so that we don't have to repent. When we have sinned intentionally or when we have even sinned unintentionally, and we suddenly come to the reality of the fact that we have
sinned against another person, and we do not want to repent. We do not want to humble ourselves and acknowledge our sin. What we do at that moment is harden our heart against God because God just wants to come in and pound my heart.

I went through this a couple of years ago, a situation with my wife. We've been married 35 years this December 18th, and uh-, I mean it's-, it's, she's the greatest thing in the world but I'm a jerk. Um. Any of you ever been a jerk? in your marriage? One honest man right over here. Okay. And I went through a situation where I just I- I did not give her the respect that she deserved, and what I did is I rationalized that. And when I was rationalizing that, when I was demeaning her as my wife at that time of 33 years, I hardened my heart against God because I didn't want to humble myself and acknowledge it. And acknowledge that I was not the husband that I should be at that time. And it took God entering into my life and cracking my heart in order to break through and to make my heart tender to Him so that I could be tender and turn to my wife. So what we do is when we sin, whether we consciously sin or unconsciously sin against those around us, when we come to the recognition of that, when we will not humble ourselves and repent, we harden our heart against God. We want our way.

The second way is when we have been hurt by others, we harden our heart so that we won't get hurt again. We don't want to be hurt again, and so we harden our heart against people; we harden our heart against those people who have hurt us. And that's what happened to my wife; is that she hardened her heart against me because I was hurting her, and what was happening to our relationship? Our relationship was strained at the core of who we were. I mean, you'd think good grief, by this time I know what I was doing. No, uh-uh. I'm just as much of a fool as I was thirty
five years ago. I need to learn in a day to day basis that my wife is a growing, maturing person and I need to live in relationship to her in that basis. And what God had to do is He had to come in and crack my heart because a hard heart cannot love.

The beginning of reversing it is to forgive. Let people lose by forgiving them and your heart will begin to recover. It hurts. But let loose of people and you'll begin to restore the relationship to what God had intended. Our spiritual growth depends upon our forgiving others. If we have hardened our heart, we cannot grow. And if we don't grow we actually start to atrophy. That is why a bitter person is one of the most miserable of all people because they are stuck in a hard heart and the world becomes their enemy. Have you ever known a person who is bitter? Bitter against the world? The world is their enemy because they have hardened their heart against everyone.

Thirdly, forgiveness is your responsibility, leave judgment to God. Like Peter, we all often will forgive only so long. And then we want payback. Judgment will come on others. But as Paul says "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." Judgment will come from God in His way, in His timing. Don't try to take it into your own hands to being- bring retribution to others. Don't try to be God's cop to the world. I am. I mean I- you know, I want to straighten everybody out. You know, whether on the freeway or driving up my block or you know somebody cuts in front of me in the, you know, grocery store, you know, I- I want to be God's cop to the world or they do it to somebody else it's none of my business, who wants to jump in there and I want to be God's cop to the world. Don't take it in your hands to bring retribution to others. This passage is a critical one for us to recognize OUR responsibility and what is God's responsibility.
And fourthly, in similar fashion, be wise as a serpent but harmless as a dove. Be wise about those who would continue to hurt you or hurt those you love. In the immediately preceding passage, Jesus has demonstrated that discipline needs to be exercised by the church. Sin is not to be ignored in the church today. You and I have the same responsibility especially-, probably most of us are leaders in the church today, it is our responsibility to deal with sin and not to let it just run unnoticed. God will ultimately judge those who do abuse others so don't be foolish about placing yourself unnecessarily a place where you will continue to be abused. We need to recognize that we need to be wise but don't be reactionary and become a hurtful person. Be wise as a serpent- serpent but harmless as a dove.

My wife and I were talking with a woman this last week about this issue. And she shared with us that she has had a very very painful life. But the most painful of all was discovering that her children had been sexually abused by a man that was her godfather. Both of her children. They were 2 and 4 at the time. All that she thought about for years once it came to the light was making them pay. And the man eventually did go to prison and he is still in prison and that's been over 20 years ago. But she still had a huge pain in her life as she saw her children grow up and have to deal with their abuse. Right now, her daughter's near the age of probably many of you. She's dealing with unwanted unexpected physical abuse, and she has to deal with that because it affects her marriage. And she now has her own little daughter who is 3 years old. And to deal with that in her own child's life. The woman, the mother of this younger woman, was able to get even with the man by seeing him go to prison but seeing him go to prison didn't bring her peace. She still had bitterness and anger and the desire to hurt him even more for hurting her
children. The growth in her own life came when she experienced the grace and mercy of God, and she said that was- it was like the world was lifted off of her shoulders. She didn't have to get back any longer.

The man is paying a penalty but her own penalty was harboring bitterness and anger. Forgiving him from her heart has brought her own healing and the strength to be able to help her children grow through their own recognition of abuse. So as we bring this particular hour to a close and we'll probably have about 5 to 10 minutes more. The central truth for our own growth is that forgiveness experienced is forgiveness given. There are a number of questions that go along with this and we'll probably deal with those in the next hour. It might be these: is a penalty always required? Yes. Sin must be paid for, in the moral order that God has established. We can deal with that more later but there will always be a penalty that is required. Do I forgive before or after a person asks for forgiveness? And I would say it's both. Both for your health and the health of the relationship. Should I forgive and forget? Miroslav Volf has written a wonderful book on forgiveness. Uh- I forgot to bring it with me tonight but he suggests yes, we must forgive and forget.

Scripture tells us that God has removed our sin as far from us as east is from west and He will hide our sins and He will remember them no more. Let me ask you this ontologically, can God forget anything? He can't forget anything. So what does it mean that God remembers our sin no more? It means the very same thing for us that we must not remember a person's sin to hold it against them. When we have forgiven a person, we forget that sin and holding the penalty against that person. When your husband has hurt you, as I hurt my wife, and she forgave me. She has
never held it against me to this day. Now, is it out of her mind? Certainly not. Psychologists tell us we can't forget anything. But at the same time, sometimes we have difficulty calling it back. But what it means we don't hold it against another person.

Several years ago as I- as I thought about this several years ago, I remember a bumper sticker that I saw, remember when bumper stickers were on everybody's car. Uhh- it's a long time ago. Now they're, now they're on your uh- um screen. When you go online, you know, those are the bumper stickers of today; online advertisements.

Well there is a bumper sticker that said "I don't get mad. I like- I get even." Yeah, you've probably seen in it recently. That's a- an example of a life model for many people. In a sense, it's meant to be humorous. But for me, it had a chilling effect when I saw that. A chilling effect because it described-, it did indeed describe my attitude and perhaps was one of my life's mottos.

I was raised by a stepfather who was umm-, a- a very mean person. Uh He uh-, I told you that my real father left six months before I was born. My mother married this guy six months after I was born. My mother having spent most of her years in a hospital was a very very naive person. I found out that she graduated from high school and she was 18. She'd only been out of the hospital for two years. This was during World War II, she went to a USO in Hollywood. That's where she lived. Met a sailor, very handsome young sailor, who came from Keokuk Iowa, uh- was on his way to the Pacific on a battleship. And they met that night and three days later they were married and three days after that he shipped out. I guess they did that in World War II but I also think that person who was really my father was uh-. I have since found out that my father,
that father, has uh- he had at least- at least 10 different wives. And every one of his wives he had children with, and every one of the first boys that were born were named Bill. So that was my older brother Bill. I just met uh- Bill Junior in Minneapolis when I was speaking a couple of years ago. There are Bills all over the place. There may be some of you that I'm related to uh-somewhere, I don't know! I meet people, wherever I speak, I meet brothers and sisters.

But my-, my mother married this- this other guy six months after I was born. Again, she was a very naive person. She was looking for any kind of help she could get and this person just turned out to be a very, very mean person. Literally, my earliest memory waking up was probably only two or three years old and I can- I can just still hear it, was to wake up in the middle of the night and to hear my mother screaming as this stepfather had knocked her to the ground, as he was- as I came toddling out just a little guy, as he was holding up her skirt and was kicking her because he- she- in whatever way she had offended him. And my mother was screaming and he was laughing and yelling "cripple" because with her tuberculosis to the bone she had several surgeries on her hip and she had a real huge gap in her hip and she walked with a limp and had a deformed leg.

That was my earliest memory of this man. It's my earliest memory of my life actually, which is too bad. Um- He turned out to be a wife beater and a child beater. He would regularly beat my mother up. He would regularly beat my older brother up. I'm not sure why but he just really really focused his hatred on my older brother. He would- he would come at me but I was faster than he was and more- you know, I would fight back, and my older brother didn't fight back.
And to this day I think that it had something to do with him becoming a homosexual. He just-, he had no sense of- of- of "me." It was taken away from him as a child.

Um- that went on through much of my early childhood. On Christmas Eve, when I was in seventh grade, I got the best gift I had ever had. He announced to our family that he was leaving. And he left that next-, stayed for opening presents the next day. And then he left and I've seen him only once or twice in my life since then. About a month later, my mother took my older brother Bill and me aside and she says, "boys, I have something to say to you" and we were going "well, what mom?" And she said "Joe is not your real father." "What?" "Well, Joe made me lie to you because he wanted you to think he was your father, and he made me lie to you that he is not your real father." And I remember, I was only in seventh grade, look up and said "so he's not my real dad?" and I went "yes!" I mean, I don't have his genes, you know, as bad as things are, I don't have his genes.

You know, life changed it became very very very difficult for us. That was the only house, growing up, that we ever owned. We were in it for two years and he left without any support. My mom had to go back to work full time. I remember having the- the electricity turned off, the water turned off. We lost our car, lost the house, had to go into low income housing. It was just a very tough time. And my mom said that what happened to me is that I became angry. I- I- I-, you know, I can seem like a nice person when I want to but I'm an angry person. And my mom said that I hadn't had that anger except she saw it developing more and more as this stepfather would just- would abuse our family. She said I became angry and I fought back when I was a little guy. And as I got older through my teens, I just became more and more angry.
When I was 18, graduated from high school with a rousing GPA of 1.67. Um, couldn't get into any colleges. Went into a JC on probation and flunked out after about three weeks. That was 1967, so angry young men when their country is at war what do they do. You go fight. So I enlisted airborne infantry. Uh I want to go fight. Um, went to Vietnam when I was 19 and it was a very difficult time. Within a month after being in country every person in my squad, and the squad has about eleven people, every person in my squad who had been in country when I got there was either killed or wounded. After a month, I was the senior person. And I took over as squad leader, walking point and being squad leader for the next six months. I became, what I described as a war machine, a war machine who could kill and not have a second thought.

Now during that time, it won't- we won't deal with that tonight, but during that time I did have an experience where for the very first time I had to look a person in the eyes and kill the person. Uh that night on guard duty God broke my heart and I cried like a little baby. This 19 year old cocky young paratrooper, cried like a baby. God began to change me but that was another story. And on the surface I just continue to be angry, angry, angry, and while I was there I thought a lot about my mother. I thought a lot about my brother. And I made a vow that when I came back to the States that I would kill that stepfather. You know what does a 19 year old do, but at 19 year old in that situation I meant it. I would kill that person for what he had done to my mother, what he had done to my father. Came back from Vietnam after a year. I became a Christian two years later. And I'd been strung out on drugs for- for months actually literally a year. And God entered into my life and put down the drugs that New Year's Eve in 1970 and I've never looked back.
God just worked an incredible miracle in my life and He still has to because if you see any of my books I always-, or anything that you saw out there on the screen as Michael J. Wilkins. You know what the J stands for? My mother meant it to be James. My wife knows it to be a jerk. I'm still a jerk. I'm still in process. But I came back and met the Lord. The Lord changed my life and I forgot about Joe, forgot about it completely until my wife and I were married and we had a little one. I just started classes here at Talbot.

So this was 1975, probably 74. And just a brand new Christian still. And there was a knock on the door. Here's Joe. And my wife Lynn who is just this love machine. She knew all about Joe but she opens the door invites him in, gives him a hug. Yeeeesh. Invites him to sit down, get him a glass of iced tea, and we talk and we talk cordially but as we talked, I had not thought about that vow in many years and that vow came back into my mind. And I was sitting on one chair and he was sitting across a coffee table, I could still see him there sitting on the couch, and I looked at him and I said "Joe I made a vow when I was in Vietnam and the vow was that the first time that I saw you I would kill you." I said "today is that day. Today is the first time I've seen you since you left." I mean he started to sweat. Because you know, he had heard rumors about what I was like and he just kind of slid down into the couch and my wife was there and she knew what I was like and she's just freakin what is Mike going to do?

And I looked at him, I remember as clearly as ever, I said "but Joe, you know what, I now realize I am no better than you. And if God can forgive a jerk like me, I can forgive you. Now I'll tell you this, I don't trust you and I will not allow you to hurt my family. So when I'm forgiving you, it's not meaning that I'm being foolish and letting you do whatever you want to do. But I am no
longer holding what you did to my mother and my brother against you. This is your opportunity to make a difference with your life just like God has made a difference in my life so I forgive you."

Well it's not-it's not produced any change in him, from what I understand he's still alive. I met him one other time after that and he was as abusive as ever-as ever when he came around our family. Um-So it didn't make any difference. But who do you think have made a difference in? What a difference it made in my life. That's- that's the- that's the key issue. The key issue is what it has done in my life. And that's the key issue for all of us. You-you and I have all been hurt. Some of you have been abused. Some of you may even right now be in an abusive relationship. I'm not going to be able-I don't have the wisdom or the counsel to tell you what to do in every single situation but I do know that God wants you to forgive a person and then be wise and yet harmless as a dove.

A life motto is "I don't get mad; I get even." A life transformation is "if God can forgive a jerk like me; I can forgive you." You may not have the same kind of memories; you may not have had the same kind of experiences but you have all been hurt, and you have all hurt other people. Think the significant feature for all of us is to stop focusing on what others have done to us and focus on what Jesus has done in and for us. That's the beginning of real transformation, and the continuing transformation on the day to day basis.