

- I. I began vocational ministry as a youth pastor when I was twenty-five. And my ministry almost ended before it really began. It wasn't because of the endless demands, the less than stellar pay or the unrealistic expectations that the people put on me. It was rather because of the relationship with the senior pastor I served under. One of our first nights there he had Meg and me over for dinner. Then he and his wife spent the whole evening making fun of and bashing the people in his congregation. We left that night feeling utterly discouraged and baffled. I wondered, "Is this what ministry does to you? Makes you cynical and mean spirited?" Within months, even though the youth ministry we were leading was growing, this pastor and his wife began to regularly berate us and criticize our every move. He even chewed me out after a Sunday night service in front of a several members because I refused to teach that wine back in Jesus' day was not fermented. He believed in the theory of the perfect grape...that the wine Jesus drank didn't contain alcohol. And because I refused to teach this he discredited my Christian commitment at every turn. After about two years of this, Meg and I couldn't handle it anymore. We both were filled with rage. I remember Megan and I sitting up late one night seriously considering throwing rocks at his car. That is when I knew that we needed to leave. I thought about not only leaving the church, but even leaving ministry. I felt hurt, disappointed, but mostly angry. We felt like this pastor was forcing us to abandon a thriving ministry, and a community and youth that we had come to love. Even though I never ended up throwing rocks at his car, I threw rocks in my mind and heart for years after...every time I thought of him and his wife. I felt stuck in unforgiveness. And I just couldn't move on. I felt like a boulder was hanging around my heart.
- II. Anger, hate, resentment. If we don't do something, these will not only keep us from moving forward in life but also can drown and destroy us. *Recap Luke 15:11-24* and **read Luke 15:28-31 NIV** This story is best known as the parable of the what? The prodigal son. So what is a prodigal? It is someone who is reckless or wasteful. And that is certainly the case here. But this morning, I don't want to focus on the reckless son but rather on the older brother. Not the prodigal son but what I like to call the prudent son, the one who had enough sense to stay home. If you will notice, the older brother doesn't join in the party when his younger bro returns. You can just picture him sitting outside in the cold. Moping outside the house with the music, laughter and dancing in the background while he stands there kicking stones and muttering to himself. "I didn't take Dad's inheritance and blow it with wild women and drink. And so he gets a party for being stupid? I am the responsible one and he the careless, and Dad cooks up the best steaks when he returns? I never do anything like that and what do I get? Squat! That is so unfair!" You can just imagine that inner monologue he is having. The prudent son feels wronged and wrathful. He is stuck in his anger and it is bringing him down...and will eventually destroy him if he doesn't do something about it.
- III. So what can the prudent son do to help move on past his anger and hurt and keep from failing in life? Forgiveness of course is the answer. It is the way forward for the prudent son

and the way forward for me years ago with that pastor. Without it, we fizzle; with it, we flourish. You might say, "I understand that I need to do it, but I simply don't know how to get there!" Hamilton, the author of the book on which this series is loosely based, and I agree. It's not that easy. It's not like, "Do these three things or 10 steps and you are good." It's not like giving directions on how to get to the mall... "First, you take a left on Country Club" and so forth. It's far more complex than that. It would be like telling a new father or mother just do these 3 steps and you will be a fantastic parent. Each child is different, and each case involving forgiveness is different as well. It's more like trying to describe how to get the Myrtle Beach. There are many ways to go so it is best to provide general directions...like you need to head east, not west. And if you try going due south, it is going to take a while. You know you are getting close when you see lots of cheesy t-shirt shops and mini-golf courses. So I am a little wary about providing steps, but I do believe there are some principles or signposts telling us that we are going the right way in this journey from anger, hate and resentment to forgiveness.

- IV. The first signpost that we are heading the right way is understanding that **forgiveness is the only way to be fair to yourself**. I have heard people say "I am not going to forgive him for what he did to me...he doesn't deserve it." And you might be right. Someone wronged you and they don't deserve to be let off the hook. But listen to what Lewis Smedes, a Christian writer, says. "**When you refuse to forgive, you are giving the person who walloped you the privilege of hurting you all over again—in your memory.**" In other words, by withholding your forgiveness you are not necessarily hurting them, you are hurting yourself...and keeping you stuck. Like in the case of the prudent son...because he couldn't forgive, he didn't join in the party. He missed out on the celebration, the T-bones, the music and the dancing. The same is true if we withhold our forgiveness. It kills our joy and keeps us in the endless cycle of anger, hate and pain. So we forgive in part for our own healing as much as the healing of those who hurt us. Because the first one to benefit from our forgiving is the guy or gal in the mirror. Going back to that pastor, for me to withhold my forgiveness wasn't hurting him. It wasn't like he was sitting up at night wringing his hands whining, "I sure hope Ron forgives me." He had moved on with his life. I was the one sleep-deprived, not him.
- V. The second signpost that we are heading the right way towards forgiveness is understanding that **forgiveness is not the same thing as re-establishing trust**. You can forgive a spouse who cheated on you, a friend who lied to you, or a co-worker who spoke poorly about you behind your back. But that doesn't mean you immediately begin trusting them again. In other words, you give up your right for revenge or striking back but you don't resume your relationship as if nothing happened. There needs to be changed behavior, like we talked about last week, before the relationship can begin to heal. The prodigal's father received his son back. He could have disowned him as this was within his rights. But instead he forgave and welcomed him home. But he probably wasn't about to loan him 100 shekels anytime soon. When my daughters were young, I had a saying that they probably got sick

and tired of hearing. Like when my youngest gave herself a haircut to look like Jasmine from the movie *Aladdin*. In reality she looked like she went to a blindfolded beautician. I said to her, "You said you are sorry, now show us you are sorry." How? By changing her behavior, as in not breaking out the hair clippers again. So yes, my wife might forgive me for forgetting to put the trash out or leaving the ice cream overnight in her car, but she expects me to change my actions ...and not to continue to do this week after week. If not, she may forgive me but not completely trust me...at least with our garbage. As a reminder from last week, Paul tells the Colossians to "**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**" So Scripture teaches us to forgive but not to be foolish. The regaining of trust takes time and in some cases might never be regained. With that pastor, I worked on forgiving him with no intention of serving alongside him on this side of eternity.

- VI. The third signpost that we are heading towards forgiveness or an understanding of biblical forgiveness is realizing that **forgiving doesn't mean we have to pretend to have amnesia**. As William Young says, "**Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is about letting go of another person's throat.**" As I worked my way through forgiving that pastor, I didn't have to act like it didn't happen. In fact, for real healing to take place, we must acknowledge our anger, our hurt, and not simply try to stuff it. And if we are to have any hope of mending a relationship, we must address the person who hurt us. But we must do so by speaking the truth in love as Paul tells us. With the intention of healing not hurting the other. Sure, the truth can be hard to hear at times especially by the offending party. But the truth is the only cure to the diseased relationship. The medicine might not go down easily but it's the only way for restoration. But we might say, "Doesn't the bible tell us somewhere that God forgets our sins?" It does, in Hebrews 8:12. But two quick points about that. First, we are not God. This might come as a surprise to some of us. He can do things we can't. Second, it's not that God forgets about our wrongs but rather He chooses not to remember. It's an active forgetting not a passive one. It's not like God says, "Now what did Ron do again? Something about lying to his wife about how he loves her new hairdo..." God decides not to recall our sins and hold them against us. As Paul tells us in his letter to the church in Corinth, we are to "keep no record of wrongs" not to forget the wrongs. But I can choose not to bring it up to them again and again as if in a court of law. "Remember twenty years ago when you told me you were sick when in reality you just didn't want to watch my 48-hour Magic Chef-athon?!" Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting but rather choosing to let it go...not continuing to hold it against another. Sure, time will help us to forget but that is not a prerequisite to forgiveness. In the case of the older brother, he might always remember how his younger bro left his dad high and dry, but he needed to leave it in the past, like an embarrassing first date.
- VII. Finally, I think we are going the right direction towards forgiveness when we understand that **forgiving is more of a marathon than a sprint**. In other words, depending on what someone has done to us, our forgiving may take time...in some cases weeks, months and

even years. Jesus tells us in Matthew chapter six that forgiveness is not optional. In fact, he says that our relationship with God is dependent on it. If we don't forgive others, God will not forgive us. So this is a serious command and may be difficult news for some of us to hear. The good news is that God doesn't set a clock on it. Forgiveness will take time. Adam Hamilton offers the image of a large boulder where we are chipping away at it day after day until it's gone. Going back to the pastor in my story, I had to ask God daily to help me forgive him and his wife. I discovered that it is hard to remain filled with hate month after month towards someone for whom you are constantly praying. I think it was somewhere between 3-4 years later after we had moved on that I woke up one day and thought, "The bitterness and hate is gone." I no longer was holding that pastor's throat. I could truly say that I had forgiven them. Now, I wasn't about to invite him and his wife on vacation or even to be my snapchat friend, but I no longer wished them harm. I was able to truly pray that God would bless and not punish them. I got to the other side. I no longer felt stuck and weighed down by hate and resentment. I was free.

- VIII. But you may say, "Ron, you don't understand. I am not talking about a pastor who chased me away from a church that I loved, or a brother who stole my inheritance and wasted it. I am dealing with a drunken driver who killed my child. A spouse who cheated on me, an uncle who abused me, a stranger who raped me. How can I even begin to forgive someone like that? They took something away from me that I can never get back...my child, my innocence, my marriage. Yes, I see how it is destroying me...but how I can let that go?" Friends, I don't mean to trivialize your pain or give you a simplistic answer. But if we believe as the Bible teaches us that it was our harmful actions and attitudes that sent Jesus, an innocent man, to His agonizing death...and God out of His mercy and love forgave us, how can we not forgive another? Even those who have hurt us the most? I don't think the prodigal son was the only one who needed to return home in our story this morning. I believe the prudent son needed to return too. He needed to forgive his brother and come in from the cold. To stop stewing about it in the pasture while everyone else was celebrating in the house. His unforgiveness was not only destroying his relationship with his brother, but also his relationship with the father whom he loved and who loved him. And the same is true with us. It's time to come home. I am not saying that it is going to be easy or quick. But with the help of God and one another we can get there...and when we do, we will be free, and the weight around our neck and hearts will finally be lifted. It's time to start letting it go and to come in from the cold.