

Beauty from Ashes – Forgiving Your Parents

Exodus 20:12

Pastor David Woolverton

Good morning! My name is David Woolverton and I'm one of the pastors here. It is my joy to share with you the Word of the Lord today and as we prepare our hearts, would you join with me and go with me to the Lord in prayer? Gracious Lord, open us up to your word and open your word up to us. Teach us, Lord, what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this. Father, I pray in Jesus' mighty name. And all God's people said, Amen.

So, I figured out how to clean out all of the clutter from the closets of your life. Are you ready for this? Here's the secret... Have your spouse retire! Ever since Kristine retired, we have been going through every single closet in our house. Every closet has been submitted to the scrutiny of three buckets. Some of you know what I'm talking about. One bucket is **keep**, one is **donate** and the final bucket is **trash**. So, we've engaged in that process for months, *way too long, in my opinion*, and as we got to the place where it's time to analyze my work, related to this adventure, I was informed that my *to keep* basket was way too large by comparison to the trash or donate basket. I don't think so, but apparently there are way too many items in my side of the closet, perfectly good items. Look, just because they date prior to my marriage does not mean that they are bad quality. Just because I have polo shirts that we used to wear in the 1960's does not mean that era of attire is not going to make its way back into our culture today. Anybody with me? Can I hear an Amen? But what I did learn is that in all of these piles and in the adventure of cleaning out closets that I had raised in front of me, a grand illustration of forgiveness. We are in a series that we're calling Beauty from Ashes and it's a series on forgiveness. The Bible has a lot to teach us about forgiving and a lot of things that we're learning about forgiveness or things that maybe are not quite that easy to do. Like putting items in a container of trash, donate or keep. But in fact, what I learned in this process is that forgiveness is really just a part of a larger-scale process that we in the church call *sanctification*. Forgiveness is actually part of sanctification. Sanctification is a big word that basically I want to translate as

‘allowing the Holy Spirit to clean out your closets’. The closets of your life, where you have to make decisions on what to keep, what to donate - and I'll talk more about that in a second, and what to throw away. All based on some principles: is it still effective, is it still worth your time or should you begin to let it go?

For those of you who have been tracking with me on this journey through Lent, you've heard me define forgiveness. Using one of the most commonly used Greek words, *aphiemi*, which is literally translated to release or to send away from us. So, to forgive is to release the person that owes you a debt. To release them from their debt. To release them from what they owe you. To send that debt far away from you. Sometimes that's easier said than done.

Let me give you another quick illustration of what God has been speaking into my journey on this topic. So, Kristine and I go grocery shopping on a weekly basis, like many of you. And one day last week, we went grocery shopping and I found myself in the produce section of the grocery department. The produce guy was hard at work laying out all the fruits and vegetables in what looked like a military framework. It was artistic, clearly, to have red peppers and green peppers and yellow peppers all lined up and layered, looking amazingly artistic. It was so perfectly done! The problem was, me being a Jersey guy, I wanted the pepper that was on the third tier down in the middle. Which meant that in order for me to get that particular pepper, I would have had to disturb this artwork. And I would normally not have thought too much about it, but the artist in residence was standing right there watching me, wondering what I was going to do. I didn't feel like I had permission, so I took the pepper on the top tier, and he seemed to be okay with that. But I then needed to go over to where the potatoes were. The potatoes were layered, even more military-esque. And I stood there, and I thought, do I take on my enemy just because? Do I dare just take one of those items from the middle and see what happens? Have you ever done that? Have you ever thought, what if? What would happen? So, I did. And this whole row of potatoes began toppling down, and I felt really bad! My initial inclination was to run and hide, but I then stood there, and I started putting those potatoes back. Have you ever tried to restock what someone else had so carefully and artistically created? It was never the same, and I left that produce aisle pretty quickly, with my head lowered, my eyes poking as to what that young man was going to think about me, and I made my way out of there and over to where the chickens were, appropriate to the situation.

Now what I learned from this was that sometimes we are afraid to go after what we really need to go after or to let go of what we need to let go of because if we do, a whole entourage of other things will come tumbling down. Forgiveness is like that as well. Sometimes if we address what we really need to address, sometimes if we let go of some of the emotions that have been inside of us for way too long, there will be a cascading of other emotions that come with it. Forgiveness is a spiritual discipline for a reason. It's because it challenges us to begin to recategorize what's really important in our lives. It's a time for us to engage in sanctification. As followers of Jesus, we are invited, in forgiveness, to let go of what no longer is appropriate for us, regardless of what will happen in the cascading of other things that come from our choice.

Let's be honest, forgiveness is rather hard. It's very hard to do, facing into those emotions, facing into the challenges and also the ramifications of our choices. It's really very difficult for us to do, no matter how strong we are in our faith, it's a matter of letting go of things that had been a part of our journey up to this point. Now, there might be individuals within this sanctuary right now who would say what I've heard over 35 years of doing ministry. I've heard this phrase at various different times talking about forgiveness and talking about letting go of the things that are no longer important to us. I've heard the phrase, *if you only knew, Pastor David, what I had to deal with. If you only knew my story, if you only knew the pain that was inflicted on me, if you only knew what that individual had done. If you only knew.*

Well, today we are focusing on how to forgive our parents. Why am I focusing in on that? Well, parents are typically significant relationships that are important to us. Our parents, our spouse, which we'll talk about next week, then there comes a time when we have to forgive ourselves. And then ultimately on week four, we're going to focus in on how to forgive God. Dare we even say that? Are there other relationships that are important? Absolutely. There's a multitude of other relationships that are important, but what I've discovered is if we can begin to focus in on the principles of how to forgive these primary relationships, then what we learn can apply across the board. And what I also have been learning is that if we can focus in on forgiving these primary relationships, whether living or deceased, an amazing thing begins to happen. We change. We begin to define and redefine what's really important for us, especially in our walk of faith with the Lord.

Some of us, when it comes to our parents, might say if you only knew my mom, who has always pointed out what's wrong with me. How do I forgive her? If you only knew my dad, who never told me that he was proud of me, or my mom who tells me I'm too fat. Or my dad who tells me that I'm a disappointment, that I'll never amount to anything. What do we do with those individuals? What about the mom who compares you to your sibling? You're not as good as your brother or your sister; I wish you were more like them. Or the dad who says I wish you were more like the neighbor's kid. What do we do with those kinds of storylines that formed the back story of our lives now? Some of you may be saying, well, why does it all matter Pastor David? My parents are long gone! But the impact of some of these stories are still at play within our lives, and if they're not at play in our lives, maybe some of what the Holy Spirit is convicting us in this series is how am I doing this to my children? What are the ways that hurt is accumulating?

You see, hurt and loss accumulate over time, and they build up a storyline of their own. The losses that we experience from what we thought we should have had in our childhood, or perhaps the relational dynamic of what's going on with our children that still is playing itself out and over time, those hurt accumulate. Sometimes they're very subtle, sometimes they're not. There are individuals within our church, I'm sure, just statistically speaking, that don't want to open up this can of worms because they don't have a relationship with their parents or a relationship with those that were the primary nurturers of their lives. There's a constellation of emotions that relate to these individuals and with each and every one of us, because we are today a product of our past - the good, the bad, and the ugly. But herein lies the hope as followers of Jesus - the story about tomorrow is yet to be written and the God that we serve is a God who never wastes a hurt. So, no matter how much of that hurt begins to accumulate over time, we still serve a God who redeems all things.

That's why we've talked about forgiveness being fragile. That's why we've talked about forgiveness, in order to be genuine, something in us has to die. Something has to be let go. Regardless of the rippling effect, the cascading of everything else that is yet to fall apart in our fears, we need to choose the right fruit of our lives. Because the story that is yet to be told is a story of redemptive hope where both we and those who have heard us stand equal at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, equal in our need for God's grace. And we as followers of Jesus, learned last week that we need to go first before we come to worship. We need to take the

first step. In other words, we need to trust God enough to trust Him with our hurts, no matter how deep those pains may be.

So how do we do that? I want to draw us to a very well read and well researched verse of Scripture that is actually from the Old Testament in the book of Exodus chapter 20, verse 12. You will recognize this as one of the Ten Commandments. This commandment says, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God has given you. I just want to very briefly talk about a few words, a few phrases found in this verse. First, notice the word honor. Honor is a very interesting word and in Hebrew, in the Old Testament, it is the word *kabed*. And it literally means 'to make heavy', to give weight to. It also means to honor. This meaning is telling us to give weight, give importance to them, hold them in a position where they have a degree of honor. So, honor your father and your mother. Notice this verse also says, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Notice that this verse of Scripture does not say anything about the worthiness of honor of your mom or your dad. This is not a command to your mom or your dad to be worthy of honor. That comes elsewhere in the scriptures, for sure. This is about us; this is about the person of faith. This is about you and me in our culture today, in our mindset today as followers of Jesus. What the Scripture is saying is that this is on us. We, who are followers of Jesus were to take the first step, even in this dynamic. *But Pastor David, if you only knew...* Yes, I know! That doesn't make sense, but when does what God asks of us makes sense in human terms? God is asking us as His followers to live differently from the rest of the world. What does it mean for us to live differently? It means for us to take the first step. For us to be the ones who offer honor to give importance, regardless of the honorable nature of the receiver. Notice also that it says honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

I know some stories, whether they're in this church or elsewhere - I've been doing this for a long time. I've heard some stories. I know that there are people who, if it means living under the umbrella of the accumulated hurt that a parent or parents have done to you, you really don't want to live very long in that land. Do you? What does that mean? I think what this is referring to is not just about chronological life. I think the principle behind this command is that when you honor, when you are the one who represents best the intent and heart and character of God, then God, in God's infinite ability, is going to give your life a sense of longevity, whether it's chronological or beyond. That a legacy that you

choose to leave, regardless of or in spite of or because of your parental situation, the choices that you make to honor God will always come back to honor you. It's the law of sowing and reaping. What we choose to do as followers of Jesus may have absolutely nothing to do with what we would deem as worthiness of our parents to receive honor. And then the last phrase, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Notice the phrase *is* giving you - it doesn't say *has* given. There is an ongoing relationship that we have with the Lord of Life. The Lord always provides what we need, not just for the moment, but He's got us. We don't have to worry about tomorrow because God, as Alpha and Omega, He's got tomorrow. And so, God is providing for us, even metaphorically, the land that is yet to be provided; the land that God is yet to give us, that God is giving us will be sufficient for us to live and to feel blessed, regardless of what our past may have dictated.

All that to say if you are here and maybe you had an okay or great relationship with your parents, but there's friction with your children, you need to hear the message of hope that it's never too late. It's never too late! It's never too late for us to build a bridge because God wants to do something here and now for the sake of what is yet to come. Even if your parents are long gone, if the influence of that accumulated pain is still going on in you, maybe it's time to clean house. Maybe it's time to set up the three baskets of what needs to be kept, what needs to be donated, and what needs to be trashed. What do you mean, Pastor David, about donating when it comes to emotions? Well, simply put, maybe it's time for us to give away the responsibility of what other people have placed on us. We can't really keep what was never ours to begin with. Some of the emotional stress, some of the emotional pain in our background are things that were really somebody else's responsibility; we just took it on because it was thrust upon us. It's time to donate that back. And the truly horrible things in our past, it's time to just trash. Forgiveness is about releasing; it's about letting go. Maybe it's time to let them go.

How do we do that in practical terms? Last week we introduced the eight concepts that we're going to continue to dance with throughout the next several weeks.

1. **Name your pain.** It's important for us to name the issues of our pain. You can't forgive what you don't acknowledge.
2. **Go to the balcony.** This means going to that 30,000-foot view to change our perspective. We'll talk more about that in a second.

3. **Don't major in the minors.** Maybe we just need to laugh off the things that are not truly that significant anymore, so how do we determine those? If we're still stressing out and clenching our fists every time, we have a certain memory about an issue that we find ourselves replicating, maybe we need to laugh that off, and release the stress. We can't change our parents. We can only change ourselves.
4. **Don't pack other people's stuff.** That's what the donate pile is all about.
5. **Exercise your power to forgive.** We do have power, as we learned last week; and we have the power to withhold forgiveness as well, but when we withhold forgiveness, we're the ones who pay the penalty twice.
6. **Redefine the boundaries of the relationship.** Forgiving doesn't mean we automatically trust, but we can move forward.
7. **Stop running the instant replay.**
8. **Pray for the person who has hurt you.**

Let's take it one step further. How do we do that? How do we do that with mom and Dad, especially when they're no longer here? Well, first we need to put on their shoes. We need to put on their shoes, speaking metaphorically. You recall that image, right? It's a classic image of a child or a young toddler putting their feet into their moms or dads' shoes. And it looks humorous and cute because the shoes are way too big. Anybody ever do that? And if you're an adult and you're still doing that, then we have a different conversation... But the reality is sometimes we discover some very unique things that maybe now as adults, we didn't know back then. Going to the balcony and looking down into the situation of our parents' life journey may help uncork all of this pent-up stuff.

So, I'm going to make some suggestions on on what to do when we put on their shoes. It's in three different categories: Discover, choose, and act. When we put on their shoes, we can discover some things about our parents like who your parents really were or who they are. Pause to hear the stories and ask the questions about their life journey. What made them who they are or who they were? You may discover that the dad who always came home and was so aggressive and mean may have been mean because he was hard at work for 14-to-16-hours a day and when he finally came home, he was exhausted and took it out on the people that he loved. Is that an excuse? Not at all. It just brings about understanding. And we as adults, we now know things we didn't as children, and what stress looks like and

what it feels like. We can also discover what of them is in you that you like? As well as what of them is in you that you don't like? Do you find yourself doing what I swore as a teenager I would never do? Like say some of the things that mom or dad used to say that really ticked me off. When it starts to come out of your mouth now, you had this moment of uh oh. Oh no. We can also discover, more specifically, how did they violate your trust? What's the real issue of disappointment or pain or resentment or bitterness? You can't let go of what you haven't acknowledged. Discovering; most of you know that my mom has cancer, and she is terminal. So, we're just walking the walk, waiting, not knowing when. but knowing that it is coming. So, I've had the privilege of spending blocks of times with my parents over the course of my mom's treatments over the next six, seven months. And the blocks of time, as hard as this journey has been, I would not trade for the world. I started having conversations with them, and even though I'm over 60 years of age and I've been, all of my life, in the domain of my mom and dad, I've learned things about their stories that I never knew. I've been asking questions and I've been listening. One of the greatest gifts that we can give to another person living or dead, is to listen to their life story. And to listen with curiosity, not with bitterness. We may just discover a picture of the heart of God, empowering us to forgive what feels or what has felt impossible to forgive. That's what we discover. Then we need to choose. We can choose to release them from having responsibility for the way that we live our lives today. It's one thing to blame our parents. Freud used to do that. Let's blame our parents for the way we were toilet trained back when we were infants and toddlers and let's make that the explanation for how we are today. Well, okay, maybe if that's what you want to do, but at some point, we have to take responsibility - because it's the adult thing to do. We may be a product of our past, but our today and our tomorrow are yet to be written. And that's on us! And we can't blame mom and dad or anybody else for the choices that we now make. It's the law of sowing of reaping, now on our agenda. And we can choose to grow into our own choose, rather than our parents. And we can even choose to redefine the blessing. You know, that blessing that we craved from mom and dad and maybe mom and dad were not able to give it. Maybe we need to redefine that and to choose today to be the blessing that we wanted to hear so that we can now replicate the blessing for the next generation. Then we need to act. If your parents are still alive, why not have a heart-to-heart dialog then with

them? Now as a peer, rather than just as a son or daughter. Ask for their blessing. If they cannot do that, release them. Release them from it. If your parents are not alive, maybe research their history; look for redemptive qualities. If there's none, then go to their grave and actually verbally forgive them. Say it aloud. Make a choice. You will actually discover a redemptive God present.

Forgiveness is hard. It is fragile. But the wonderful thing about this is that the God who designed it and the God who designed you is not fragile. And He's holding you.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for holding us and for reminding us that we are never, ever alone on our journey. That we can trust you with our pain, even as we can trust you with our joy. That we can trust you with our past, even as we trust you with our present and future. Pour into us, Lord, your Holy Spirit, and give us the courage to face into the relationships that have defined us and are defining us. Help us, Lord, to honor, regardless of the honorability of the person on the receiving end because we choose to honor you with who you are. All of this, Father, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.