



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

**Program #5110**  
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### WELCOME

**Daniel Pawlus:** Welcome to *30 Good Minutes!* We're glad you've joined us for this half-hour reflection on faith. I'm Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I'm Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is Dr. Brad Braxton from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He'll be talking to us about what it really means to forgive someone.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We also welcome back Rabbi Michael Siegel, who reflects on the story of a 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi with an important lesson about forgiveness.

**Lydia Talbot:** And we begin with a powerful story of forgiveness from a woman who, at the age of ten years old, was taken with her twin sister to Auschwitz, where Dr. Josef Mengele used them for medical experiments. Eva Kor didn't speak publicly about her experience for more than 30 years. Then, in 1995, at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, she stood by the ruins of the gas chambers and read a document forgiving her Nazi tormentors. Let's hear the story in her own words.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**Eva Kor:** I, Eva Moses Kor, a twin who survived as a child Josef Mengele experiment at Auschwitz 50 years ago, hereby give amnesty to all Nazis who participated directly or indirectly in the murder of my family and millions of others.

Forgiveness is nothing more and nothing less but an act of self-healing, an act of self-empowerment. Pain was lifted from my shoulder. There I was no longer a victim of Auschwitz. There I was no longer a prisoner of my tragic past. There I was finally free. This is the last picture of the family. Everybody here, except me, are dead.

My mother was still holding on to us as the SS was running around, yelling in German, "Twins." And at that moment another SS came, pulled my mother in one direction and we were left, Miriam and I, holding hands, completely bewildered, crying, not knowing what would happen to us. They burned into my left arm the capital letter "A-7063." We were taken to our barracks. There on the filthy floor were scattered corpses of three children, so I made a silent pledge that I will do anything within my power to make sure that Miriam and I shall not end up on that filthy, littered floor.

I arrived in Auschwitz a very religious child. I don't think that after the war I was ever again religious. I don't know if there is a God or not, and if there is, I want a debate when I go up there. I never, ever thought that I would ever forgive anybody. Then I remembered that a documentary was done by German television and there was a Nazi doctor from Auschwitz and I figured that he might be still alive. He treated me with the utmost respect and he was extremely remorseful that he was part of that regime. I tried to figure out, how can I thank a Nazi for helping me document the history and the operation of the

gas chamber? I said to myself, how about a simple letter of forgiveness?

Now, there are people, of course, of faith who might say that it was God's will. In my opinion, forgiveness is a seed for peace. Victimhood and anger is a seed for war. If we could teach every angry person what the anger can create... [Whatever is difficult, you are going to be able to overcome it. Do you want a hug? Yeah.] ...and instead of being angry, that they can turn their life around and become creative members of society, we would not need any more tanks or bombs.

### INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** "Forgiveness is a seed for peace," Eva Kor said. A remarkable woman! To learn more about Eva Kor's story, we recommend the documentary "Forgiving Dr. Mengele." For more information, please visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org).

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Dr. Brad Braxton is an Associate Professor of Preaching and New Testament at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee. Brad is a Baptist minister and former Rhodes Scholar, whose books include "Preaching Paul" and "No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience." We're honored to welcome Brad Braxton back to *30 Good Minutes*. Welcome, Brad.

### MESSAGE

**Brad Braxton:** Thank you. I'm delighted to be here!

Listen to a reading from Matthew, chapter 18, verses 21 and 22:

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*

The title of my message is "What To Do When You're Messed Over."

At a bowling alley, two men were talking about marriage. One man said, "My wife and I argue a lot, and every time we argue she gets *historical*. His friend interrupted him, "You meant to say that she gets *hysterical*, didn't you?" The first man responded, "No, when my wife and I argue, she doesn't get hysterical; she gets *historical*. She drags up everything from the past and holds it against me."

I wonder if some of us are excessively *historical* in our relationships. With pinpoint accuracy, some of us can recall every bad thing that has ever happened to us and the smallest details surrounding each event. Perhaps you cannot anticipate the future or enjoy the present because you are imprisoned by the pain of your past.

Like re-runs on cable TV, some of us have hurtful memories playing repeatedly on the screens of our minds, and these mental re-runs can make us hysterical. There is often a fine line between being too historical and being hysterical in our relationships. The unwillingness to move beyond episodes where we've been messed over can create spiritual dysfunction that hinders us from enjoying God's peace, power, and prosperity. Thus, the question before us is this: When people have messed over us, what are we, as God's people, to do? Jesus provides an answer, "Forgive."

In Matthew 18, the Apostle Peter poses a question to Jesus. "Jesus, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In other words, forgiveness is not a product that we should seek to quantify. It is a practice that enriches the quality of one's character.

The ability to forgive is a Christian's birthmark—a sign that we have been born anew spiritually. To be a Christian is to be forgiven. To be a Christian is also to be someone who forgives. Godly forgiveness is counter-cultural. We live in a culture that says, "If you mess over me, I will sue you or worse." Ours is an age of countless lawsuits, continual retaliation, and cold, calculated revenge. Matthew 18, however, compels us to take our cues from Christ, not from culture. We are in the world but not of the world.

Permit me to offer a working definition of Godly forgiveness: Forgiveness is the disciplined, lifelong commitment to offer Godly reactions to ungodly actions.

Forgiveness requires discipline. We must work at it. Like a muscle, forgiveness will be flabby and weak unless we exercise it. Forgiveness also requires a lifelong commitment. It is not a sporadic occurrence: 7 times. It is a lifelong commitment: 77 times. As a lifelong commitment, forgiveness involves every aspect of our existence. Furthermore, forgiveness requires us to focus on our reactions, not the actions of others. We cannot control other people's actions, but by the power of the Holy Spirit we can control our reactions, even our reactions to unrighteousness.

As I explore what forgiveness is, I also need to explain what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not condoning wrong. God does not expect us to ignore injustice or injury. Sin must be acknowledged for what it is both by the victims and the perpetrators. Too often, Christians equate forgiveness with passively accepting or ignoring wrong. That's why so many victims end up bitter and angry.

When the church preaches that forgiveness requires persons to put themselves in situations to be victimized, the church dispenses cheap and lethal grace. For example, the church should never send battered women back to their homes to be beaten. Genuine grace creates new life and does not condemn us to old patterns of death. When Christians fail to insist that perpetrators confess, repent, and make restitution for injustice, we short-circuit the transforming power of forgiveness. Rather than condoning wrong, forgiveness responds to wrong in the right way. This kind of response involves courage so that genuine justice can lead to genuine grace which can lead to genuine healing.

Forgiveness also should not be simply equated with forgetting. The slogan "forgive and forget" is a recipe for denial, not a formula for forgiveness. Forgiveness does not require spiritual amnesia. There are some hurts and scars from our past that need to be remembered. Getting historical can bring healing.

Healing is not found in forgetting; it is found in holy—not hostile—remembering. We remember the hurts of our past not to repeatedly play the role of victim or to hold the perpetrators hostage with guilt. Instead, through a holy remembering, we are empowered to make wiser choices in the present and the future and to help perpetrators do the same.

Remembering the hurts of South African apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that forgiveness draws out "the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence." We remember the evil done to us in the past in order to liberate the past from evil. Once the sting of evil is removed, the past is redeemed to impart to us wisdom for today and tomorrow.

Forgiveness does not condone evil; nor does it require us to forget. What it does require is "release," the release of the negativity and hostility associated with being messed over. In Matthew 18, the Greek verb translated "to forgive" also means "to let go." Even if justice for our injuries is delayed or denied, Christ compels us to forgive so the desire for revenge will not poison our souls.

Like the Apostle Peter, many of us have asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times should we forgive?" Just as

Jesus' response likely puzzled Peter, it baffles us as well. "Seventy-seven times is a whole lot of forgiveness, Jesus." To that response, Jesus replies, "Seventy-seven times; seventy-seven hundred times; seventy-seven thousand times; or even seventy-seven million times cannot compare to that one time that God forgave the whole world." On a skull-shaped hill on a dark Friday, as Rome "messed over" him, Jesus pleaded with God from that old rugged cross, "Father, forgive them!"

All of us have been messed over at one time or another. Yet Christ, our Great Redeemer, our great Liberator calls us to forgive because we have been forgiven.

### CONVERSATION

**Lydia Talbot:** If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Brad Braxton, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now let's talk to Dr. Brad Braxton. Terrific, strong message on forgiveness, Brad. You started the message with the statement that people who do not forgive are imprisoned by the past. Have you ever felt that way?

**Brad Braxton:** I have felt that way. In fact, part of my experience with forgiveness comes from my own hurts and the notion that forgiveness actually is a gift of liberation to oneself. I finally realized that in order to really be free and to have the abundance that Christ offers to us and the liberation that is promised to us in Scripture, I had to give myself the gift of forgiveness so that I could be a better Brad.

**Lydia Talbot:** To be free. You addressed that in the Bray Lectures you were invited to give at Oxford on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the slave trade. How does that weave in? What do you say to people about that history?

**Brad Braxton:** It's a powerful narrative that I've been involved in the last couple of months. This year represents the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the slave trade in the British Empire. So groups in London, England invited me to come and help communities think about that tremendous hostility that was sowed into the moral universe centuries ago. And so one of the things that I've been thinking about is, how do you speak to those who were involved, or at least the heirs of those who were involved in the slave trade? How do you help them come to grips with that tremendous hostility? And then also, how do you speak a word of healing to those who were the victims or the heirs of the victims? So I've been moving around the country and even the world thinking about forgiveness, giving this gift of liberation so that we might have a better world, a more peaceful world, a world of release, as I mentioned in the message, where no longer are we bottled up with hostility, but we let that go for the sake of a better and more just, peaceful world.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And to hear you talk, Brad, this is a very active process, isn't it? That we have to engage ourselves in a very conscious way.

**Brad Braxton:** It is.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Do you think we do that often enough or do we wait for the timing of forgiveness to show itself and then take action in that moment?

**Brad Braxton:** I think too often religious communities have taught that forgiveness is a passive reality. But if you come at it as an active spiritual discipline, then you need to be honest with yourself and say that when you suffer a hurt, when a wrong is done to you, there is a process that one has to go through. By no means do I want to say to people that forgiveness is an automatic process. There is a place for anger. There is a place for bitterness. But what I'm trying to suggest is, it cannot stay long to take root in your heart and in your soul. So that you must actively—through conversation, through meditation, through this process of reflection—learn to get this hostility out of you lest your whole being be poisoned by this. So I think we

need to do a better job of teaching that it is an active spiritual discipline.

**Lydia Talbot:** Is acknowledgment of the injustice for the victim an integral part of that process?

**Brad Braxton:** It is a major part of the process. Something about that acknowledgment humanizes those who have been injured. And it says, in spite of you trying to move on, that is, you the perpetrator, I have not moved on. There is something that is still hurting me and my community and I need you to acknowledge that because in acknowledging that you are actually acknowledging my humanity and now we can engage in a process of moving forward towards a new future.

**Lydia Talbot:** You've quoted Archbishop Desmond Tutu in your message, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It also reminded me of the Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation who are against the death penalty, who have forgiven those who have taken the lives of their loved ones. You said that forgiveness is a Christian birthmark. But what do you say to non-Christians?

**Brad Braxton:** I would say the same thing to non-Christians, in the sense of those persons who are really concerned about goodness in the world, who are concerned about positive moral energy, even if they do not make any kind of particular faith claim. If they are concerned about a better world, for us and for those who come after us, it too should be a birthmark for a moral person, a person who says as long as I keep hostility within me, the world will be a place of violence and a place of warfare. But it is at this individual level that we must start. I want that birthmark, whether or not I'm a Christian; whether I'm a Jew, a Muslim or a person of no religious affiliation. It is what it means to be a moral person concerned about goodness and positive spiritual energy in the world.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We've only got about 30 seconds left, Brad. I think of the recent example of the Amish in the forgiveness over the murders in the schoolhouse. The wonderful part of this is the end product of this transforming power of forgiveness, isn't it?

**Brad Braxton:** Absolutely. I think about the Apostle Paul and II Corinthians 5, where he talks about a new creation. Indeed, if there is to be a new creation, forgiveness must become a regular part of our spiritual practice. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, "We must forgive if there is to be a future."

**Daniel Pawlus:** Thank you so much for being with us today, Brad. We appreciate it.

**Brad Braxton:** Thank you.

#### INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** And now our friend, Michael Siegel, Senior Rabbi of Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, has this final thought on forgiveness.

#### REFLECTION

**Michael Siegel:** The great Rabbi Susya of Hanipol was once asked to speak in a far away community. The journey was long and the rain fell for most of it. When he finally arrived in the community it was already late and there was no time to freshen up or change his clothes. Rabbi Susya went to the Synagogue with filthy clothes on. At the door he was reprimanded by one of the townspeople. "Don't you know that the great Rabbi Susya is coming today? How dare you beggars come around wearing such filthy clothing?" And he was sent away. The next morning the Rabbi was introduced to the community. After his lecture the man came and apologized to the Rabbi for the case of mistaken identity. To this Rabbi Susya said: "It is not me that you should be asking forgiveness, it is from all beggars." So often we ask for forgiveness from those who can have an effect on our lives. The others who equally deserve to be approached are too often ignored. Forgiveness should be about the act and not about the individual being asked.

CLOSING REMARKS

**Lydia Talbot:** Thank you, Michael. And our thanks again to Dr. Brad Braxton, Eva Kor, and you for joining us today on *30 Good Minutes*. I'm Lydia Talbot.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at *30 Good Minutes*, may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.