



This Undone Life Together Podcast
Season 2 – Relentless

A God Whose Mercy Carries You
June 23, 2020

Are you aching for a love that will never leave, a presence that will push back the dark? If so, I have good news for you. God's love is relentless even when your faith isn't.

Welcome to the *Relentless* podcast, a 15-episode podcast designed to give you a behind-the-scenes look at the stories and biblical history shared in the pages of my newest book, *Relentless: The Unshakeable Presence of a God Who Never Leaves*. My goal is simple. First of all, I want you to know you're not alone. I first told my story so you would feel safe experiencing yours, but, ultimately, my primary goal is to help you discover solid evidence of God's presence in the middle of your story even if your story doesn't look like you thought it would.

Today, we are talking about the fifth Altar Stone in chapter 5, "A Tabernacle: A God Whose Mercy Carries You." As we begin, I can tell you this is the hardest story I tell in the whole entire book. It was harder than even the introduction. Rather than try to recreate it, I am just going to read it from the pages of *Relentless*. Then, we're going to get down and dirty and talk about it. Chapter 5:

"I walked downstairs to a living room filled with church leaders. I thought they had gathered to offer encouragement and support. I was wrong. Although barely 21, I was still a girl attending college, working full time, and living at home. I still wrestled with lingering adolescent confusion and angst.

This was exacerbated when a week before my entire world imploded in an unexpected crisis. I discovered at the cost of more innocence that the man I was engaged to marry was mired in a life I knew nothing about. Without going into details that are not mine to share, I was in over my head and devastated by it. What was I to do?

I dreamed of marrying and having a family of my own, but the deception and unknown scared me. Should I move forward with my engagement or run fast the other way? It was too much for a young girl to unravel on her own. Moments before I had been in my bedroom face on the floor, overwhelmed and praying. I had asked God for wisdom to please walk me through this hard, hard situation and to show me his love and nearness in a tangible way, but what waited for me on the other side of that prayer was the opposite of what I asked for.

I hoped the people waiting in my parents' living room, men and women I had known most of my life, would offer comfort and support. Instead, they decided to confront. They rebuked me. Rather than offer comfort for my crisis, they felt a need to correct a past one. Although I had been a model teenager in many ways – straight As, no partying or sleeping around with consistent youth-group attendance, leadership mission trips and ministry – I had grown resentful toward my parents' rigidity, and they decided to confront my disrespect.

As a mom, I now look back on that night with inner conflict. I understand the sting of an adolescent's disrespect, but I also understand the normalcy of it, the complex developmental process of impending adulthood, and the push-pull learning curve of independence. As parents, our role is to create a safe place where our children can struggle through that transition, to coach them and guide them, not to crush them, but in a religious world of black-and-white rules there is no space for growth, grace, or complex teenage emotions.

The priority? Good behavior, obedience, doing what is expected of you every time, without fail. This group of church leaders, however, neglected connection for the sake of harsh

correction. With tears streaming down my face, I looked at each stern face and asked the question at the core of my pain.

'Do any of you care why I feel like I do? Does it matter to you at all?' There wasn't even a pause. One man answered for the rest of them, 'No, we don't. It doesn't matter. The Bible says you're supposed to respect your parents, and that's what we expect you to do,' and with that, a light inside me went out. My biggest fear was confirmed with his answer to my question. I didn't matter. Only my obedience mattered."

Wow! Even now almost exactly 27 years later, it still hurts to read that story. That was an incredibly painful moment for me, but worse, it was a demarcation point for me in my faith journey. That moment in my parents' family room was an utterly defining moment in my ability to connect with God and with other Christians, and it wasn't a positive one.

Granted, I'm sitting here thinking it has been almost three decades since that moment, and there is a good chance my memory isn't entirely 100 percent accurate. Yet, it's what I experienced and what I felt that impacted me, but those formative spiritual experiences, both good and bad, end up shaping what we believe to be true about God, and that experience led me to believe that God cares nothing for how I feel, God cares nothing for my struggle, and God cares nothing for my wrestling. All he cares about is good behavior.

As a person, as a woman, as a girl, and as a human, it's irrelevant to him. The only thing he cares about me is me being a good Christian robot, me being a woman who does everything right all of the time, who always does what he says and never fails. Period. Anything less than perfect obedience is unacceptable. That has been a huge message or lie I have bought into for a very long time.

As I reflect on that day, too, I also think about the truth of the fact that we are both good and evil. We are a mix of positive and negative. We are capable of great good, but we are also

capable of causing significant harm to those we serve and lead. As Christians, we can do great things, but we also make mistakes.

When I think back on the men and women in that room, I love every one of them. I'm still in touch with most of them. They are valuable relationships to me. These are men and women who contributed enormously to my growth and development as a young Christian woman. Without their influence in my life, there would be a lot of good that would be missing. These men and women were such a huge part of the growing of my faith.

At the same time... We have to hold these things in tension. At the same time, what happened that night was devastating to my faith. Devastating. Somehow, we need to hold both of those in tension, that we are capable of such good and such evil. We are capable of offering so much love and hope and so much judgment and criticism at the same time. We do both.

Now that I have lived long enough and I've been a mom of multiple children for long enough, I've seen myself do the same thing. I can think of way too many times with my grown sons when I erred on the side of too much correction and criticism and not enough relationship. In fact, I believe if you ask all six of my kids, they would probably say I erred on that side.

It's not surprising that we would repeat patterns that are familiar to us, but I have made the same mistake. The purpose of the story in this book isn't to browbeat these Christian leaders who were a part of my youth and to point out how they so ridiculously failed but to really paint this picture of how you and I fail to get the grace and truth formula right. We fail to get the mercy and justice formula right. We err on one side or the other.

Through all of this and the telling of that story and understanding how that moment in my parents' family room impacted my perception of God and the building of my faith or the unraveling of it, the four key lessons I learned are...

1. *Even well-intentioned, God-loving leaders get it wrong from time to time.* Even well-intentioned, Bible-reading, prayer-offering, God-loving Christian leaders and pastors and teachers and mentors get it wrong from time to time and that includes me. I have gotten it wrong, too, way too many times.

There have been times I meted out consequences and correction when I should have offered relationship and mercy, where I've been critical and harsh when I should have shown love and kindness. Sometimes we get it wrong, and we need to own it. The second lesson I'm still learning.

2. *Securing someone's compliance doesn't mean you've captured their heart.* This group of church leaders was so intent on securing my obedience. There is certainly value to that. There is value to correction, and as we continue to lead those younger than us behind us who we teach and lead, there is certainly value in correction. There is nothing wrong with obedience. There needs to be a sense of obedience, but compliance before connection doesn't work.

We have to decide. Do we want robots or do we want relationship? Do we want little robots that just go through the motions or do we want relationship? Just because we demand obedience and we secure it doesn't mean we've captured hearts, and God is in the heart business. The third lesson I learned and am learning is...

3. *When we emphasize obedience before connection, we will always end up with a fractured relationship.* I'll go ahead and say that one again because I need to hear it again. When we emphasize obedience before connection or outside the context of connection, we will always end up with a fractured relationship.

As a mom of children who have come through early childhood trauma, there is a saying we use over and over again. It's kind of a benchmark of how we parent kids from trauma. This is so important. Kids who have come from trauma (some kind of abuse, neglect, or traumatic

experience) respond to correction differently. Because their brains are so hyper-wired to sense danger they can be hyper-vigilant about attacking or resisting any kind of correction, so this is the motto we always use when parenting kids from trauma. "Connect before you correct."

Connection has to happen first. There has to be the safety of a trust relationship before you can correct. There has to be the assurance of love, a reminder of love, a reminder of connection. There has to be a relationship in place, a relationship that is built on trust and love, before you correct.

It doesn't mean there isn't correction. It means we connect first, because if we emphasize obedience before connection, if we emphasize that compliance of those little robots before we make a connection, we will always end up with a fractured relationship. The fourth lesson I learned which is really a culmination of all of this is...

4. *God is the only one who connects and corrects in perfect proportion.* Just so you know... God has the right to demand obedience. God has the right to punish if we don't give it. God has every right to demand compliance from us without offering anything in return. Yet, he has always, always, always prioritized relationship.

God has always prioritized relationship. From the very beginning in the garden of Eden all of the way through, and this is what I'm showing you throughout the pages of *Relentless*, is that God's primary aim with humanity (all of us) was to be with us. God's goal was to be with us. All other redemption, all other covenant-cutting, all of the pillar of cloud and fire...

Everything he did was to build relationship. Yes, he asks for our obedience. He commands our obedience, but it has always been within the context of a loving, protective, safe, trustworthy relationship. That is how our relationship with him is so different than our human relationships where we don't get that formula or that proportion right.

We try to correct first. How many of us as parents...think about this for a moment...have punished a child for misbehaving and said, "I'm not going to hang out with you until you figure this out," or "I'm not going to spend time with you," or "We're not going to do this other thing together until you do A, B, and C"?

We want them to correct their behavior before we connect with them, and God does just the opposite, which is so incredible. It's mind blowing. The New Testament says, "**...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**" While we were yet disobedient. He didn't require us to get our act together and put it all together before he entered in and loved us. "**...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**" That's how great the love of God is.

In the Old Testament, there's the story of the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was the visible evidence of God's presence. On the cover of the ark there were two cherubim (two angels), one standing at each end of the ark of the covenant, and their wings were covered out or spread out over the cover of the ark.

The ark of the covenant was said to hold God's presence. There was a cover over the top of it, and the cherubim's wings came over the top of it. That cover was called the *atonement cover* or the *mercy seat*. It was thought that was where God's presence sat. God's presence sat on the mercy seat. It's also called the *atonement cover*. To make atonement is to pay the price for wrong. It is the payment or the penance required to square up accounts.

Remember the covenant-cutting ceremony with Abraham. It was an agreement that Abraham promised obedience and God promised protection. There was this agreement that was made. This agreement (this mutual promise or this mutual commitment) or covenant was about obedience, but we disobeyed. Remember, God alone walked through the pieces of that covenant. God put himself on the hook for our redemption.

Now, come back to the atonement cover. Atonement is the price paid to square up accounts to make up for all that has been wrong. Our disobedience required death, but God called the atonement cover the *mercy seat*. The atonement cover (the place where God's presence was said to dwell) was a place of mercy. God's presence sat in mercy not in judgment.

He could have demanded payment from us, and, instead, he offered it. Even there in the Old Testament on this mercy seat, God emphasized relationship. His mercy, that mercy seat, made a way for us to connect. That mercy seat made a way for us to connect with a God who, without his payment of the cost and without his mercy, we would have been separated from forever.

Now, I want you to fast forward to the resurrection really quickly. Jesus dies on the cross. He's buried in a tomb for three days. Three days after his death, the women and the disciples go to the tomb and find it empty. Jesus' tomb is empty three days after. They find two angels on either side of where Jesus lay.

Are you tracking? Two angels on either side of where Jesus lay in the tomb. One sat on one end. The other sat on the other. The table where Jesus lay was empty. The table where Jesus' dead body was laid was empty. The mercy seat (the price paid to restore relationship) was empty.

Jesus' life was the fulfillment of the atonement. His life and death paid the atonement so we would receive mercy. Relationship. God has always been about relationship, even when our behavior didn't deserve it. Guys, I get all geeked out and excited about this! This is amazing! I want you today to spend some time thinking about the truth that God's presence sits in mercy. God's presence sits in mercy. I wrote this on page 84.

"God's presence doesn't sit in judgment. He sits in mercy. He doesn't withhold His compassion until I get all of my Christianity right. He doesn't even wait for me to have it all together to

show me his kindness. Though my prayers are flawed and my performance unpredictable and though I claim to love Him and can't always understand Him, His mercy carries me.

It carries every single one of us, flawed children and parents alike, and the glimmers of his presence cover us like a bottle of glitter upended, and we all who, with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory (2 Corinthians 3:18)."

My friends, God sits in mercy. I now have a chair in my office. I've had it here for a couple of years. It sits right over here in the corner, right to the left of me as I'm recording this podcast. I call it my *prayer chair* or my *mercy seat*, because when I sit there, I remind myself that I sit in mercy. I don't sit in judgment anymore.

Every now and then, I still hear those tired old voices in my head. I still hear the words, "We don't care. We expect your obedience. You need to do it right. Get your act together. You can't pray until you put yourself together. You can't ask God for anything. You can't approach him until you clean yourself up. You've made mistakes. You need to fix it."

I sink into this mercy seat, and I remind myself that God's presence sits in mercy. Jesus' blood of the covenant shed for us covered the ark of the covenant so you and I could approach God in mercy and not judgment. We don't have to worry anymore. We get to sit in mercy in the presence of God because of Jesus.

This is what I want you to do, the fifth Altar Stone. I want you to look for God's presence in places of mercy. Maybe you don't feel like you have found much mercy lately. Maybe you feel all you're getting is judgment. Maybe you have been criticized and pushed away and disregarded and judged one too many times. I get that, so this is what I want you to do.

I want you to find a chair. I want you to sit in it, and I want you to give it a new name. Call it the *mercy seat*. I want you to open your Bible, and I want you to read about God's presence sitting in mercy. I want you to read about Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, death, and his resurrection and how in all things God sits in mercy not judgment. You are his, and he has gone to great lengths to let you know he is with you. Find a chair, re-name it, and sit in mercy today.

Thank you so much for joining me today, friends. It is so much sweeter and more bearable to do this life together, and I'm so grateful you're with me. Besides that, we have a God who has promised to never leave us and never stop loving us. "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you," Jesus promised. Oh, I believe him.

Are you aching for a love that will never leave, a presence that will push back the dark? If so, I have good news for you. God's love is relentless even when your faith isn't, and the circumstances you fear might drown your faith could become the stones giving testimony to it. Join me, and let's find evidence of him together.