

FREEWAY

JUD WILHITE | *Forgiveness*

PART 4: *Holding On Keeps Us From Moving On*

WELCOME BACK TO WEEK 4 OF FREEWAY: A NOT SO PERFECT GUIDE TO FREEDOM. I've noticed there are a couple ways that I approach problems: I either deal with them or adjust to them or live in complete denial about them if I can. When the problem is too big to ignore, I deal with it. Like when the water heater goes out; it doesn't matter what else is going on, I have to clean up the water in the garage. But other problems, especially little annoying things—I adjust to them. For instance, one day I plugged in my old iPhone 5, and it wouldn't charge; but then I noticed, if I pressed down the phone, it would beep and start charging. So I got a few books, set them on my phone and boom! I get the beep, and it starts charging. But pretty soon my phone needed more books to get the beep. And then more, and more till it finally looked like this. [Slide 0.1] We put an arrow on there so you can see the little cord coming out of the bottom. Here's what this is a picture of: adjusting to a problem, rather than dealing with a problem.

We don't just do this with things, we do this with our lives and relationships. Rather than deal with a problem, we adjust to it, or live in denial about it, and we underestimate the toll this takes on us, particularly in the area of forgiveness and relational debts. We've been looking at Freeway, a not so perfect path to freedom. We saw that step one on the journey to freedom from things that trip us up begins with **awareness** and acknowledgement of what we need to face. We looked in week 2 at the process of **self-discovery** and God discovery and how it sometimes gets harder before it gets easier. Last week we explored the power of **ownership** in finding healing. Today we're taking about step 4 on the freeway to freedom: **forgiveness**. This is the process God has given us to deal with all the relational debts that open up in our lives. If you picture your heart as a bank, every time someone you love hurts you, ignores you, disrespects you, betrays you... it's like they are taking

unauthorized withdrawal. You feel that loss, and for whatever reason, rather than deal with problem, we adjust to it. Some people blow up in anger. They start trying to extract payment from everyone around them. But all they end up doing is causing more damage and more debt.

Others feel that unauthorized withdrawal and respond by clamming up, either through fear or guilt. They don't want to make waves. Don't want to seem needy. But over time, the debt builds, until one day, this normally calm, quite person goes off like a bomb. When all we do is adjust to the relational debts in our lives over time your heart gets compressed by layers of suspicion, mistrust and fear. The result is what's called a reduced trust capacity. This means you move on from the conflict, but hold back a little of yourself each time. One boss burns you, so you trust the next one a little less. One relationship ends in flames, and so you offer a little less of yourself next time. Your child or parent or spouse disappoints you so often, so consistently, you lost almost all of your trust in them. And without real trust, there can be no real relationship. ***Without real relationship, there is little real joy.***

This slow reduction of trust capacity is the problem forgiveness was meant to fix, but there is a lot of confusion about it. Lots of people offer or receive forgiveness but never feel any different—the debt still weighs on their heart. Sometimes you forgive but the person doesn't really change. And what about lawsuits, child custody issues and abuse? Does God really want me to open my life to people who are willing to hurt me over and over and over? Some people owe you big time, but have no interest in you or forgiveness—they may not even be alive. What do you do then? I believe forgiveness is one of the most powerful and healing processes in life, but it's also scary and confusing. Richard Rohr once noted that if we don't trans-

form our pain, we will transfer our pain to others. I'd add that if we don't let God transform our pain we will transfer it to others. Forgiveness is how God transforms our pain, so we don't transfer our pain. You don't have to live adjusting to relational debt and having your trust capacity reduced. God has already led the way made real joy possible. Forgiveness is near and dear to His heart, so let's dive in.

If you have your bibles or mobile device and want to follow along, we'll be looking at a famous parable of Jesus in Matthew 18. We'll also put the verses up on the side screens. What sets this parable in motion is an argument Jesus's disciples were having about power and who among them has the most. They ask Jesus to settle it for them, "Who's the greatest in your Kingdom?" Jesus answers them by calling over the least powerful, most vulnerable person in the room—a little child—and basically said, 'This little guy, right here. He's the greatest because he's vulnerable enough to trust me. The more you open your heart to people like him, the greater you will be.' Basically Jesus is saying, a great life requires a trusting heart.' This sounds great and all, but there's a problem: the more you trust, the more likely you are to get hurt by others. This confused the disciples so they sent up the guy who's never afraid to ask the hard questions.

Matthew 18:21 (NLT) Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

Peter is asking about trust capacity. How many times do I forgive relational debts? He throws out a number: seven? This is more than double the amount of forgiveness prescribed by Jewish tradition. He's figuring he's being waaay generous. But look at what Jesus says:

Matthew 18:22 (NLT) “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

I like to think everyone in the room went silent at this point. They are just looking at him, wondering, ‘How is that even possible? How will I have any honor, or self-respect or resources left over by the time I’m done forgiving that much relational debt?’ In response to their confused silence, and ours, Jesus tells them a powerful story about the process of forgiveness.

Matthew 18:22-25 (NLT) “Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.”

At this point the disciples are probably feeling a lot better. Finally a story that makes sense. Bad guy does bad thing and is punished. You do the crime—you do the time. The fact that the family was sold into slavery was like the ancient version of bankruptcy. It sounds harsh to us but was totally just in that day. Jesus’s story doesn’t end here, but this is the first place we need to stop to truly understand forgiveness. The first step is to always...

1. ACKNOWLEDGE THE DEBT

Anyone ever received a really large phone bill? I read this week about two people who have gotten a surprise in the mail from their phone carrier. The first is a French woman who switched from one provider to another and

was told to expect a small cancellation fee. When the bill arrived, it said she owed \$15 quadrillion. That's more money than is currently available in the entire world. This is clearly a mistake, but she had it set to automatically deduct from her account. She called the phone company and at first they wouldn't reverse the charges—and I'm dead serious about this—they offered to put her on an installment plan! Finally, after a few more calls, they see the error and reverse the charges. The second bill went to a Florida woman, and it was for \$201,000. At first she was like, "This can't be right!" But as she read through all 43 pages of the bill and spoke to customer service, the truth came out. She had two hearing-impaired brothers on her unlimited data plan, and one had gone to Canada for two weeks and didn't realize the unlimited data didn't work up there. So every text, every download is racking up international roaming charges—one video download alone cost \$2,500. She came to this shocking realization: I am responsible for every single cent of this ridiculous bill. It was unfortunate, unintentional and a complete surprise, but in the end she acknowledged the debt. They reduced her bill from \$201,000 to \$2,500 and set her up on an installment plan. I wish they had wiped out the whole thing, but that's just me.

Here's the point. If both of these women had refused to acknowledge the debt, they each would have had their lives slowly destroyed. The first woman would have had \$15 quadrillion slowly withdrawn from her bank. She had to stand up and say, you guys can't do this. You can't make all these unauthorized withdrawals. The second woman couldn't receive mercy till she fully accepted that the debt was hers to pay. She had to humble herself and say, "Yes I owe this, but I can't pay. Can you help me?"

It's easy to talk about phone bills and strangers, but it's not so easy to talk about hurt and debt that stand between you and those you love. If you have been hurt (and feel that trust capacity shrinking), you need acknowledge the debt—even if you have no desire to collect. This is really hard for people who do not like conflict, but to begin the process of forgiveness, you need to get that stuff out in the open. You can't forgive a debt you don't acknowledge. As you talk it out you may discover some of those hurts were unintentional or a misunderstanding. On the other hand, if you are the person who has done the withdrawing, you need to have the patience and courage to listen and acknowledge the debt. This is really hard for the type A or controlling personality types. You want to argue the bill and shut the conversation down, but you can't accept forgiveness for a debt you refuse to acknowledge. Forgiveness always requires bravery. One person has to admit they received a wound; the other that they caused a wound. It's very humbling for both people and requires both to be vulnerable.

For some of you this means you have to start praying about a tough conversation you need to have. Some of you might have to start owning some of the hurt in your own heart or hurt you have caused others. You may need to think back to your past and see if a person who betrayed your trust then is affecting your trust now. This doesn't mean we mine our past to come up with every possible injustice ever done to us. It means we acknowledge the debt, not to dwell on it, but to release it. Forgiveness is how God transforms our pain, so we don't transfer our pain. Then we are finally ready for the second step in the process of forgiveness....

2. RELEASE THE DEBT

So in Jesus's story, the master has confronted the stealing servant. The debt is acknowledged and the punishment is under way. But then comes a call for mercy. Check in out:

Matthew 18:26-27 (NLT) "But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt."

Now this finally sounds like a Jesus story, right? The man pleads for mercy, and the master is filled with pity. The word used for pity is often translated, 'moved to compassion.' This is the same word used of Jesus when he sees hurting and lost people. Rather than ruin the servant's life, the Master releases the debt, and even keeps him on the payroll. So this is an incredible second chance story. But this step of releasing the debt is another place where the process of forgiveness can get stopped. Here is why: in order for a debt to be released, it has to be absorbed. The master takes the hit and does not dish one back out. This is not the normal human response. The natural reaction is you hit me, and I hit you back. You steal from me I steal back. We are hard-wired for justice.

I read a great justice-story this week about a young-woman who's bike got stolen. A few days later she noticed the exact make and model listed on craigslist for sale. So she pretends to be a customer, meets the person in a public area and sure enough it's her bike. She asks to take it for a test ride, and the thief says, "Okay, but be sure to come back." Well, she didn't. She kept riding to another parking lot where a friend was waiting. She stole her

bike back! Here's a picture. [Slide] See that smile. That is the smile of justice! We love stories like this. Something in us craves payback, and if we aren't careful, it sneaks back in to the forgiveness we give and receive.

Here's the trouble. Sometimes we forgive someone, but we still try to make them pay. Every time you bring up that mistake, and make them relive that thing they did, you are making them pay. Every time you complain to someone else about something that person did in the past you are making them pay. One of the things that has helped me in this area is to pray for the people you are having trouble releasing. It's pretty hard to hold a grudge against someone you are praying for. Sometimes you can't forgive yourself. Whenever you feel in your own heart that you are not worthy, or need to make amends for something another has forgiven or God has forgiven you are making yourself pay. You need to watch out because unforgiven hearts tend to be unforgiving hearts. You may have to write down exactly what you think you own and release it. Also remember that just because you release someone's debt doesn't mean trust is immediately re-established. Forgiveness restores the relationship so that trust can begin to be rebuilt. That will take more time and humility. This whole process is hard because it goes against this ingrained idea of payback.

I love what Bono had to say about karma vs grace. He said,

“At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma... what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to up-end all that. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. If Karma

was going to finally be my judge. I'd be in deep [trouble], but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross."

Earlier I said in order for a debt to be released it has to be absorbed. And if you really want to know how to give forgiveness, the best way is to receive, really receive the ultimate forgiveness from God. You acknowledge your debt, your sins, and Jesus releases you. You go free, but He goes to a cross to pay the debt. That's the way Forgiveness transforms our pain, so we don't transfer our pain. Jesus pays the cost so you don't have to. He offers love, peace and joy that can never be taken. And all he asks is that you move on to the next step, and that's to...

3. LIVE DEBT FREE

Jesus's story is about to take a strange turn. Remember that servant who was forgiven the million dollar debt and set free? There was one debt he couldn't let go of.

Matthew 18:28–33 (NLT) "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'"

We've learned some other things from Jesus's story, but this is His point is this: the way we forgive others is to remember the forgiveness God gave us. When we refuse to have mercy on people who are genuinely sorry and acknowledge their debt, God feels about us the same way we feel about this 'evil' servant—that's he's an ungrateful tool. The story ends with the once-forgiven man sent to prison to pay off the millions because he wouldn't forgive the thousands. Friends, it wasn't his screw up that sent him there, not squandering and stealing his master's stuff... it was his hard, unforgiving heart that removed his freedom. He refused to live debt-free and ended up un-free. Peter's original concern was 'how can I offer mercy over and over and over,' and Jesus's answer is, 'considering how much mercy you have received, how could you not? God has forgiven you billions! How can you not forgive thousands?' Jesus has called us to live debt free. When someone hurts you, forgive them. When you hurt them, ask to be forgiven. In Romans Paul says the only debt you are supposed let remain outstanding is the debt of love each other. You keep paying forward the love you receive from Christ rather than pay back the injuries you receive from others. Transform the pain, don't transfer it.

Next week I'm so excited to interview American Football legend Mike Singletary. We're going to hear all about his time with the Bears and 49ers, but what I'm most excited to hear about is his journey with God. In a recent interview, Mike was reflecting on a high point in his career where he had just won the Super Bowl, won MVP, signed a new contract. Everything was going his way, but inside he felt empty and frustrated. He broke down saying, 'Lord, I'm supposed to be your son, and you don't talk to me, use me. You don't do anything. I don't understand this.' Mike says that in his spirit God told him two things. 1: you need square up some issues in your life. 2: you

need to forgive your father. Mike's father divorced his mother and walked out on the family when Mike was 12 years old and he carried a lot of bitterness and confusion about it.

So Mike began the process of forgiveness: he acknowledged the debt and hurt his dad had caused, he released that debt, allowing Christ to absorb the payment, and then started learned to live debt free. He says, "What people don't understand about forgiveness is that you're the one that's in prison. You're the one that's going to be hurting. When I [finally forgave my father], the Lord began to change my life. Had it not been for Jesus Christ, I'm sure I'd be divorced. I'm sure that I'd know my kids from a distance." God has continued to use Mike in powerful ways, and I know you're going to love hearing what he has to say. He's a living example of the fact that Forgiveness is how God transforms our pain, so we don't transfer our pain.

Giving and receiving forgiveness is as important and powerful step on the way to freedom. It's how you repairing your relationships, expand your trust capacity and allow the joy return to your life. Don't adjust to the debts you feel in your life, release them. Celebrate God's great mercy towards you, let it soak into your heart and pass on to others. It's a more vulnerable life, but Jesus says, that is how you become the greatest in His kingdom.