

FUEL THE FLAME OF FORGIVENESS

Week #2 of a 6-Week Series, "Ignite Your Spirit: An Inner Journey"

Rev. Richard Maraj

Sunday, Jan. 18, 2026

A husband messes up and does something inconsiderate and hurtful to his wife. And he apologizes profusely, but she still yells at him and gives him the silent treatment for three days. And finally, she says to him, *"I forgive you. And my new policy is going to be forgive and forget."*

Well, that sounded wonderful, but every couple of months, she kept bringing up the very same thing and mentioning it over and over. After a year, he couldn't take it. So, he said, *"Honey, why do you keep bringing that thing up? I thought your new policy was forgive and forget."*

And the wife says, *"It is my policy. I just don't want you to forget that I forgave and forgot."* [Congregants laugh]

So, how many people have ever held a grudge or bitterness or blame or resentment towards anyone? Anybody ever? And how many people that even though you knew forgiving was the right thing, hated the other person so much you refused to forgive? And how many people have ever found that you have a harder time forgiving yourself than others? Does anybody have a harder time forgiving yourself?

Today we are talking about forgiveness. It is one of the most powerful, liberating, transforming, empowering of all spiritual practices. It is also one of the hardest, most difficult, and least liked of all spiritual practices.

Forgiveness is important and powerful, because it is one of the core beliefs and teachings in Christianity and in Jesus' teachings. You know, besides faith and love, compassion, kindness, gratitude and generosity, forgiveness is right up there. But it's just the most unpleasant one. I mean, nobody says, *"Hey, let's go get out there and forgive!"* It is not the most exciting or enjoyable. Sometimes it's unpleasant. It's hard. It sounds difficult. How many people would agree that forgiveness is powerful, it's important, but it is not easy? How many people would agree with that? It's hard stuff to forgive.

So, I want to give you the five reasons that forgiveness is hard, or at least five reasons that forgiveness is harder.

The first one is: we take things personally. And when we take things personally, we get hurt easily. That we begin to interpret things like that person attacked us, our people are out to get us. Or they did that or said that intentionally. And so, when we take things personally, things – the hurts – get engrained a little more deeply.

The second one is that we are not great at dealing with painful emotions. And when we have painful emotions, sometimes we shut down or sometimes we get overwhelmed. Sometimes we throw a tantrum and just lose it. Sometimes we go to name calling. I mean, sometimes we have all kinds of different ways where we have a difficult time processing painful emotions.

The third one is that we like to blame others. And whether it's our mom or whether it's our ex or whether it's our boss, we think things like, *"They ruined my life"* or *"They did this to me"* or *"They are the cause of my unhappiness and frustration."* You know, we don't like taking responsibility. And instead of bringing our "A game," we like to bring our blame game about why our lives aren't going as well as we hope they would.

The fourth one is that we like to create grievance stories. Ever had somebody do something to you and you told that story over and over and over again? So much so it creates a mindset and a pattern that

becomes true to us. We keep attracting more stuff just like it. And so when we're stuck in that story, it's hard to forgive.

And then the last one is letting go is hard. Forgiveness is a form of letting go. And all letting gos scare us to a certain extent, even letting go of things aren't good for us ... wven letting go of the pain of the past or letting go of old dreams or letting go of unhealthy relationships, letting go is hard for us.

And so, the more attached we are to all those previous things I mentioned, it makes it harder to let go and forgive. And also, what makes it not fun is it takes a lot of work – mental, emotional and spiritual work – to fully and freely forgive.

So, our theme for this year – 2026 – is, “Ignite Your Spirit.” And it's coming off of the Christmas experience where we lit our candles at Candle Lighting Service to remind us of the light of the Christ that's in us, the light of God that is in us, the light of our soul. And we lit them to reignite that light that is always in us; the light that Jesus said that *“You are the light of the world.”*

But sometimes, even though he said that, we don't believe it and we certainly don't act like it. Sometimes we live our lives with our lights dim or fading, or feel like it's flickering or it's wavering and not burning as brightly and shining as bright as we know we can or are meant to.

And so, we are moving away from the traditional setting a resolution list, forgetting it by the end of January, and then setting it over again, and just kind of repeating. This year, we're setting our intention of making one powerful resolution as our priority, and that is to ignite your spirit ... and to awaken the incredible spiritual power that resides in each and every one of us: that divine potential in us that we call the light, the light of the Christ.

And we are making a priority of seeking that first, knowing absolutely when we make that our priority and keep building that foundation, that all the other things in our lives will fall into place.

In Week #1, the message was entitled, “Awaken the Spark Within.” And the whole idea of that is to look within or go without. So, as we search for happiness and fulfillment and answers in other places, the first thing we need to do is look within. The second thing is: we need to own and embody our divine nature, that we are eternal spiritual beings. And we need to live from that mindset. And finally, we need to raise our faith and our frequency -- to raise our vibration -- to the level of good that we are seeking in our lives through our words, our thoughts and also our feelings. And we are trying to remember, as Stephen Covey reminds us, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing is to do our inner spiritual work so we can ignite our spirits.

And so today, the message is entitled, “Fuel the Flame of Forgiveness.”

How many people believe that our lives are the sum of the choices that we have made? How many people agree with that? Well, I will tell you, one of the boldest, one of the most powerful choices we can make is to choose to forgive.

And so, this morning, we're going to look at four things that we can choose to fuel the flame of forgiveness.

And the first one is to **CHOOSE FREEDOM**. You know, to choose forgiveness is a choice for freedom: to be free and no longer dwell in the past; to no longer be stuck in our pain; to be no longer living and reliving our old hurts and pains. Forgiveness is a gift of freedom that we give ourselves.

Remember the story in the Book of Genesis with Lot and his wife? And they were running away from Sodom and Gomorrah, and they were told, “Do not look back! Look ahead; do not look back.” And what did they do? They looked back, and they turned into a pillar of salt. And I find that profound. They turned

into a pillar of salt. Pillars do not go fast very quickly. And salt is a preservative. And so, they're really trying to emphasize: don't keep looking back; look forward. Otherwise, you will get stuck right where you are and your life will not move forward. You know, blame and resentment look backward. Forgiveness looks forward. And it's a powerful and important message for all of us: that, if we want to be free, we've got to stop looking back. We've got to stop turning and blaming others from the past.

In the Book of Philippians, it says one of my favorite Scriptures. It's Philippians 3, Verse 13 and 14, and it says, *"Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which I've been called heavenward."* And it's a powerful message to say: free yourself from the past and move forward to greater and better things.

Forgiveness is basically having us say, *"I refuse to let this hurt imprison my spirit. I refuse to let this betrayal imprison my peace and my joy."* You know, it's a powerful thing with forgiveness. It frees us to move forward and to let us know that there are greater possibilities in our lives than what we have been accepting and repeating and reliving.

And the whole idea about forgiveness is about letting go. But it's letting go with a trust and a faith of knowing there's something greater ahead of us than what was behind us. You know, nothing stops us more from moving forward or restricts our inner peace than when we hold on to resentment and bitterness and blame and shame and guilt. And nothing frees us quicker than forgiveness and letting go of the past.

So, I ask you: What in your life do you need to be free from? What in your life is it time for you to forgive? And so the first thing for us to fuel the flames of forgiveness is to choose freedom.

The second one is to **CHOOSE COMPASSION**. You know, when we get hurt, we shut our hearts and our minds off to that other person. We send them hate. We think they're horrible, and we just don't like them and don't want to be near them.

But compassion is a valuable and powerful practice for our lives, and particularly as a prerequisite for forgiveness. Because compassion opens our hearts, and it helps us shift our perspective from anger and hatred to understanding ... and to realizing that this person is not just the jerk that we think they are, but they are a spiritual beings, struggling with their own life, dealing with their own hearts, their own wounds. It's not excusing anyone's behavior, but it's also realizing that this individual is also a child of God. This individual is trying to live their life in the best way that they can.

Remember that Scripture when Jesus said, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"*? How many people have ever been like a little bit cranky or tired or overstressed and said something that was kind of cold or rude or unkind? It made you look like a jerk a little bit. Anybody ever do that? You know, so, it's having compassion. Sometimes someone's not on their "A game" in the way that they show up. That they are doing the very best they can. And it's important for us to open our hearts in compassion and not just judge them on that moment, that decision, or those words that they said.

And another important thing for compassion here is in John 15, Verse 13. It says, *"No greater love than this: than a man who will lay down his life for his friend."* I think that's a little on the extreme side – of laying down your life – but it makes an important point. Because it's a great love to set aside your care for yourself and put your thoughts in consideration and care on someone else, wondering, *"What's going on with them. I hope things are going well for them."* And be considerate of what someone else's struggles, what someone's hurts might be, and wonder if there's any way we could even help.

The Dalai Lama, and Buddhism in general, says the absolute key to happiness is found through compassion. You can have all the success and wealth in the world, but if you don't have compassion ...

and they define it as the care for the well-being of all living things without exception. To have compassion and care for everyone and everything, he said, is the absolute road to happiness.

They did a very interesting study at Stanford, at the Center for Compassion that I didn't know even existed. That compassion triggers the pleasure center in our minds: the same pleasure center of when we do fun activities or have great levels of success or eat dessert. Just any of those things that trigger pleasure, that someone acting with compassion and kindness and generosity triggers the very same pleasure centers.

And do you know why, I think? It's because it connects us with who we are and are meant to be, which is love. Compassion is a form and an expression of love: a desire to care for other people and be considerate towards others.

People are doing more research at this place on self-compassion. And the fact that self-compassion sounds wishy-washy and soft. But self-compassion is one of the fundamental determinants of resilience, inner peace and success.

How many people grew up in the “beat-yourself-up-and-criticize-yourself-harshly” school of self-improvement? [Congregants laugh] Anybody grew up in that one? For school, for life, for sports? You know, pound-yourself, beat-yourself, It's-not-enough kind of mindset?

And you know what they found with studies? That makes you feel dissatisfied, distraught and depressed. That we constantly feel like we're never enough. And that, when we do succeed, it's just a relief. So, we don't have to get pounded because we didn't measure up to whatever that level is that we are trying to achieve.

Self-compassion is just about being a little kinder, a little more supportive, a little more positive, a little more encouraging to ourselves. And they found that the more and consistently we do that, the better results we have for happiness and for levels of success. You know, they say it's always better -- if you mess up -- to be a soft, supportive friend than a tough, brutal coach.

You know, self-compassionate people tend to have healthier relationships with themselves. You know, they tend to be able to forgive themselves and handle their frustrations and challenges and losses and difficulties much easier in a more positive way.

But we all have this feeling and this idea, *“If I don't stay hard on myself, if I'm not tough, I'll never make it.”* And it's not true. It is absolutely not true. You can hold a high standard, but not be pounding, and still demonstrate levels of compassion.

The fact is: life is not easy for anyone. And even for the person that you might have some upset in your life, is there any way that you would be willing to open your heart to have some compassion for what they might be going through? Because not only would it facilitate some connection in that relationship, it'll actually bring more peace into your own heart and has the potential for touching and making a difference in their lives, as well.

And also, in what way can you express more self-compassion and then be kinder and gentler to yourself? To be more supportive and encouraging to yourself? That, when you have a bad day, be a good, supportive coach, and to lift yourself up and not just beat yourself up.

Compassion is a powerful prerequisite for forgiveness, because it's about teaching us to open our hearts and be kinder and softer to others and kinder and more understanding to ourselves, as well.

Choose freedom. Choose compassion. And then the third one is **CHOOSE HEALING**. How many people I've ever had someone in your life that really presses your buttons? I mean, they just know how to

trigger all the upset and anger in you, your unworthiness. Anybody have that? I only see a few hands raised, but I'll assume there's more.

And so, we often think it's those people -- they're doing it to us, it's those people -- that are causing my pain. But here's the one thing that is the truth. The people who press the buttons in our lives are not the ones who installed them. [Congregants laugh] If anybody is triggering you in your life, it's probably a sign that there's something deeper in you that needs healing that actually has nothing to do with them or very unlikely nothing to do with them.

It does not mean that you put up with any stuff from anybody -- you set good boundaries. But it is a sign that says maybe we might need to do some deeper inner work. And maybe there's some healing for us to do.

I absolutely believe that every single person alive is here to share some gift, to make some difference, to discover something, to learn something, and also to heal something. I believe every single person in this room and alive has something that they are here to heal. And whether that's abandonment, or whether that is shame or unworthiness or regret -- whatever it is -- we'll figure it out. But be aware that -- when we get triggered in relationships where we don't want to forgive -- it's usually a sign that there's something deeper in us that has nothing to do with them that needs to be healed.

Colin Tipping said this. He said, *"Seen from a spiritual standpoint, our pain and discomfort in any given area provides a signal that we are out of alignment with spiritual law and are being given the opportunity to heal something. This may be some original pain or a toxic belief that stops us from being our true ourselves. Everything that happens to us is divinely guided, purposeful and for our greater good, without exception."*

So maybe things don't just happen to us; maybe things happen for us. And maybe looking at these things and not just thinking, *"Oh, they're unfair and I'm a victim and there's something to blame,"* look at it and think, *"Maybe there is something this thing's trying to teach me and to help me to go deeper -- to heal some deeper wound that I haven't allowed myself to face or own or process as yet."*

So based on whatever is going on in your life that feels like conflict or tension or negative energy, what do you think it's trying to heal in you? Or teach you? Or help you to see from a different perspective? Or ask for help? I don't know what it is, but I do absolutely believe that we're all here to heal something, if we're willing to choose that.

You know, one of the reasons I call this thing "Fueling the Flames of Forgiveness" is because, in the Bible, flames and fire represent purification. And that dense, heavy energy of unresolved hurt or anger or resentment kind of sits in us. And, as we forgive, we release that and allow that same dense energy to be purified into pure light, creative power and energy to transform it to create something greater and better in our lives.

And so, choosing healing as a part of choosing forgiveness is a powerful thing to transform that energy and to purify it from pain to power.

And then the final thing is that forgiveness is about **CHOOSING MASTERY**. Choosing mastery. Let me read you from Matthew 18:21: *"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times? How many times do I have to forgive?"* And Jesus responds, *"I say not until seven times, but 70 times seven."* That's 490, by the way. [Congregants laugh]

Do you think Jesus is saying you've got to forgive for 490 times, but on 491, you let them have it? [Congregants laugh] You cut loose on them then? [Congregants laugh]

The number seven in the Bible represents completion. And so, when the disciple's saying seven, he so wants to emphasize to do it all the time, he says 70 times seven. And what he is saying is to have forgiveness, not just be a one time or occasional thing, but it should be a consistent consciousness with which we live. To continually release and let go the resentments and the hurts and the reactions we have on a regular basis. Of consistently and daily choosing peace over pain, of choosing the present over the past, of choosing moving forward rather than being stuck. And he's talking about forgiveness as a way of life, a consciousness.

Matthew 5, Verse 43 to 48: *"Love your neighbors. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you. And pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you. Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect."*

And for us to develop spiritual mastery and to master forgiveness, we have to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. Now what that's meaning is that: when someone gives you hate or anger, return to them love and peace. That, no matter what comes at you, be perfect as our Heavenly Father – of always expressing good; of always expressing love; always expressing joy.

I want you to think of someone in your life who may be rubbing you the wrong way right now. I want you to close your eyes and think about them for a second. And I just want you to send them peace: blessings of peace. Can you take a deep breath? And from your heart, can you send them peace? Take another deep breath and, from your heart, can you send them love? Take another deep breath. And, from your heart, can you send them joy? And one more time, take a deep breath. And from your heart, send them God's abundant blessings. And take a deep breath.

And knowing that, the next time you do this, you will do it far more sincerely than you just did. [Congregants laugh] And I'm kind of joking and I'm kind of serious, because sometimes when we do different things like these -- these spiritual practices -- it feels mechanical, and it will be. But when you set the intention that you will open your heart and do it with compassion and love, that over time it really will begin to happen.

To close our eyes and send those we love, blessings of peace, love and joy is powerful. And I would say it is as, or even more, powerful when we send peace, love and joy to those with those with whom we're not getting along as well. They say, *"To err is human; to forgive, divine."* Because it is to send love -- even when pain has been sent our way -- to keep sending love, keep sending peace, keeping sending joy and love.

You know, self-mastery -- spiritual mastery -- can also be called enlightenment. It could be called be attaining the Christ's consciousness. It could be self-actualization. But that's why we're here! So, if we're having a difficult time forgiving somebody, we should say: Do I want to forgive and develop spiritual mastery? Because that can help us realize this is an important part of our path.

Emmett Fox says, *"If you cannot forgive, you cannot make any real spiritual progress."* If we cannot forgive, we cannot make spiritual progress. So, if you want spiritual mastery, we need to master forgiveness.

A woman goes to her priest and she's really troubled. She says, *"I have two female parrots. And the only line they know how to say is, 'Hi! We love to party; you want to have some fun?'"*

And the priest says, *"Oh, my God, this is absolutely terrible. That's terrible."* He's trying to think what's a solution. And he said, *"Hey, I've got an idea. I've got two male parrots, and I've taught them to read the Bible and pray with the rosary eight hours a day. Why don't you bring them over to my house? We'll put them in cage, and they'll have a much better influence over your parrots."*

So, they bring the two parrots over, put them in, and the two female parrots say *"Hi! We love to party; you want to have some fun?"*

Both the male pirates are stunned. They're totally in silence. And then the one reading the Bible turns to the other one and says, *"Put down your beads, Harry. Our prayers have been answered."* [Congregants laugh]

That joke had nothing to do with forgiveness ... other than asking your forgiveness that I told that joke. [Congregants laugh]

Every act of forgiveness adds fuel to brighten the inner flame within ourselves. When we forgive, we choose freedom over being stuck in the past. When we forgive, we choose compassion and opening our heart over judgment. When we forgive, we choose healing over holding onto the pain. And when we forgive, we choose spiritual mastery over just reacting. So, let's ignite our spirits by fueling the flames of forgiveness.

God bless you all.

Copyright 2025 Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center/Rev. Richard Maraj