

SESSION 8: FEELING FORGIVENESS

Do you need to forgive someone? Do you need to ask for forgiveness? What would forgiveness feel like in your life?



SHARE A PRAYER

Open the session with prayer requests and a prayer.

INTRODUCTIONS

Last week's homework was to identify and track healthy and unhealthy coping strategies in your life.

- Does anyone want to share what they learned from the homework?

Today's session is about "feeling forgiveness." There's a reason it's the 8th session and not the first—because there are a lot of steps that lead up to truly feeling forgiveness. First, we had to think about the loss and hurt in our lives and try to help that heal. Then we needed to think about how our anger, blame or coping strategies might be holding us back from our best selves. All along, we needed to look to Christ's example to prepare our minds and hearts to forgive what might seem unforgivable.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Fifteen years before this confrontation scene, Brooks opened the door to a stranger, and his life changed forever. Innocence lost. Faith shaken.

Brooks emerged from the hospital broken, alone, in shock, and then angry. Now all his paths align—as a soldier, a senator, and a loyal son—and he sits across the table from Glen Ake, the man who murdered his parents.

Through his anger and his tears, Brooks stands abruptly, struggles, then says: "*I forgive you.*" And his life changed again.

Brooks describes that moment as the single biggest turning point in his life since the night of the crime. He says, *“It was like someone took a crank off my chest and I could breath for the first time. I felt like my body was full of water and poison that drained out of the bottom of my feet. When I left the room that day, the sky was bluer. The greens were greener.”*

Since making the movie, we’ve heard the saying: *“Hatred for others is like drinking poison and expecting your enemy to die.”* Brooks says in hindsight he was unaware of the detrimental effect his anger and hate were having on his body and his relationships until after he let it go.

Forgiveness is a central theme in the Bible and integral to Richard Douglass’ work as a pastor. Richard visited prisons for years trying to inspire inmates to find Christ and change their lives. *(Ironically, he spent a lot of time at the same prison Glen Ake and Steven Hatch were later incarcerated.)* As discussed in previous sessions and portrayed in the movie, Richard’s last sermon was dedicated to forgiveness. In his words:

“You see, the joy of life is poisoned by the resentment of past grudges. We have to get rid of the bad blood because we grow by getting the skeletons out of our closet and opening the door to life with forgiveness and mercy and love.”

MOVIE CLIP – Play Session 8: Feeling Forgiveness

THINK-PAIR-SHARE QUESTIONS

Before discussing these questions as a group, take a minute to write your own responses (think), discuss them with a partner (pair) then join together for a group discussion (share).

- 1) Who in your life comes to mind when you hear the word “forgiveness”?

- 2) In their meeting, Glen Ake said to Brooks, *“I am so, so sorry for what I did to you and your family.”* Who do you want to hear *“I am sorry”* from?

- 3) Who would benefit from hearing you say, *“I am sorry”*?

- 4) How do you think Brooks felt as he was walking down the hall to face Glen? How did he feel as he sat across the table from him? What can you tell from his body language and his words?

- 5) How do you think Glen felt during this confrontation scene?

- 6) At the end of the meeting, Brooks stands up, struggles through his emotions, then says: “*I forgive you.*” What physical changes do you observe in both Brooks and Glen after forgiveness?
- 7) Most agree that a meaningful and authentic apology requires:
- a) Taking responsibility for one’s actions,
 - b) Expressing genuine regret and remorse without excuses,
 - c) Trying to make amends, and
 - d) Committing to not repeat the behavior.

Do you think Glen’s apology met these criteria? Why or why not?

FAITH WALK

Christ experienced the ultimate torture in his last hours on earth. Wrongly accused, he was scourged (whipped with a thorny lash), beaten, stripped, spat on, mocked, and crucified. In the midst of his torture, Jesus looked to the heavens and said, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” Then he turned to the criminal being crucified beside him who asked for repentance and forgave him. Jesus said, “*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.*”

Read Luke 23:32-46.

- **What does this passage tell us about Christ’s capacity for forgiveness?**

Jesus disciples shared in much of Jesus persecution. They watched him suffer and suffered themselves as well. No doubt they felt angry and vengeful at times. Yet forgiveness is not just recommended in the Bible, it is commanded. **Read Luke 17:1-4 and Matthew 5:43-48.**

- **What did Jesus say to his disciples about forgiveness? Why did he challenge them to find forgiveness?**

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” is a powerful request.

- **What is the difference between *forgiving* your enemies and *loving* your enemies?**

The most remarkable aspect of Brooks' and Glen's meeting is that totally apart from Brooks—Glen had found Christ in prison. When Glen talked about “getting down on his knees and accepting Jesus,” Brooks was skeptical. He figured Glen might just be telling him what he wanted to hear, trying to evoke compassion. Not shown in the movie, Glen told Brooks he hadn't had a single disciplinary incident since he'd accepted Christ eight years earlier. Again, Brooks was skeptical.

When Brooks left the meeting with Glen, the first thing he said to the warden was: “*I want to know the last time he had a disciplinary incident.*” The warden responded, “I'm sure it hasn't been long. You can get one for not making your bed. Everyone has them.” The warden called the central office and asked. The answer: July 1986. Eight years earlier.

Glen evidenced a true change of heart. Though Brooks hadn't prayed for his enemy, “a TV preacher” and other prison ministry efforts reached his heart and changed his life. With that, Brooks' life changed, and he was freed through forgiveness. Glen's genuine remorse and regret opened the door for Brooks to feel forgiveness. God had been working in both Brooks' life—preparing him for this confrontation—and Glen's life—preparing him to be genuinely remorseful.

[FUN FACT: The warden in the movie, Ron Ward, is the real warden who was there the day Brooks met with Glen Ake. Ron said that day, “*I could see my whole career flash before my eyes,*” worried that things could go terribly wrong in their meeting. He was, and remains, grateful that the meeting had such a positive impact for both Brooks and Ake.]

APPLICATION & REFLECTION *(for self-reflection and/or group discussion)*

- **What is your heart telling you about forgiveness?**
- **What is the greatest conflict or challenge for you around feeling forgiveness?**
- **What could help you overcome this challenge?**

HOMEWORK

Imagine sitting alone at the same table where Brooks and Glen met. Now imagine that the person you need to forgive or be forgiven by enters the room and sits across the table from you.

- How would you feel? What do you hope for? What are you afraid of? What would you say? What would you want him or her to say to you? What are the different possible outcomes? Can you reach a point of forgiveness? If so, what would forgiveness feel like in your life?
- Give yourself a quiet place and plenty of time to truly absorb this experience. Brooks and Glen met for more than an hour and half in their real meeting. Pray before, during, and after. Ask God to guide you through this confrontation.

As you think about forgiveness this week, re-read Luke 17:1-4 and Matthew 5:43-48.

FROM BROOKS – WILLING TO BE MADE WILLING

What are your thoughts about forgiveness?

Forgiveness is an unnatural act. It's like jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. Yet there is something inside of us as human beings that requires it. We all have situations in our lives where we have been wronged by someone or have wronged someone else. Usually there are both if we're really honest with ourselves.

The sermon my father preached the Sunday morning before he died on Monday night put the subject of forgiveness front and center for me. I remember standing outside the sanctuary, in the lobby, listening to his sermon through a speaker and still being pierced by his words. This was the same sermon that I preach a portion of during the movie, playing my father.

Most of what I was dealing with then was the need to be forgiven. I haven't spoken much about this, but I tended to be a bit of a bully. There was one particular kid I picked on a lot at church and occasionally at school. The day after hearing that sermon, and only a few hours before we were shot, I remember driving from my high school a few blocks to the church to meet my father. Along the way I passed this young man walking along the street. His mother worked at the church, and I was pretty sure that was where he was going, so I stopped and asked if he wanted a ride. He looked at me a little nervously but got in the car anyway.

As I was pulling into a parking place at the church I turned to him and said something to this effect: "I know that I have made fun of you and beaten up on you unmercifully. You haven't deserved this at all. I'm really sorry I have done that and I would like to ask you to forgive me for being so mean to you." He looked at me with astonishment. He said, "Yes, I forgive you. Thank you for the apology."

Later that evening Ake and Hatch came to our home and shot us. A couple of days later I remember waking up in my intensive care room to see a woman from our church standing over me. The first words out of her mouth were, "You need to forgive those guys." It was a horribly foolish thing for her to say, partly because it was hard to argue against and would serve no purpose other than to make me feel guilty if I didn't. It wasn't her place to say that. I also knew that it was something I would eventually have to deal with. That was just not the right time.

As the years went by and I went through the trials, both literally and figuratively, I came to a place where I thought I had forgiven them. At least I convinced myself I had. At the same time my life was in a constant state of chaos—in total shambles—although I was able to hold up a different picture of things to the world. I graduated from law school, got elected to the state senate, and things looked great. But I had pushed my finances, my marriage, my health, and everything else in my life to the breaking point. I kept myself busy with work and activity to keep myself from thinking about what was going on inside me. This culminated in a divorce.

I authored victims rights legislation and passed the bar exam. I started working out again every morning. One morning at the gym when I was on the bench press and needed that extra burst of strength I went to a place I had never realized I had gone before. As I set the bar on the rack and sat up, I remember realizing that at that moment when I needed strength I would think about Ake and Hatch and breaking them in half. It dawned on me that I went there regularly, although I had never realized or acknowledged it before. I made note of it.

A few months later I found myself at the prison, face-to-face with Glen Ake. I don't think I ever realized the amount of anger and rage that I carried until I was making the walk to that room to see

him. I didn't know what would happen when I met with him but I can say that none of the possibilities I could think of were good. Forgiveness was something I didn't even consider. It was nowhere on the radar.

The meeting went for an hour and a half and I told him during the conversation that although my father had always taught me to forgive, it was not going to happen. I told him it was not within me to do that...it wasn't who I was. I got up and walked to the door and had my hand on the door handle to open it and walk out. I felt something in me say, "This isn't finished yet." I turned to him and walked back to the table. I said again, "My father always taught me that I should forgive, but.... I forgive you".

At that moment, I remember falling back into my chair and feeling like my body and head were full of water. It was poison. The feeling was so physical, I could almost visibly see the bottoms of my feet open up and the water flood out of them across the floor. I remember feeling at the same moment like someone took a clamp off my chest, and I was able to breathe again for the first time in 15 years. It was life-changing. When I walked out of the prison doors, all my senses were heightened... the trees were greener, and the sky was bluer than I had ever seen before. I was finally free.

I wish this kind of freedom for everyone. I also don't feel that it's my place to lay forgiveness at anyone else's feet. It's my job to tell my story—and as part of that I understand that real forgiveness is hard and usually takes a long time. I also believe that if all we can muster is to be willing for God to make us willing, God honors that and will eventually bring us to that place. For me it took 15 years and even then I didn't see it coming.

FROM LESLIE

People often ask how Leslie is and what she thinks about forgiveness. Leslie summed it up best in two different talk show interviews. Here are her thoughts on forgiveness and moving forward:

"You have to forgive or your heart's not clean and you just can't move on. You just dwell on it and dwell on it, especially when people have hate for people. I couldn't go on hating these men because that reflects in your own life. If you have hate for people, it makes you a hateful person... and I don't want to live like that the rest of my life."

—Leslie Douglass, Interview with Dateline NBC, January 7, 2011

"I think that in ourselves that we have to forgive, and it's hard to go on, and if you don't, you live angry—I think for the rest of your life. I see so many kids and adults that have so much hatred. And I think, who is it they haven't forgiven? What grudge are they holding on to?"

And I always think if I can forgive this, I can forgive anything. I have children and I have a lot of love to give and that's what I need to focus on and not regrets—and not guilt and hate."

—Leslie Douglass on *The View*, March 25, 2011

FROM RICHARD – A RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE

By Richard B. Douglass, August 15, 1975



The most important word in the Christian faith is the word *relationship*. It has important doctrinal and historical facets. Primarily, it is a personal relationship with God. Growing out of a relationship with God, the Christian also finds that he has a series of vital relationships with other people.

In the twelfth chapter of the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul describes the behavior that grows out of a personal relationship with God. Because a person is related to God, he has God's love in his life. He can have genuine love for others because God's love controls his life. Love for God causes a person to hate the evil things that limit and destroy people's lives. This love opens up a person's mind to see the needs of people who are hungry, hurt, and suffering. Even enemies and those who persecute us can be loved.

A famous philosopher stated that Christianity could not be true because it taught the impossible. He insisted that only the weak would love their enemies. They are to be hated and destroyed, he insisted. His philosophy greatly influenced men like Adolph Hitler. The world became an insane asylum because of a philosophy of hatred and retaliation. The first century Christians were persecuted and killed for their faith. The Roman historians declared: "Behold how they love one-another." The philosophy of love Christ brought into the world changed men and won those that tried to destroy the Christians.

Men who have not experienced God's love, do naturally think in terms of retaliation. Those who

have a personal relationship with Christ create right relationships with people. The Apostle Paul taught that we are to live peacefully with all men. Harmonious relationships, humility, and personal nobility stand out in relationships with people. There is no need to retaliate or repay the evil done to us. We can care for our enemies, feed them, and provide for their needs because we have ability to care for them.

Abraham Lincoln was approached by a member of his cabinet. "Your opposition has grown and your enemies are gaining power. You must destroy them by every means at your disposal," Lincoln was told. "I will destroy my enemies by making them into friends," the great president stated. He had discovered the key to changing the world. Actions of hatred and revenge are natural. People respond this way because they are hurt and want to hurt back. But this sets up a chain reaction. The person they hurt back wants to hurt them back. Then they feel a need to hurt the one who has hurt them back. This chain can go on forever.

The solution to the problem of hatred and vengeance in the world, is a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. This will give a basis on which we can build the right kind of relationships to other people. When Christian love takes over, the world can be changed.

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