

Forgiving, Forgiving, and Free!

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Some time ago, a woman came to the microphone at a conference and told of how, fortune years earlier, her adult daughter had been stalked and then viciously murdered by a man. The woman turned to me, standing in front of the whole congregation, and began to pour out her heart. "I have hated this man for fortune years, and you say I have to forgive?" she asked. Brokenly she pleaded, "How can I forgive? How can I?"

The details of each of our lives are different, but at one time or another we have all asked that question: How can I forgive?

Let's take a look at some biblical insights about the matter of forgiveness.

Everyone Gets Hurt

First, we need to realize that everyone will get hurt. It's inevitable. Hurt cannot be avoided.

You may have been hurt by a trusted friend who lied about you. You may have been hurt by a teacher or professor who embarrassed you in front of a classroom. You may have been hurt by a parent who was harsh or abusive or who did not know how to express love. You may have been hurt by someone who wounded your children. You may have been hurt by a child who has rebelled and turned on you. You may have been hurt by an employer who wronged you or your mate. You may have been hurt by someone who stole your moral innocence and used you sexually in a way that was sinful and inappropriate. You may have been hurt by a husband who broke his wedding vows and has not been faithful to you. The list of potential hurts could go on and on.

In many cases, that pain comes out in anger. It's been said that the most dangerous animal in the forest is the one that's been wounded. I think that's a good picture of what we're seeing in our homes, in our communities, and in

our schools today. People who have been wounded instinctively tend to wound others.

Women talk today about how angry they are—angry with their husband, their children, their parents, their pastor, and, ultimately, with God. Those harbored hurts, that smoldering bitterness, has turned to anger, hatred, revenge, and, at times, to violence.

Although we cannot avoid being hurt, the important thing to remember is that the outcome of our lives is not determined by what happens to us. Nothing that anyone has ever done to you or ever will do to you can determine who you become. What is done may affect your life, but it cannot determine the outcome of your life. The outcome of our lives is not determined by what happens to us, but rather by how we respond to what happens to us.

Two Ways to Respond to Hurt

The first way to respond, and the way that most people choose, is what I call becoming a debt collector. The mentality of the debt collector is, “This person wronged me; she owes me, so I’m going to hold her hostage and put her in debtor’s prison until she pays me back.” This way of responding ultimately leads to resentment, bitterness, and anger—it is the way of retaliation. That is where most people live much of their lives today. The way of retaliation is a subtle, secret desire for revenge. We may not retaliate with guns, but we do it with looks, attitudes, and words.

Ultimately, those seeds of bitterness and resentment are likely to grow up and produce a multiplied harvest, not only in your life, but also in your children and their children and the next generation.

The second way to respond is to choose to release the offender from prison. We choose to forgive, not because the offender deserves to be forgiven or has even asked for forgiveness, but because of God’s grace that He has poured upon us, which we then are able to pour out upon others. This is the pathway of reconciliation.

Our God is a reconciling God. He took the initiative to be reconciled to us. We were His enemies, we were estranged, we were sinners. We hated God. We were not seeking Him. We were not searching for God, but He came searching

for us as the Hound of Heaven, pursuing our hearts, pursuing reconciliation. And He calls us in His name to initiate reconciliation in our relationships.

What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a choice, an act of my will. If I waited until I felt like forgiving before I forgave, I might never forgive. We are not to wait for our emotions but rather to choose to obey God. Then, in time, God will cause our emotions to catch up to right choices.

Second, God commands us to forgive, regardless of how we feel and regardless of what has been done to us. Jesus says in Mark 11:25, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (NIV).

"If you hold anything against anyone"—that pretty much includes every offense, doesn't it? When you come to offer up to God your prayers, before you pray, if you hold anything against anyone, there's one step that you must make first: To forgive. Jesus says we must do this so that our Father in heaven may forgive us our sins.

Third, forgive as God has forgiven us for the ways that we have sinned against Him? How did He forgive us for taking the life of His Son? Psalm 103:12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us." He does not deal with us as our sins deserve; rather, He deals with us in mercy and kindness. His mercy toward us is infinite, unconditional, complete, and undeserved.

The blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin. That's how God forgives us. He didn't wait until we deserved it to extend forgiveness. He didn't wait until we realized our need for forgiveness. He forgave us before we had any thoughts of seeking Him.

As infinite and unconditional and great is His forgiveness toward us, that is the measure of the forgiveness we can extend to others. The person who is not a Christian does not really have a capacity to forgive the person who has never experienced God's love and forgiveness. But if you are a child of God, if you have been washed by the blood of Jesus, if you have experienced His forgiveness, then you can extend that same forgiveness to others.

Fourth, forgiveness is a promise. It is a promise never to bring that sin up against the offender again—to God, to him, or to others. It is a promise to clear the record of the offender.

I know just enough about computers to be dangerous. But one thing I've learned the hard way is the meaning of the "delete" key. I've had the unhappy experience of spending a lot of time working on a document and then pressing that delete key accidentally. What happens to that document? It's gone. Forgiveness is pressing the delete key. It is clearing the record of the one who has sinned against us.

Now that doesn't mean the person never sinned. It just means you're clearing the record so she no longer owes you for those sins. You're promising never to hold it against that person again.

How can we expect the world to believe that God's grace is so wonderful and His forgiveness is so available if we, who claim to have been forgiven, refuse to forgive others? Our lack of forgiveness steals our credibility. It's no wonder that people aren't knocking down the doors to get into our churches. They know us. They work with us. They live next to us. They listen to the way we talk about those who wounded others and who have wounded us. They hear the bitterness, anger, and resentment that come out when those names or those situations come up. They don't see in us the grace and the forgiveness of God. As a result, they have no interest in what we are offering.

Without forgiveness, you and I are really not much different than the unbelieving world. I believe that when we begin to demonstrate biblical forgiveness, our message will finally become believable to our world.