

## WHEN FORGIVENESS SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE

Recently, I received a disturbing letter. The writer said, "Satan keeps me agitated with evil, vengeful thoughts toward my family. I suffered emotional abuse for all the years I was growing up and into young adulthood until I was married. It was horrible at times. I carried the stigma of my parents' hate and jealousy. I was constantly criticized for everything I did. I was never encouraged. To this day, I wake up with nightmares of getting revenge. If I'm a good Christian, shouldn't I be able after all these years to forgive them and be free from this awful pain? How can I learn to forgive so that I don't feel this anger whenever I am around them? Please help me!"

The writer is not alone in her struggle with forgiveness. I know a man whose wife had an affair but who cannot find it within himself to forgive her for betraying his trust. He tries to save the ruptured relationship, but fear, distrust, and rage repeatedly undermine his efforts.

Then there is the person who gossips behind your back. A personal struggle you shared with him in confidence has now become a juicy morsel whispered across neighborhood telephone lines and office breakroom tables. First you feel hurt, then betrayed, and then angry. The wound is as painful as if you had been stabbed. Then you start to feel vengeful. A trusted person has hurt you, and now you will find some way to make him pay for the harm he has done to you. Forgiveness is the furthest thing from your mind.

### **So what does it mean to forgive?**

What comes to your mind when you think of the word *forgiveness*? Forgetting? No more pain? No more anger? Letting bygones be bygones? Letting someone off the hook? Unfairness? Injustice?

Let me say at the start that I believe forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood doctrines of the Christian life. Many believe that forgiveness requires us to unconditionally release others from past wrongs. They assume that we have to forgive in order to love. Others have adopted the "I forgive you for my own sake" attitude that advocates forgiveness as a means of releasing ourselves from the cancer of bitterness and the fire of anger. In many different ways,

forgiveness is therefore seen as an unconditional offering of pardon that says, "No matter what you have done to me, I forgive you."

The results of unconditional forgiveness, however, are not as positive as many believe. One shudders to think of a wife offering forgiveness to an unrepentant alcoholic husband who has privately beaten her and publicly humiliated her with his sexual affairs. Is such forgiveness the kind of love her husband needs? Is it in his best interest for her to release him from accountability for vicious violations of their marital vows?

I believe the Scriptures teach that whether or not we should forgive depends on our answer to the question, "What does Christlike love require?" The answer, in turn, depends on the circumstances in which we are asking the question. Sometimes love requires us to say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Sometimes love requires us to forgive over and over (Mt. 18:21-22). And sometimes love requires us to withhold forgiveness for the sake of the one who has harmed us.

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## **FORGIVENESS--A DEFINITION**

Throughout the Bible, forgiveness carries the idea of "release," "sending away," or "letting go." The Greek word often translated "forgiveness" was used to indicate release from an office, marriage, obligation, debt, or punishment. The idea of a debt or something owed is inherent to the concept of forgiveness.

In biblical terms, therefore, forgiveness is *the loving, voluntary cancellation of a debt*. It is the kind of release Jesus spoke of when, during a teaching moment at Simon the Pharisee's house, He likened forgiveness to the cancellation of a financial obligation (Lk. 7:36-47). While having dinner there, Jesus was visited by a broken, repentant prostitute. Her emotions were uninhibited. Expressing deep affection for the Lord, she washed His feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed them, and poured an expensive perfume on them (vv.37-

38). Luke says that Simon was incensed and thought within himself that if Jesus were a prophet, He would know what kind of woman was touching Him.

In response to Simon's reaction, Jesus told the following story: "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii [1 1/2 year's wages], and the other fifty [2 month's wages]. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?' Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he forgave more.' And He said to him, 'You have rightly judged'" (vv.41-43).

The point is that sin incurs a debt that must be canceled or forgiven. The more aware we are of how much we've been forgiven, the more love we will have toward the one who cancels the debt.

## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

In Luke 17:3-4, Jesus gave His disciples a pattern for forgiving those who sinned against them. He said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (vv.3-4).

Let's look at the five parts of the pattern of forgiveness that Jesus outlined.

**ONE: The Offense**

**TWO: The Confrontation**

**THREE: The Repentance**

**FOUR: The Forgiveness**

**FIVE: The Restoration**

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## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

### **ONE: The Offense**

What is the offense or sin committed against us that Jesus told us to respond to? While He was not specific, we must remember that sin can be defined as any failure to love. On another occasion, Jesus summed up our entire obligation to God and to one another as a debt of love (Mt. 22:37-40). Paul did the same when he said, "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (Rom. 13:8).

If we were to identify the sin of Luke 17:3-4 as *any* violation of love, however, that would raise questions. Was Jesus teaching us to confront one another for every failure to love? Or was He teaching us to deal with violations of love which, if not dealt with, would damage the relationship and cause us to become uncaring about the interests of the offending party?

If our understanding of patient, Christlike love tells us that Jesus was speaking of *significant offenses*, we need to be careful that we do not close our eyes to sins that are more serious than we want to believe. By nature, we all have an unlimited capacity for rationalization. We all are inclined to minimize the cancerous impact that everyday offenses have on ourselves and our relationships.

Denial of pain is a common form of self-deception. We pretend things really don't hurt that much, or we tell ourselves that we are just being too sensitive. A small crack begins in a relationship and steadily widens to the point that there is no real closeness. We then continue the charade by simply saying, "Oh well, people change." We miss an opportunity to experience the joy of honest love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Sin is an ongoing problem that erodes the trust and intimacy for which we were made. Forgiveness, therefore, is an ongoing necessity for dealing with our sins against one another. Not only do we need to forgive, but we ourselves need to be forgiven by those we have harmed.

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## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

### **TWO: The Confrontation**

After having felt the sting of an offense, a wounded person has a responsibility to act. Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him" (Lk. 17:3). Since this word *rebuke* sounds harsh, we need to remember that everything Jesus taught must be understood according to the principle and motive of godly love. The rebuke He was calling for will therefore be in the best interest of the one who has harmed us.

One meaning of the Greek word Jesus used for *rebuke* was "to honor," or "to give due weight or value." Such usage shows why the same word could be used in the sense of "to reprove, rebuke, admonish, or sharply censure." To hold people accountable for their actions is a way of honoring them. It shows that they are important enough for us to take their actions seriously.

From the beginning, however, we should keep in mind that the deciding question must be, "What does Christlike love require?" At times, a direct rebuke is not called for. Sometimes we can pray as our Savior did on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34; see also Acts 7:60). Such love can "cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8) that are beyond the capacity of the offender to understand at the moment. This is often true of little children, of the spiritually immature, or of those who don't have the Spirit of Christ. Again, however, we must be careful that our mercy is in the best interest of the other party and not merely a self-deceiving effort to avoid confrontation.

If loving confrontation is called for, it can be gentle. The rebuke Jesus called for will sometimes require no more than a knowing look or a loving touch. On other occasions, a simple question like, "Do you know how that makes me feel?" or a statement like, "You mean too much to me to overlook what you did," may be the only necessary rebuke.

But sometimes the nature of the offense and the attitude of the offender require a more direct response like, "I need to let you know how much you have hurt me. You need to know what this has done to our relationship. I feel that you have betrayed my trust."

Sometimes the confrontation escalates to legal charges and even imprisonment. But nothing is worse for the offender than to be allowed to go on in his sin unchallenged and uncared for until led into the judgment hall of God.

The Scriptures give examples of the many different kinds of rebukes that are needed. There is the example of Nathan who found a creative way of confronting King David with sins of adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:1-14). There is also the example of Christ who, with a gentle word, let His friend Martha know that she was so obsessed with trying to be a good hostess that she had no time for Him. Who could doubt the tender love of the Teacher who said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things" (Lk. 10:41-42).

The need for loving confrontation is apparent. Unresolved problems of relationship can result in unexplained distance and coolness. They break down mutual trust, breed fear and avoidance, and if not dealt with can leave the offending party free to go on without accountability. Letting an offender off the hook actually encourages him to repeat the same pattern of behavior again and again.

This is true whether we are talking about sexual offenders, thieves, liars, gossips, or promise-breakers. They will practice their habit until someone loves them enough to challenge them.

Whether the confrontation is tough or tender, we must always be careful. Loving rebukes should not be handed out easily nor quickly. Some people delight in "putting others in their place." That is not what Jesus advocated. A thoughtful rebuke must be well-timed and tailored to fit the needs of the individual. A wise person should be able to rightly interpret it as a gift of love that is intended to build up rather than to tear down (Eph. 4:29). Ideally, the correction should come from one with whom a level of relationship has already been established. Rebukes are more likely to be heard if they are from the

lips of someone who is seen as a friend rather than an enemy (Prov. 27:6).

The purpose of giving a loving rebuke deserves careful thought. It should be offered with the desire to bring offenders to an awareness of their sin so that they have an opportunity to understand clearly what they have done, take responsibility for it, and change their course of action by looking inside at the internal beliefs that have prompted their behavior.

A willingness to be lovingly honest with someone who has wronged us takes wisdom and courage. It takes wisdom to know when to speak up and when to keep quiet. It takes courage because there is no way to predict what the outcome will be. Sometimes all of the best efforts to show love are met with the worst expressions of anger, denial, and avoidance.

We therefore need to be ready to live with a worst-case, as well as a best-case outcome. Our goal is not merely to remove the pain that has come into a relationship, but to do whatever Christlike love requires.

Since there are no promises about how a confrontation will turn out, the need for courage can be a practical obstacle to our obedience to Christ. Yet in Luke 17 Jesus also spoke to our fears. He assured us that God Himself would enable us to be obedient if only we would give Him the smallest amount of faith.

Jesus assured His disciples of this God-given power in an unusual way. When they expressed wonder at what He was telling them about rebukes and forgiveness, He talked to them about "supernatural landscaping." Pointing to a mulberry tree, He told them that with faith the size of a mustard seed, they could speak the well-rooted tree out of the ground (17:6). Then He went on to tell them that the role of servants is to do what they are told to do (Lk. 17:7-10).

The interpretation of our Lord's words depends on an understanding of faith. Christlike faith isn't defined as believing whatever we want to believe. It is believing *what God has said*. If God says He wants a tree to uproot itself, only the smallest amount of faith on our part will be necessary to see it happen. God's power will do the job. But in Luke 17:1-10, Jesus was not telling us that God's power stands behind us to

move trees. He was telling us that heaven stands behind us to enable us to walk through the difficult, frightening process of confronting and forgiving personal offenses.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. While it is important to remind one another that God can enable us to do whatever it takes to confront and forgive, it is just as important to see that Jesus made repentance a prior condition of forgiveness.

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## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

### **THREE: The Repentance**

Jesus didn't teach unconditional forgiveness in Luke 17. He said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (vv.3-4).

To repent means "to change one's mind." In and of itself, repentance does not mean to overcome sin and make it history. Repentance refers specifically to the change of heart and mind that is necessary for a real change of behavior to take place.

Such repentance is essential to Christ's pattern of forgiveness. He makes it clear that those who sin against us must be brought to the place where their failure to love is admitted.

While offenders cannot unspill the milk, they can help clean up the mess they have made. They can admit their wrong and then offer evidence that their repentance is real. When we offend others, we can admit our wrong, and do what we can to make restitution. We can help those we've hurt by assuring them that we had no excuse for what we did.

While it is impossible at times to know whether repentance is real, we can look for evidence. We can expect a truly repentant person to confess the wrong, offer no excuses for his sin, humbly plead for mercy, and quietly accept the consequences. That was the response of



King David, the man after God's own heart who received forgiveness from God but paid an awful price in the death of his son, family discord, and national turmoil (2 Sam. 12:13-23).

Sometimes repentance is impossible. The offender may have died. In such cases we can only prayerfully and mercifully "release" the offender into the hands of God.

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## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

### **FOUR: The Forgiveness**

Remember the definition: *Forgiveness is the loving, voluntary cancellation of a debt.* Forgiving one another removes obstacles to loving, honest, growing relationships. It removes reasons for avoidance, distance, and coolness.

When an offense is dealt with, a forgiving heart can rightly say, "I will no longer hold this against you. I can see that you know you have hurt me and that it was wrong for you to do so."

On the other hand, to lovingly withhold such forgiveness can be necessary if there is no evidence of repentance. In the worship service, the church might refuse to serve communion to such a person. In a marriage, forgiveness withheld might involve refusing to act as if nothing is wrong. In a friendship, a conscious, unresolved issue can result in lovingly withholding communication, or whatever is necessary to let the other person know that the offense is of such a nature that it has broken trust. In employment circumstances, unforgiven failures can result in withheld promotions or pay raises so as to let the employee know where he stands.

It's easy to wrongly assume that the one who withholds forgiveness is to blame for problems in a relationship. That is true only if the offender has already shown evidence of repentance. Until then, focus must be kept on the one who refuses to come to terms with his wrong.

At the same time, however, we must also remember that it is not right for offended persons to withhold forgiveness if they have not been

willing to offer the loving, honest confrontation Christ calls for. Forgiveness can be rightly withheld only if motivated by Christlike love, the kind of love that cares enough to do the difficult work of serving notice that there is a relationship-threatening problem.

But forgiveness does not mean that we ignore the consequences of forgiven sin. Love for a repentant child abuser, thief, alcoholic, or drug abuser will mean exercising wise caution to avoid placing the person in circumstances that will play to his weakness or endanger others.

In forgiving us, God Himself does not suspend the natural law of "sowing and reaping." In Galatians 6, Paul wrote, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life"(vv.7-8).

God does not forgive so that all consequences of our sin can be removed. He forgives so that we can enjoy His loving acceptance of us. He forgives to offer a relationship in spite of the losses incurred by our sin. He removes eternal guilt and shame, but not all of the scars and consequences that we must live with.

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## **FORGIVENESS--THE PATTERN**

### **FIVE: The Restoration**

When there has been a separation in a relationship and things are made right through repentance and forgiveness, there is a wonderful moment of release that words cannot describe.

Most of us have felt moments of tension in a relationship with a friend or family member. Moments that felt so thick the air could be cut with a knife. In many cases, the issue was not what we would think of as an unforgivable sin. Yet even in the daily pains and problems of relationships, confession, forgiveness, and restoration can be a wonderful source of renewal and joy.

I can vividly recall the tension I caused in my relationship with my wife one spring morning. I was finishing my senior year of graduate studies and was hard-pressed to complete one of my final research projects. My third-shift job had kept me working overtime for several weeks so I felt pressured to try to finish it with the small amount of time I had left. I decided to stay at home on a Sunday morning.

That particular Sunday was my wife's first Mother's Day. We had waited 8 years for our first child. This was a big event for her. At church, mothers were honored, asked to stand, and given a flower. But I was not there to honor her. I was focused on my research project.

I will never forget the mixture of pain, shame, and anger I saw in her eyes as she returned home. In tears she tore up the flower and threw it away. I was stunned, silent. I had crushed her, not by being consciously abusive but by being insensitive and oblivious to her needs. I had missed an opportunity to honor her. Never again would there be a first Mother's Day. I couldn't change what I had done.

Tearfully, I went to her and apologized. I had no excuses. My failure was obvious. I asked her forgiveness. We talked, embraced, and wept. The paper didn't seem important anymore. She offered me the gracious gift of forgiveness that opened the door to rebuild the closeness we both craved.

Restoration in our human relationships gives us a finite taste of the joy God experiences when we in repentance come to Him admitting our sin. After all, God loves to forgive. Love fuels His longing to forgive, just as it also motivates His willingness to make an issue out of sin. It is that kind of love Nehemiah wrote about when he prayed:

They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them (Neh. 9:17).

The message of the gospel is forgiveness that leads to reconciliation--the restoration of the broken relationship between God and man. We who were at one time far from God and living in opposition to Him

have been brought near to enjoy a restored relationship with Him (Rom. 5:8-11; Col. 2:12-19).

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## **THE COST OF FORGIVENESS**

A high price is required from both sides involved in the forgiving process. The prime example of the high cost of forgiveness was what God paid to extend forgiveness to each of us--He punished His Son for our offense. The Just One was executed for the unjust (1 Pet. 3:18).

For the offended, the cost is relinquishing the demand to seek revenge now (Rom. 12:17-21), canceling the debt owed, and seeking the restoration of the repentant person.

For the offender, the cost involves humble confession and repentance, refusal to hide what one did, taking ownership for what was done, accepting full responsibility for one's actions and the consequences of those actions, making restitution where possible, refusal to make excuses, and brokenness that pleads for mercy and receives grace with gratefulness.

While the cost of forgiveness is high for both the offended and the offender, the price is well worth the joy of restoration and the release that comes because of the renewed relationship.

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## **PREREQUISITES FOR A FORGIVING LIFE**

What do we have to do to make forgiveness a way of life? The following suggestions give a starting point as we pursue a forgiving spirit.

**When facing forgiveness, think of it as the process of a lifetime.** Forgiveness is not a once-for-all event. It is a continual process of canceling the debts of those who fail us again and again and again. Remember Luke 17? There Jesus told His disciples that if a brother

sins against them seven times in a day, and seven times in a day repents, they were to forgive him.

Some might assume that what is important about this passage is that Jesus makes seven the greatest number of times we should have to forgive in a day. Ceiling numbers are not the issue. Jesus was teaching a principle of unlimited forgiveness. When Peter on another occasion asked, "'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Mt. 18:21-22). The process is unending.

**When you are the offender, be careful not to demand forgiveness.** Be careful when you ask forgiveness. The problem is not so much in the words themselves but in the motives of the person doing the asking. Many requests for forgiveness are nothing more than thinly veiled demands to avoid the pain of wrongs and harm done.

The truth often comes out if forgiveness is temporarily denied. If the offender tries to turn the tables and shame the hurt person into letting him off the hook, then it's apparent that the request for forgiveness is not an honest request. True repentance claims no rights while asking mercy for wrongs done. Real repentance expresses a broken, undemanding heart (Ps. 51:17).

**In anticipation of future hurts, begin developing a heart of forgiveness.**

There are at least four qualities of character that can help us to develop a forgiving spirit toward those who harm us.

*1. A passion for more than what the here-and-now can provide.* The immediate pleasure of sweet revenge is only temporary. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught us to hunger for that which in time will prove more satisfying. He said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt. 5:6). Here He approved of hungering for the ways of God who, in His time, will satisfy the longings of those who entrust their well-being to Him.

Some of the "rightness" that can be hungered for includes a Christlike love for those who are presently harming us (Mt. 5:39-42; Lk. 6:32-36). Such kindness might look mindless and even self-destructive to

those who are living by the rules of this world. But this is the love that can distinguish us as followers of Christ and as grateful subjects of the kingdom of heaven.

Living in a sin-cursed, enemy-filled world can drive us to our knees to pray, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20). For the loving heart, this is not mere escapism. It is also reason to long for God's work in the lives of our enemies, to bring them to the kind of repentance that will prepare them for the any-moment return of Christ.

*2. A brokenness through sorrow and grief.* As we become more aware of how much we need the mercy and forgiveness of God, we will be more willing to extend forgiveness to those who confess and repent of their sins against us.

Paul spoke of a godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). To the extent that we ourselves have experienced this godly sorrow for our own sins, and to the extent that we have tasted the resulting forgiveness of God, we can coach and urge others through the repentance that can lead them to the relief of God's mercy.

*3. A refusal to seek revenge.* Imagine that you are given the choice to: (a) torment for all eternity those who have harmed you the most (the one who sexually abused you, your unfaithful spouse, the date rapist, the drunk driver who killed your child, your abusive parent), or (b) see them brought to brokenness and to their knees before the God who has been so kind to you. Which would you choose? Your answer will expose the direction of your heart.

Revenge is natural. Undeserved kindness is not. Those who live apart from grace live in various stages of bitterness, guilt, rage, fear, separation, and loneliness. The poison of an unforgiving heart is not merely offered to the enemy but is swallowed first by the one who is holding the bottle.

Leaving vengeance in the hands of God is not to deny justice against those who have harmed us. Turning our just complaint over to Him is not to say to our offender, "Hey, no problem; it's okay. I don't care what you do to me." It is saying, "I will not choose to seek revenge now. I am going to trust God to deal with you in His time and in His own way."

he refusal to pay back evil with evil can throw the person who knows he deserves judgment off balance. It is not what he expects. Our role is to stun our offenders with unexpected kindness that gives them an opportunity to repent and receive the forgiveness that God has already shown us.

It's God's role to mete out vengeance. Our challenge is to believe so much in the One who says, "Vengeance is Mine. I will repay" (Rom. 12:19) that we find ourselves pleading for mercy on behalf of our offenders.

*4. A courageous desire to love others as God has loved us.* Loving others with a passion to see them receive the same forgiveness God has shown us is a distinguishing mark of a person who knows God. There is no greater reason to love and forgive others than the realization of how kind and merciful God has been to us.

Jesus plainly taught that a person who has been forgiven much loves much (Lk. 7:40-48). And a person who refuses to forgive "pocket change" after being forgiven "millions" deserves severe punishment (Mt. 18:23-35).

It is not natural to love in this way. Our mission is not to do what comes easily, but rather to seek to love and forgive sacrificially out of the riches of the One who sacrificially loved and forgave us. Our actions are to mirror our heavenly Father's efforts to reconcile disrupted relationships. Our love is to fuel and shape our willingness to forgive, just as God's love caused Him to find a way to keep our sin from separating us from Him forever.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

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## MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

### **1. Minimizing The Offense.**

To deal with a painful situation that we are powerless to change, we often pretend as though it didn't happen, that it wasn't all that important, or that it wasn't as bad as it seemed at the time. We say, "It really wasn't a big deal, so there's nothing to forgive."

I sat with a woman who was brutally and methodically abused by her father. When asked about her life growing up, she responded, "It was a pretty normal childhood. Good times. Family vacations. The normal stuff." It wasn't until several months later that she began to release her stranglehold on the memories of abuse that continually terrorized her nights and paralyzed her relationships with men for 40 years.

Minimizing the offense only served to stifle her growth toward facing the full force of the horrid reality she had grown up in. But it wasn't until she began to face the truth of the damage done to her that she felt the concrete around her feet loosen. Only then was movement toward godliness and a restored beauty of her womanhood a possibility.

There are many ways of minimizing offenses: "That's just the way Uncle Bill is. He really didn't mean it. You don't need to forgive him for that. Just accept him for who he is." "Don't take things so seriously. You're just too sensitive." "Don't expect so much of people."

By such reduced expectations, forgiveness is viewed as an emergency tool taken out of the Christian's toolbox only on severe occasions, but certainly not on a regular basis.

Admittedly, some go too far in the other direction. They seem unable to let go of even the smallest offenses and feel they must always confront everything. That too is an obstacle to a healthy view of forgiveness. We must struggle to strike a balance between the destructive extremes of always or never confronting sin. Preoccupation with personal safety is the basis of both extremes.



## **2. Forgiving And Forgetting.**

Many believe that to forgive means to forget. They are likely to quote Jeremiah 31:34, which quotes God as saying, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." The resulting logic is, "When God forgives us He actually erases our sins from His memory." On that basis such persons reason, "We are to forgive one another the way God forgives us. Since He has forgotten our offenses against Him, we too will forget when we have truly forgiven."

God, however, does *not* forget sin when He forgives it. From eternity to eternity He is the allknowing One. He is the Author of Scripture, who breathed into the Bible a record of David's sin after he had been forgiven. The same is true of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Paul, Peter, and the rest of the forgiven people of the Bible.

God is not seen as loving because He chooses to forget forgiven sin but because He chooses not to hold it against us. That is what the psalmist desired when he said, "Oh, do not remember former iniquities against us! Let Your tender mercies come speedily to meet us, for we have been brought very low" (Ps. 79:8).

God remembers that Rahab was a harlot, that David was an adulterer, that Moses was a murderer, that Abraham was a liar, that Paul killed Christians, and that Peter denied his Savior and sometimes spoke words that were more demonic than godly. He remembers their sins-- not to shame them but to tell us the truth about those whom He loves to forgive and restore to Himself.

The "forgive and forget" approach to forgiveness is an attempt to find a way to escape the hurt of the past. But it is based on a wrong assumption. God does not teach us to forget, but rather not to hold sins against one another. By His example, and by the help of His Spirit, He enables us to lovingly forgive even those wrongs we remember.

## **3. Forgiving For Your Own Sake.**

This approach to forgiveness is a spin-off of the "love yourself first" teaching. In her recent book *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*. Robin Casarjian, a secular psychotherapist, advocates forgiveness as a means of helping people let go of old anger and

resentment. It sounds good. But how is she defining forgiveness? In an interview she stated, "So often when people think about forgiveness they think about what it's going to do for someone else. . . . What they don't realize is that forgiveness is really an act of self-interest. We're doing ourselves a favor because we become free to have a more peaceful life--we free ourselves from being emotional victims of others" (*New Age Journal*, Sept/Oct 1993, p.78).

Many in our day have satisfied their legitimate longing for peace by adopting this unconditional approach to forgiveness. Forgiving for your own sake does relieve feelings of rage and bitterness. It does allow us to release ourselves from the bitter emotions of revenge. It does allow us to treat those who have harmed us in a manner that *seems* Christlike. But on closer inspection it is a Trojan horse that threatens to undermine the loving forgiveness taught in the Bible. The danger is that it changes forgiveness from an expression of love to a self-centered act of self-protection.

But doesn't God unconditionally forgive us? No. When He gives us the initial forgiveness in salvation, He does so on the basis of our repentance. He forgives us when we stop believing that we can take care of ourselves, and when we begin believing that Christ alone can save us by His own sacrifice and life.

The same is true of family forgiveness that comes into play once we become God's children. John makes it clear that God does not unconditionally release His sinning children from responsibility for their choices. He wrote, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

While it is necessary for us to love in order to show Christlike forgiveness, it is not necessary to forgive in order to show Christlike love. The answer is not to forgive unconditionally, but to ask the question, "What does love require?"--love for God and love for those who have harmed us.

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## **A CASE STUDY OF FORGIVENESS (Gen. 37-50)**

Joseph was the child of his father's old age. He was raised with 10 older half-brothers, 1 younger brother, and several sisters. His early life was troubled. His older brothers despised him because their father made no secret of his special love for Joseph. When he was 17, they conspired to kill him. But they threw him into an empty cistern, instead, and ignored his desperate pleas for help. Later they sold him to a group of traders who were on their way to Egypt and then reported to their father that he had been killed by a wild animal.

Joseph was taken involuntarily across international borders and resold as a slave to the captain of the Egyptian Palace Guard. Then his life took a turn for the worse. He was falsely accused of sexually molesting his employer's wife, subjected to wrongful imprisonment, and forgotten in jail by someone who could have interceded with government officials on his behalf. If anyone ever had reason to be bitter, angry, and vengeful, it was Joseph.

What's amazing about Joseph's story is that in spite of all the tragedies that befell him, he became, by his 30th birthday, Pharaoh's appointed ruler over all of Egypt. What's even more amazing is that he is one of the Bible's best studies in forgiveness. He eventually forgave his brothers, and became with them one of the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Joseph also provides insight into the process of forgiveness. Most important, he shows us that we can forgive others when we realize that our well-being is not in the hands of those who have harmed us.

The process of Joseph's forgiveness is worth careful study. Genesis 42-50 describes the prolonged series of events by which both Joseph and his brothers came to terms with the sin against him. Forgiveness didn't occur overnight. The harm his brothers had done left deep feelings of guilt in them and bitter memories in Joseph.

The process of reconciliation was begun by God. A widespread famine caused Jacob to send his sons down to Egypt to find food. The unsuspecting brothers ended up standing face to face with the

governor of Egypt. What they didn't know was that they were looking at their own brother. He recognized them but did not disclose his identity. Instead, Joseph accused them of being spies, put them in jail, and then conceived a plot which, as it played out, brought a great deal of stress into his brothers' lives.

At one point, Joseph overheard his brothers speculate that they were being repaid by God for the sin they had committed many years before. When Joseph overheard their admission, he turned away from them and wept (42:21-24).

Coming to terms with the past did not happen quickly. Joseph himself tried to avoid the pain of the full truth. When he finally revealed himself to his frightened brothers, he attempted to minimize the harm they had done to him. He said, "Do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5).

That incomplete reassurance, however, did not heal the wounds of the past. Some time later when their father died, his brothers worried that Joseph would use the occasion to get even. Once again they pled with him to forgive them. Finally, Joseph came to full terms with their wrong. He told them, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (50:20). Then the text says that Joseph comforted and encouraged his brothers.

The process of forgiveness was finally complete. Restoration of relationship was sweet. Joseph could forgive completely a wrong that was fully acknowledged. He could forgive because he had come to understand that his well-being and provisions were not in the hands of his brothers. He was in the hands of his provider God.

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## A PARABLE OF FORGIVENESS (Luke 15:11-31)

Another beautiful perspective on forgiveness is given to us in Jesus' well-known story of the prodigal son. Here we see evidence of:

### **A Repentant Heart.**

The prodigal son demonstrated a repentant heart that was broken when he came to his senses and decided to return home to his father. Repentance is a brokenness and change of life-direction marked by:

- *Hunger for restoration.* He longed for something more than what he had available to him in his sin. He longed to go home (v.16).
- *Humble confession.* He willingly acknowledged his selfish violation of love first toward God and then toward others (vv.18-19).
- *Plea for mercy.* He recognized that he deserved nothing and pleaded for mercy, to serve as a slave, without a demand for restoration to his previous position in the family (v.21).

### **A Forgiving Heart.**

It is the father in the story who represents the unexpected forgiving heart of God in response to genuine repentance that is marked by:

- *Hopeful anticipation.* The father never gave up hoping for his son's repentance and return home to be restored to him again. He was persevering in prayer and intently looking for the day he saw the familiar form of his son on the horizon (v.20). The hopeful yearning for restoration was never quenched in the heart of the father.
- *Courageous love.* The father was willing to humble himself and not conform to the cultural mandate of his day to make his son grovel in the dirt. Instead, in a spontaneous, jubilant act of love, he ran to embrace his son (v.20).
- *Gracious mercy.* Forgiveness was joyfully granted because he sensed the repentance in the heart of his son, and he restored him to a position of sonship that was unheard of (v.22).
- *Celebration of repentance.* The father planned a party to celebrate the return of his son. His son was heading in a direction that brought

separation and death to their relationship, but now he was alive and reconciled to his father (vv. 23-24).

### **An Unforgiving Heart.**

The older son (representative of the Pharisees who were listening to the parable) is a study in the stubborn refusal to forgive that is characterized by:

- *Hardness.* There was an unwillingness on his part to consider restoration of his younger foolish brother. He felt justifiably cold toward his brother. And he was outraged that his father would still want a relationship with a son who had so deeply offended him (v.28).
- *Demanding of revenge.* His focus was only on immediately punishing his brother for what he had done rather than focusing on what had changed in his heart. He wanted to make his brother pay for what he had done. He had no mercy and no desire for reconciliation (v.28).
- *Arrogant refusal to celebrate.* The older son withheld relationship from both his brother and his father (v.28). He missed an opportunity for joy and celebration because he was preoccupied with himself. He missed the loving heart of the father that longs for restoration. Instead, he angrily withdrew in self-justified indignation and smugness over being right, and he refused to recognize that what he was doing was causing just as much pain and separation between himself and his father as was caused by his younger brother.

The refusal to forgive indicates a rebellious, stubborn heart that has not drunk deeply of the water of grace and mercy at the well of God's forgiveness (Lk. 7:47).

Our unwillingness to love those who have harmed us reflects our own failure to understand how much God has loved us. The apostle Peter reminded us of this in the first chapter of his second New Testament letter. After describing seven essential, progressive graces, which culminate in godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (2 Pet. 1:5-7), he added, "For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins" (vv.8-9).

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## **THE PARADOX OF FORGIVING LOVE**

God's concept of love is so radically different from our own. We tend to love what we like. He loves what is in our best interest. We are inclined to forgive when we think it is in our best interest to do so. He wants us to forgive when it is in the best interest of someone else to do so. We are inclined to embrace what is comfortable and to avoid what brings pain. He tells us, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good" (Rom. 12:9).

Loving others requires that we be willing to forgive. Forgiving others requires that we be willing to love. Both require an ever-deepening relationship with God to make us a reflection of His good heart to those with whom we have relationships. For then, and only then, is love "made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like Him" (1 Jn. 4:17 NIV).

This ability to love and forgive can begin only when we have first been forgiven by God. Have you taken that first step? Have you experienced the joy of a restored relationship with God through the forgiveness of your sins that He offers through faith in His Son? If not, humble yourself, acknowledge your inability to pay the debt of your sin, ask Him to forgive you, and accept His gift of forgiveness. The debt has been paid. The offer stands.

Accept Christ today and begin to experience the freedom to forgive others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven you.