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THE
SECRET
POWER OF
KINDNESS

**GREG
ATKINSON**

Foreword by Mark Batterson

**THE
SECRET
POWER OF**

KEYNES

***10 Keys to Unlocking Your
Capacity to Change the World***

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PRESS**

Plano, Texas

**THE SECRET POWER OF KINDNESS:
10 KEYS TO UNLOCKING YOUR CAPACITY
TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I want to acknowledge my first mentor, Jerry Stepp, who not only invested in me and changed the trajectory of my life but is the kindest person I know.

I'd also like to acknowledge my wife, Amanda, for her love and support of this project and my work.

I'd like to dedicate this book to my three kids: Grace, Tommy, and Katie, who are the sweetest and kindest kids I could ask for. I'm so proud to be their Dad.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to my father-in-law, George Montagno, who was a kind and gentle soul, and the memory of my wife's cousin, Kris Petterson, who was one in a million and while leaving this world at the young age of 26, she made an impact on innumerable lives. You lit up a room. May our world see more people live and be like your example.



PREFACE

“The secret power of kindness is the self-awareness to know that you have the power to make or break someone else’s day and eventually change the world. Kindness has no hidden agenda or strings attached. Its only purpose is to express love to another soul made in the image of God.”

—**Greg Atkinson**

“Kindness has been defined as loaning someone your strength instead of reminding them of their weakness.”

—**Brené Brown**

“Kind words soothe and quiet and comfort the hearer. They pull him out of his sour, morose, unkind feelings. We have not yet begun to use kind words in such abundance as they ought to be used.”

—**Blaise Pascal**

“Always be a little kinder than necessary.”

—**James M. Barrie**

Kindness: noun; the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate.

Imagine a world where everyone is kind to one another. Don’t we all agree that the world needs more kindness? Not only does the world need more kindness but it would be a better place if we each displayed kindness in our daily lives.

Preface

As Christians, we believe that kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit that flows out of us naturally when we are abiding in Christ. The more time you spend with Jesus, the kinder you will be. But kindness is also a choice that comes out of a soul at peace with itself, a soul that feels free.

Whereas we would imagine that Christians should be the kindest people on earth, given our faith in Christ's promise and our commitment to his way of life, most of us know that this is not the case. In fact, sometimes it seems that we struggle more than others to show kindness, especially when our most beloved traditions or opinions are at stake.

But why? What prevents us from behaving kindly toward others? Why is it so hard for us to exude the simple acts of kindness that bind all of us closer as fellow human beings?

As humans, Christians too, sometimes our hearts can get locked into places of pain and fear caused by our experiences with the world, misunderstandings about God, or our own unreasonable expectations of ourselves. Once we become enmeshed in misconceptions, anger, pain, or perfectionism, it can become tough to see ourselves kindly, let alone emit kindness to the world. This can be the case even for the most ardent of Christians.

We live in a complicated world. People today face a myriad of problems. Yet, we know that kindness can be the powerful force we need to make positive change in our world, to unlock anger and bitterness, heal divisions, forge relationships, and foster respect. Think about it. Simply choosing to be kind to someone could be the healing balm that he or she needs that day. Have you ever smiled at a waiter or a cashier who looked beyond stressed or simply blue, and then saw them suddenly light up? Kindness is a secret weapon. It disarms people and breaks down their defensive walls. Kindness unlocks kindness. Complimenting people, commending people, af-

firming people, and thanking people can make all the difference in their day, their attitude, and in their life and yours.

Kindness changes the way we look at people. To cultivate kindness within ourselves not only helps us to be kind to others but gives us a fresher, easier perspective on life, one that is filled with grace, love, and hope. You never know the impact you may have on an individual simply by practicing the power of kindness.

I've seen many wounded, bitter people who have grown so mean, nasty, and hateful that you couldn't help but see the prison walls that they had built up around their lives. Kindness begins to flow when we free ourselves and others from the walls and fences that divide and confine us.

I invite you to read this book like a mirror. In it, I will show you some ways that you can begin to unlock the prison walls surrounding you—those fears and feelings that are keeping you from feeling God's joy within and from expressing that joy in kindness toward others. Ask God to reveal those areas of your life that you need to address, and pray for the courage to do your part in that work of change as you humbly submit your will to His.

As you delve into this book, my prayer for you is that God would open your eyes to all that you can become for yourself and others. Remarkable change can happen when you realize that you're loved just as you are. Let me share with you what I have learned about unlocking the "secret power" of kindness.



INTRODUCTION

“As long as we remain resentful about things we wish had not happened, about relationships that we wish had turned out differently, mistakes we wish we had not made, part of our heart remains isolated, unable to bear fruit in the new life ahead.”

—Henri Nouwen

When I was young, I loved fishing. My favorite place to fish was a pond not far from my home, a quiet place filled with life, simplicity, and the sounds of nature—crickets chirping, birds singing, fish splashing, frogs leaping. Here on the banks of the pond, fishing pole in hand, I felt happy. My soul felt at peace and calm. Often, I would spend the entire day at the pond, catching fish, enjoying the wind in my hair, and listening for God’s voice. That was the best part. I could hear God speaking to me in that peaceful place, telling me I was loved.

Having had a difficult and traumatic childhood, the pond was my solace; fishing became my healing balm, and prayer became my comfort. I longed daily for the peace I found in fishing. And yet, that pond was not as easy to access each day as I might have wished. Surrounded by a tall, sturdy fence, the area could only be entered into through a single gateway at the edge of the woods. Nearby stood a shed. When the ranger was in the shed, he would kindly come and unlock the series of padlocks on the gate and grant me access. No matter how many times I came, he always let me in.

Introduction

When he wasn't there however, I faced a dilemma. The fence was too high to climb, too slim to slide through, and I had no way to open the gate—or so I thought. It took a long time, and a lot of failed attempts, for me to realize that I had access to the keys to unlock that gate all by myself all along.

I could enter the shed, which was always left open. Once I stepped in the door, I knew where to find the box with the keys inside. All I needed to do was to find the right keys to unlock the padlocks on the gate. After that, each time I came to the pond, I began to pay more attention when the ranger unlocked the gate. When the ranger wasn't there, I gradually learned how to gain access all by myself—access to the pond, access to peace, access to the freedom and power inside of me.

Although those days of boyhood are now long past, the lessons learned stay with me to this day. My keys to peace and wellness come from learning how to open the gates to the fences that keep me locked into places of unrest, anger, self-criticism, and doubt.

Through years of unlocking my own fences, I have learned to be kind to myself, unlike those who were unkind to me, and to find peace within myself, unlike the tumult I sought to escape. Then I noticed a pattern. The kinder I felt toward myself, the kinder I became to others.

I have long lamented the plight of all those who have suffered traumas similar to what I endured, or who have felt wounded by illness, poverty, anxiety, other people, or even by the church itself, and who have become locked into places of inaccessibility in their hearts and souls.

Sometimes, we can be hindered simply by our inability to see past untrue things we've been taught about God. Sometimes, we may succumb to the false limitations of rigid dogma, traditions, rituals, or rules that have governed our churches and inhibited us from emotional and spiritual growth. Sometimes, we may suffer from the idea

that to be a member of a church requires a level of inhuman perfectionism that we continually fail to meet. Or perhaps we are simply our own inner critics, unaccepting of our imperfections, critical of our mistakes, angry with those who disagree with us, and prone to protect and control our turf. All of these become fences that require unlocking if we want to become the kind and loving people we hope to be.

The truth is, with God's help, we hold the keys to unlock the kind of change we want to see in the world as Christians, in ourselves and in others. We have the power within us to be extraordinarily kind, to be the people of God we were meant to be, to demonstrate over-the-top kindness that goes the extra mile, to start a "kindness movement" that spreads and multiples. But first, we must learn to tap into that "secret" place within us where kindness, love, and peace dwell.

In this book, we will learn about the fences that we allow to form around us, we will identify the keys that will unlock our true kindness potential, we will find that true peace and joy that comes with self-acceptance and love, and we will free ourselves to experience and practice the secret power of kindness.



***“BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER, TENDERHEARTED,
FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER, AS GOD IN CHRIST
FORGAVE YOU.”***

—EPHESIANS 4:32 (ESV)

***“THE MOST PROFOUND THING WE CAN OFFER
OUR CHILDREN IS OUR OWN HEALING.”***

—ANNE LAMOTT





Key One

UNLOCKING FORGIVENESS

How to Replace Hostility and Bitterness with
Mercy and Compassion

John Stott quotes the administrator of the largest psychiatric hospital in London, who said, “If the people here only knew what it means to forgive, I could dismiss half of them at once.” In the same way, when a news reporter asked Billy Graham, “What do you see as the biggest obstacle in people’s lives,” Reverend Graham responded, “Unforgiveness. I believe that 75 percent of patients in hospitals would be made whole if they would forgive.” Pain in life is inevitable. It is also crushing and devastating. I’ve been on the highest mountaintops and in the lowest valleys throughout my nearly fifty years on planet Earth.

My mentor always said, “Every man or woman has a father wound and a church wound.” I have both. I’ve been deeply hurt, wounded, neglected, and abused by my earthly father. I’ve also been deeply hurt, wounded, betrayed, and lied about by church members where I previously served as a pastor. If that were not enough, I also suffered the trauma of sexual abuse at a daycare when I was just a young child.

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In the following pages you will read about the devastating toxicity of wounds and the healing power of forgiveness. It's vital that you address the emotional and spiritual wounds in your life. If you don't, you will become like a soldier wounded on the battlefield whose toxic wounds go un(a)dressed: that soldier is going to become extremely sick. No matter your trauma or hurt—whether it's family of origin wounds, father wounds, church wounds, sexual abuse wounds, or any other of numerous scenarios—if you don't address your wounds, you're going to become bitter, toxic, and emotionally or spiritually ill. In order to begin to access our inner well of kindness, we will need to start by acknowledging the fences we have erected around us that harbor and perpetuate our wounds. Then we need to start unlocking the parts of ourselves that we have refused to access for fear of stoking and poking those wounds.

The first key then that we need to search for in our toolbox is the key that will unlock our ability to forgive. That key for us is shaped like a caduceus symbol, the pharmacological symbol of healing, because for us, forgiveness is an antidote that can restore our souls to wellness.

The secret power of kindness, when released, can solve most of our problems, not only personally but as a nation collectively. Taking the first step to unlock our ability for forgiveness begins to release that personal power.

How can we talk about initiating forgiveness and kindness in a world that is so cruel? How do we forgive when bad—sometimes unbelievably bad—things happen to us? In this chapter, I'm going to share some thoughts on the secret power of kindness and the key role that forgiveness plays in our lives.

How you deal with the trauma and pain in your life—including how you respond to it—will shape your life presently and in the future. The bottom line is that you have a choice—you can become bitter or better. Kindness is the remedy, and forgiveness is the anti-

dote. There's no doubt in my mind that you can live a whole and healthy life, even if it hurts to get there.

WHY FORGIVENESS MATTERS

“Forgiveness doesn’t excuse their behavior. Forgiveness prevents their behavior from destroying your heart.”

—*Justin and Trisha Davis, Beyond Ordinary*

When I was a young boy, I was molested and sexually assaulted by a man at a Baptist church daycare. I was around five years old, and I blocked it from my mind—at least I thought I did. As I grew in years, I started thinking, since I was so young, that I was simply confused. Maybe I was mistaken about what happened at the daycare. I blocked it all out, and I went on with life. Later, when I started going to a therapist for other issues in my life, the memories started to come back.

Once, I met with a pastor and mentor. He was unlike many pastors that I had ever known. In fact, he has what's called “a prophetic gift.” Without me saying anything, he told me what had happened to me as a boy. As he talked, memories flooded into my mind. Vivid memories. Difficult memories. I remembered everything about the abuse and the perpetrator.

As soon as I got back home, I called someone who was at the daycare with me. I said, “Hey, man, I don’t know if you remember that daycare we went to when we were young, but I got molested there.” My poor friend—I just blurted it out without so much of a thought as to how it sounded or what he would think. But just as I finished my sentence, he responded, “I know, it happened to me too.” I started crying. Even though I was only five when the sexual abuse happened, I felt horrible that I couldn’t protect my friend from what I knew was soul-destroying pain and trauma.

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Survivors of sexual abuse, especially children, experience trauma through feelings of confusion, fear, humiliation, and shame. When people are abused, shame falls on their shoulders; they feel as though they did something wrong. That shame follows them into adulthood and implants itself into their hearts until they can experience healing. Forgiveness allows them that healing. Forgiveness is not a benefit for the perpetrator, but a healing salve for the victim.

While at therapy I learned that shame is not from God. It originates from the enemy of our souls. God convicts us of sin to bring us out of shame, not to put us into it. Shame often fuels addiction and other unruly behavior, because it drives a person further down into a pit of shame.

God will never shame you. That's not God's way of transforming us. Shame is not rooted in love. Shame and love do not coincide.

Shame silences victims of abuse. We don't want to think about it, and we especially don't want to talk about it. A big part of my healing journey consisted of dealing with the shame that I felt. Once I did, that changed my whole trajectory.

Another difficult part of abuse is lack of validation. When sharing about my own sexual abuse with a family member, my family member replied, "No, you're mistaken. That certainly didn't happen. Absolutely not." There's nothing more painful than to go through trauma like that and then not be validated.

I've been asked a few times what happened to the perpetrator of my abuse. I honestly don't know. Since it was kept hidden for so many years, I don't know if he ever faced the music. But no matter where he is (or even if he's not alive anymore), my journey toward healing would need to include forgiving not only my abuser but also my family member, whether or not that person ever chooses to believe my testimony.

Forgiving means letting go of the anger, pain, shame, and guilt that I carry upon my back and no longer allowing my abuser to have

a perpetrating and influential role in my emotional and spiritual life. In forgiving, I render him powerless.

“YOU ARE NOT ALONE”—THE GAPING FATHER WOUND

“The major turning points I’ve seen for a lot of successful people:

- 1. The day they give their life to Jesus.*
- 2. The day they forgive their dad.”*

—Ryan Leak, Twitter, June 19, 2022

“You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.”

—Anne Lamott, Twitter, April 23, 2012

My father was a very harsh man. Most of my memories of him consist of me receiving verbal and physical abuse. He was constantly yelling at me. Not surprisingly, I never heard him tell me that he loved me.

While my dad was many things, he was also a man who had been deeply hurt in life. Though I don’t know a whole lot about his history, what I do know was that his life was difficult right from the beginning. His dad died in the Spanish Civil War, and his mom died giving birth to him.

My dad grew up in an orphanage until he finally got adopted by the Atkinsons, which of course is how I received my last name. The Atkinsons were a rich family who adopted my dad as little more than a charity case. They didn’t give him any attention and certainly didn’t give him any affection.

When my dad got to middle school, his adoptive parents decided to send him off to military school. The boarding school was full-time, and though some kids went home for holidays and other special events, my dad did not. The Atkinsons paid for his tuition

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through high school but never brought him home. In fact, once my dad was sent off to military school, he never saw his parents again for the rest of his life. Can you imagine that? Is it any wonder that my dad lived in a constant state of turmoil?

Of course, I didn't know my father's background until much later in life. So growing up with him was unbearable for me in many ways. My dad would ruin every meal we had, whether we were at home or at a restaurant.

At home, the yelling started as soon as I sat down at the table. He would yell at me to sit up straight (thanks to his experience at military school) and get my elbows off the table. My siblings and I would be in tears trying to eat dinner. He would just destroy the whole mood. Going out to eat was not any better. If something got messed up on his order, he would aggressively lean into the waitress, and because he was so mean, she would end up crying—something that made all of us embarrassed.

The first time I ever brought my college girlfriend (a woman whom I ended up marrying) home to meet my parents turned into a nightmare. We went on a drive with my dad to see a lake front property that he was purchasing. I was in the front seat, and my girlfriend was in the back. It didn't take long into the drive when my father started biting my head off, uncontrollably screaming and yelling at me. I was hurt and upset. My girlfriend had just met him. Wouldn't you think he would have put on a good face for company?

I remember looking out the window at the lake with tears in my eyes, feeling both humiliated and embarrassed. I couldn't believe he was talking to me like this in front of my new girlfriend. Meanwhile, my girlfriend was shell-shocked. This behavior was completely contrary to how her dad interacted with everyone. Of course, I got to know her dad while we were dating and then when we married. Her dad is an exceedingly kind, loving, and gentle man.

I would find out later just how livid my girlfriend was that day at my dad. When she became a part of “our family” through marriage, she would come to see just how harsh my dad was toward me.

When I was 12, I found out that I had half-sisters and a half-brother because my dad had been married before—something he kept secret and hidden from my mom. When my dad met my mom, she said she would never marry somebody who had been divorced. So, my dad just kept it a secret. That bit of news was traumatizing to me and rocked my world.

I thought I was my dad’s firstborn (the only thing I felt I had going for me). My dad’s name is Tom, and I had always wondered why I wasn’t named after him. Well, he already had another son named Tom.

When I met my counselor for the first time and gave her all the information regarding my dad (with a lot more details, I’m afraid), she looked me in the face and said, “You had a very traumatizing childhood.”

Later, I would meet my half-brother, Tom, who was terribly angry, having grown up without his dad in his life. He became a Christian and worked through the process of forgiving our dad. Today, Tom and I have a good relationship, and we are always in awe at how God brought us together and worked in both of our lives to bring about much-needed healing through the balm of forgiveness. Recently, at a Boston Red Sox baseball game, Tom told me, “You know, it’s funny. I’ve always wanted a brother.”

My dad died of a heart attack on May 27, 1997. He was sixty years old. I was just twenty-one years old. On the day he died, I had been reading my Bible, specifically Psalm 66. I read the verse where it says that God is “a father to the fatherless” and circled it. It caught my interest, as I had never noticed that verse before. Next to the circled verse, I wrote the day’s date, 5-27-97, a habit I had gotten into when I noticed something I had never seen before in Scripture.

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Later that same day, my Uncle Joel called me and told me my dad had just died of a heart attack.

It's been twenty-six years since my dad died. A large part of my healing journey came about by realizing that God is the father I never had. He's a father to the fatherless. This was huge for me. Many people struggle with the concept of God, especially God as their heavenly Father, because they had an imperfect earthly father. Maybe as you're reading this, you can relate to what I'm saying. Perhaps your father is a mean man, harsh, abusive, or mostly absent, and you just can't relate to God as a father figure. I get it. I struggled with the same concept until I realized that God is a father to the fatherless. He's the perfect Father I never had—one that loves me perfectly, brings about healing in my life, and provides great comfort.

For the last twenty-six years I have related to God in a whole new way as a father, something I couldn't do as a boy. I wish I'd seen that verse when I was younger. However, I find it loving and special that God would show me that verse on the actual date of my dad's death. It was as if God was preparing me for the news and saying, "Hey, look at this verse, I'm a father to the fatherless." It was a special embrace from God that nudged me towards my healing journey.

It would take a long time for me to truly forgive my father. But seeing God as my true father helped me to begin to unlock my ability to forgive and to heal that gaping wound inside.

THE DEEP WOUNDS OF CHURCH HURT

"God heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds."

—Psalm 147:3 (CEB)

One of the reasons I speak often at mental health conferences is because I have bipolar disorder. There's still a huge stigma attached

to mental illness—especially bipolar disorder. People think bipolar means crazy, which is not the case at all. In fact, many people with bipolar disorder are intelligent, operate businesses, have families, and hold leadership positions in the community.

My wife, myself, and our kids were living in Missouri in 2011. We loved it, and it easily became our home. I had worked in the community and really wanted to place down roots. I interviewed with a popular multi-campus church in our area. I was extremely excited about the prospect of becoming a campus pastor. During the interview for the job, I was upfront, and told them I had a mood and anxiety disorder. They were not bothered by that news and in fact said, “That’s not a problem.”

I got the job and started working at one of the campuses almost immediately. I really loved being a campus pastor. Along with our team, we reached out to the community in many ways, and it was a blessing to see the church grow. In fact, in a short amount of time, we tripled our attendance. Our campus also set records for baptisms. We were busting out of the seams. The lead pastor of the church was thrilled with what was going on at my campus. We had built a good relationship, and he would hug me every week and say, “You’re doing such an excellent job. You’re the man. You’re doing great.”

I had been with the church for about two and a half years, and I really felt that I should share with the lead pastor about being bipolar. So, when I saw him in the hall one day, I told him that I wanted to tell him something about me. He said, “Man, Greg, you can tell me anything.”

I thought to myself, *well, we will see.*

Weeks later, in a meeting, I said, “Remember when you hired me, and I told you that I had a mood and anxiety disorder?”

“Sure, I remember that. It wasn’t a big deal,” he said.

I looked at him and said, “Well, that mood disorder is actually bipolar—that’s what I have.”

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His whole facial expression changed—he looked angry.

A month later, the lead pastor asked my wife and me to meet with him and the executive pastor. As we sat in the office, my wife and I were stunned when the lead pastor coldly read a letter that said I was being fired because the insurance company could not provide liability coverage for a pastor / counselor with bipolar disorder. It was a shocking proclamation. The lead pastor made it sound as though his hand was forced, that if he didn't let me go, they would lose their liability insurance. This reason ended up not being true.

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote an article on the subject, and when they interviewed the church's insurer, GuideOne Insurance, they denied that they ever said that or participated in the matter.¹ I knew the lead pastor had lied. He had operated out of his own prejudices, bias, and views of bipolar.

I chose to take the high road. I decided to resign to keep the peace and unity in the church and agreed to write a letter (that church leadership would have to approve) that would be read to the congregation. I asked if I could meet with the lead pastor once again before my final day at the church. When I met with him in his office, another pastor was there as well. The lead pastor was anxious and asked me three times in the meeting, "Are you going to sue us?" He had reason to be anxious. The American Disabilities Act (ADA) states that it's illegal to fire somebody or not hire somebody due to mental health reasons. The lead pastor asked me yet again, "Are you going to sue us?" I politely said, "No, I'm not going to sue you."

On my last day of church, the lead pastor came to our campus. After I read my resignation letter, I sat down up front, so the lead pastor could deliver the sermon. But before he started to preach, he

1. Ian Lovett, January 20, 2020, *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/its-like-i-got-kicked-out-of-my-family-churches-struggle-with-mental-health-in-the-ranks-11579547221>.

told the congregation that after the service they could come down front to hug me and say goodbye.

The line of people was long. Besides the pleasant words and hugs, I also got whispers in my ear—“I have depression and have never told anyone. Thank you for your courage,” “I have anxiety. Thank you for speaking up,” “I have bipolar too. Thank you for being so brave.” The whispers kept coming, one after another, after another.

Twenty-five percent of people sitting in church today have mental health issues. After the coronavirus pandemic, this percentage rose even higher.

Thanks to the *Wall Street Journal* article, much needed attention was placed on how we deal with mental illness as a society—not only in our country but in our churches as well. I was encouraged by the many calls and emails I received from Christian leaders around the nation.

Working in ministry is a beautiful calling, but it can also be disappointing when one is faced with situations in which Christians don't behave like Christ. I have worked at three mega churches and have had the experience of feeling chewed up and eventually spit out when not needed anymore. Sadly, when people experience church hurt—whether they work in ministry or attend a church where they have had a traumatic experience—they often walk away from their faith or become angry with God.

But church leaders are just people—flawed, sinful humans, just like the rest of us. Shouldn't they be a good example and take accountability for their actions? Yes, of course. I was disappointed in some of the leaders I worked for and was hurt by this as well. But in order to begin to forgive, we need first to see our leaders and peers as fellow human beings with their own sins and foibles.

In our culture we tend to idolize people. We put them up on a pedestal until they come crashing down. Then we walk away from what they represented. We idolize pastors—especially mega-church

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pastors—and treat them like rock stars. Then the moment they do something wrong, we crash. Our idol is broken, and we walk away from God, as if we are surprised that Christians are, well, human.

When I say this, I'm not minimizing the wounds I have from church hurt. In our culture, in which we see sex abuse cases raging in churches and even in the higher ranks of denominations, it is critical that churches remain accountable and that survivors of abuse or church hurt are heard and protected. But for those who know Christ, we need to realize that we are following Christ, not the pastor or the leader who did wrong.

Through the hurts I experienced by leaders in church, I found an ever-increasing faith in God. God was always my comforter and my defender, and God would be my healer as well.

FORGIVING MEANS LETTING GO OF WHAT "SHOULD" HAVE BEEN

Forgiving is always a process. When I was let go (resigned) from the church in Missouri, my plans came crashing down. I had planned to be at the church and in that community for the long haul. I loved southwest Missouri, the church, and the community. I wanted my kids to graduate from the local high school, Carthage. My ministry career was flourishing, and I was receiving invitations to talk at conferences around the nation. But when my job was terminated, so was the vision and plans of what I had expected to be a life-long endeavor in that church and in that community.

All my heroes in ministry have been at their churches for twenty years or more. They committed to a particular church, a particular community, and that area of service. I wanted that for myself. I didn't want to jump around from church to church, or town to town. I wanted to stay somewhere for decades. However, that would not be my story. I not only had to forgive the pastor who lied in Missouri

but also other pastors or leaders who promised me the world but fell short on delivering. I had to grieve that I wouldn't have a several-decades-long ministry at this particular church.

My family and I ended up moving back to the Southeast, specifically to South Carolina. That's where my kids ended up graduating high school. No, it wasn't my vision to be there, but I would find out along the way that my story really was God's story. And God had a plan.

While still in Missouri (though no longer working at the church), I did what had become a custom for me—I flew to Spartanburg, South Carolina, to speak at a worship conference. This was something I did yearly. It was only ten minutes from where I grew up and where my mom, sister, and aunt still lived. On a break from the conference, I met my mom and aunt for lunch. They had just picked up Mark Batterson's book, *Draw the Circle: 40-Day Devotional*. It was based on his *New York Times* best seller, *Circle Maker*. They couldn't stop talking about the devotional book. I've known Mark for years. He's a longtime friend. So when I got back to the conference, I bought a copy of Mark's book.

While in the hotel room, I started reading it. The very first devotional day I read made me think about my grief over "what could have been" my life in Missouri. But then something happened. I realized that my life in Missouri was nothing like what I had planned and hoped it to be. I was in the middle of the country, far from family, humiliated and embarrassed that I lost my job. I was the guy going to the grocery store who everybody knew used to be the pastor at the big church in town, the pastor with mental illness. It was as though a light turned on in my brain and in my heart. I prayed, "God, bring me home." I decided to move my family back to South Carolina—my home state—and to be there for my mom as she started to age.

By the time I read day 40 in Mark Batterson's devotional, Transformation Church in South Carolina called and said, "You got the

Key One

job. You're moving here." They paid for my move from Missouri to the Carolinas.

I'm amazed by how God brings good things out of bad stuff that happens in our lives. He used my horrible circumstances, and even Mark Batterson's book, to get me back home, all expenses paid.

Now, I'd like to be able to say that I stayed for decades at Transformation Church, but that job only lasted a year, because they shut down my campus. Yes, I went through hurt and pain again, but it wasn't as severe. Why? I was thankful to be home—to be where I wanted to be, and though short, my job with Transformation accomplished that prayer.

There was also something else that made the situation fine. After being laid off in South Carolina, I wrote a devotional titled *Take Courage: Winning the War on Fear*, on mental health for the YouVersion Bible App.² Well over a hundred thousand people around the world have read that devotional. People have been helped. Because of the loss of jobs in my life, I ended up working for myself and have been grateful for all of the doors that God has opened for me to serve in a way that helps others both inside and outside of the church.

EXPERIENCING HEALING THROUGH FORGIVENESS

"You are not responsible for how other people have hurt you. But . . . you are 100 percent responsible for how long you let their hurt dominate your life."

—Perry Noble

We're not going to be kind people if we don't learn to forgive those who have hurt us. I believe everyone wants to find healing and wholeness and not live in a prison of bitterness, anger, and depression. Problematically, though, I also believe that many people either

2. Greg Atkinson, The Bible App, "Take Courage: Winning the War on Fear," accessed Mar. 29, 2023, <https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/3121-take-courage>.

don't know how to find wholeness or they don't want to face the trauma that they have experienced in their life. Sometimes living in denial seems safer than facing those horrible truths. However, as someone who has experienced trauma and denial, I can say that the path toward healing, though often difficult, is worth the journey. Nothing compares to living life free from the emotional and physical effects of trauma and woundedness. Living in freedom—freedom from bitterness, hate, and mental anguish—enables you to love and forgive people, to be compassionate and empathetic, and truly to be kind to all of the people you meet.

Are you looking for wholeness? Are you tired of living in a prison of bitterness and hate? It's time to get help and healing by unlocking your ability to forgive.

I'm a big proponent of seeking professional help through counseling and therapy to assist one on their journey toward healing and wholeness. I've been to individual therapy, couples therapy, and group therapy. I've been in therapy programs that are on-site, like Onsite in Tennessee—they do nine days of therapy that equals nine months of therapy. I have a ton of friends who have done the on-site program. This type of program addresses your family of origin, trauma, woundedness, sexual abuse, childhood trauma, and more. I've invested both money and hours into therapy, because I didn't want what happened to me when I was younger to rule and dominate my life. I wanted to be whole.

If you don't forgive those who hurt you, you will never find healing. If you never find healing for the trauma and the hurts that you have faced, you will live in bondage—a prison of bitterness, anger, hate, and hardness. And this will affect not only your life but those around you as well. Without healing, you won't move forward in life. You will be stuck in a constant childhood state of trauma.

Forgiveness is a process. But the more you are able to forgive, the more you will free yourself to experience kindness, and to give it to others too.

HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE—AND THEY ARE MISERABLE TOO

It's an old saying that has become a cliché, but it's also a golden nugget of truth: "Hurt people hurt people." If you have not been able to forgive and move on from what happened to you as a child (or an adult), you're going to be a mean, grumpy, inconsiderate, and bitter person. You're not going to be fun to be around. You're not going to be loving. You're just going to be a jerk to people.

Hurt people hurt people. Wounded people wound people. But rescued people rescue people.

I've been blessed with the opportunity to help others on their healing journeys. It's wonderful to help others and be an advocate for those who have been traumatized, abused, and treated poorly in life.

Everyone's healing journey is unique. There's no set pattern of time when it comes to finding wholeness. It could take years, decades, or even happen in an instant. Even though I'm a proponent of therapy, I believe that it is God who does the healing. The power of God can heal any wounded heart. He can take a hard heart and make it soft again, and He can transform a bitter heart into one that forgives. God can do that in an instant via prayer, or He can do it over time. The biggest step you will ever take toward healing is learning to forgive.

When I got wounded by my church, I forgave my boss—I took him to lunch and said, "I love you and I forgive you," and then I hugged him. Forgiveness releases you from seeking revenge. Forgiveness recognizes that every human being is flawed and damaged in some way. Forgiveness allows you to unload the emotional baggage that keeps you from entering into a place of joy, peace, comfort, and love.

When you forgive your dad, when you forgive that person who abused you, or when you forgive the source of your trauma, your

heart and mind will start to change. When you work through the process of healing, when you pray, when you seek counseling and therapy, you can find wholeness and live a joyful, peaceful, fruitful life that responds naturally to people with kindness. And if there's something all of us need in our lives, it is more kindness.

None of this is easy, but if you're up for it, I invite you to continue on in this book as we keep unlocking keys to our inner power of kindness. You can do it. I believe in you. But most of all, I believe in the goodness of God.



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