



Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008
SHARED LIVES
Shared Forgiveness
January 30, 2008 – 2nd Corinthians 2:1-11
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Gretchen: Today I have the immense privilege of having my big sister Paula here to share the microphone with me. Paula is an author, a vegetarian who raises much of her food on a four acre ranch in California, mother of two and grandmother of two. We grew up together in a family of five – these pictures are not actually from the movie *The Grapes of Wrath*, but in fact are from our family trip to Minnesota when I was about ten months old.

Although I call her my big sister, to you in the audience it's obvious that I am now the big sister, since she is the skinniest of the bunch. However, Paula is the eldest and firstborn of the five children in our family. I am the fourth. For eight years I was the baby of the family – little and cute – but then I got displaced by my sister Tina and was never considered either little or cute again.

Now Paula and I, like most sisters, had a somewhat tangled relationship growing up. At six years younger than her, I was perfectly placed for maximum annoyance, and I was a truly annoying child. By age 7, I was already a pompous know it all. I was forever getting into her cosmetics, trying on her bras long before I needed them, and generally pestering her. Because, you see, Paula was the height of both brains and glamour. She was the golden girl – literally, the only blond in the family - with a wit as quick as a gunshot and the ability to succeed at whatever she tried. So naturally, I adored her and looked up to her. But that desire to emulate her was also very competitive, and we often irritated each other. When we moved from our childhood home, we discovered with great amusement the misspelled scrawls that I wrote in retaliation inside the heater door: “Paula is a dope”.

But once Paula married and moved out, the competition ceased and I simply looked up to her as the be-all and end-all of glamorous young womanhood. And Paula was always there at the crucial times of my life. I remember her sitting patiently with me in our daughter Kirstie's room, handling her clothes and toys and listening while I spoke aloud memories of my child. When Nick had meningitis at six weeks, and ended up in the same Pediatric ICU where Kirstie had died, Paula was there within a few hours – no mean feat for a working mother who lived over one hundred miles away. One of the most perceptive things that Paula ever did for me concerned a package she sent twelve

years after Kirstie's death. It contained our daughter's clothes, cut off by paramedics at the accident. Paula had kept them and returned them to me at just the right time, when I was able to cherish them for the immediacy of the memories they gave back to me.

But somehow, in the great wash of events that filled our lives over the past twenty or so years, a wedge of misunderstanding began to grow between us. I've shared with you before how I returned from a family reunion with the puzzled sense that I had lost the key to the family home. And somehow I knew that Paula held it.

Paula: Gretchen calls it an "immense privilege" for us to be sharing the microphone today, and I feel exactly the same way—not only because as a Catholic, it's rare for me to be standing in front of an Evangelical group, but because this moment represents a major victory for the two of us. Before I tell you our reconciliation story, however, I really have to object to a couple of points in Gretchen's intro. You've now seen the photos for yourselves, and YOU be the judge: Golden Girl? That gap-toothed, self-important little tow-head with the caterpillar eyebrows? Resident Ugly Duckling was more like it, and there's nothing worse for Ugly Ducklings than being the largest object on the horizon. I always felt like I was flapping clumsily along amidst a flock of graceful little swans.

And just for the record, Gretch NEVER stopped being little and cute. In fact, when I finally morphed into someone a boy might ask out, I had to lock her in the bedroom whenever he came by to save him from losing his heart to a fourth grader. I might have treated her like a pesky little fly, but that was just big sister bluff. She was already serious competition. So when she wrote "Paula is a dope" inside the heater door, never truer words were spoken.

I. A Story About Forgiveness

The wedge that Gretchen alluded to clearly had its roots in that old sibling rivalry, but like all fallings-out between people who love each other deeply, the problem was complex and many-layered. I'm a person who likes to figure things out, and I couldn't get anywhere with this one. All I knew was that it was getting increasingly hard for me to be around Gretchen—and that she could sense that and was trying to get through to me, but the harder she tried, the more I felt like fleeing. And this weird animosity was becoming obvious to the rest of our normally close family and making them very uneasy.

After that painful family reunion, she sent me a humble but straight-forward letter, asking me to tell her upfront what was wrong. I knew I could no longer avoid the issue—it had to be dealt with, once and for all. So I went to several wise people for advice. One of them recommended that if we were going to sort this thing through, we needed to really devote some time to it—this was not a rift that could be solved over the phone or through e-mail. We needed to find a place we could be alone together, disconnected from our spouses, kids, and friends, and we needed to approach our discussion in a careful, prayerful way.

We agreed that I would fly to Minnesota, and that Gretchen would find us a place to spend the weekend. We ended up at Solitude Ridge in Wisconsin, a Franciscan convent that offers small hermitages for individual retreats. It was the perfect place to be, at the perfect time of year—cold, wintry, cut off from the rest of the world. We each had our own little cabin, and we agreed to take regular breaks from the conversation.

What we hoped to do was get to the bottom of a mystery. For once we made the decision to move toward forgiveness and reconciliation, we were both struck with how complicated and difficult to understand this rift had become. Not only were we dealing with left-over family dynamics from childhood, but we were also dealing with years of moving in opposite directions, spiritually speaking. Shortly after I graduated from high school, for example, I gave up my faith and began calling myself an agnostic—even an atheist. Gretch, on the other hand, married a bright young Baptist minister from England and embarked on a life of service to the church.

I began teaching in a big secular university, where the atmosphere was distinctly anti-religious, just at the time that Evangelicals in America were starting to make their voices heard on the political scene. My academic friends were outraged at the audacity of Christians daring to engage in cultural criticism. I very much picked up on that—and even after I came back to God, I had over twenty years of academic liberalism to slowly give over to Christ. In other words, despite a very real re-conversion, I was a long way from embracing the fullness of the faith, and Gretch was the one person in my life who sensed that and had spoken worriedly about it, which only made me more resentful.

There were other layers to this mess—old, unforgiven wounds on both sides, we discovered, and impediments to our friendship caused by other, competing relationships in our lives—but the moment we arrived at our cabins and prayed together for the wisdom to see clearly and the courage to speak honestly, things began to shift. God began to address each of us very directly.

We began each session with a prayer, then one of us would either ask a question or present a point of contention while the other listened. It was very important that every single thing come out, so we took a lot of time with each issue. It was emotionally exhausting, so it was good we'd built in those breaks. When we separated, we each wrote in our journals. And we both found that God was waking us up in the middle of the night with new insights.

The mystery was being uncovered, piece by piece. By the end of our weekend together, I had been convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that most of my strange animosity was based on misperceptions about who Gretchen had become and what she was doing with her life. They were based on prejudice and ignorance. As for the old, unspoken wounds we'd unearthed, we'd both agreed to forgive one another for, as Gretch put it, “the sins of our youth, the sins of our middle age, and whatever sins we may commit against each other in the future.”

Gretchen: We've shared this story with you today as a lead in to our discussion of forgiveness. First, so that you can see that a biblical understanding of forgiveness has practical implications for how to get along, and second, so that you can know that forgiveness CAN truly take place. It wasn't just that we wanted to be like Oprah or Geraldo... "Estranged sisters reconcile in front of church group!"

Actually, we are here to place the topic of forgiveness into the setting of 2nd Corinthians 2: 1-11, so please turn to that passage in your Bibles.

In this passage we see three motivations for forgiveness. The first is that we should:

II. Forgive, because it is required by love

"So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." (2nd Cor. 2:1-4)

A. Paul's motivation for discipline was love.

In our study last week, Jann referred to the fact that Paul had written a now-lost, "painful" letter to the Corinthians about a particular issue of sin in the congregation. He had also had to make a difficult visit, and clearly, according to verse 1, he did not want to make another one. There are different theories as to what was going on that prompted the need for discipline, but one likely possibility was some had challenged Paul's leadership in a sinful way. When one person causes deliberate division within a church, especially through heretical teaching, then action is called for. Whatever the stimulus was, Paul had requested that the church deal with this person rather than just let him go on destroying unity.

But it's clear from his words in verse four that this was not a recommendation that Paul made lightly, out of self interest or wounded pride. It was made from the motive of love. Hebrews 12 is quite clear about the relationship between true love and discipline: **"Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness." (Hebrews 12:9-10).** In parenting, the relationship between discipline and love seems pretty obvious. Unless we want our children to grow up as savages, we correct them from time to time. It would be unloving not to. So Paul rebuked his children in Christ with tears and sorrow because of his great love. But true love also requires true forgiveness. The last thing you want a child to do is to have their spirit

broken because of excessive discipline, and so the wise parent follows rebuke with forgiveness and affection. We forgive, because it is required by love.

The reason we can forgive as part of love is because of the pattern set by Jesus Christ:

B. Christ's motivation for our forgiveness was love

We cannot escape the idea that true forgiveness is possible in human relationships only because Christ first forgave us. Because he loved us, he gave himself for us. That gift of his atoning death was to demonstrate his forgiveness of our sins, and his love made him willing to stand in our place and take the penalty. **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.” (John 15:13-14)**

Paul lays down his life for his friends at Corinth by caring deeply for their spiritual wellbeing, deeply enough to correct, love and forgive. We forgive, because love requires it.

Next in the passage we see that we must

I. Forgive, because it promotes community

“If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent – not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything.” (2nd Cor. 2:5-9)

Commentators agree that the sinner in the Corinthian congregation was probably an individual man (notice the pronouns like “he”, “him”) and that in some way his sin directly challenged Paul’s authority. Paul then wrote to the congregation, asking them to deal with the sinner in a godly way – by discipline, followed by love and reconciliation. They did as he asked, as we can see from verse 9. They **“stood the test and were obedient”**.

But Paul also points out that one person’s public sin can cast a whole congregation into disarray. It might have brought shame on the name of Christ in public among nonbelievers, just as we are criticized when a pastor stumbles. It might cause disunity, gossip and taking sides in the congregation, as often happens when people don’t know the whole story and get angry about the bits they do know. But the Corinthians apparently presented a united front in confronting this sinner at Paul’s request. Now, Paul says, the point’s been made. He has repented, and we don’t want to drive him away from God’s grace. **“Instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” (v. 8)**. Discipline followed by repentance should ALWAYS be followed by love and by comfort. Remember comfort, that word from the first chapter? The root of comfort is the Latin “fortis”, meaning

strong. True comfort will strengthen, not just make the person feel better. So in comforting him the congregation will strengthen the sinner in his resolve to do better in the future. And, as Paul taught us in chapter 1, that comfort spills over into all our lives.

We forgive because love requires it and we forgive because it promotes community. But there is another compelling reason to forgive.

II. Forgive, because it thwarts Satan

“If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2nd Cor. 2:10-11)

A. Paul sets aside his feelings for the greater good

Notice how Paul hands back the baton of leadership to the congregation – “if *you* forgive anyone, *I* also forgive him.” He gives them credit for being spiritually mature enough to decide whether this sinner is repentant and should be restored. It’s important to note that the original offense was probably against Paul himself – he was the wronged party. Yet he defers his hurt feelings or any personal desire for revenge to the greater spiritual good of the body. He uses the unusual phrase **“I have forgiven in the sight of Christ”**. It’s likely that he meant “I have forgiven because I cannot face Christ, who forgave me, and at the same time withhold forgiveness from another.” That is a tremendous attitude with which to approach forgiveness. If we understand how much we’ve been forgiven, how can we possibly withhold it from someone else?

Finally,

B. Forgiveness means that Satan cannot outflank us through bitterness.

We know that Satan is hard at work trying to destroy spiritual progress. A church that is flourishing, where people are fully engaging in the work of faith, is a sitting target for Satan. He’ll try to destroy through pride, through discouragement, and often, through lack of forgiveness. Paula will speak more about this shortly, but our individual failure to deal with forgiveness in our lives will likely act to block the conduit of God’s grace. And then we are prevented from knowing fully what Christ has for us, both as individuals and as a church. **“For we are not unaware of Satan’s schemes.”** (v. 9) Would we go out in this subzero weather without a coat? Of course not – that’s dangerous. Then why would we leave ourselves open to danger through lack of forgiveness when we KNOW that Satan is taking aim?

Now let’s take some time to expand the application of this passage to the wider issue of biblical forgiveness.

Gretchen: Paula, you are currently writing a book on forgiveness, which will be published in the spring of 2009. You’ve spent a great deal of time pondering the subject.

I'd like to ask you four questions, and would also like you to read a passage or two from your upcoming book on forgiveness as it applies to these questions.

1. Are we, as Christians, required to forgive everyone?

The tough news is, we are. Christ makes no exceptions to his very clear statement that **“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:14-15)**. And he does not distinguish here between forgiving fellow Christians and forgiving others. He expands on this relationship between our willingness to forgive and receiving divine forgiveness ourselves in the parable of the unforgiving servant, who is consigned by his angry master to the torturers. Jesus says, **“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Matt: 18: 35)**. And he reiterates this basic spiritual law in many ways throughout the Gospels.

For example, he tells us that it is not enough to love our neighbors but continue to bear grudges toward our enemies. He says instead, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:44-45)**.

Neither are we allowed to hang on to our anger toward a brother, no matter how justifiable: **“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt: 5: 23-24)**. He tells us to think about what God means when he says, **“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” (Matthew 12:7)**

Not only are we to forgive, but we are to do so limitlessly, even when we're dealing with a repeat offender. As Jesus says, if necessary, we are to forgive **“seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22)** He gives us a compelling image of this kind of patient forgiveness in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

More, we are not to take vengeance on those who hurt us. **“I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (Matt: 5:39)**. And he demonstrates what he means in the most graphic of ways when he addresses his Father from the cross: **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:24)**

In other words, forgiveness is not an option for Christians, but sits right at the core of what it means to follow Christ. But this can be an extremely difficult teaching at times. What about the parent whose child has been murdered, for example? Is he or she expected to forgive this brute?

Under circumstances like these, most of us—Christian or not—are completely incapable of fathoming such a move. All we can do in such cases is pray for the honest desire to forgive, and then for the grace to do so. With everything in us, we try our best to obey and leave justice to God. Because forgiveness never supercedes justice. The sinner must still make his peace with both society and the Lord. He must still repent in order to be reconciled to God. But we ourselves can forgive him regardless. We can do what the Amish did when their children were gunned down in a country schoolhouse.

Why would Jesus require such a difficult thing of us? First, there seems to be a causal relationship between being forgiven and conversion of heart. Think about this in terms of the Atonement—without first knowing ourselves forgiven, without realizing that the terrible weight of guilt and shame has been taken from us, we remain trapped in either hopelessness or angry hardness of heart. When the fact that God has truly forgiven us sinks in, however, we are freed up to turn toward him with joy. When we ourselves forgive, we are able to offer someone else a mini-version of this experience, which may turn out to be a decisive factor in his or her reorientation to God.

This notion sits at the heart of the work that Sr. Helen Prejean, made famous by the movie *Dead Man Walking*, has done for so many years among death row inmates. These are the truly “unforgivable”—men who have committed unspeakable crimes. They are also lost souls, and Sr. Helen’s vocation has been to find them in the dark interior ravines where they are trapped and to offer them a way into the light. Does this mean society does not extract its price for their atrocities? No—most of the time they go to execution, or at the very least, life in prison. What it does mean is that, thanks to a loving Christian willing to show them what God’s forgiveness could be like for them, they now have a chance for redemption.

These are the miracles that can happen when forgiveness takes place. When on the other hand we refuse to forgive—refuse to even pray for the *desire* to forgive—we consign ourselves to a settled state of bitterness, rage, even hatred, which if left unchecked predisposes us to the hardening of our own heart. I know someone who has been crippled in this way by his refusal to forgive a group of kids who ganged up on him when he was small. Forty years later, he still struggles to contain his outbursts of rage at innocent people. Forty years later, he still grapples with self-hate and anger toward God for not protecting him.

The fruits of the Spirit cannot come to life in such a heart, no matter how vociferously a person professes to believe. Grace is blocked. In part, we are meant to forgive in order to protect ourselves from being drawn into evil ourselves. Seen in this light, Christ’s seemingly hard teaching about forgiveness *is* his way of protecting us—protecting his weak children from Satan. As Paul points out **“For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2nd Cor. 2:11)**

2. Is forgiveness the same as reconciliation?

No. Reconciliation implies that we are now back in a relationship with the person who has hurt us. Yet it is possible to sincerely forgive without ever re-establishing that relationship. And there are some prudent reasons for not making the attempt to do so. In cases involving severe, long-term damage, there are scars to contend with, and sometimes even open wounds. Getting to the place of forgiveness can be tremendously healing but some measure of vulnerability often remains. If the person we are trying to forgive is both unrepentant and malicious, then he or she still has the power to hurt us.

Here, we need to be **“wise as serpents,” (Matthew 10:16)** and very clear and honest with ourselves about our own weaknesses and strengths. This isn’t a time for trying to play the hero or saint. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves—but this means we must also love ourselves as much as our neighbor. We must take heed for our own well-being. We are responsible for cherishing the great gift God has given us—our own personhood.

My friend Andrew, for example, had so many bruises on his arms and legs when he was growing up that he always had to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts to school in order to hide what was going on at home. When he was fourteen, he began sleeping with an axe under the bed, vowing to himself that the next time his father tried to beat him, he would kill his oppressor. Somehow, his father sensed that his son was no longer a safe target and started leaving him alone. When Andrew left home at 18, he never looked back.

He went on to marry and have children himself, and for years struggled with the dark possibility of falling into the same cruel rages with his own son. However, with the loving support of a tender and faith-filled wife, he finally understood that he was free from the specter of domestic violence bequeathed to him by his dad.

Thirty-five years after leaving home, he made the two hundred mile drive to his father’s house in order to tell him he had forgiven him. The old man who greeted him at the door did not even recognize the graying, middle-aged son who stood on his porch. But when Andrew said what he’d come to say, the old man wept.

Did Andrew then seek to reconcile and establish some kind of new relationship with his dad? He did not. He was wise enough to sense that his father, though momentarily repentant, was still a mentally disturbed, potentially dangerous man. He did not want his father near his own children. It was better to let it be.

Andrew’s forgiveness was genuine, and going in person to the man who had once made his life a living hell was truly an act of love. He could not be expected to do more. However, sometimes the Holy Spirit seems to enable near miraculous reconciliations.

You may have heard about the genocide in Rwanda in the 1980’s. Thousands and thousands of people were slaughtered, often with machetes, by former friends and neighbors. The violence took place on such an unbelievable scale that the cover of *Time Magazine* read “All the devils of hell are loose and living in Rwanda.”

After the storm was over, villages had been emptied and the economy was nearly destroyed. And thousands of murderers had been rounded up and put in prison. But Rwanda came up with an idea. What if the perpetrators, who could never be adequately punished for their horrendous crime anyway, were offered a chance to apologize to their victim's families? What if the families were given the chance to formally forgive their victimizers?

And so began a remarkable experiment in a country desolated by murder. One of the interviews I watched featured two young men with their arms across one another's shoulders. The first young man had lost over 13 members of his family to the second—yet now they were, as he put it, “brothers.” When the incredulous interviewer asked how this could be—how he could possibly set aside his hatred and rage at what had been done to him—he replied, “But when he did it, he was not himself. Satan had taken him over.”

Because of this incredible forgiveness and reconciliation project, a number of perpetrators are now living and working in homes of people whose relatives they slaughtered.

3. How can we begin to forgive in a situation that seems beyond repair, as, for example, in a crumbling marriage?

Sometimes a relationship has degenerated to the point that both parties are exhausted by the conflict and are more than ready to walk away. This is often the case when people start talking about divorcing. Initially, this seems like a real solution—a move that might offer some kind of peace in the midst of unresolvable battling. Sometimes the situation is compounded by the presence of a third party and split loyalties. I have to confess that this is what happened to me.

To answer that question I'd like to read a passage from *Forgiving Evil for the Sake of the Good*:

When I went through a divorce over twenty-five years ago, a decision that came after thirteen years of marriage to a good man, I had a list of justifying reasons longer than my arm. The most important thing to me at the time was to do what I wanted to do—be with somebody else—but also to avoid shame at all costs. So it wasn't enough to be able to articulate all the sad but true facts about our “irreconcilable differences.” I also needed to turn my failure at marriage into a noble act of heroism.

I *had* to leave, I told myself and anybody else who would listen. I'd gotten married so young, after all—only nineteen years old: a teenager!—and I'd never had the chance to “find myself.” I'd taken on the full load of adult responsibility when I should have been going to college and learning who I was. Instead, I'd been consigned to boring clerical work in cramped offices. Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, my spirit longed to spread its wings and soar. Being “tied down,” even to a fine human being, not to mention two small children, was “killing my soul.”

The important thing was that this divorce was “nobody’s fault.” It was “just the way things were.” People “grow past” one another, I told myself, but there was no reason we “couldn’t be friends” when it was all over.

The more I repeated this sad analysis of events, the more I found myself wallowing in sentimentality for what had obviously “had to be.” The hard-headed decision to move out so I could pursue another relationship got smothered somewhere beneath the billowing heaps of sentimental prose. It was as though I’d never made a decision at all, but had simply been swept up by cruel fate and now just had to make the best of it.

For many years, my refusal to face the truth because it would mean facing my own shame kept me from apologizing to my ex-husband for ruining our marriage. I could not even begin to look at the facts until after I’d returned to Christianity. There, in the heart of the Church, I could no longer go on telling myself the self-deceiving lie. Ninety-eight percent of what happened to our partnership had to be laid at my door.

Though I told him I was sorry and sincerely begged his forgiveness, I could not yet bring myself to empathetically imagine what my betrayal had cost him in terms of emotional suffering. I could not bear to look at that, because I could not bear to imagine *myself* in that position. I was happily remarried by then, and the thought of being betrayed in the way I’d betrayed my first husband’s trust was not to be born. Whenever I mentally veered close to the subject, I got hammered by a terrible thought: if I could do that to *him*, than anybody can do anything to anyone.

Despite my cowardice, that long-overdue conversation ended on a note I could not have anticipated—really, an unexpected manifestation of Christ’s loving mercy. My ex-husband, who up until the moment I put the first crack in our marriage had been my one and only from the time I was fifteen, said very gently, “But don’t you know I forgave you years ago?”

I learned a lesson during that surprising moment that I have never forgotten. Committing our heart to another does indeed make us terribly vulnerable to suffering. But despite all the pitfalls, love is our Christian vocation. As John so eloquently puts it, **“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).**

And when we who dare to love deeply find ourselves shivering at the very real possibility of being hurt or abandoned, we can find strength by praying for the grace to love *more* rather than caving in to the temptation to withdraw our hearts. For ultimately **“there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4: 18).**

But even for divorced people, forgiveness is essential and some kind of reconciliation is entirely possible. Here is a passage from *Forgiving Evil for the Sake of the Good* that describes the process:

As I found out to my amazement when I finally got around to apologizing to my ex-husband, the reason he'd been able to go on with his life in such a healthy and productive way is that he'd taken the initiative and gone on with the process of forgiving without my even having asked. He knew that both our lives, and also the lives of our children, would be somehow crippled if we carried our sorrow, disappointment, guilt, and still smoldering anger forward into the future. And because he was a practicing Christian (at the time, I was not), he knew what he needed to do, and he did it.

However, the knowledge that I had been sincerely forgiven was in part what helped move me back to God. For the first time in my life, I experienced the enormous sense of relief and heady joy that comes when another person mercifully and lovingly releases us from the burden of guilt and shame we fully deserve to carry the rest of our lives. And that opened my closed heart to the possibility of confessing my sins to God and being absolved. My re-conversion was thus initially a moral one; once I knew myself as forgiven, I longed to never hurt people again. Without God there to save me from myself, however, this was pure fantasy. I desperately needed his grace in order to change.

Does this mean that nowadays I never feel the weight of that old shame and guilt? No—periodically, and usually during special family events, the two of them rise up before me like spectral mourners at a funeral. I'll never be rid of them, and that's as it should be.

Yet the release that came with knowing I was forgiven overshadows all this. My ex-husband's sincere expression of forgiveness showed me that the fine person I once cut to the quick was truly going to be all right. Those ugly open wounds were healing or had already healed, and though they would certainly leave scars, he'd emerged as a stronger and more loving human being. Because of his faith—faith he'd clung to for both our sakes—God had moved into the sad mess I created and made sure that all things really did work together for the good. I can now look back and see how carefully God guided both of us through the dark valley of spiritual temptation and marital death and led us out into the light.

More, that sincere act of forgiveness on my ex-husband's part continues to produce blessings in our divorced but reconciled relationship. Not only have we been able to share the joy of our children's big moments—graduation, marriage, childbirth—but we've also been able to witness the healing of a myriad of broken relationships that were a direct result of our divorce. For example, he was my siblings' beloved brother-in-law for thirteen years, and I was very close to his mother. Because of the complicated ties of loyalty that exist between blood relatives, these friendships were necessarily put into suspended animation when we split. People needed our tacit permission to resume them.

Last Thanksgiving, however, both extended families celebrated together at our house, the first time we've gotten together without some kind of major event providing

the reason. People seemed excited and pleased to have this opportunity to reconnect. Where I thought there might be tension or ice that required breaking, there was only a happy, warm buzz in the room. Folks had missed one another. The atmosphere was so upbeat that before we dived into the turkey, we actually joined hands and formed a large, if wavering, family circle.

Then we sang the Doxology.

Christ very clearly calls us to forgive. But the Christian vocation calls us to something more—to love one another as he loved us, which suggests that reconciliation, even in legally broken relationships like divorce, is our true goal.

4. What about some practical steps we can use in preparing to forgive, since true forgiveness is usually a process?

Through time, experience and reflection I've come up with a list of biblical steps that one can use to begin and proceed with the task of forgiveness. We will include these, with explanation, in the notes; in the interest of time right now, we'll just show the bullet points.

Steps to Forgiveness:

- 1. Pray for clarity regarding the issue.** Was someone else really at fault, or was I possibly over-reacting, or perceiving things in a distorted, egoistic way? **“A hot tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.” (Proverbs 15:18)**
- 2. Identify the nature of the injustice or wound.** What was done to me, specifically? How has it adversely affected my life? How does it continue to hold me back? **“The heart of the righteous weighs its answers.” (Proverbs 15:28)**
- 3. Make an honest assessment of the willingness to forgive.** Do I really *want* to forgive at this point? Why might I prefer to cling to my anger and sense of betrayal instead? What might need healing or God's forgiveness in *me* before I'm able to forgive another? Do I need to pray for a strong desire to forgive before I even try? **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18)**
- 4. Pray for wisdom.** Should I confront the person who has hurt me with the truth? What is likely to be his or her reaction? How will I handle that? Will my truth-telling simply escalate the conflict at this point? Will the resulting emotional fallout impede or help my progress toward forgiveness? **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5)**

5. **Pray for courage, then state the case.** If I do confront the person who has hurt me, what can I do to reduce the chances of escalating conflict and misunderstanding? Am I still liable to falling apart emotionally in his or her presence? Would it be better to write a letter? How can I say what needs to be said in the fewest, clearest, and least offensive words so that he or she has the best chance of hearing what I'm saying? **"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed."** (1 Peter 3:3-14)

6. **Stop feeding the conflict.** What specifically am I doing to keep the anger alive between us? What kind of negative thoughts do I have about this person, and how often do I indulge in them? What can I replace them with? **"...everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."** (James 1:19b-20)

7. **Stop speaking ill of the other.** What is my habitual way of talking about this person? Do I enjoy complaining to my friends or gossiping about him or her? Do I verbally pass judgment on everything he or she does? **"Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down."** (Proverbs 26:20)

8. **Start praying for the person.** Do I include this person in my daily prayer time? What, specifically, can I ask God to do on his or her behalf? If I can't bring myself to pray for blessings on this person, can I at least hold him or her up to the light? **"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."** (Matthew 5:44-45)

9. **Reread the Gospels in regard to forgiveness.** Does Christ exempt any of us from forgiving? Does he suggest that there are unforgivable sins? How strongly does he enjoin us to forgive? How has he modeled it for us? How can I find strength to move forward through Christ's example? **"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** (Matthew 6:14-15)

10. **Be patient.** How can I tell when I'm really forgiving or just doing what I think I have to do? How can I tell when I'm ready to move forward with forgiveness? Will God let me know? **"A man's wisdom gives him patience..."** (Proverbs 19:11a)

11. **Listen for God's direction.** Do I make time each day for focused prayer? Do I allow myself to become so busy and distracted I can't concentrate on what God might be saying to me? What gets in the way of my hearing God's voice? **"Be still, and know that I am God..."** (Psalm 46:10)

12. Wait for grace. Do I truly believe that God can do all things? Do I trust in him to know me better than myself, and to never try me more than I can bear? Do I really expect him to answer my prayers and lend me strength? **“Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” (Psalm 27:14)**

13. Expect a miracle. Do I truly believe that “all things work together for God for them that love God”? Do I understand that I am part of a divine picture I can’t see? Do I realize that when I try to live up to this hard teaching about forgiveness, God will reward my faithfulness? **“...everything is possible for him who believes.” (Mark 9:23)**

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8)

Paula: In regard to the story we told you at the beginning of this session, both Gretchen and I have learned important lessons from our forgiveness marathon at Solitude Ridge. I learned that it was possible to forgive in an instant, but to remain wary for a long time afterward. When I said goodbye to Gretchen and got on the plane home, I was filled with joy and relief. I could hardly wait to call the family members who had been waiting with great trepidation for the outcome of our session together. And my mea culpas were completely sincere. But I found that when Gretchen and I tried to move forward into a real, healed relationship, I got skittish. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her, it was that I didn’t trust myself. There were so many triggers still to dismantle. And I had so much work to do in my own life before I was ready to fully embrace a deep friendship with my sister. It took me several years to gradually lay down the self-protective armor I’d worn so long. That’s why today is such a milestone for me.

Gretchen: This experience with Paula showed me how dangerously vulnerable our deepest relationships are, yet in the end, how resilient. The odd thing about this conflict was that there was no specific offense that triggered it. And yet in another sense it had its roots in the breakup of her first marriage, in that the consequences of her willfulness affected us all. But my pride and sinfully self righteous response set the stage for twenty years of misunderstanding. Our mutual forgiveness taught me to watch for the danger signs – starting to view someone you love as a competitor, or worse, an adversary. Remember, as Paul warns us, one of Satan’s great tools is lack of forgiveness... **“but we are not unaware of his schemes.”**

Paula: From this forgiveness experience, I learned that 1) I had faith issues to resolve that had nothing to do with Gretchen—she was simply the catalyst for that, and 2) I was breaking the commandment against idolatry in a different relationship without knowing it, and 3) I needed to take Satan and his works and ways much more seriously than I’d been willing to do in the past.

I also had a general realization about being a Christian. As members of the Body of Christ, we are *all* called to reconciliation with one another. Despite real theological differences that are in the final analysis unresolvable no matter how long we argue about them, we who call Christ our Lord, regardless of where we worship, all believe and are baptized. And as the face of Christ in a bleak world, we can no longer avoid learning how to love one another. For the face of Christ is love.

Intensive Study Questions:

Memory verse: “And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2nd Cor. 2:10b-11)

Please answer these questions biblically, providing scripture references for your answers. Feel free to use other passages than the ones we are studying:

- 1. Paul is writing about an incident of church discipline in verses 5-8. From where does the idea of church discipline come? What is it meant to accomplish?**
- 2. How can we tell if someone is truly repentant about sin? Look at 2 Cor. 7:10, or Acts 26:20. Do outward deeds truly indicate the condition of the heart? Why or why not?**
- 3. What can we tell about Paul from this passage? What characteristics does he have that make him a true pastor or shepherd? Name at least three. Now describe how a modern day pastor might demonstrate those characteristics.**
- 4. What does Paul think that Satan will do if we do not forgive each other? Find at least one other passage about Satan’s work or aims. How can we counteract those aims of Satan by specific actions? How does the Bible tell us to resist him?**
- 5. Some of the last words Jesus spoke were “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) What are some of Jesus’ other teachings about forgiveness? Is there a relationship between our ability to extend forgiveness and our ability to be forgiven? Is it really possible to forgive someone who has profoundly wronged you?**

Discussion Questions:

- 1. Why is forgiveness so difficult for many people? Have you found any way to make it easier, yet still truly be forgiveness?**
- 2. Is it really possible to forgive someone who has profoundly wronged you? Why or why not?**
- 3. Why do you think Christ was able to forgive those who wronged him?**