

The Power Of Forgiveness



Part 1 – Why I Can't Forgive

Matthew 6:14-15 (NLT) If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

- C.S. Lewis observed, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word, until you have something to forgive."
- If you've spent any time in church at all, you realize the importance of forgiveness. You know that it is a biblical concept, you've read verses like our text, and you may even have been warned about the physical, emotional and spiritual consequences of unforgiveness.
- And, you are no doubt genuinely grateful for a God who was willing to take on human form and die an excruciating death so YOUR sins could be forgiven.
- Why then, is there such a discrepancy between our understanding of forgiveness and our willingness to grant it to others?
- Respected counselor and author David Seamands observes that most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are caused by the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people. He says, "The good news of the gospel has not penetrated the level of our emotions."
- **The issue of forgiveness touches each of us every day.** Occasionally, it's a major crisis that forces us to choose between forgiveness and unforgiveness (i.e. an unfaithful spouse, an unwanted divorce, an unfair termination from your job, sexual abuse you experienced as a child, a slanderous rumor that has cost you your reputation). But most of the time it is lesser offenses that we must deal with (i.e. being overlooked by a friend, a fight with our spouse).
- Regardless of the size of the offense, FORGIVENESS IS NOT USUALLY THE PREFERRED RESPONSE!
- **Why do Christians, who have been forgiven so much, have such difficulty forgiving others?**

THERE ARE THREE REASONS WHY I CAN'T FORGIVE:

1. I don't understand what forgiveness is and what it isn't.

- A survey by Barna Research Group conducted last summer (July/August 1999), clearly illustrates the depth of misunderstanding that surrounds the subject of forgiveness.
- How would you respond to the following questions from the survey? Rate each statement as an **ACCURATE** or an **INACCURATE** description of forgiveness.
 - You cannot honestly forgive someone unless that person shows some remorse for what they did. **(62% agreed)**
 - If you really forgive someone, you would want that person to be released from the consequences of their actions. **(60% agreed)**
 - If you genuinely forgive someone, you should rebuild your relationship with that person. **(73% agreed)**
 - If you have really forgiven someone, you should be able to forget what they have done to you. **(66% agreed)**
- **The biblical perspective is that each of these statements is WRONG!** But only 4% of respondents gave the biblical response to all the questions. Among evangelical Christians, only 8% gave the biblical response to all the questions.
- The FOUR MYTHS identified above confuse the issue of forgiveness for many people. We're going to deal with all of these questions in this series, because it is vital that Christians have a biblical viewpoint – especially about an issue as crucial as forgiveness!
- A failure to understand the true nature of forgiveness leads to prolonged bitterness, illegitimate fears and unnecessary guilt, and prevents us from receiving and granting life's most important gift!

2. I'm riding the "guilt-blame" seesaw.

- Remember riding a seesaw as a child? What happened when a mischievous playmate suddenly scrambled off the seesaw? CRASH! The only way you and your partner could ensure a safe landing was to get off the seesaw simultaneously.
- In the human mind, there is a seesaw with one side labeled "GUILT" and the other side labeled "BLAME." The only way to keep the seesaw in balance is to make sure you have enough "blame" to balance your "guilt."

- The more guilt you feel for your own mistakes, the more blame you must pile on to remain in emotional equilibrium. But what happens if you suddenly get rid of the blame toward others (through forgiveness) without also removing your guilt? You will emotionally CRASH!
- Our sense of self-preservation keeps us from forgiving – we don't want to grant forgiveness and be left holding the bag of personal guilt. So, in reality, it is our guilt for our own personal failures in our relationships that prohibits us from forgiving others. If we do choose to forgive, we will attach blame to someone else to keep in emotional balance.
- One reason we're hesitant to forgive people is that it is much easier and safer to blame others for our problems than to blame the most logical culprit – ME! After all, that would put all the weight on my side of the seesaw!
- **THE ONLY WAY TO GET OFF THE SEESAW SAFELY IS TO REMOVE YOUR GUILT AND STOP BLAMING OTHERS AT THE SAME TIME. BUT HOW DO I REMOVE MY GUILT?** That's where #3 comes in.

3. I can't give away what I don't possess.

- It is basically impossible to impart something to another person that YOU have not fully experienced. If the majority of people on this planet have never experienced the unconditional forgiveness of God, is it any wonder they have difficulty forgiving others?
- You can't give away what you don't possess. **ONLY THE FORGIVEN CAN TRULY FORGIVE!**
- But wait – that should mean that the church should be filled, not only with FORGIVEN people, but with FORGIVING people. Is that the case? Often church people are the most unforgiving people you'll ever encounter. WHY? Because many of them have a KNOWLEDGE that God forgives, but no EXPERIENCE of forgiveness.
- Dawn Smith Jordan had to learn about forgiveness the hard way. Her story became the basis for a CBS television movie, Nightmare in Columbia County. On May 31, 1985, her seventeen-year-old sister, Sherrie Smith, was abducted while walking from her car to the mailbox. Five days later Sherrie's body was discovered. Soon afterward the Smith family received a letter in the mail that had been written by Sherrie. The kidnapper had allowed her to write it before he murdered her, then had mailed her letter. Sherrie called her letter "my last will and testament."

She wrote, "I love you all so much. Please don't let this ruin your lives. Keep living one day at a time for Jesus. Don't worry about me because I know I'm going to be with my Father." Since the time Sherrie and Dawn were little girls, their father had made a practice of taping Scripture verses to the bathroom mirror for them to memorize. Now, in the moment before she was to die, Sherrie recalled one of those verses and wrote, "Everything works out for the good of those who love the Lord. All my love, Sherrie."

But her family's nightmare was far from over. The killer telephoned the Smith family numerous times, cruelly describing the gruesome details of how he had murdered Sherrie. Ultimately, he was apprehended and received two death sentences for his brutal crime. Now, Dawn thought, the story was finally finished, and she could try and rebuild her shattered life.

A few years later, however, she received a letter that would forever change her life. The killer wrote to Dawn to let her know that he had become a Christian. "Dawn," he asked, "will you and your family ever forgive me for what I have done?" HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND? Dawn said, "I knew as a Christian that when somebody wrongs you, you forgive them. That's basic knowledge. Yet all of a sudden forgiveness was a lot harder to do."

God brought her to **Ephesians 4:32** – "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

Dawn declares, "It wasn't easy. It wasn't overnight. But God gave me the answer that I needed. We are to forgive just as Jesus forgave us. I was finally able to sit down and write a letter to Mr. Bell telling him that only because of the grace that I have received in my life could I let him know that he was forgiven."

- **There is an inseparable link between RECEIVING God's forgiveness and GRANTING forgiveness to others.** "EVEN AS" God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you – that's the HINGE relating God's grace to our forgiveness of others.
- Can only Christians forgive? Of course not. But the Bible does teach that Christians should find it EASIER to forgive, based on the grace they have experienced. Remember Simon the Pharisee?
- Luke 7:41-47 ⁴¹ Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people—five hundred pieces of silver to one and fifty pieces to the other. ⁴² But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts.

Who do you suppose loved him more after that?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt." "That's right," Jesus said. ⁴⁴ Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You didn't give me a kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in. ⁴⁶ You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. ⁴⁷ I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."

- A few years ago a lady with colon cancer, who had only four months to live, was interviewed about her illness. "How does it feel to know that you are terminal?" the interviewer asked. She replied, "The truth is, we are all terminal. The only difference is that some of us realize it and some of us don't."
- Both Simon and the prostitute suffered from the terminal disease of sin, and both were in need of forgiveness from Jesus. **THE ONLY DIFFERENCE WAS THEIR AWARENESS OF THEIR CONDITION.** The prostitute understood her need for forgiveness; Simon denied his.
- The primary reason Christians should be better forgivers than non-Christians is that they've been forced to admit their own failures. **When we realize the great gulf that God overcame to forgive us, the gap between us and our offender seems quite insignificant!** In God's eyes, we all need forgiveness – there is no difference between the preacher and the prostitute, the governor and the gunman, or the sophisticate and the savage. **Compared to the holiness of God, such differences in human behavior are negligible!** When we understand that the same evil that motivated our offender to hurt us resides in OUR heart as well, we're in a much better position to forgive! And remember that it was GOD (the offended party) who took the INITIATIVE to seek reconciliation with us, even though we didn't deserve it!
- **Romans 3:23** For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.
- James Montgomery Boice compares our good works to **Monopoly money**. As long as you're playing Monopoly, those bills are of tremendous value. But they're absolutely worthless in the real world. In the same way, our good works are like a "filthy garment" (**Isaiah 64:6**) in the sight of God – they're worthless!

- Several decades ago, at a British conference on comparative religions, a group of experts were discussing the uniqueness of Christianity. What differentiates Christianity from other religions? When C.S. Lewis entered the room and was told what the group was trying to ascertain, he remarked, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." **EVERY OTHER RELIGION EMPHASIZES MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO SECURE GOD'S APPROVAL. ONLY CHRISTIANITY MAKES GOD'S LOVE UNCONDITIONAL.**
- **GRACE is a deliberate decision to give something good to someone who doesn't deserve it.** That's what God did for us. That's what He wants us to do for others. And such an action is never without cost!
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.
- Amazingly, most people reject God's offer of forgiveness and a home in Heaven. But those who accept God's invitation are in the best position to understand what grace is all about – granting to others what they do not deserve, earn, or sometimes even request.
- **WHY I CAN'T FORGIVE** – maybe I don't understand it, or maybe I'm afraid of doing it, but most likely, I just haven't experienced it.
- **THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS IS AVAILABLE TODAY!** But we block God's forgiveness toward us if we refuse to release our forgiveness toward others.
- **Matthew 6:12** And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.