

FREEDOM IN FORGIVENESS

The Road Back



Introduction

The heart of the Christian message beats in rhythm to the theme of forgiveness. The Bible tells us the great lengths to which God has gone to forgive us. From Genesis through Revelation, it develops the story of the redemption of sinful men and women by the grace of God. It tells the story of God's pursuit of His cherished-but-disoriented, beloved-yet-culpable human creation. He would rather 'die' on a cross than live eternally without us.

The Word of God does not tell the story of God's forgiveness without also bringing forgiven people to the challenge of forgiving one another. Just as God tells us to be holy because He is holy (1 Peter 1:15) and loving because He is loving (1 John 4:8), so does He call us to be like Him in forgiveness. **"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).**

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us a manual for Christian discipleship. In one section of that sermon, He gave

instruction about prayer. And one of the specific links He made in that prayer between human and divine action had to do with forgiveness. **"Forgive us our debts," Jesus told us to pray, "as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).** Of all the things He mentioned in that prayer, this is the only petition He amplified in the immediate context: **"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15).**

The point here is not that God is dependent on our handling of a situation before He can act or know what to do. Our act of forgiving another does not trigger God's forgiveness of us. Your willingness to release someone from his debt to you does not thereby put God in your debt. Forgiving someone is neither a prerequisite to nor proof of worthiness for forgiveness, it is a corollary to forgiveness. When I see the terribleness of my own sin, it is easy for me to forgive someone else; so long as I am unwilling to forgive another, I have not taken my own sinfulness seriously.

"But you don't know what I've experienced!" someone wants to shout back. "You don't know the pain or shame or chaos that came to me because of what someone did to me and you have no right to preach to me about needing to forgive that person! Until you've walked in my shoes, you have no right to . . ."

Wait. Please wait! You've misunderstood. I'm not here to judge you for how you feel. I probably haven't walked in the shoes of your most awful life experience — any more than you have the means to understand mine. And I'm not about to throw out the tacky **"I-feel-your-pain" line that rings so hollow in so many settings these days. My point here is not meant to add to your anguish or to put a layer of guilt on top of it. I want to take you to the subject of forgiving others for your sake.**

The Bible verses I have mentioned already link forgiving and forgiveness. Will you just explore that link with me for a few minutes? Will you let me share the experiences of some other people with you? Will you allow me to work with some biblical material that might help you shine some light into a painful dark corner of your life? I promise to go there with all of Jesus' gentleness I can summon.

Some Things You Should Understand

It will be hard for some of you to read these things because of the depth or freshness of your pain. In fact, it may be impossible for you to read certain parts of it at all right now. As you will shortly see, I do not treat the bestowal of forgiveness any more glibly than I treat its acceptance from God. I know how much it cost God to forgive me and I know how much it has cost me to forgive some things to people who have hurt me. But if you will hear what you can bear today, perhaps the remainder will become meaningful over time.

You may have been the victim of racial prejudice or sexual harassment. You may have been raped. Someone may have killed a person you love. Your church may have failed you at some critical time in your life by judging and criticizing you instead of loving and nurturing you. You may have been betrayed by a philandering husband or wife. Your child may have been put through a miserable marriage and traumatic divorce. Are there feelings to be dealt with in any of these situations? Are those feelings real and painful? Will it take a miracle to move you to the point of being able to forgive that person?

When someone has suffered a terrible wrong, there is usually a time of stunned denial that is followed by an overwhelming pain that threatens to destroy you. Your father could not have done that to you! Your wife would not have been unfaithful to you and left her children without there being some fault in you that caused it! Your child can't be pregnant or on drugs or in jail! The church just wouldn't turn its back on you!

The painful truth is, however, that these things do happen. They happen to good people as well as bad ones. They happen to hard-working, tax-paying, church-going people. They happen to people just like you. Sometimes they happen to you, to your family, to the people you love. And when the full reality of that truth sinks in, there is incredible pain and anger.

This isn't right! Something must be wrong with me! I've failed! God has turned away from me!

Then the Accuser begins to bring his messages to you. Satan tells you God doesn't love you or has abandoned you. He may tell you there is no God. He says you'll never get over this. He

says you need to get even. He tells you to scoff at the idea of ever forgiving that person — and never to trust anyone again. He tells you your life is ruined and can never be put right again because of what has happened to you. All Wrong! Oh, so wrong!

Steps to Healing

You can get over what has happened to you. You can get unstuck from the situation of the greatest wrong ever done to you. You can pray as Jesus taught and both claim and offer forgiveness in the same breath. Forgiveness really is a journey of many steps. Let me trace the basic ones for you.

Step One: You must get past your shock and denial about what has happened and bring it into the light of God's healing mercy. You must find a safe person to trust with your pain. That person becomes your confidant, your prayer-partner, your accountability person. **Not just anyone you know or who is your friend can be that person.** You must select carefully and pick someone who is spiritually mature enough to be ahead of you on this spiritual journey called the Christian life.

The secrets we keep tend to be terribly destructive. Maybe you've heard the story of the boy and girl visiting on their grandparents' farm during the summer. Throwing rocks one day, the young boy hit a chicken in the head and killed it. When he saw what he had done, he hid the chicken's body behind a woodpile in back of the barn. But his sister had seen it all. When it was her turn to dry the dishes that night, she whispered to him, "If you don't dry the dishes for me, I'll tell what you did today."

For the next several days, the young boy lived with the double torment of a guilty conscience and a manipulating sister. Finally he couldn't take it anymore and went to his grandmother. "Grandma," he said with a quivering lip, "I have to tell you what I did." Through tears, he told the whole sorry tale. His Grandma smiled, got on her knees, and hugged him close. She said, "Billy, I saw it happen and forgave you then. I just wondered how long you would let your sister torment you before you would trust me, come to me and tell me about it."

So we will not be tormented by secret guilt over our sins, the Bible commands: **"Confess your sins to each other and pray for**

each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16a). It isn't only our sins that need to be brought into the light though. Our fears need to be brought into the daylight. The shame-based feelings drummed into us need the healing light of God's grace. The esteem-shattering events that have made us feel worthless and ugly, dirty and second-rate need to be verbalized. Speaking the unspeakable has a remarkable power to break the hold it has on you.

Step Two: You must give yourself permission to grieve whatever you have lost through what has been done to you. When someone does you wrong, something is taken away from you — your innocence, your security, your peace, your joy. When you finally face up to what was done to you, you will soon be hit by the force of anger welling up from the knowledge that that deed has continued to rob you across time.

Robbed of love through a father's abusiveness or coldness, you went looking for love in all the wrong places. Robbed of innocence, you felt such shame that you medicated yourself with alcohol and drugs. Robbed of someone you loved, you have been angry at God for taking your mother, or husband, or baby away from you. Robbed of your sense of worth by being fired from a job, you harbor a grudge against a former boss or the person who has the job now. Robbed of your family by a divorce, you are so angry at your former spouse or your Dad. Your sense is that the person who did you wrong owes you something now and you are angry at the world that nobody is paying up on that debt.

At some point, you will need to release God or fate, a boss or an ex-wife, an abusive father or an unprotecting mother from their debt to you. They can't give back what has been taken away. Scrambled eggs can't be unscrambled. Humpty Dumpty can seldom be put back together again! But before you can approach canceling the debt you feel somebody owes you, you will have to take the time to grieve what you lost. No stiff upper lip. No pretending it doesn't hurt. No denying what it did to your image of yourself. And no glib "It doesn't matter!" or "Who cares anyway?" Of course it matters, and you care that somebody did such a terrible, unjustified thing.

Step Three: Reasonably early in the process, you must stop fanning the flames of your anger and resentment. In her book Hope Has Its Reasons, Rebecca Manley Pippert tells about a

man who caused a lot of pain to some very close friends of hers. One day she told her husband, "I hate that man." To her astonishment, his reply was, "Yes, Becky, I have known that a long time. But I felt it was something you had to see on your own." As they talked, she expressed her feelings — I'm glad he didn't blurt out "You can't feel like that, Becky!" as some of us might — and confessed her confusion. She wanted to deal with her hate, but didn't know what to do. So she asked her husband, "I know that God is the only one who can change my heart, but what is my responsibility?"

Becky's husband, Wes, gave her some sound advice. "Well, first, quit gossiping about him. Every time you get together with the others, you all talk about him and dredge up what he did. My suggestion is to quit gossiping, just stop talking about him." She did. And, to use her own words, it was "almost embarrassing to admit how much it helped." We fan the flames of old hurts when we talk about them in gossipy ways. **Talking to a spiritually mature person in order to come to terms with negative feelings is one thing. Talking just to keep the books open on some issue is quite another.**

If someone tries to bait you into a negative conversation about some person or situation, it's all right to say, "I'd just rather not talk about that. It's painful and dredges up too many bad feelings in my soul."

Step Four: Make a unilateral decision to forgive. Have you ever wondered about Jesus' command that His disciples love their enemies? He was taking exception to the way the rabbis of His time had interpreted certain biblical commandments and said, **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor 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 5:43-45a).** How in the world can somebody love his enemies? Especially if those enemies are still doing him wrong?

Whoa! Hold on just a minute. I think we've confused some concepts around these words from Jesus — a confusion that makes some people feel hopeless about ever obeying this commandment.

First, Jesus didn't command you to be reconciled with your enemy or to get back together with your wife. Reconciliation is

bilateral and depends on mutual desire, mutual willingness, and mutual commitment. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is unilateral. You can choose to forgive, even if the person hasn't asked for your pardon and mocks the idea that you have offered it. In your choice to forgive, you simply close the books and cancel the emotional-spiritual debt somebody owes you from a wrong done. You may forgive the employee for slacking or stealing, but you don't have to give him his job back. You may forgive your philandering husband, but you don't have to stay married to him or take him back. For your own sake, you must forgive and turn loose of the anger. You may never have reason enough to effect reconciliation.

Second, Jesus didn't tell us we had to like our enemies. Liking somebody is having good vibes when you're around him. Liking has to do with positive feelings, enjoying being with someone, or having the ability to relax and have a good time with her. Some people are more likable than others and certain personality types are more or less compatible. These are things beyond our control. But love is always a conscious choice that involves both the intellect and will. **Liking is emotional; loving is volitional.** You love someone when you make an intellectual and intentional decision to nurture your own or another's well-being through certain behaviors — not keeping a tally sheet of wrongs, showing patience, not flying off the handle or being rude, etc. (cf. I Corinthians 13:4-7).

When we understand that love is a chosen way to behave rather than an unpredictable jumble of feelings, it starts to dawn on us that we can forgive our enemies. We can choose not to react in kind, get even, or fight fire with fire. You can refuse to take revenge. You can return kindness for unkindness, loving words for hateful ones (cf. Romans 12:17ff).

Step Five: Pray for whoever has done you wrong. Did you catch the progression in the words of Jesus that were quoted earlier? "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," He said, "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

A Sunday school teacher was instructing her class of four-year-olds one day and made the mistake of asking a little girl if she had ever prayed for an enemy. The little girl told of her playmate who had taken a doll from her in a sand pile the week before. "I prayed for her," she said. "I prayed she'd drop

dead!" That's the spirit of dealing with other people that works too often in adults and doesn't heal as quickly as it typically does with children.

Some Closing Thoughts

Forgiving others is not a quick, simple process. Working through the steps I have just outlined takes a while. If the hurt was real, you can't flippantly say, "Oh, it's all right. Just forget it!" You can say that about a glass of tea spilled on the kitchen floor by an honored guest, but you dare not say that about a genuine wrong. Moral evil such as lies, prejudice and attacks against one's person or good name are not to be taken so lightly. They rip holes in the fabric of God's spiritual universe. It takes time to come to terms with them, work through all the feelings and practical repercussions and move toward healing. A person can't always work through ten years of sexual abuse or a lifetime of racial prejudice or the loss of a baby in the course of a 45-minute sermon or two-hour counseling session.

And forgiveness is not forgetting. Some memories of certain evil and painful things will never go away, but God will give you the grace to deal with them. He will turn you from anger to concern, from retaliation to prayer. Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded one day of a vicious deed that someone had done to her years before. She acted as if she had never heard of the incident. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No," Miss Barton replied. "I distinctly remember forgetting it." We can "forget" only in that we refuse to keep the books open.

Conclusion

Albert Tomei was a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. On the Op-Ed Page of the New York Times ("Touching the Heart of a Killer, March 7, 1997), he related one of the most touching stories I have ever read.

A young defendant was convicted in Judge Tomei's court of gunning down another person execution style. The murderer had a previous bad record, was no stranger to the system and only stared in anger as the jury returned its guilty verdict.

The victim's family had attended every day of the two-week

trial. On the day of sentencing, his mother and grandmother addressed the court. When they spoke, neither addressed the jury. Both spoke directly to the murderer. The mother spoke first and then the grandmother. They both forgave him.

"You broke the Golden Rule: loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. You broke the law — loving your neighbor as yourself. I am your neighbor," the older of the two women told him. "So anyway you have my address. You want to write, I'll write you back. Because I sat here two weeks and for sixteen months I tried to hate you. But you know what? I could not hate you. I feel sorry for you because you made a wrong choice."

Judge Tomei writes: "For the first time since the trial began, the defendant's eyes lost their laser force and appeared to surrender to a life force that only a mother can generate; nurturing, unconditional love. . . . After the grandmother finished, I looked at the defendant. His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him collapsed helplessly before this remarkable display of humaneness."

A mother and grandmother forgive the angry murderer of their grandson. And I insist on holding a grudge? Or you demand the right to keep the books open on what happened to you?

Forgiveness is a journey of many steps. If God has forgiven all your sins by His marvelous grace, surely you can start on the road of forgiving others. You can take the first step on that path today.