



# Desperate *Forgiveness*

HOW MERCY SETS YOU FREE



From **BE**'s *Duck Dynasty*

AL & LISA  
ROBERTSON

WITH STEVE & LOIS RABEY

The topic that Al and Lisa have taken on in their new book is a crucial one—*Desperate Forgiveness*. As human beings, we are all sinful and in desperate need of God’s forgiveness. Then in our daily lives, His Word instructs us to “forgive as the Lord forgave [us].” Many times that can be easier to say than to put into practice, but forgiveness has an enormous impact on our relationships. My mother, Ruth Bell Graham, often said, “A good marriage consists of two good forgivers”—and she was right! The personal life stories that Al and Lisa share in this book bear witness to that truth and will help readers take a fresh look at the need for forgiveness—both extending it and receiving it—in their own lives.

FRANKLIN GRAHAM

CEO/President, Samaritan’s Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association

There’s only one way out of the dark hallway of bitterness, and it’s through the doorway of forgiveness. Al and Lisa’s new book, *Desperate Forgiveness*, is real talk for couples who have honeymoon-strong marriages and also for those who are walking through the valley of the shadow of relational death. After reading these real-life inspiring stories, you’ll have the tools you need to better understand both why we forgive and how to forgive.

KIRK CAMERON

Al and Lisa Robertson are heroes for telling this wild story, warts and all. A vitally needed, transparent look at

two people at their worst moments in life—and how God redeemed them and their marriage, too. We need more stories that do not shy away from how badly we are messed up and how God can shine light into our darkest moments. Read this and be encouraged.

ERIC METAXAS

*New York Times* bestselling author and host of the Eric Metaxas Show

In *Desperate Forgiveness*, Al and Lisa Robertson bring a powerful message of the freedom we find when we let go of past pain and hurts. Bitterness can eat us alive, but forgiveness sets us on a path of peace and redemption. If you've ever been hurt or wronged—and we all have—put *Desperate Forgiveness* at the top of your reading list today!

JASON AND DAVID BENHAM

Entrepreneurs, authors, and public speakers

As a police officer, a policy-maker, and a pastor, I've spent a lot of time dealing with issues that impact families. Among the biggest problems that fracture families are bitterness and unforgiveness. We hold on to the pain of the past and stoke the embers of anger that Christ calls us to let go. In *Desperate Forgiveness*, Al and Lisa Robertson tackle this head-on from the depth of personal experience. We all need to be reminded of the power of forgiveness. After all, it is the essence of what Jesus taught. I want to thank the Robertsons for having the courage to bring us back to the heart of the gospel.

TONY PERKINS

President, Family Research Council

We will never forget the call of desperation from Alan saying, “It’s over; we can’t go on.” The Robertsons’ marriage was at a breaking point. Should they listen to man’s wisdom and end their failing marriage? Or perhaps listen to the still, small voice saying, “My grace is sufficient for you” and put back together what evil was determined to tear apart? Al and Lisa’s story is a testimony to the power of God when we surrender our will. Nothing is too big and too far gone for God to heal. Come as you are and immerse yourself in their story. Then see and feel the hope that is available to you, too, when you trust in Jesus Christ.

MAC AND MARY OWEN

Celebrate Recovery national directors

Al and Lisa Robertson have a very real backstory, and they aren’t afraid to talk about it. It has a lot to do with forgiveness, as all of our real stories do. In an easy-to-understand story form, Al and Lisa open us up to the many angles of the desperate forgiveness we all need to give and receive, while sharing tools to help us all. In a day when Christian leaders spend a lot of effort spinning their images, these two lay it all out, and the world is better because of it.

TIM HARLOW

Author and pastor of Parkview Christian Church

Thank you, Al and Lisa Robertson, for sharing raw honesty, biblical truth, compelling stories, and your passion for marriage in *Desperate Forgiveness*. Your life experiences

and wisdom paint a true picture of the freedom and fulfillment that can emerge through forgiveness.

DAVE STONE

Pastor, Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky

For anyone struggling with forgiveness, you'll find hope and a way forward in this book. *Desperate Forgiveness* is not the testimony of perfect people preaching Christian forgiveness. It's so much better than that. Al and Lisa, like many people, had hard and hurtful childhoods, and as adults they did their share of hurting others. This book chronicles their journey to follow the Christian imperative of forgiveness. It wasn't easy. But now their story inspires readers and shows them that no matter how bad the situation, forgiveness is possible.

ANN MCELHINNEY

Journalist, author, and filmmaker

In *Desperate Forgiveness*, my friends Al and Lisa Robertson share deeply personal stories about how the Lord led them down the path of forgiveness. With compassion and grace, they offer practical tools and guidance to help you along your own journey toward forgiveness. I truly believe this book has the potential to change the relationships in your life forever.

ROBERT MORRIS

Lead senior pastor of Gateway Church and bestselling author of *The Blessed Life*, *Frequency*, and *Beyond Blessed*

# DESPERATE FORGIVENESS



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*How Mercy Sets You Free*

**AL AND LISA ROBERTSON**

*With Steve and Lois Rabey*



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS



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A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Cover design by Nathan Cook

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-800-323-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

ISBN 978-1-58997-031-1

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*We dedicate this book to those who have found themselves in a broken and desperate place, needing forgiveness from the Healer of brokenness. We pray this book helps you find your way to Him and find freedom in God's grace! If you have found His forgiveness and need to forgive someone or receive forgiveness from someone, we pray God shows you the way to release the hurt and embrace restoration whenever possible. Not all relationships can be restored on this side of heaven, but we can always be restored to our heavenly Father.*



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CHAPTER I

DESPERATE FOR  
FORGIVENESS

THERE'S AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD BOY perched high in a magnolia tree. It's ten o'clock at night, and the evening is dark as molasses, so no one can see him—but he can see the people below just fine. He watches as his dad throws two men out the front door of the run-down juke joint, beer hall, and gambling den that his father operates for its crooked owner. The two men land in a rutted gravel parking lot, then quickly get up and begin hitting each other hard with their fists. After the one on the left knocks back the one on the right about five feet with a roundhouse punch to the cheek, the slugged man stumbles to his feet, pulls a knife out of his pants pocket, stabs the other, and runs wildly into the dark.

That was young Al Robertson up in that tree, and it was his pre-*Duck Dynasty* dad, Phil Robertson, throwing the two drunken fighters out of the joint. Phil had previously worked as a schoolteacher and coach, but he got tired of that. So he'd walked away from a decent job, determined to find a better way to make a living. That's how he wound up at a dump of a beer hall just south of El Dorado, Arkansas. The rest of the Robertson family—Al's mom, Kay, and his two younger brothers, Jase and Willie—faithfully followed along. The family of five lived in a dilapidated one-room trailer located across the parking lot from the bar.

The Robertsons were too poor to afford a TV, so young Al's nightly entertainment consisted of what happened at his father's place of employment. He saw it all: live fistfights and stabbings, prostitutes negotiating fees for their services, and wrecks of human beings who would drink until they couldn't drink anymore and then stumble outside and pass out.

A few years later, Phil would have another tired-of-that episode. This time he was sick and tired of Kay and his three boys. (Their fourth son, Jep, wasn't born yet.) Phil didn't want to see any of them anymore, so Kay took her sons to Louisiana, where she found a job.

### **Little Girl Lost**

There's a seven-year-old girl shivering in her bed at her grandmother's house. That's where she stays when her parents go off to work each morning. Right now she's wishing with all her might that she could disappear, because she

hears footsteps in the hallway and the turning of a squeaky door handle.

She knows who it is. It's a family member who will soon be touching her where she shouldn't be touched. She wants to scream out, but he warned that he would hurt her if she ever told a soul about what happens, so she shivers and tries to disappear into the bed.

That was little Lisa, who would grow up and marry Al. This hopeless scene would repeat itself over and over again for the next seven years.

Her grandmother should have known something was wrong, but she never seemed to notice. Her mother should have known something was wrong, but she was too pre-occupied with her own problems and the problems of Lisa's older, wilder sister. Overall, her mother gave little thought to the things happening in Lisa's life unless they impacted her life personally.

The older women in her life weren't there to help her, so Lisa would cry herself to sleep, blaming herself for this man's sins and dreaming that, someday, a prince would arrive to rescue her.

### **Two Broken People**

Those two broken, abused, and neglected children married each other about a decade after these experiences, and those two people are *us*. People say that every person brings psychological and emotional baggage into marriage. We brought big, overflowing bags full of ugliness, pain, and bitterness



into our relationship. We thought we could simply forget all about these bad memories and hurts, but you know how that goes. Every time we faced a minor issue or disagreement, those bags would open up and their nasty contents would pour out into our marriage.

We were two injured people, striking out blindly and hurting each other even more in an effort to overcome or ignore the things inside us that were tearing us up. The pain we inflicted on each other wasn't always intentional, but it doesn't have to be intentional to cause harm. Not only were we blind to the pain we were inflicting on each other, we were also ignorant of the one solution that could heal such hurts.

Now fast-forward a few decades.

We're older and wiser now, we're more happily married than we ever imagined possible, and we're no longer haunted by a closet full of unopened baggage. We realized that as long as we tried to ignore our brokenness and pain, it would sneak up on us in harmful ways when we weren't watching, so we went through a process of dealing with these historic hurts.

While our marriage isn't perfect, it has been miraculously transformed. Once war-torn, our union is now loving and beautiful. Our love is deeper than it has ever been, and we're grateful for the blessings of two grown children and six grandchildren (so far).

The fact that two people who couldn't even manage their own marriage are now leading marriage retreats for other couples still amazes us. We love helping the many men and

women who are just as damaged, confused, and conflict-prone as we were.

Once during one of our retreats, someone asked us, “Say, how did the two of you learn about helping married people?”

We looked at each other and responded with the first thing that came to our minds: “Forgiveness!”

It’s true. If it weren’t for forgiveness, the two of us probably wouldn’t be married to each other, not after all we’ve been through. We might not even be alive.

Our love story is colored with seeming opposites: brokenness and restoration, deceit and redemption, betrayal and reconciliation.

### **Forgiveness: What It Is and What It Isn’t**

Two children are playing together when one grabs the other’s toy. Hopefully an adult will intervene, return the stolen toy, and restore order so the two kids can go back to playing again like nothing ever happened. That’s an example of a simple form of forgiveness that many of us practice in small ways every day: letting bygones be bygones.

That’s not the kind of forgiveness we’re talking about in this book. We’re talking about *desperate forgiveness*, the end-of-your-rope, face-in-the-dirt, empty-handed realization that you experience when you discover you cannot survive another day without giving and receiving mercy.

We’re talking about the kind of desperate forgiveness people reach for and cling to when they’ve been completely shattered, exhausted, and drained of all pride.

We're talking about the kind of desperate forgiveness people seek when the sins they've committed in private become public, shining a bright light on dark places.

We're talking about the kind of desperate forgiveness that each and every one of us needs to reconcile our broken relationships with God and all the people in our lives: our wives, our husbands, our children, our relatives, our neighbors, our coworkers, and even our political opponents.

We're talking about the most powerful resource in the world for experiencing changed lives, revitalized marriages, rekindled relationships, and hope and healing for tomorrow.

Take a look around our world and you can see we desperately need this kind of forgiveness today. Whether you look into people's lives, or whether you look at the divisive-ness and partisan anger of today's culture, you can see people torn apart by bitterness, division, and a widespread lack of forgiveness.

Thankfully, in our relationship, we reached the point of desperate forgiveness. Both of us were so desperate for our love to survive that we *had* to learn to forgive each other.

Have you ever been in that dark, desperate place where receiving forgiveness is your only answer? Or have you ever found yourself on the other side of the argument, desperately needing to offer forgiveness to another person who has hurt you?

If so, we want to invite you to accompany the two of us on a journey of forgiveness. We are glad to serve as your guides because we know the territory well. We stand before

you as two desperate sinners who have experienced forgiveness through Christ and have regularly practiced offering and receiving forgiveness with each other.

Forgiveness is not only what we believe. It's how we live. In fact, we've discovered it's the only way we *can* live.

### **Forgive and Forget?**

When you mention the word *forgiveness*, many people immediately think of commercials they've seen on TV promoting auto insurance that offers "accident forgiveness." In a sense, that's the same kind of insurance God is offering us: *life* accident forgiveness.

When others hear the word *forgiveness*, they think about a Christian teaching they may have heard. "Jesus says we should forgive each other," they say. "You know, turn the other cheek and all that."

Forgiveness is right there in the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray, and that millions of us pray every Sunday at church: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

Sounds like a simple, painless transaction. But truly forgiving someone who has hurt you is actually one of the most difficult and costly decisions a person can make. This forgiveness was won for us by Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. In fact, as Jesus was dying on that cross He prayed for God to forgive the very men and women who had persecuted and crucified Him: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

But does forgiving mean forgetting? Does it wipe the slate clean? Not necessarily. Desperate forgiveness doesn't mean you forget the pain that others have caused you. It means you release the pain and the terrible hold it has on you so you will not be eaten up by bitterness and anger.

As the Dixie Chicks sang in their angry hit song, "Not Ready to Make Nice":

*Forgive, sounds good  
Forget, I'm not sure I could.*<sup>1</sup>

Let's think back to two stories that showed the world how powerful forgiveness can be.

One morning in 2006, a man and his wife walked their two daughters to the school bus stop, then came back home. After the wife left the house, the man drove to a nearby school where he killed five young girls before killing himself. The shooting at the West Nickel Mines School, a humble one-room Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, outraged the nation. But the community's response may have shocked this country's people even more.

Police were still on scene investigating the tragedy when an Amish man warned his neighbors against holding bitterness against the killer. "We must not think evil of this man," he said.<sup>2</sup>

Within a few hours of the shooting, one Amish person visited the shooter's home to comfort his wife and children. Some later attended the killer's funeral. The Amish community even created a charitable fund for his family.

Two years later, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist walked into an evening Bible study at Charleston's Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a historic church that played a significant role in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. He started shooting, and then he walked out of the church six minutes later, leaving nine people dead, including the senior pastor.

Within days, many from the church forgave the killer. "It took me a while," said one seventy-year-old member of the congregation. "I just felt that I've been praying 'forgive those who trespass against us' . . . for years, and now it was time to re-examine those words and practice it."<sup>3</sup>

The people of Nickel Mines and Charleston may never forget the pain, heartache, and tragedy of these devastating shootings, but they've chosen how they're going to respond. By forgiving cold-blooded killers, they've decided they won't be held hostage by the fear, anger, and sorrow that, over time, could eventually turn into resentment, bitterness, and a thirst for vengeance.

That's how forgiveness can heal our hurts, turn victims into victors, and transform bitterness into blessings.

### **Better Than the Alternatives**

Forgiving others can be difficult and painful, but it's a whole lot better than the alternative. When forgiveness is refused or rejected, people can find themselves spiraling out of control, rapidly descending into darkness and depression.

Look at Judas, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. He

was part of the inner circle. He watched Jesus forgive sinners, dine with unsavory characters, heal the broken, and tend the sick. He saw all the greatness, goodness, and grace of Jesus, but he still refused to believe that such forgiveness could be extended to him. Stuck in a whirlwind of despair, Judas was in a terrible, desperate place. His desperation revealed itself when he took his own life.

Desperation is a terrible place to wind up. Today, many people walk through life caught in the same kind of internal storm Judas suffered. They don't experience forgiveness and become locked in bitterness. They're drowning in a spiral of shame, guilt, and fear.

Isn't that the way the devil works? He wants to close us off from God's grace, making us desperate and alone. Satan doesn't want us to relinquish our hold upon the hurt and pain that consume our existence. He wants us to ignore our emotional baggage rather than clean it out and heal our hearts.

Both of us know how sin makes people desperate—desperate to find the next thing that will alleviate the guilt, or the next relationship that will take our minds off our loneliness, or the next diversion that will give us a moment of pleasure. Some people are so desperate to find relief that they will try just about anything, as long as that relief doesn't require them to shine the light of truth upon what they know is wrong in their own lives.

Some people turn their backs on forgiveness and try to address their pain and sorrow through revenge and vengeance, like the movie heroes in *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, or

many of the early Clint Eastwood films. But no matter how many times you imagine saying, “Make my day,” getting even will not heal your heart. Unforgiveness only leads to unfulfillment and loneliness.

Even so, people with closed hearts usually need to be desperate before they open themselves to God’s grace. Alan witnessed this while serving as a pastor for more than twenty-five years. He knows you can’t push forgiveness on someone who doesn’t want it or think they need it. He tried every tool in the preacher’s toolbox. He taught his people about forgiveness. He reminded them about what they were taught. He pleaded with them to act upon what he had taught them. He even tried to guilt-trip them by convicting them of their sin and their need for forgiveness. But for people with closed hearts, it typically takes real desperation before they’re able to see they need forgiveness themselves.

### **Stories of Redemption**

In this book, we’ll share stories of desperate forgiveness, beginning with our own. You may know some of our story from *Duck Dynasty* or from our previous book, *A New Season*. You may know about the Robertson family. All of us have lived very public lives in recent years, and we have not been silent about our problems, our insufficiencies, our opinions, or our faith. Our family is an open book.

*But there’s so much more to our story.* You’ll learn more about our battles and victories in the pages that follow. We want to be authentic and approachable because we truly



believe that when lives are changed and marriages are saved, future generations are affected. Destinies are altered through desperate forgiveness.

We'll also tell you stories about men, women, and families we know who found themselves at the end of their ropes, desperate for a way out of the darkness. These people are just like the two of us—they reached the point of desperation and then found reconciliation on the other side of forgiveness.

Amid all these stories we will share powerful biblical accounts of forgiveness both given and received. As the prophet Micah tells us, God absolutely loves forgiving us when we ask Him:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over transgression  
for the remnant of his inheritance?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in steadfast love.  
He will again have compassion on us;  
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.

MICAH 7:18-19

Not all the stories you read in the following pages have happy endings. Some end with despair or death because the subjects closed the door on forgiveness and God's grace. Without forgiveness, desperate people tend to sink deeper

into a place of despair, depression, and destruction, at least until they seek relief and restoration.

### **An Invitation to Healing**

We pray that this book will challenge you and change your thinking about forgiveness. Perhaps you are desperate to receive forgiveness. Perhaps you desperately need to offer forgiveness to someone else. Either way, we extend you a humble invitation: Will you choose to seek a place of healing and peaceful reconciliation?

As two fallible people who have lived lives of desperation in a sinful world, we see how Satan tries to remind us every day of the many messes we made in our marriage early on. But each time he reminds us of the sins of our past, we exercise our choice and choose to not remember all the hurts, shame, and failures we've experienced. Instead, we celebrate the many healing memories and personal victories that God has brought to our lives.

As children, we lived through some evil situations. As adults, we've seen our share of sin, ugliness, and despair. But we can still tell you that there is hope. There is light. There is a way through the darkness. It begins with forgiveness. Come with us and see how forgiveness can transform your life.

