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Baby Steps to Forgiveness

Guest: Leslie Leyland Fields
From the series: Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers (Day 2 of 3)
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Bob: Author, Leslie Fields, says there is a cost to forgiving another person; but the cost of not forgiving is ultimately a much greater cost.

Leslie: What we’re doing is—we’re feeding our own bitterness, we’re feeding our own hurt, we are feeding our own hate. We are cutting ourselves off—not only from that person / that offender—but we’re cutting ourselves off from lots of other people, as well, because that bitterness leaches out into all kinds of other relationships.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, October 7th. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. How do you work through the emotions—the pain and the bitterness—you may feel toward another person and get to a place of forgiveness? We’re going to talk about that today. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. I think—and we’ve talked about this this week. I think all of us grew up in whatever family we grew up in, thinking the family we grew up in was normal. Normal is defined as what you experience when you’re growing up. I guess it’s not until later that you meet other folks and go: “Oh wait. My normal and your normal were different normals”; you know?

Dennis: That’s kind of what happens when we get married. [Laughter]

Bob: That’s true; that’s true.

Dennis: [Laughing] You are introduced to a new normal, and then you have to establish your own normal. We have a guest with us who knows a little bit about what you just said. Leslie Leyland Fields joins us again on FamilyLife Today. Leslie, welcome back.

Leslie: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Dennis: Leslie is from near Kodiak, Alaska. I say near because she lives—not all year—but for a good part of the summer on an island called Harvester Island. How big is the island you live on?

Leslie: It’s a mile long and half-a-mile wide. We are the only inhabitants on the island—that’s the coolest part of all.
Bob: Do you get the idea Dennis is a little jealous? [Laughter] I mean, you’ve been here enough. Do you get the—

Leslie: Yes.

Bob: --the sense that Dennis kind of wishes he—

Leslie: Yes.

Dennis: I am an adventurer too—I love the adventure. There are only two trees on the island—that’s what doesn’t move me to want to live on Harvester Island. [Laughter] I’d like to be tucked away in a little cove, surrounded by a forest. [Laughter]

Bob: But there is something in your blood—every time you talk about Alaska, I just see there’s something like: “I wish we could do FamilyLife Today from Juneau”; you know?

Dennis: There’s a guy I’d like to interview up there. Maybe we’ll get a chance to take you up there, Bob, and let you experience it.

Leslie has co-authored a book with Dr. Jill Hubbard. The book is called Forgive Our Fathers and Mothers. Leslie has written seven other books besides this one. It’s really the story of how you, Leslie, grew in your ability to ultimately forgive your father and mother.

Bob: In your growing-up experience, you grew up in a desperately poor family, with a father who was emotionally absent / often physically absent, who didn’t really have any regard for you, as a child. You left home for college. I would have to imagine—left home, thinking—“See you all later.”

Leslie: Exactly.

Bob: No thought that you’d want even to come back for Christmas, maybe.

Leslie: No; no.

Bob: You were charting a new course—and just glad to get out of the life that you had grown up with—when you left, as a young adult.

Leslie: Oh, absolutely. I had no idea what the future held; but I knew that, wherever I was going to be, it was going to be far away.

Dennis: You were one of six. You all grew up / went your own way. I guess, not long after you all left home, your mother and father divorced.

Leslie: Yes, just a few years after I went—
**Dennis:** Where did your father go? What did he do?

**Leslie:** He went down to Florida. He had always had the dream of living on a sailboat and sailing around the world. He actually had just a little bit of money—he bought a very small, old sailboat. He lived on that sailboat for about ten years, I think.

**Bob:** Wow. When you got news that your mom and dad were divorcing, did that have any emotional impact in your life at all?

**Leslie:** Yes, it did. I was angry because I thought, “Why didn't that happen 20 years ago?”

**Dennis:** Oh, really?! Why did you feel that?

**Leslie:** It would have made life a lot calmer for everybody.

**Bob:** So your thought was not sadness that your mom and dad were not going to be husband and wife or mom and dad to you anymore. It was just the thought that: “Life would have been better for all of us if this had happened earlier.”

**Leslie:** Yes. I actually felt a great sense of relief for them because it was so difficult for them to live together. I knew that this was probably better for both of them.

**Bob:** Did you stay in touch with your dad following the divorce?

**Leslie:** No. We wrote occasionally. There was an occasional letter, but there was very little contact between us.

**Bob:** What prompted the letters?

**Leslie:** I wrote. My father never initiated contact at all. I think it was a sense of: “This is my father. That’s supposed to mean something, and now he’s away on his own.” I felt bad for him. I was sort of checking in—like: “Who are you, now, that you’re not…”—maybe the six kids / maybe it was partly our fault that he was the way he was. “Maybe now he’s going to be a different person. Maybe he’ll care more.”

**Bob:** But you never called long distance.

**Leslie:** No, he didn’t have a phone.

**Bob:** You never sent pictures of grandparents—or did you do that?

**Leslie:** No, I didn’t do that.

**Dennis:** Why?
Leslie: He would not have any interest in my children.

Dennis: So, at what point, did the Spirit of God begin to move you from hurt and hate to forgiveness? When did that start?

Leslie: That started probably about ten years ago, now—with a phone call. It was my sister calling me to tell me that my father had had some sort of heart attack or something. In that moment, I realized that my father was going to die. He was in his 80s by then—he was 84. I realized: “My father is going to die, and no one is going to cry. No one is going to shed a tear.” That almost made me cry, all on its own, because it just completely violates all of creation—

Dennis: Right.

Leslie: —that God would have created this man, brought him to life, brought him into our family, made him the father of six children—that he would live 80-some years, and die, and nobody would shed a tear. I knew that was wrong—I knew that was so wrong. In a moment, God turned my heart back to him. I realized, “I've got to do something about this.” The next moment, I knew that forgiveness was what was required of me.

Dennis: Yes, but you couldn’t embrace it.

Leslie: Oh, no—no. It is: “How do I do this?” I knew something had to happen—and already the turning had already begun—that “Okay, this cannot happen. Someone needs to be sad when my father dies, but where to go next?” No, I didn’t know.

Bob: A lot of people—when they're confronted with what you were confronted with—the only thing they can do / the only thing they think they can do is: “I've got to protect myself. Protect myself means stay walled-off from that whole emotional experience. If I go back near that thing again, the pain is going to be insurmountable.”

Dennis: A lot of people feel like—if they forgive, they’re placing themselves back in the crucible to be hurt in even a deeper way than they were before.

Leslie: You know what? That's true—that to forgive means to rip off those scars / to turn back and to open yourself to be vulnerable again to feelings. But I have to tell you—the feelings are so much worse / the pain of not loving someone is so much worse than the pain of loving—maybe that love isn’t returned exactly the way you’d want it to be.

Dennis: You can say that now because you’re on the other side of the fence.

Leslie: Yes; yes.
**Dennis:** But when you’re on the side of the fence, where some of our listeners are right now—

**Bob:** Or where you had to be ten years ago, when you were first confronted with this idea of “I think I need to forgive my father,”—I’m sure there were little voices, going, “Oh no, no, no, no.”

**Leslie:** Yes. Here’s what I discovered, along the way—that we think that the cost of forgiving is too high—for all the things that you just mentioned. But what I would say to that is—the cost of not forgiving is much higher because, when we continue to wall ourselves off, and protect ourselves, and protect—what we’re doing is—we’re feeding our own bitterness; we’re feeding our own hurt; we’re feeding our own hate. We are cutting ourselves off—not only from *that* person / *that* offender—but we’re cutting ourselves off from lots of other people, as well, because that bitterness leaches out into all kinds of other relationships.

**Dennis:** You believe the reason some people don’t forgive is because they’re afraid. They’re afraid that if they forgive it’s going to erase accountability for all the ways they’ve hurt us. Comment on that.

**Leslie:** Yes. This is a really important point. I’ve had people ask me—come up to me and say: “My father…” or “My uncle…” or “This man in my life abused me. I think he may be abusing other people.” Okay, we are so afraid that forgiveness just takes away all responsibility and all accountability—that it covers these sins and these crimes—and it does not. There still may be matters of the law to be addressed. It may be that someone needs to pick up the phone and call Child Protective Services because, maybe, your father is hurting someone else. We are called to love the offender / love our enemy, but we are also called to love our neighbor. If our neighbor is being hurt in some way, then we absolutely need to try to protect that neighbor.

**Bob:** Divine forgiveness does not erase consequences. It’s like when—God absolves us of guilt—but a young boy, who is promiscuous outside of marriage, and his girlfriend gets pregnant / and he says, “God, I’m sorry,”—there’s still a baby, even after you’ve said, “I’m sorry.” The consequences don’t go away when we forgive somebody else. But there is a recognition that we’re not going to continue to hold this sword of judgment against you—in our hands. We’re going to let go of that.

In fact, often, when we’ve talked about this at our *Weekend to Remember*® marriage getaways, we talk about the expression that we use when we say, “Let’s bury the hatchet.” Why do we have a hatchet in our hand in the first place?—right?—we want to hurt somebody. Burying the hatchet is really giving up the right to punish somebody else for what they did in our lives.

**Leslie:** Right. But the reason that we can do that—the reason that we can do that fairly—is because we’re going to take them off our hook and we’re going to put them on God’s hook.
**Bob:** That’s right.

**Leslie:** Because *He* is the only rightful judge. We find ourselves—and I’ve done this *so many times*—when we are offended, we instantly go into cop mode / arresting officer mode. We pull out our mental handcuffs, and we slap them on that person, and we haul them up in front of the jury. The jury, by the way, is us. Then we haul them in front of the judge, and the judge is—

**Dennis:** Us.

**Leslie:** —us. And then we call the prison guard. The prison guard takes them to prison, and the prison guard is—

**Bob:** Us; right.

**Leslie:** —us; right?—right. We put ourselves in this role that we were *not* intended to play, and it’s *exhausting*—it’s exhausting!

**Bob:** And it is why, in Romans, Chapter 12, Paul says, “If possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” Right there, in the same passage, he says: “‘Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord.” It really is an understanding of saying: “Okay, I’m going to step back from a role I don’t belong in. I’m going to let God be the executor of justice, as it is needed; but I’m going to be an agent of forgiveness and mercy.”

**Dennis:** Back to the illustration of being the judge, jury—

**Leslie:** —prison guard.

**Bob:** —prison guard.

**Dennis:** —prison guard, and locking them up—a number of years ago, I wrote a book that’s been repackaged and re-released here recently, called *The Forgotten Commandment*. It’s about honoring your parents, and it’s about forgiveness. It’s what you’re talking about here.

One woman, who read that book, said: “I went to the prison to let my mother out of prison. In the process of forgiving her and honoring her, I found out the one who was imprisoned was me, not my mom.” By honoring / by moving toward honor, we can actually experience the freedom to be able to love, as you’re talking about—to be able to go forward.

But I think there’s something we skipped over here that I know you believe and feel strongly about—and that’s the *process* of forgiveness.
Leslie: Yes. Yes.

Dennis: Walk our listeners through—what is the process of forgiveness?

Leslie: I’m going to describe the process that I followed and that many people have followed. It’s important for people to recognize—there is a lot of individual variation that happens here—but, for me, I think the very place to start is sometimes the place we want to run away from—and that is confess. Confess what happened—be honest, be real, be truthful. Name the things that happened—what happened to you, as a child / what happened to you in your marriage—whatever this deep hurt is—face it. That absolutely has to come first. We stop, and we take a look at, and we name these things.

There are times, Dennis, when sometimes those traumas are so great that we should not do that alone. We ought to do that sometimes—maybe with a counselor, with a therapist, with a best friend, with a pastor. Sometimes, we need a support network around us, even for that first stage.

Dennis: I couldn’t agree more. I’ve had the response to my book, over the years, where people have said, “I read your book and…” One woman said: “I threw it across the room and it landed kind of like a teepee. It stayed there,” she said, “for the better part of a week. I’d go by it and look disgustingly at the book because of what it was calling me to do.” She was angry—didn’t want to go through it because of the hurt you’re talking about.

She finally picked it up again; but it still took her—I think, as I recall, over a year / maybe two—to move through the process of ultimately giving up her right to punish her mom and her dad.

Leslie: Yes. I’ve had people say the same think about my book as well. They know they need the book. They get the book, and then it sits there because there’s all this fear. There’s all this fear to open it because they know they’re called to forgive, and they still don’t want to forgive.

I want to tell people that I think all of us are like Jonah, running away. God says to Jonah: “Go to the Ninevites with this message. Go to your enemies with this message to forgive.” Jonah does not want to do it—and that’s all of us! We don’t want to do it. So, I want to say to people—for Dennis’ book and for my book—we’re with you. We understand that completely. Trust us, though. Trust and just open the first page. Open the first page and take that first step of confession.

Dennis: It’s easier to punish somebody than to forgive.

Leslie: It is; but, you know, let’s not skip over that stage, though, because there’s a lot of anger, at that stage. We need to be angry at what was wrong. We will not move toward the right until we acknowledge what is wrong. I look back at the Old Testament, and I look at God’s anger against wrong. God was angry when His people did horrible,
destructive things. He was angry when people were hurt and destroyed. So, our anger is okay. It’s not wrong to be angry over sin. What is wrong is when we stay there / when we remain trapped in our anger and we refuse to go any further.

**Bob:** So, when you entered into this process—and came to this first step of needing to confess, and name, and go back through and catalog, and say, “He did this, and he did this, and I remember this,”—did you do this on your own? Did you get some help to do it? What was it like for you?

**Leslie:** I did do it on my own. Honestly, I had been thinking for many years / I had been cataloging for many years. So, it wasn’t hard or traumatic for me to do this. But some people, in response to their past—they just have this huge wall up—so breaking through that wall—they need some help to do that.

**Bob:** Did you, late at night, write out papers or did you just kind of, in your own mind—I’m just wondering, for somebody, who is saying, “How do I do this?”

**Leslie:** “How do I do this?” I did write it out—I did write it out. I’m a writer—so that’s the first thing that I do—is I wrote. I worked on this essay. I think the essay started off something like, “Confessing the sins of my father,” or something like that; but I wrote it down. I think it’s helpful to have some sort of concrete way to do this so it’s not just in your head. Get it outside your head—down on paper—or whatever form you want to use—but make it concrete.

**Dennis:** I don’t want to sound too pious or too spiritual here in making this observation. You didn’t really do it alone—there was the Comforter / there was the One who guides us into truth.

**Leslie:** Yes.

**Dennis:** There is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of where we’re wrong and where we’ve had a wrong attitude. I’ve watched too many people go through this process. They really aren’t alone—God was there when wrong was done. He didn’t stop being God, and He didn’t stop loving you. I do know that, despite what happened, God wants to use it in our lives to ultimately move us to loving like He loves—and to replacing the hurt and the hate with God’s love for another person.

**Bob:** And the step of forgiving another person is really the first step in a process. We want to continue unpacking that process this week.

Let me first let our listeners know how they can get a copy of the book that Leslie has written—that talks about the process you went through in forgiving your father. It’s a book called *Forgiving Our Fathers and Mothers: Finding Freedom from Hurt and Hate*. We have copies of it in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. You can go, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. Click the link at the top of the page that says, “GO DEEPER.” You’ll find information about Leslie’s book available, online. Again, the website is
FamilyLifeToday.com. You can order from us at that website; or you can call to order: 1-800-FL-TODAY; 1-800-358-6329; that’s 1-800- “F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

This past Saturday, we were in Washington, DC, for our I Still Do™ one-day marriage event—thousands of couples joining us, live, in Washington, DC, and tens of thousands of couples joining us, all around the country and around the world, in more than 200 churches, where the event was being hosted as a simulcast video event.

It was exciting to hear the reports back from couples who said this event had a profound impact in their marriage relationship. A lot of couples were coming, I think, for a marriage tune-up—just for some preventive maintenance on their marriage—but there were couples who were coming with some deep hurt / the kind of hurt we’ve been talking about today. We saw God use the day in a significant way in the lives of many of those couples, and it was exciting to see.

I mention that because I want to say, “Thank you,” to the folks who help make events like that possible—who help make this radio program possible; the resources we’re creating, here at FamilyLife; the website that we’ve got, FamilyLifeToday.com—all of that’s possible only because folks, like you, make it possible. We are listener-supported. Your financial support is what keeps FamilyLife Today viable, and we are so grateful for your partnership with us.

In fact, if you can help with a donation today, we’d like to say, “Thank you,” by sending you one of Barbara Rainey’s new resources. She’s been working on a line of resources called Ever Thine Home®. One of her new resources is a chalkboard that you can hang in your kitchen or in your den / somewhere in your home. It’s in the shape of a house. It says: “In this home we give thanks for” and there’s a place for you to write, in chalk, whatever you’d like to write.

It’s a great teaching tool for the kids. It’s also a nice home decoration. It’s our gift to you when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click on the link in the upper right-hand corner that says, “I Care,” and make an online donation. You can see the chalkboard there when you do that. Or you can call and make a donation over the phone. Request the chalkboard when you call 1-800-FL-TODAY to make a donation. Or you can request the chalkboard when you mail a donation to FamilyLife Today at P O Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. Our zip code is 72223.

Now, tomorrow, we’re going to continue working through the process of forgiving another person. We’ll work through the process that Leslie Fields went through as she forgave her father. I hope you can join us back for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with Mark Ramey. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.
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