

Melva's Corner

The Simplified Soul & The Gift of Forgiveness

March 14, 2005

**Bible Text: I John 1:9 Ephesians 2:8, 9 Psalm 103:12
I Timothy 1:15 Psalm 51:7 Romans 8:38, 39**

Central Truth: A weary Christian lay awake in bed one night trying to hold the world together by her worrying and anxiety. Then she heard the Lord gently say, "You can go to sleep now. I'll stay up."

I would like for you to imagine that you have a ten pound bag of potatoes that you must carry around with you everywhere. You have to tuck it into bed with you at night, drag it with you on the bus, sling it over your shoulder when you're shopping and load in the back seat of your car when you are driving. It must be carried with you everywhere for the next three weeks. After three weeks you can dump the sack of potatoes in the nearest trash can. There should be three essential observations that you will make after the experience:

- ◆ **The potatoes were heavy.**
- ◆ **They started to smell.**
- ◆ **It felt great to dump them!**

That's also true of offenses-both what we have done and what others have done to us. In fact, the failure to deal with hurts is one of the primary reasons people feel exhausted and weary. Carrying a load of guilt or resentment takes a terrible toll-physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I read somewhere that 80 percent of health problems can be traced to the root cause of unforgiveness.

When you think about it, it's easy to see why being forgiven can be a wonderful gift. It's really the gift of love and freedom, the gift of a second chance. But we sometimes forget that forgiveness can be as beneficial to the one giving it as it is to the one receiving it. Forgiveness, in other words, is not only a gift you give others; it is also a wonderful gift to give yourself.

The trouble, of course, is that forgiveness can be costly. If your hurts are deep or recent, even reading this message may be difficult for you. But please don't skip over it. Instead, I suggest you ask the Holy Spirit to work on your heart as you read and to gently move you to the place where you might consider forgiveness.

It's possible you have carried pain for so long that you don't even notice how heavy the burden has become. Without your realizing it, these hurts are draining your energy and distracting you from a more fulfilling life. Once you take the steps to forgive someone who has caused you deep pain or even to forgive yourself for something you regret, you might be astonished at the fresh energy you have. Your outlook on life will improve and you'll wake up each day with new vitality.

The big question, of course, is how do you give the gift of forgiveness? A simple, "I forgive you" rarely cuts it. You might wish for a quick formula so you can check off each item and be done with it. But forgiveness is more a process than a once-and-for-all activity. As you move through the process step by step, you gradually begin to realize that something wonderful is taking place in your heart and setting you free. Here are seven steps that can help you find that freedom:

Forgiveness Step #1: Admit the Hurt and Anger

It may sound strange, but the first step toward forgiving another person is to admit how hurt and angry you really are. Sometimes it seems easier just to pretend the hurt isn't important and try to forget about it. The trouble is, you don't forget. Offenses that wound your heart accumulate in your memory and keep you from experiencing the abundant life God has planned for you.

The process of healing and forgiveness must begin with honesty. You don't want to minimize what happened, but you don't want to exaggerate it either. Truthfully look at what, if any, examine the part you contributed to the problem. Writing down your memories and feelings about an event will help you determine if you are off balance. When you do this, try to step back and get some perspective as well as pouring out your feelings.

Forgiveness Step #2: Talk It Out

If you are in an ongoing relationship with someone who has hurt you, it is important that you talk about the hurt with the one who caused it. Try to choose a convenient time and a private place, but don't put off your conversation just because the circumstances aren't perfect. You will want to be open and honest while not slipping into an attack mode. Calmly express your perspective and feelings about what happened, and then invite the other person to do the same.

Listen carefully, trying to understand without interrupting or becoming defensive. Remember that there are two sides to every story. Seeing the other side may not reduce the pain, but it may well soften your heart and help you forgive. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible or advisable, you can still benefit from writing out the things you would otherwise say. Be specific about what the other person has done and how this has affected you. If appropriate, ask for clarification or state that you are in the process of trying to forgive. Whether or not you actually mail the letter, "talking it out" in this way will move you one more step down the road to forgiveness.

How to Talk it Out with Someone Who Has Hurt You

- ◆ Share your hurt and let the other person see your heart.
- ◆ With a calm voice, explain how the offense has affected you.
- ◆ Don't accuse, attack, insult, belittle, or use sarcasm.
- ◆ Use positive statements wherever you can. Use "I" statements like "I feel hurt because..."
- ◆ Avoid "you" statements like "You are the one who..."
- ◆ Stay on the subject.
- ◆ Maintain eye contact.
- ◆ Try to talk about your anger without acting it out.
- ◆ Listen to the other person's viewpoint.
- ◆ Don't interrupt.
- ◆ Speak as though God is listening. (He is.)

Forgiveness Step #3: Remember Why Forgiveness Is Necessary

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." The last part of this verse is a great reminder of why you need to forgive others.

The truth is, we all carry the weight of the careless, hurtful, or terribly wrong things we have done, and we all have abundant need of forgiveness. The amazing thing is that when we come to God, confess our sin, and ask forgiveness...He forgives us. The Bible says it clearly: "If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."

Jesus has already died to pay the price for your mistakes, and He longs for you to accept His free gift of forgiveness. But He wants something else, too. He wants you to forgive others-not necessarily because they deserve it, not even because forgiving is good for you, but because He forgave you first.

Accepting Gods forgiveness and forgiving others are like two sides of the same coin. They're both necessary if you want to be the person God has in mind for you to be— and avoid lugging around all that guilt and resentment. Besides, if Christ has given you the gift of forgiveness, how can you refuse to offer it to others?

Forgiveness Step #4: Choose Forgiveness

Forgiveness essentially means giving up your right to make other people pay for the wrongs they have committed against you. It's a choice, a decision of the will. **And it's good to keep in mind that the choice of forgiveness almost always precedes the feeling of forgiveness.** When you first make the choice to forgive, you might still feel angry or resentful. By choosing forgiveness, you are asking God to take your willingness and gradually work a miracle in your heart. But it may take time-not because forgiveness doesn't work, but because your emotional wounds still need time to heal.

Forgiveness Step #5: Put the Hurt Behind You

The mind is a fabulous computer that usually runs seventy years or more without warranty work. I read somewhere that it can

record up to eight hundred memories per second, storing the more significant memories for a lifetime. (Don't you wonder how scientists determine that?) This means that the old saying "forgive and forget" really isn't very likely. But since forgetting is not really a prerequisite for healing a hurt, it's not a necessary part of forgiveness. What is necessary is making a decision to stop rehearsing the pain over and over. Once we have faced what has happened to us, we can be done with reliving the past and rehashing the details. Memories will rise in our mind, but we can choose to put them away and focus on other things.

Putting hurts behind us involves making four promises:

- ◆ I will no longer dwell on this incident.
- ◆ I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.
- ◆ I will not talk to others about this incident.
- ◆ I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our relationship.

Forgiveness Step #6: Be Patient with the Process

It would be nice if the process of forgiveness happened quickly, but often it doesn't. Some hurts are just too painful to let go of, even when we truly want to forgive. It takes time to put the pain behind us and move forward. But as the days pass, we usually come to realize that forgiveness has taken hold in our hearts and we are beginning to trust again.

This process is complicated when the other person hurts us again, as is almost inevitable in a very close relationship such as a marriage. In this cycle of hurt, forgiveness, and trust, the forgiveness must be repeated over and over.

In cases of physical and emotional abuse, renewed trust may be inappropriate or even unsafe, and it is vitally important to seek help from a pastor, trained professional or a refuge shelter. But usually in most life situations the cycle is part of the ordinary struggles that deepen our commitment to one another as we work through them. When relationships are restored through the process of giving and receiving forgiveness, they can even become more durable. Like a treasured porcelain vase that has

been accidentally broken but is too precious to discard, we lovingly mend the vessel. Sometimes the glue makes it stronger.

Forgiveness Step #7: Forgive Yourself

It is not enough to forgive others. We must also learn to forgive ourselves—and to accept the gift of God's forgiveness. This is often the most difficult step because we feel that the guilt-producing secrets we carry in our heart are too horrible for forgiveness. Remember that God is willing to forgive everything and, indeed, has already forgiven if you have asked Him to. He wants you to move forward and stop punishing yourself.

If you are struggling with ongoing guilt issues in your life, try adapting the steps of the forgiveness process and applying them to your own heart. Admit to them. Talk it out with God and others you have disappointed or hurt. Remember God's forgiveness. Choose forgiveness by accepting what God has offered. Try to put the pain behind you and look forward. And be patient with the process of coming to terms with the beautiful reality of God's forgiveness.

I just completed reading a booklet "My Heart—Christ's Home" by Robert Boyd Munger where he uses the example of a house to describe how "room by room" we turn our hearts over to Christ. For example, he talks about the Living Room, where we develop intimacy through prayer and reading the Bible, and the Library, which holds things that occupy our minds. But the last room Munger describes is the Hall Closet—the place where we keep the secret things of our heart. And it is in this place that we find the key to forgiving others and ourselves, this is the excerpt:

One day I found Christ waiting for me at the door. An arresting look was in His eye. As I entered He said to me, "There is a peculiar odor in the house. Something must be dead around here. It's upstairs. I think it is in the hall closet." As soon as He said this, I knew what He was talking about....

With trembling fingers I passed the key to Him. He took it, walked over to the door, opened it, entered, took out all the putrefying stuff that was rotting there, and threw

it away. Then He cleaned the closet and painted it. It was done in a moment's time. Oh, what victory and release to have that dead thing out of my life.

For every person-for every stressed-out person-the glorious gifts of forgiveness are victory and release. They are gifts that make your heart soar.

What hurts, offenses, or regrets are you having a hard time letting go of? How is this affecting the way you feel about yourself, about others, about life in general, and about God? Many of us have areas of our life where we feel we are not worthy of God's forgiveness. On a blank piece of paper, write one that you struggle with. Next, in bold letters across the page, write, "Forgiven Forever!" Then take the paper and shred it, burn it, or bury it. **You are free!**

Memory Text:

"If we [freely] admit that we have sinned *and* confess our sins, He is faithful and just (true to His own nature and promises) and will forgive our sins [dismiss our lawlessness] and [continuously] cleanse us from all unrighteousness [everything not in conformity to His will in purpose, thought, and action]." (I John 1:9) Amplified