

If You Forgive

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A lesson on how to forgive others,
and why it is vital to our own
relationship with God

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INTRODUCTION

We seldom talk about the subject of forgiveness openly and frankly. It may be because we feel that it is an insurmountable challenge, an area that we seem to get no victory over. Talking about it brings feelings of guilt, so why do it? It's a tricky subject, and it is important that we struggle to hone its definition. Perhaps we struggle with the application of forgiveness even more than its definition. We don't truly understand its nature. We easily confuse it with overlooking wrong behaviour, or we think that we must somehow magically forget something that was done to us.

Dealing with the subject of forgiveness places responsibility on us to act, but we honestly don't know how in many circumstances. We are dealing with something personal and emotional, not just intellectual. That certainly adds to the challenge and maybe even impacts our motivation. Unwittingly we conclude that it is easier to bear the hurt, and carry around unforgiveness. We want to own that hurt, and we don't want to give the person who caused it to get something they don't deserve. So the struggle to understand how to apply this biblical directive isn't necessarily something we give much time and energy to, but we must.

It is such an important subject that Jesus said that God cannot forgive us or answer our prayer unless we forgive others. It is why Jesus, in His lesson on prayer, taught us to pray: *“Forgive us our debts **as** we forgive our debtors.”*

Of all that the Lord’s Prayer includes, Jesus felt it necessary to expand on this one thought after He was done praying. He said: *“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* (**Matthew 6:14-15, NLT**). When we read that contemplatively, suddenly we have a strong desire to understand the subject of forgiveness and how to apply it.

Jesus’ words may seem a little harsh, but the truth of the matter is that God can only forgive sin that we are repentant of. Clearly He considers unforgiveness to be sin. Jesus couldn’t have said it any plainer than He did in **Luke 13:5** *“unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* In **Luke 3:8**, John the Baptist taught us to *“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”* Forgiveness is one of those fruit. If unforgiveness is a sin, which it clearly is, the responsibility lies with us to repent of it. The fruit of that repentance is the forgiving of others.

Let me say it again a little differently. If repentance is to confess our sin and to willfully turn from it, our decision to not forgive someone is a decision to not repent of sin. This puts us on very dangerous ground spiritually. We must understand forgiveness.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS

God casting our sin into the Sea of Forgetfulness is pretty common Christian jargon. That saying comes from the book of **Micah 7:19**: *“Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean!”*

We also talk of God, upon the completion of our forgiveness, casting our sin as far as the east is from the west. This is a direct quote from **Psalms 103:12, NLT** *“He has removed our rebellious acts as far away from us as the east is from the west”*

These verses seem to indicate that when God forgives, He forgets all about our sin. Is God even capable of that? After all, God is omniscient. He knows everything. From the beginning to the end, God knows everything – forgiven or not. He knows what has and is going on in the dark place of your life and in the light. To take omniscience away from Him is to change one of His commonly known attributes, and to make Him less than who he really is.

I like to think of it this way: (It is all allegorical, of course.) God has a very special memory bank. Let's call it "The Sea". That memory bank is kept at the place "where east meets west". When we come before Him with repentant hearts, He takes the memory of that sin and puts it in that memory bank. Then, He chooses to behave toward us as if none of the things in that memory bank, the Sea of His Forgetfulness, ever happened.

He hasn't truly forgotten that the sins happened. He simply chooses to act toward us as if they never did.

YEAH. WE'RE NOT LIKE THAT

It is different for us. The dictionary definitions of forgiveness are actually pretty good. They are: “To grant a pardon to a person”, or “To cease to feel resentment against”.

Peter asked Jesus a question regarding this topic. *“Then Peter came to him and asked, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’”* 22 *“No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”* (**Matthew 18:21-22, NLT**). I will explain this passage in greater detail in the chapter “Keep on Keeping On” (pg. 19).

Jesus was saying that we must forgive people an indefinite number of times. After all, that’s exactly what we expect from God. Isn’t it? We are almost lackadaisical about our expectation that God will forgive us. At the same time we can be a bit stingy when it comes to our willingness to forgive others.

We have learned already that harboring unforgiveness is harboring sin. Sin comes between God and man.

You'll notice that in the definitions of forgiveness, the word 'grant' is used. For example: "to grant pardon" That means that we willfully and intentionally choose to behave as if the sin never occurred. It is a choice we make. It is a choice to act as if we have forgotten it, even though it is not possible for us to forget literally.

Sometimes we confuse forgiveness with forgetting. A common saying is that we should "forgive and forget" almost as if those terms are synonymous; or that you can't have one without the other.

The reality is that as human beings, we don't have a separate memory bank that we can dump our unwanted memories in. There is no Sea of Forgetfulness. We can't 'will' memories away. Still we can grant forgiveness without forgetting. Those two words are far from synonymous.

PREQUISITE TO TRUE FORGIVENESS

My wife and I have a furry family member. She is a Bichon Poo, a cross between a Bichon Frise' and a Poodle. She is thirteen years of age at the time of writing, and has been an amazing little pet. She is virtually no trouble at all, but she is not perfect. I recall numerous times when my wife would make her 'sit and stay', then proceed to scold her. At those times, Saffron had done something that made momma mad. It wasn't long, however, before my wife would have the dog in her arms, telling her that she forgave her and how much she loved her.

What a great example! The foundation for forgiveness is unconditional love. Unconditional love is the reason that God can forgive so readily, so quickly, so easily when we are truly repentant. His love is so pure that forgiveness most naturally flows out of His love without reservation, once we have revealed our determination to change our ways. It is important for us to put some biblical truths together for greater understanding.

Christ's admonition to love our enemies is deeply connected to His teaching on forgiveness. Love, the first of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5, is what gives us the ability to forgive others, even those who determined to hurt us.

We spoke previously about how the ability to forgive others enables us to receive forgiveness from God. This is true because we are no longer walking in the sin of unforgiveness. Here is what Jesus said: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."* (**Matthew 5:43-45, NIV**). The command to love included both our enemies as well as our neighbours.

Our neighbour may be a perfect stranger who takes our parking spot, or cuts us off on the highway. Your neighbour could be the business person who did you wrong, the store clerk that intentionally gave you the wrong change, or the person who cursed you out for no reason at all. Our neighbour could be our son or daughter, brother or sister, mother or father. According to Jesus, the second greatest commandment, right after loving God with all our heart, soul and mind is *"Love your neighbour as yourself."* (**Matthew 22:39**).

Loving your neighbour not only enables you to reflect the nature of God to them, but it empowers you to forgive them of any wrong doing, which in turn enables you to be forgiven because you are no longer harbouring unforgiveness.

Forgiving our enemy and our neighbour is as important to us, as believers, as it is to those we must forgive. Lack of forgiveness comes between God and us, no matter who the subject of our unforgiveness is.

It is clear that the root of forgiveness is unconditional love. Christ made this obvious when He hung on the cross at Calvary, bearing the weight of all humanity: including the Jews that shouted “Crucify Him”, Caiaphas who instigated the whole thing, Judas who betrayed him, Peter who also betrayed Him, the soldiers who gambled for His clothing at His feet, the criminals who hung beside Him; and you and I. He said: *"Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34, NLT).

Jesus' love for the world was so deep that He was able to offer forgiveness in the midst of unimaginable pain. His love for the specific individuals that I mentioned, who wronged Him deeply, was totally unshaken. He prayed for their forgiveness.

So often, we think that we have to wait for the pain to subside before we can forgive someone. We have to reach a certain level of peace over the situation before we have any level of love to offer. That is not the example Jesus set for us. He forgave out of His pain. He forgave while the wounds were still fresh, while the pain still ran deep, while the emotional hurt was still greater than what He was feeling physically.

We have already discussed that forgiveness is a willful act. It is a 'granting of pardon', a decision to 'cease to feel resentment against'. Your heart truly must beat as God's does to be able to act toward someone who has hurt you badly as if they never did you wrong.

This is not something attainable without the help of the Holy Spirit. It is made possible by His presence in the life of the Christian. It is a fruit of the Spirit's presence in our life that makes it possible. Supernatural love is the spring from which the river of forgiveness flows. That river carries all offense into the sea of willful forgetfulness.

In my book ...'Fruit Loose and Fancy Tree', I define the Fruit of love this way: *"This is the kind of love that will cause you to give completely of yourself for those who are completely undeserving. It is a willful act that motivates us into action. In fact, it is a love that requires demonstration. It is Calvary kind of love."*

Calvary kind of love is not natural; it is supernatural. You can't love like that by yourself, no matter how hard you try; but it is impossible to forgive the way we are required to forgive without it. If we are a Christian, however, we have no right claiming an inability to forgive someone. That denies the power of God in you. It is not that you are unable, it is that you are unwilling. You are choosing to hold on to the sin of unforgiveness. By doing so, you are defaming God. You are saying to those around you that the Spirit of God in you is incapable of helping you to love enough to forgive.

Unforgiveness is not only harmful to the reputation of God, it is hurtful to you as well. Clinging to bitterness puts you in a very precarious position spiritually as it is the equivalent of intentionally harbouring sin. That is very strong teaching, but it didn't come from me. It came from the mouth of the Son of God. Until we take it seriously we will continue hurting God, others and our self.

Everyone is capable of forgiving – to a limit – but, not everyone is capable of forgiving as Christ did until they become a Christian. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in us that gives us the ability to allow His character to supersede our own. It is by His Spirit that we have the ability to love as Christ loved, which is

necessary to forgive as Christ forgave.

“For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting love.” **(John 3:16, KJV)**. God loved us enough that He gave up His Son in order to make forgiveness possible.

Do you love those around you enough to give up your hurt, your bitterness, your pride, and your anger in order to forgive? It seems like a small request compared to what God gave up to be able to forgive us.

THE FRUIT OF FORGIVENESS

The way to truly determine if we have forgiven someone or not is to assess our behaviour toward them. Are you acting toward them as if you remember the offence, or are you acting toward them as if you have no recollection of it; even though you do? Remember forgetfulness, when it comes to forgiveness, is not a human possibility. It is a choice that we make. We choose to act as if the offense never occurred.

Forgiveness is actually a river that runs deeper than how we behave toward those who have offended us. True forgiveness runs so deep that your thoughts toward the offender are as if no offense ever occurred. Forgiveness is so complete that it is reflected in your hopes and desires for them. It is reflected in the way you to talk about them to others.

When Laws are Broken

I acknowledge that this is a bit over-simplified, but please consider this. In some cases, when a law has been broken, or some type of abuse has occurred, you cannot deny the reality of what took place. Forgiveness does not override the necessity of due legal process. The safety of others must be considered. Christ-like love for the larger society and others who are at risk by an individual come into play.

Forgiveness does not eradicate the need for the individual to experience the consequences of the decisions made by the public judicial system. If necessary, it is still appropriate for legal proceedings to take place. In these situations you may even be required to act as a witness and recount the story or stories of things done by someone who has sincerely asked for forgiveness. This is not wrong.

What you must assess are your hopes for them and your best wishes for them. If you are honest with yourself, those attitudes will truly tell you if you have forgiven the individual or not. Do you hope that they will get the help they need to be able to change their ways? Do you wish that they would find their way to becoming a positive influence in society? Most importantly, do you sincerely desire that they will come

to repentance before God and that you will see them on the golden streets in heaven some day? The answer to these questions will tell you if you have truly forgiven them. They will help you know the condition of your own heart.

KEEP ON KEEPING ON

The Bible makes it clear that God can't forgive sin unless it is repented of. *"I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."* (**Luke 13:5**). I need to re-word this very carefully. Forgiveness cannot be received unless there is repentance. I'll explain in a moment.

I have also made it clear that if we are harbouring unforgiveness, we are guilty of sin 'not repented of', and that puts us in a very bad place spiritually. **Matthew 6:14-15** says: *"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

When I compare these two truths, it almost seems as if God expects more of us than He does Himself. On the surface, it appears that we have to forgive everyone, no matter what, while He only has to forgive those that are truly repentant of their sin.

In fact, Jesus taught us to forgive indefinitely. *"Then Peter came to him and asked, 'Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?'"* "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, *"but seventy times seven!"* (**Matthew 18:21-22**). Peter and Jesus are talking about someone whose behaviour reflects an unwillingness to change.

You no sooner forgive them, and they offend you again. So you forgive them, and they find yet another way to hurt you. He is speaking of someone who is constantly and intentionally at odds with you. Jesus' response to Peter was that you keep on forgiving that person. That's hard. Before we forgive we want that person to stop hurting us and change their behavior. We want them to repent first, and then we will forgive them. After all, isn't that what God expects?

It is very important that we reconcile these two truths, because God never expects more from us than He does Himself. In fact, He is the supreme example in all things.

The reason that God can't forgive sin not repented of is because the person who continues in sin is also continuously rejecting the forgiveness offered. It is not because God is unwilling to forgive. It is because the person is unwilling to receive forgiveness, and that is reflected in His behaviour. God offers forgiveness for every offense, but if it is rejected, which is evidenced by lack of repentance, then the offer of forgiveness is of no effect.

When we accept an offer of forgiveness, whether it be from God or someone else, it is an acknowledgement that we have committed an offence. When you make such an acknowledgement it implies

that you will endeavor to not do it again. If you continue in your behaviour, you have clearly rejected the offer of forgiveness.

So, to be clear, the reason that God can't forgive the person who chooses to not repent isn't because He won't forgive. It is because the person won't receive forgiveness. Forgiveness is always available, but is only effective when accepted.

Here is an example: I have a gift for you and I take it to your house. I knock on your door. You answer, and I kindly offer you the gift, but rather than accepting it you close the door in my face. I knock again, and you answer the door, but rather than receiving the gift I have for you, you close the door in my face once again. Even though I have a gift for you I can never say that I have given you a gift because you have chosen to not receive it.

Even though God has made the gift of forgiveness available to us all, God can't say that He has forgiven everyone because many have chosen to not receive it. That is proven by their ongoing behaviour.

God cannot forgive sin not repented of because unrepentance is an indication that the offer of forgiveness is rejected.

Jesus' response to Peter teaches us that we are to keep the offer of forgiveness available to the person who

repeatedly offends us; just as God does with us. Perhaps someday they will accept it and change their ways. In the meantime, we need to keep the offer available to them at all times. Forgiveness must be in our hearts and on our lips. It must be out there. It must be dangling in their face. It must be something that they know they can lay hold of at any time, just as we can with God's. If they reject it, that is their choice, but it must always be available to them. That is the godly way.

As in all things, God is the perfect example of forgiveness. He expects no more of us than what He makes available to us.

CONCLUSION

These are the three parts to the cycle of forgiveness.

1. An offence is committed
2. Forgiveness is offered
3. Forgiveness is accepted

If you are the person that has been offended, as a Christian, that cycle cannot be broken by you. You must make forgiveness available. Does that mean that you have to act as if the offense didn't occur? No! The person will never improve their behaviour unless there are consequences or confrontation. Does it mean that the person that has offended you should become one of your very best friends? It could happen, but it is not a requirement! Does it mean that, if you are being physically abused, you have to stay in your situation and take it? No! Does it mean that you have to love the person who has offended you with a godly love? Yes!

You may dislike or even hate the behaviour of the person who has hurt you, but you must be compassionate toward them as a person. You must hope the best for them and desire that they will change their ways for the sake of their own spiritual well-being. You must hang forgiveness in front of them, hoping that at some point they will reach out and receive it.

Without Christ-like love, you will never be able to offer forgiveness. To do so may seem like an impossible challenge in some situations, but thankfully, the first fruit of the Spirit listed is love. That love never runs out, and the Holy Spirit is constantly at work in and through our lives if we choose to let Him.

Let me remind you that this is the best thing for you as well. God always has your best interest in mind, as well as the interest of the other person. If you harbor unforgiveness, it will turn into bitterness and will impact you spiritually, emotionally and physically. Most importantly it is a sin that must be repented of or God can't forgive you.

I'm glad that God doesn't require us to be perfect before He offers us forgiveness. Heaven would be a very lonely place. He just requires that we desire forgiveness, which is proven by repentance, or a change in our behaviour.

What has struck me is that so many things about

Christianity is totally opposed to the way the human heart and mind naturally responds in most situations.

How desperately we need to yield to the person of the Holy Spirit to be all that God wants us to be. We need His help in all things spiritual, including the ability to forgive that person that continually hurts and offends us.