

The Lifestyle of Forgiveness in Marriage

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[0:00] Well, last week, Paul Tripp was telling us we need a harvest mentality in our marriages. that we see that every day we're sowing seeds and we're reaping seeds that we've sown yesterday.

And to take advantage of the opportunities that are ours today to sow good seeds in our marriage. Now, he then began to set forth six daily commitments that are to become habits, a very lifestyle that make our marriages flourish.

And the commitment number one, we were on it last week and we'll conclude it this week, is that we will give ourselves to a regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness.

A regular lifestyle of confession and forgiveness. Last week, we saw the importance of a lifetime of confession to each other.

A willingness to own that we are still recovering sinners who fail daily. Who need to shut up that defense lawyer inside who's ever rising to excuse us and rather to welcome the input of our spouse, to listen to it, to consider it, and to confess where we come short of the mark.

[1:21] And it's the gospel that frees me to do just that. There's only one perfect one and that is Christ, not me. And so I'm free to recognize I am the sinner that the Bible says I am.

I'm in need of this Savior. I don't need to hide, excuse, run from the truth. I can own it because I have a Savior for sin. And it's in confessing that we open the door for God's grace to rush in.

If we confess, He will not only forgive us our sins, but He will cleanse us. He will change us from all unrighteousness. Well, now that's just one side of this coin of the first daily commitment.

A lifestyle of confession, but also a lifestyle of forgiveness. Quick confession is to be met with quick forgiveness.

Now, Tripp begins by sharing a personal experience in their marriage, and I want to read it. We were so burdened. We took our debts very seriously. Luella is his wife.

[2:32] Luella had just delivered our second son, and we had no means of paying the enormous bill. Our little church was struggling to pay us, and we had encountered unexpected auto and home expenses.

Times were so tough that we wondered if we would have sufficient food for our children to eat. And then we got the call from the hospital. I didn't want to answer it, but I knew I should.

As I walked to the phone, I was anticipating what the caller would say to me. I was anticipating the threats and the guilt. The only thing that gave me peace was that I knew they couldn't repossess our infant son.

Well, the caller's voice was friendlier than I had anticipated. She asked me how I was doing. How I am doing, I thought. How do you think I'm doing? I'm about to face my economic execution, and you're asking me how I'm doing?

But instead of saying what I was thinking, I mumbled some kind of non-answer. She then said, we have an assistance program for families like yours. We have decided that you qualify, and we've decided to cancel your debt.

[3:40] Now, we did have to pay some minor expenses, he says in parentheses. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It felt like a boulder that had been taken off my chest. I can't express the joy and gratitude that flooded into my heart.

After weeping together, Luella and I began to realize that not only had the cancellation of the debt lifted a burden from the past, but it had changed our financial future. Now we could struggle through without the burden of this debt hanging over us every day.

And Tripp says, why have I told you this story? He says, because it speaks so powerfully to our marriages. Healthy marriages are healthy because the people in those marriages find joy in canceling debts, just like the hospital did for them.

Indeed, the Bible speaks of forgiveness in these terms, doesn't it? When it teaches us to pray, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Tripp says, no ingredient is more important in marriage than forgiveness because we're constantly going into debt to one another by the way we continue to sin and fail each other.

[5:03] Yet forgiveness is difficult and costly. It will push you to the borders of your faith. But the alternative is simply not an option.

Now, if you want, you could turn to 1 Corinthians 13, but I think all of you know the verse that I'm going to quote. In fact, I'll ask you to finish it. It's where Paul is delineating what love is and isn't, what it does and doesn't do.

And he says there in verse 5, it keeps no record of wrongs. Okay? That's what love does not do. It keeps no record of wrongs. Now, I've had a marriage counseling session where the wife, a professing believer, came to the session with an 8 1/2 by 11 inch notebook into which she had entered the ways that her husband had wronged her.

And we may gasp at such a blatant sin and failure against the word of God and failure of love.

[6:19] But we have our own ways, don't we, of keeping records in the invisible notebook up here, in our memories. And we call it up at handy moments to rehearse their wrongs, either to accuse them or perhaps to feel sorry for ourselves.

But keeping record of wrongs is a gross failure of love. It's a failure to forgive. It's the opposite of what we've just read, of finding joy in canceling the debts of others.

Now, Tripp tells of a couple where each held on to their record of the other's wrong as if it were some treasured family heirloom. And they would not let go of that record.

And over the years, it was lethal to their marriage. When wronged by the other, it was simply added to the record.

And old wrongs would be regurgitated and rehearsed. When accused of wrong, they defended themselves by pulling out their precious list of the years of wrongs the others had done to them as if it excused their present wrong.

[7:30] And so the confrontations never moved toward reconciliation. It only added to the record and kept it fresh. And so they were stuck in their marriage.

Forgiveness had failed. They had failed to forgive. Now, something else was happening. And this was sucking the life out of their marriage. It used to be that they liked each other.

And though they would still say they liked each other, Tripp says they really didn't. There were many more things about each other that they disliked than liked.

And when asked what they could say positively about the other, what they liked about him, it was something from ancient history. Or it was very hard for them to say anything that they did not immediately qualify with all kinds of negative offsetting examples.

Well, I like this about him, but he's never hardly like that anymore. Or he does this, but he doesn't really mean it. And so on. So what had happened?

[8:38] Faults and failures were not met with the pattern of confession and forgiveness. So what they had left to meditate about each other was largely negative.

It was just that growing record of wrongs. And when that's all that you have to meditate upon your spouse, whatever was good in the other got easily overlooked by all the wrongs that they remembered.

And so fixating on each other's faults, they quickly forgot why they got married in the first place.

Their earlier gentle and patient acceptance of each other's faults was now replaced with irritation, anger, bitterness, dislike, and disrespect.

And Tripp says they were simply reaping the harvest of an unforgiving spirit that they had sown for years in their marriage.

Now, Tripp believes that countless couples are on the same path as this marriage. And so he lays out this marriage-damaging stage, these stages of the harvest of unforgiveness.

[9:55] He wants us to see how it goes from one stage to the next, this pattern of not forgiving, of keeping record of wrongs, that we might see ourselves in these stages and repent before it's too late.

The first stage is immaturity and failure. And Tripp simply recognizes and states the obvious when he says, not only are all marriage partners sinners, that's strike one, but most enter their marriages quite young and immature.

That's strike two. It means that typically in the early years of marriage, they do dumb, selfish, sinful things to each other. Now, we still do dumb, selfish, sinful things, but especially in the immature years, he's saying, we do that a lot.

And when that's met with the reaction of accusation going back or blame or judgment, rather than gracious confrontation, confession, and forgiveness, it leads to the next stage.

Because each time they do this, they may not realize it, but they're setting a course for their marriage. They're setting a pattern. This is the road we're going to pursue now, and it will have a harvest of pain.

[11:17] So that's the first stage. It's the stage of immaturity and failures against each other. But the second stage then is that it moves into falling into those comfortable patterns, where those patterns become comfortable to us.

Since confrontation, confession, forgiveness, or hard work, he says, it's much easier just to give in to these fleshly responses. It's easier to walk away from confrontation by just going away in self-pity and silence and pouting and rehearsing the hurt, or to lose your temper and say hurtful things in anger.

And as they fall into these behaviors, they find that this becomes the pattern, because it's easier. And their affections all the while are cooling, and distance between them is widening.

And that leads to stage three, establishing defenses against accusations. I heard it at least once yesterday about a football team that was getting pummeled by the other team, that when their offense was on the field, they better try to hang on to the ball as long as they could, because a good offense makes up for a weak defense.

And Tripp says, marriage partners learn very early that the best defense is a good offense. So if you need to defend yourself, how do you do it?

[12:49] You do it with an offense. You go on to the offense. So they respond to criticism by dragging out the record of wrongs to let the accuser know that their faults are not easy to live with either.

And the relationship then suffers further, because they're not standing together, arm in arm, to defend their marriage against everything that would attack it, but rather they're viewing each other as adversaries and attacking each other.

So establishing defenses against accusations by going on the offense and accusing in return. The fourth stage is nurturing dislike.

He says, Because both are meditating on what is wrong with the other, rather than celebrating God's goodness in them, their view of each other becomes increasingly negative. You keep reading the list, and that's where your mind ruminates, then why would you have anything but negative thoughts of the other?

And that negative view becomes the lens through which they then look at each other. It becomes the glasses that they wear 24-7.

[14:05] And so it puts a negative slant on everything that the person does. Even otherwise good things are interpreted as bad. They can now do no good in their eyes.

And this is why they come up with negative interpretations of each other's actions. They've been meditating on each other's debts. So it's hard to find something they truly appreciate about one another.

That's the fourth stage. And then the fifth stage is that they become overwhelmed. Daily living with someone you don't like very much and being caught up in attacking and defending becomes very exhausting.

Just waiting for the next argument. Stage six. Envy of other couples. Looking over the fence or across the aisle. And envying happy couples.

Comparing your marriage to theirs. Thinking they don't have any problems. Even wondering what it might be like to be married to him or to her. And seventh. Fantasies of escape.

[15:10] Angry, hurt, overwhelmed. Tired of it all. It just seems hopeless. They'll never change. And so it begins with just fantasizing about escaping.

Just getting away from this problem. Daydreaming about getting away from it all. And at first they think it's harmless.

They would never do anything. They would never act upon those fantasies. But they do sometimes turn to resolve. They're very vulnerable at that point of taking some means of escape, which is

always just another step into further trouble.

And Tripp says, Remember, this couple had no major sins against each other. Their marriage just rusted into brokenness by the daily rain of the little drops of unforgiveness.

And then Tripp poses a question. If keeping records leads to such misery as he's just laid out, then why don't couples just get over it and forgive each other?

[16 : 19] If that's where this is going, why don't they wake up and just say, Listen, it's not worth it. You got any answers to that?

Why not just forgive? Well, Jim? Well, kingdom falls into it again. Okay. I mean, short answer, yeah, that's what it is.

We won our way. Yeah. Pride. I think it's a little bit of pride. Hmm. Have you heard that one before? I've never heard that one before. I've heard of the middle letter of pride is an I. I, but there is saying there's also a good, helpful way of remembering that the cross is I marked out.

The cross humbles us. And so, yes, we have this pride. We we have this desire for our way. The this is sin and sin is the curse of every marriage.

[17 : 21] So, Tripp says, we hang on to our spouse's debts because there are some dark benefits of not forgiving.

There are some dark benefits. What he's saying is there are some things that are very tempting to us to hang on to these things because they do give us certain, quote, benefits.

They're dark benefits, but they appeal to our darker side, our flesh. And so he lays those out. And again, as Tripp's materials often do, they expose us, don't they?

They show us why we do what we do. We have these this darkness in us that actually wants these benefits. Well, what are the benefits of not canceling each other's debts?

Well, number one, debt is power. Debt is power. There's power in having something to hold over the other person's head where we're able to say, you owe me.

[18 : 20] You owe me. Remember, here's the list. You owe me. Keeping a record of wrongs gives us the upper hand in our relationship. It gives us leverage.

And in moments when we want our way, as Jim was saying, we can pull out the record of wrongs and use it against them for our good. It's what Tripp calls the relational trump card for you card players.

The list of your wrongs trumps everything else. You owe me. It wins the trick. So possessing this power is very tempting. That's one reason why we don't cancel the debts.

Because debt gives us power over the other. But then secondly, debt is identity. Our self-identity is given a boost when we've got a list of somebody else's sins, doesn't it?

We hold on to their sins and that makes us feel better, superior, more righteous than them. And so we can get a sense of well-being about ourselves that we're doing just fine.

[19 : 28] How? By comparing ourselves against the list of our spouse's failures. Self-righteousness is a powerful lure as to why we would not cancel the debt.

Third, debt is entitlement. You see, because of all these ways that you've wronged me, I deserve a break today. I deserve it. And it makes us feel comfortable being self-focused and demanding.

After all, I deserve it. After all that he has done to me. Debt is entitlement. Fourth, debt is weaponry. Tripp says we carry around their record of wrongs like a loaded gun.

And it's easy to pull out and use when we're angry or being accused. Use the record to hurt them for having hurt us. It's the weapon of revenge. A very tempting allurements to hang on to.

And then, fifthly, debt puts us in God's position. It's not our place to punish, to judge our spouse for their sins. That's God's place.

[20 : 35] And yet we can be seduced into wanting to take God's place in this matter. And Tripp says, in conclusion, we've all enjoyed these dark benefits of unforgiveness.

We've all used our spouse's sins against them in one way or another to hurt them, to get what we want, to defend ourselves. And that's what makes forgiveness so difficult.

It means giving up all these dark benefits. Now, forgiveness, then, is the only way to live in a close, long-term relationship with another sinner where we're often going into debt against each other.

I've likened it to bumper cars at the fair. If you're going to get on that ride, be prepared for some bumps. That's marriage. We bump into each other because we're in the closest confines, the most intimate of relationships.

It puts two people in the tightest relationship. And there's a lot of bumping. There's a lot of splashing of sin on each other. There's a lot of going into debt.

[21:47] So, forgiveness is the only way to live in this relationship called marriage. It's the only way to give your marriage the fresh starts that all of our marriages need.

Fresh starts. Continually in need of fresh starts. Now, Tripp shifts gears, then, and says, well, what is forgiveness? It's so important. Well, then, we better understand what it is.

And he defines it helpfully in this way. It's a vertical commitment that is followed by a horizontal transaction. It's first of all, a vertical commitment to the Lord.

And that's followed by a horizontal commitment or a transaction to the one who sinned against us.

So, when you're wronged by your spouse, your first response must be a commitment with God.

You start by giving the offense over to the Lord. You give that up to him. That debt, it's given to him.

[22:51] It doesn't mean that you deny the wrong. It doesn't mean that you call the evil good. Or that you act as if the evil was really good.

Not at all. But it does mean you do not carry the wrong with you. That's bitterness. And you do not treat the other in light of the wrong.

That's judgment. So, by giving it to the Lord, we free ourselves from bitterness and from treating them in judgment based upon what they've done to us.

You entrust yourself to God. You give yourself to the agenda of overcoming evil with good, as Paul lays out in Romans 12. If your enemy's hungry, you feed him.

If he's thirsty, you give him to drink. You go out of your way to serve in love the one who's wronged you. You respond to your spouse with the same grace you've been freely given by God.

[23:49] Now, Tripp spends some significant time with this qualification and this explanation. He says, it doesn't mean that you act like nothing has happened.

As if you were not affected or hurt by what they said or did. In fact, the Bible calls the one sinned against to go to the person doing the wrong and to present it to them.

And then he asks us, does that sound like a contradiction to what I just said? It's not. Rather, it shows the importance of the order of the two parts of forgiveness.

The vertical commitment before the horizontal transaction. You first give the offense to God so that when you do go to your spouse, you go with the right attitude.

Grace. And you go with the right goal. Reconciliation. Giving it to God clears your heart of the baggage of bitterness and condemnation so that you can face him or her with kindness, humility, gentleness, encouragement.

[25:02] Aiming at reconciliation. Reconciliation. Now, there are some things that we overlook in love. The Bible says there's a multitude of sins that love covers. But it's not helpful to you nor loving to your spouse to never point out the wrong that has been done.

To always just grin and bear it as though what is not okay is okay. And Tripp shows how that's often not motivated by our love for them, but by our love for ourselves.

Our own ease. Our own not rocking the boat. We like it without the waves. And we know that if we went, confrontation might result.

That's self-love. That's not love for the other person. Rather, the Bible says we ought to go to them and point out their wrong and give them the opportunity to confess and to grow in their own relationship with Christ.

And if we never go to them, it tempts us to bitterness as we let it fester in our hearts like an infection.

[26:11] Now, at this point, Tripp opens up an ongoing debate over the matter of forgiveness. Maybe you've bumped into this in some of your reading in different books on forgiveness.

And it's the question, are we supposed to forgive the person who's wronged us whether or not they ever ask us to forgive them?

Are we supposed to forgive them whether or not they ask us to forgive them? Would one of you like to weigh in on the ongoing debate?

There's that it. Go ahead. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Okay. Did you hear that in the back?

[27:37] Yes and no. Well, that was a hearing test and some of you failed. Dick's got good ears. He's in the back. So I'm going to go with Dick. But I can't say everything she said.

But she's saying that the forgiveness of them, whether or not they confess, is freeing to me. But as far as seeing reconciliation happen in the relationship, that can happen unless they acknowledge they're wrong and receive the forgiveness that I give.

All right. So she's playing both sides of the fence. Jackie. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know where I am on the team. But to say that, is that if you're looking for us into 1 John 1 and 9 and say God says, if you confess, then I forgive.

What do you do when you're not for a second? Yeah. Okay. So we're looking at God's forgiveness. If you confess your sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us.

So confession, then forgiveness. And that's referring to our relationship with God and the way he forgives us. And I suppose you could look at other passages that talk about forgiving as the Lord forgave you.

[28:54] And forgiveness follows with confession. There's also the text in Luke chapter 17, verse 4, that says, if he sins against you seven times a day.

These are Jesus words. If he sins against you seven times a day and seven times in a day returns to you saying, I repent. You shall forgive him.

Now, in that passage, their sevenfold sin is accompanied by a sevenfold confession of their sin.

And Jesus says, if that happens, you must forgive. If they confess, you must forgive. So there are those verses that this side of the argument would quote and use to say, I can only forgive or I only need to forgive if the person doing the wrong asks me for forgiveness.

All right. All that do something from Ed and then Dale. Well, there is no way that we can confess all of our sins because we sin constantly.

[30:05] So therefore, because of what Christ has done, God remembers our sins no more. But to go along with 1 John and other passages, there is that appropriateness in our relationship that if we just sin blightfully, there's a hardening of our heart towards God and a hardening of his response back to us as Christians.

Okay. Hmm. Okay. Speaking of the relational aspect, what happens in our relationship with God when we've sinned against him and we are not confessing our sins?

There's a breakdown. Indeed, Scripture speaks about our sins separating us. And there's a wall that goes up in our relational aspect of fellowship with God.

Why? Because there's something, there's this white elephant in the room. And until it's acknowledged and confessed, that will be the way that it is in this relationship. All right. Dale.

Dale. What is the issue in that situation? Actually, not being treated to a person, but what is exposed in our own life?

[31:18] Hatredfulness or bitterness or selfishness. You know, my will has been crossed or whatever. And that now becomes the issue, not so much between the horizontal, but now the vertical.

And what has been exposed in my heart now needs to be dealt with. And the situation that the Lord brought really is... It does, doesn't it?

That's the passage we can be so focused on the speck and the other that we forget the logs that are in our own eyes. And many times those logs that get in our eyes, they get in our eyes because of the ways we've been sinned against.

And so bitterness grows up as a log. And before we go, we must first confess to God our bitterness.

I had someone over here. Roger? Roger? It's not a complicated thing, but I think when you're dealing with a believer and an unbeliever, the believer has experienced the forgiveness of God.

His death, his tremendous death, it's so much easier for a believer to forgive other people because we could never forgive us once we can forgive you. But when you're dealing with somebody who doesn't know the Lord, who doesn't know that, sometimes they can't even forgive themselves without a lot of other person.

[32:39] I'm not going to get into this idea of forgiving yourself, but you're right. That's true. There's a difference between the believer and the unbeliever's response. One more from Jim.

I totally agree with what Dara said. She had to be reading my mind when she said that. I couldn't say it better myself. But I see Jackie's point. But the point I want to make is if we forgive others for what they've done to us, a lot of their knowledge of it, it gives an opportunity to slam the door in the sacred space because all he'll do is use that.

And what happens, what Jim tells us when, you know, what sin will do when it starts small, where it goes. Leads to death. It's just better off to let it go because it gives Satan an opportunity. This way we slam the door in his face. Very quickly. This is me. It's really important. Our daughter was assaulted. She was 10 years old.

And in the afternoon after all that, the Christian counselor at a certain point said, Sarah, I'm not going to ask you to forgive this person.

[33:45] But I want you to think about the fact that this person could come to God and ask God to forgive him. Would you then be willing to forgive him?

And that's up. Okay. We're not going to solve the issue here. But what I like about Tripp's answer to this issue is that it touches both set of scriptures because both sides are responding to certain scriptures.

There are texts that say if they confess, then you forgive. But there's also things that would show that it is absolutely wicked to hold a bitter grudge against someone for their evil done to us just because they haven't come and asked us to forgive.

So there's both sides of that issue. And what Tripp does is he says, now, let's remember, forgiveness is a twofold thing. And so his solution concerns both sides.

It addresses, the first part of forgiveness is judicial. It's entrusting the offense to God who alone is able to judge. And so we say, Lord, this is not mine to judge, to pay back.

[34:54] I give this over to you. Ultimately, sin is against you. I give it up to you. But the second part of forgiveness is horizontal and relational. You cannot relationally forgive someone who's not asked for it.

When you forgive someone, you promise not to bring it up again. You promise it's done. The debt is canceled. I consider it as gone. But Jesus says if you go to a person and they do not acknowledge their sin, you're to get another person with you and to go back and to confront them again with their sin.

Well, that's not forgetting it. That's not just canceling the debt. No, you're coming back. Because until the person acknowledges their sin, confesses it, there is a big obstacle in the relationship.

And so when they ask for forgiveness, I can say, yes, I freely forgive you. I've already given it over to God. And as you're asking me, will I forgive? Of course I will.

I can do no other. So, trip's vertical and horizontal aspect of the matter keep us from ever harboring ill will in our hearts, treating the person with any sort of revenge.

[36:14] No, because we have given it up to God. That's one aspect of forgiveness. It's to give it up to God. And if that person acknowledges the sin, I verbally acknowledge and verbally give off that, cancel that debt, and tell them it's over.

As far as I'm concerned, it didn't happen anymore. It's gone. So, let's remember the two sides of forgiveness, vertically and horizontally.

Tripp says, often forgiveness is a process, not an event. You may find yourself, as Dale was saying, returning to old bitter thoughts and getting angry once again.

And so you need to go again and confess to the Lord and seek His help and give it over to Him again. You may have given in to your treatment of treating your spouse judgmentally.

And now you need to confess to her that you've sinned against her, even in the way you've responded to her offense. The offender may be having a hard time seeing their offense.

[37:21] You may have to go to them more than once, reminding them that there is this sin between you that's not been dealt with, and it's creating a breach in your relationship, and you don't want anything coming between the two of you.

It's never okay to be bitter and ungracious in our response and in our thoughts. Canceling the debt. Finding joy in canceling other people's sins.

That's what we need, and as someone has said, that's what we find when we think about how we have been forgiven. What does forgiveness require?

Tripp says, number one, humility. It's when we stand in the center of our universe with nothing more important than ourselves that we find nothing is more offensive than someone that would sin against us.

But nobody gives grace better than the one who's convinced of how much he needs it himself. And, of course, Matthew 18 is given to us for that very reason, to remind us of the mountain of death that the Lord's forgiven us.

[38:35] So, if we're going to forgive, we need humility. We need, second, compassion. Compassion is being moved inwardly by the plight of another and taking action to help.

Tripp asks, are you ever touched by your spouse's struggle with sin when he sins against you? Are you ever sad for him when he's entrapped again by that sin that so easily besets him?

Does it ever move you to stand alongside of him in his worst of moments to do anything you can to relieve his burden and struggle with sin? Because you know, too, what it is to commit yourself to doing what's right and to end up doing what's wrong.

Even as Paul, who wrote Romans 7. If you are going to forgive, you'll need compassion. Thirdly, you'll need trust. Not so much trust in your spouse as faith in God.

Taking his way. Believing that his way is always right. Forgiving is always the right answer.

Confronting.

[39:41] Confessing. Forgiving. You'll need self-control. You'll need to say no to yourself. No to all these dark benefits of not forgiving that are so enticing.

No bitterness. No to revenge. No to lashing back. Confessing. And all the myriad of ways the flesh suggests. You'll need sacrifice. And lastly, and he says most importantly, you'll need remembering. If you're going to be a good forgiver, you must be a good rememberer. He says that a lifestyle of unforgiveness is rooted in the sin of forgetfulness. Forgetting that there is not a day in our lives when we do not need to be forgiven.

Are we forgetting that? Forgetting that God has not treated us as our sins deserve. Have we forgotten that? Forgetting that God does not turn his back on us and leave us to buy our way back into his forgiveness.

But rather, as David says in Psalm 130, If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, oh, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you might be feared.

[40:50] Isn't God wonderful? Isn't he to be stood in awe of because of his forgiveness? If we're remembering that, we're well on our way to being good forgivers.

It makes for the good harvest of reconciliation and peace in our marriages. May the Lord make it so. We're dismissed. May the Lord make it so.