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Karen: We've been talking about many interventions for coming alongside and ministering to people in pain. And in this lesson, we want to talk about forgiveness. I think it is such an important topic, because I think we have a lot of misunderstandings about what forgiveness is.

I don't know if you've ever seen two parents saying to their two children who have been squabbling, "Okay, say you're sorry, and let's be done with it and move on." And I think that sometimes we take that attitude as ministers. We take the attitude when we're coming alongside people in pain, that all they need to do is just forgive the person who has hurt them, move on, and heal. And I think sometimes, as ministers, we can do a disservice to people when we adopt those particular attitudes towards forgiveness.

Alice: I agree with you, Karen, because we make forgiveness sound so easy: just forgive and forget, as if you can. And I think very often, even just linking forgetting to forgiveness can be something that people can easily misunderstand. If I think that I have not really forgiven someone until I have forgotten the incident, this can be very discouraging. It can cause a great deal of feelings of guilt that I haven't forgiven this person when, in fact, I may very well have put the incident behind me, but that does not mean that I can forget it.

Karen: Okay, here's a question for all of you watching the course: Have you ever forgiven somebody for something that they've hurt you? And if you can say "yes" to that question, that means that you've probably not forgotten, right?

Alice: That's right.

Karen: And there are many ways where we have forgiven somebody, but we remember it. And to forget it would mean that,

in fact, we'd have to cut that part of our brain out in order to never be able to remember.

Alice: That's right. And that is a part of ourselves that will be with us, usually, for the rest of our lives, especially if it's a big hurt.

Karen: Now, some of the material, by the way, that we're going to be sharing today comes from Christian PREP, which is the Christian Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, which is based on 20 years of marital research and has been developed and integrated into a biblically integrated approach to marriage enhancement and divorce prevention. They have some wonderful material on forgiveness, as well as many other issues, so we encourage you to look up other materials from PREP as well.

But let's continue to talk about what forgiveness isn't. So we've talked about how forgiveness really is not forgetting. In order to forgive and forget, you would actually have to chop part of your brain off in order to not remember hurts that have occurred to you.

Alice: And one of the things that goes along with that is that, very often the thing that has hurt us, that I have to forgive, is so tangled in my life, it may have caused a change in the direction of my life so that I can't forget. I can't because it has so totally altered my life that it's just an indelible part of what I have become.

Karen: I think about David and Bathsheba who, even though David sought forgiveness from God, he still experienced the death of his newborn son. And there's a way where that particular circumstance touched him indelibly for the rest of his life. And that's another reason why we can't forget when we're working on this issue of forgiveness.

Alice: I think that there are some harms that are easy to overlook, easy to forgive. You bump into somebody in a store and you say, "Oh, I'm sorry," and the person says, "That's all right," and you go on your way and that's the end of the matter. But there are other things that happen that are so damaging to the very core of who you are that it's not enough for somebody just to say, "Oh, I'm sorry" and go on, as if everything is done and over and all is forgiven.

Karen: The bruises, the scars, the hurts, they're always going to be there.

Alice: That's true.

Karen: And one of the things that we have to figure out is what to do with those.

Alice: That's right.

Karen: So one of the things that has to happen in forgiveness is that you have to acknowledge the debt. And sometimes when you're ministering to a person in pain, you help them do that. You help them to actually think about how they've been hurt. And that's a little counter to what we expect to do when we're helping people work through forgiveness.

We expect people to hurry up and move to the healing. And we forget that, in some ways, you have to acknowledge the hurt that has occurred before you can actually work towards the forgiveness.

Alice: And that's a way that I can come alongside someone else who is in pain over some hurt and I can help that person by saying let's talk about this. Let's talk about what actually happened to you so that that person can acknowledge the hurt.

Karen: I think about going to lunch with a friend, and if the friend pays for lunch and I say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I meant to pay for lunch," and the friend says, "No, no, no, it was my turn," and she does not give a chance to acknowledge the fact that I had messed up, and if I can't acknowledge that I messed up, I can't really apologize, and we can't really work through that issue that potentially is there if she's not acknowledging it. So one of the first steps is acknowledging the hurt that has occurred.

Alice: That's right. And I think that it's important to recognize that forgiving doesn't end the pain. We might think that once I have forgiven, the pain is over. No, no. I may forgive someone, but the pain may go on.

Karen: I think there's a way where we need to grieve some of the losses that occur for people. So, for instance, when Kent was killed, when my brother, your son, was killed by a drunk driver, there's a way where before we can work towards forgiveness, we have to grieve the loss that Kent's never going to come back. That's an important part of working through the forgiveness process.

Alice: That's right. And to recognize that something precious has been lost, that we'll not have again in the same way.

Karen: So forgiveness is actually giving up the right to being owed something. Forgiveness is giving up a debt. It's saying, "I will not hold this against you anymore." It's saying I will move past what you owe me. It's giving up the right to get even.

So if my husband and I start to have an argument and, this has never happened, but if he were to call me a name, I would actually have to give up the right to get even with him as the process of forgiveness unfolds.

Alice: You can't call him a name right back.

Karen: If forgiveness happens, I cannot call him a name right back. Forgiveness is actually giving up that right to get even.

Alice: It sounds to me, Karen, as if what you're saying is that forgiveness, basically, cancels the debt that that person owes me.

Karen: Which is what happened when Jesus died on the cross. Jesus cancelled the debt that our sin created. And in canceling that debt, He forgave us. And that's what we do for other people. It's a process that we've been talking about. It's a process that is not forgiving. It's a process that involves acknowledging the hurt, and then working towards being able to cancel the debt.

Alice: And we can come alongside people who are going through pain and help them with that process as we walk with them.

Karen: Part of it might be helping them slow that process down, to think about the issues that are always going to be lost, as a result of the hurt that's been done to them. And help them, at that point in time, work towards being able to give up the right to a debt.

Alice: One of the things that happens when we are hurt is that trust is destroyed. And there must be a rebuilding of trust and how can we go about the process of helping someone rebuild trust once that trust has been damaged, sometimes in a way that seems irremediable.

Karen: It's like sitting in a chair that breaks. If this chair right here broke out from underneath me, I would be cautious around that

chair every time I got near it. It's the same thing with people; once we've been hurt by somebody, we do lose trust. And we actually should be cautious around that person until we have a sense that it will no longer, like a chair, break from out from underneath us.

Alice: Yeah, and that takes time. I have been with women who have been abused physically in situations of domestic violence and the husband has said, "Well, I'll never do it again." But she goes back, and he does do it again. And it happens again and again until she reaches a point at which trust is gone. It's completely gone, and he may say, "Oh, I won't do it again." But she doesn't trust him. And it will take a long time for him to convince her that he is trustworthy; that he is worthy of her trust.

Karen: As Christians, I think sometimes we feel bad that we don't trust people. But we need to make the difference. We need to distinguish very wisely between wise trust and dumb trust. And there are situations where people do not deserve to be trusted.

And so in that process of forgiveness, as we're helping people to work through towards forgiveness, one of the things that we can do as we minister to these people in pain is help them distinguish, use some of our objectivity that helps them distinguish between wise trust and dumb trust.

Alice: And we're always moving, aren't we, Karen, toward reconciliation? We want to restore or reconcile a relationship that has been broken by the thing that has destroyed our trust. And how do we do that? How do we restore relationships that have been broken?

Karen: Well, I think reconciliation is a combination between the two things we've been talking about. It's a combination between forgiveness—letting that person off the hook so to speak, as far as the debt that they owe us in having hurt us—and then it's also adding that piece called trust back again.

And since there are some situations where trusting is not that right thing to do, sometimes there are going to be situations where relationships are not reconciled. We can forgive. We can do the forgiveness all by ourself, but sometimes we can't reconcile because that requires behavior change on the other person's part.

That requires the chair no longer breaking out from underneath me. And when that does not happen, then there are going to be times when reconciliation does not occur.

And we can help people as we're ministering to people in pain, we can help people think through this issue: Is this a relationship where we're working towards reconciliation, or is this a relationship where we're working towards forgiveness? Are we working towards letting that person off the hook? And do we need to be cautious around this person because they have continually hurt us?

Alice: Good point. I'm thinking at this point, Karen, about forgiveness not as something that is optional, but something that is required. And I have found that difficult at times in my own life. And I suspect that others have found it difficult as well.

Jesus was very clear that if we want to be forgiven, we must forgive. And I have found that not an easy thing to accept.

Karen: It's so clear in the Scriptures that Jesus expects us to forgive others as He has forgiven us. Now, what we do when we take in Jesus' forgiveness is that we then give that back out to others who have hurt us, in the same way that Jesus has forgiven us. And it's a difficult process as a Christian to do that.

Alice: My mind goes to Matthew 18, a conversation that Jesus had with Peter, His disciple. And Peter came up to Jesus in verse 21, and he said, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" And Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And as he began a settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. . . . Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all that he owed." [Matthew 18:21-24, 32-34 NIV]

And Jesus went on to say, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother [or a sister] from your heart." [NIV] These are stiff words, but words that we need to heed. Even as we, in our own personal lives, have to face the issue

of forgiveness, but also as we come alongside others to help them in times of pain. We cannot forget that their forgiveness by God is in some way tied to their willingness to forgive others.

Karen: And Jesus made that point so many times. I'm thinking also about the Lord's Prayer that many of us pray every Sunday. And we say, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." And at the end of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says very clearly, "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 6:12-15 NIV] Remember that when you have needed to be forgiven. It's so important to remember these words of Jesus because forgiveness is so hard.

Alice: That's true.

Karen: It's not an easy thing.

Alice: It is not.

Karen: It's important to remember how much Jesus wanted us to work on this issue. It is not a snap the fingers event.

Alice: That's right. And it often takes time. Now, Karen, you mentioned earlier PREP and their steps to forgiveness. Go over those with us.

Karen: Yeah, let me talk about four steps to forgiveness. And the first one that is mentioned in PREP is really just to choose to work towards forgiveness. It's so important to cut ourselves some slack and to realize how hard the work of forgiveness is. And to, first of all, just start out being committed to working on the issue of forgiveness. And sometimes it's just remembering those words of Jesus that makes us committed to starting to do this work of forgiveness.

The second step is to fully explore the pain and your concerns. And the emphasis is really on taking all the time that you need. The research suggests that taking time in forgiveness is important. And as people who come alongside others who are in pain, we need to be willing to spend the time to help them do this work of working through the pain that they've experienced, and remaining committed to working towards forgiveness.

The next step is helping the person, who has been hurt, to communicate with the offender, and giving the offender an opportunity to apologize and committing to change. Because it is through their commitment to change, that trust is rebuilt in the relationship.

This person who has hurt the one that we're working alongside, may have to come and ask for forgiveness many times and in many ways over a long period of time.

The last step really is something that we do on our own. Because sometimes the person that has offended the person who's in pain is not willing to make changes. At the same time, the person who's in pain can still take responsibility to move forward. It's okay to look back occasionally to remember the hurts that have been experienced. Don't stare back there for very long. It's okay, though, to remember that those hurts are there.

You will be reminded of that pain from time to time. You will grieve from time to time, and expect once in a while to stumble. Expect once in a while to regret having offered your forgiveness. Expect once in a while to slip up, but repeat those steps as often as you need to. Repeat the steps to work towards forgiveness.

Alice: Okay, you've given us these four steps that PREP has laid out on forgiveness. Now, if I am coming alongside someone in pain and that person needs to forgive, let's just go over these steps one more time.

We must help that person choose to work toward forgiveness. That is a conscious choice that the person makes, that that person will work in that direction.

And second, we can sit with that person and help that person fully explore the pain that has been experienced and the concerns that are there. And then, as the person is thinking about forgiving and has explored the issues, it's important for the offender to apologize. So I am there. I am trying to help this person. Suppose the person who is supposed to apologize doesn't do it, then what do we do?

Karen: Then there's a broken trust in that relationship.

Alice: Okay. And we help the person who is in pain to understand that.

Karen: And recognize that.

Alice: And recognize that.

Karen: There may not be safety in that relationship.

Alice: And then the fourth step is that we help that person move on.

Karen: Absolutely, and I think moving on is so important. That's the goal we're reaching towards.

Getting there takes time. So in summary, we've been talking in this lesson about the importance of forgiveness. We've talked about how important forgiveness was in Jesus' world. How much he emphasized the importance of us forgiving others who have hurt us.

We've talked about the fact that forgiveness takes many steps. It takes a long time. It takes a great deal of commitment. It takes a great deal of discipline. It also only requires you to be able to forgive. Reconciliation takes two people; forgiveness just takes you.

And when we come alongside a person who is in pain, we can help them move towards forgiveness.