

finding freedom in forgiveness



Marriage Enrichment Seminar

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.

- Many times in Christian circles, we pay “lip-service” to the idea of forgiveness without dealing honestly with some of the objections people raise. We are prone to tell only one side of the story, extolling the benefits of forgiveness without mentioning how hard it can sometimes be to truly forgive those who have wronged us.
- Have you ever heard a sermon that made a strong case AGAINST forgiveness? Have you ever heard of a spiritual advisor counseling a victim by saying, “What happened to you is so awful that you would be a fool to forgive – it’s alright to hang on to those feelings of bitterness and hurt for the rest of your life”? No pastor would ever advise someone to do that, for their own good. And yet, that’s exactly what most people choose to do to themselves – to hang on to an offense until it adversely affects them.
- The reason we hold on to these feelings is because we build up a rationale against forgiveness in our own minds. We put it together logically, piece by piece, until the case seems airtight to us. And yet, we know instinctively that the actual arguments circulating obsessively in our minds would sound pretty unconvincing to others. So, rather than voice them, we simply sum them all up with one conclusive statement (or attitude): “I can’t forgive.”
- **The real issue many times is not that we CAN’T forgive, it’s that we think we SHOULDN’T HAVE TO forgive!** After all, if we are the victim, why should we have to do something that is uncomfortable for us? Why should our offender be allowed to get off scot-free?
- **Today, let’s put forgiveness itself on trial and weigh the evidence for and against it.** Are there legitimate reasons why I shouldn’t forgive? Are there times when not letting an offender off the hook is the right option? And, am I justified in feeling the way I do?

THERE ARE 4 REASONS WHY I SHOULDN’T FORGIVE:

1. Forgiveness denies the seriousness of sin.

- Many people believe that by forgiving, we are denying the severity of an offense – like saying that what our offender did wrong doesn’t really matter. Now, even those same people would probably agree that some offenses are so petty we should overlook them – a forgotten birthday, an interrupted sentence, an unreturned phone call. And the Bible certainly would support this viewpoint:
- **Proverbs 17:14 (NLT)** Beginning a quarrel is like opening a floodgate, so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
- **Proverbs 19:11 (NLT)** People with good sense restrain their anger; they earn esteem by overlooking wrongs.
- Solomon is telling us that a wise person is one who doesn’t make a federal case out of every injury they experience in life. This is not to say that even small slights aren’t painful (ever get a paper cut?).
- **But what about major offenses?** They shouldn’t be overlooked, should they? Is it possible to even treat every offense the same way? It isn’t humanly comprehensible that something as serious as childhood sexual abuse could be compared to something as trivial as a sarcastic remark from a coworker! **How could God possibly expect us to treat them the same?**
- **FORGIVENESS DOES NOT TRIVIALIZE OUR PAIN, JUST AS GOD DOES NOT TRIVIALIZE OUR SIN!**
- Some people believe that when God forgives our sin, He overlooks our sin, but that is not what the Bible teaches!
- **Nahum 1:3a (NLT)** The Lord is slow to get angry, but his power is great, and he never lets the guilty go unpunished.
- God’s mercy cannot override His holiness! He does not casually declare that sinners are suddenly righteous and serious offenses are suddenly inconsequential. Our sinful offenses demanded payment ... and that took the agony of Calvary!
- If a perfect God finds it impossible to just “overlook” sin against Him, how could He expect us to just “overlook” the serious hurts inflicted by others against us?
- Sin creates an obligation – and someone has to pay! If forgiveness is going to simply gloss over the serious wrongs that have been done to me, then I shouldn’t have to forgive! **Or should I?**

2. Forgiveness lets people off the hook too easily.

- One of the most basic hindrances to forgiveness is the fear of further abuse. We have a legitimate concern that forgiving our offender will give him permission to hurt us even more deeply.
- Such a legitimate fear about the consequences of forgiveness probably prompted this question from Peter to Jesus ...
- **Matthew 18:21 (NLT)** Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"
- Before coming down too hard on Peter for not knowing that there is no limit to forgiveness, ask yourself: "How many times am I willing to forgive a person for committing the SAME SERIOUS OFFENSE against me?" Suddenly, Peter seems quite generous!
- One popular rabbi in Peter's day taught that you forgive people three times for the same offense. So Peter was offering more than twice the "going rate" of forgiveness, but he still believed (**as do YOU!**) that there surely must be SOME LIMIT to prevent ourselves from being taken advantage of!
- If forgiveness is just going to carelessly let people off the hook to sin again, then I shouldn't have to forgive! **Or should I?**

3. Forgiveness places too much responsibility on the victim.

- Quite a convincing argument could be made for the fact that asking victims to "let go of their pain" and deny their desire for justice is placing too much responsibility on the OFFENDED instead of the OFFENDER, blaming the VICTIM instead of the VICTIMIZER.
- It seems similar to coming across the mangled body of a hit-and-run victim, and telling them to take care of their own injuries while you go tell the driver of the car not to worry about it!
- Isn't it unrealistic to place the forgiveness burden on the victim of the wrong? Is it logical to expect them to be able to let go of serious hurts? Aren't we asking them to do the impossible?
- The word of God gives us the distinct impression that He doesn't exempt us from tasks just because they're unfair or difficult ...
- **Matthew 5:38-41 (CEV)** ³⁸ You know that you have been taught, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." ³⁹ But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek. ⁴⁰ If someone sues you for your shirt, give up

your coat as well. ⁴¹ If a soldier forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles.

- Is it reasonable for God to expect this of us? It doesn't seem right that a victim would have to struggle for years to get victory over something they didn't cause or deserve, while their offender just goes on with life as though nothing happened!
- If forgiveness is going to place such a heavy burden on my shoulders, then I shouldn't have to forgive! **Or should I?**

4. Forgiveness is unfair.

- Gradually, as we have considered these legitimate objections to forgiveness, we have inadvertently uncovered the bottom-line argument on which all other objections to forgiveness are based. Have you detected it lurking in the background, hidden behind the words spoken earlier? It is this: **FORGIVENESS IS UNFAIR!**
- All of us are created in the image of God, and regardless of how badly that image has been marred by sin, we still retain a sense of innate fairness. When we see a wrong committed, we instinctively know that it's unjust for that wrong to go unpunished!
- Isn't there is something fundamentally unfair in letting our offender go free without any consequences? And if forgiveness is essentially unfair, then I shouldn't have to forgive! **Or should I?**

DEFINING FORGIVENESS

- All of these rational objections arise from a basic misunderstanding of the concept of forgiveness. Before we define the word biblically, let's state what forgiveness is NOT:
 - It is not denying the reality of your pain.
 - It is not letting your offender off the hook.
 - It is not blaming you, the victim.
 - It is not unfair. **(God can't do anything unfair!)**
- **Romans 9:14 (AMP)** What shall we conclude then? Is there injustice upon God's part? Certainly not!
- If forgiveness is "none of the above," then what is it? **The Greek word translated "forgive" carries the idea of a release from some type of obligation**, most commonly a financial obligation. That's how Jesus most often illustrated the concept of forgiveness.

- **Luke 7:41-42 (NLT)** 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?"
- The moneylender chose to RELEASE both of the debtors from their very real obligations – the money owed was not a figment of his imagination!
 - He had a legal right to be repaid – he was the innocent party.
 - The borrowers had a legal obligation to pay.
 - There was a deficit between their debt and their resources.
- The rule of accounting said that the books had to be balanced! The greatest misunderstanding about forgiveness is that it is simply overlooking someone else's transgression. The truth of the matter is that **SOMEONE ALWAYS HAS TO PAY, BECAUSE AN OFFENSE ALWAYS CREATES AN OBLIGATION THAT MUST BE SATISFIED.**
- **ILLUSTRATION:** Someone rear-ends your car at a stoplight, and when you get out you take one look and know it's going to cost some big bucks to repair the damage. You're standing there fuming when a little old lady gets out of the other car and begins to weep. Between sobs she tells you that she's a retired missionary who has limited resources and no insurance. You tell her to forget it, that you will take care of the damage. The next day when you take the car to the mechanic and he hands you a \$2000 estimate, who is going to pay for the repairs? YOU ARE! You let the other driver off the hook! The offense created an obligation that must be satisfied, but there was a deficit between her obligation to pay and her resources to pay. However, the deficit did not just evaporate into thin air – you decided to cover it YOURSELF.
- This is the essence of forgiveness! When we forgive ...
 - We acknowledge that a wrong has occurred.
 - We recognize that there is an obligation for repayment.
 - We CHOOSE to release our offender from that obligation and to cover the loss ourselves.
- Most of us have no trouble with the first two, because we are expert record keepers! The stumbling block for us is the third ingredient of forgiveness! Why should I have to suffer the consequences myself when there are many reasons WHY I SHOULDN'T FORGIVE my offender?
- Jesus' answer to Peter's question about forgiveness anticipated such objections and offers us some compelling reasons to unilaterally forgive:

- **Matthew 18:22 (CEV)** Jesus answered: Not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!
- Perhaps after a brief pause to let the impact of His statement settle in the minds of His listeners, Jesus relates a dramatic and unforgettable story to drive His point home:
- **Matthew 18:23-27 (NLT)** ²³ "For this reason, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn't pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt. ²⁶ But the man fell down before the king and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' ²⁷ Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.
- Although the servant has absolutely no way to make even the smallest dent in such a huge debt, he begs for just a little more time to try. What a pitiful sight, to see him groveling before the king – and what a beautiful thing the king did, because he felt compassion for the man. This is a perfect illustration of forgiveness ...
 - The servant owed a very real debt to the king.
 - The king had every right to expect repayment of the debt.
 - But the king voluntarily released the servant from his obligation and covered the loss himself.
- We've talked about some logical reasons WHY I SHOULDN'T FORGIVE. But, now that I understand better what forgiveness is, there are some equally strong reasons why I should make a CHOICE to take the initiative and RELEASE my offender.

THERE ARE 4 STRONG REASONS WHY I SHOULD FORGIVE:

1. Forgiveness is often the only way to settle a debt.

- Realistically, what alternative to forgiveness did the king have? He didn't have to release the slave, but would the slave's imprisonment have resulted in even one dollar returning to the king? Was there any advantage to be gained by demanding that the slave remain behind bars for the rest of his life?
- THE KING WAS SMART ENOUGH TO REALIZE THAT HE WAS HOLDING A DEBT THAT WAS UNCOLLECTIBLE!

- Many people struggle with offering forgiveness because they are unaware that they are holding a worthless debt. They mistakenly believe that there's some payment they can extract from their offender that will compensate for their loss.
- Understandably, they want vengeance. **But the truth is that very few sinners have the resources to pay for their offenses!**
- What satisfactory payment could someone give you to compensate for a child killed by a drunk driver? A reputation slandered by a false rumor? A marriage destroyed by infidelity? A childhood innocence stolen by an immoral relative?
- Mahatma Gandhi observed, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth cannot sustain itself forever; ultimately both parties end up blind and toothless."
- Suddenly Jesus' seemingly outlandish solution of "turning the other cheek" appears more reasonable! He understood that **forgiveness is sometimes the only way to break the endless cycle of hurt and unfairness.**

2. Forgiveness frees us to get on with our life.

- THE KING WAS ALSO SMART ENOUGH TO REALIZE THAT HE HAD TOO MANY RESPONSIBILITIES TO ALLOW HIMSELF TO BE DISTRACTED BY ONE SLAVE'S OBLIGATION.
- Sometimes the only sensible option is to cut our losses rather than risk needless preoccupation with a hopeless situation. Why should the king spend every waking moment checking with the royal bookkeeper and neglect the rest of his kingdom duties?
- Each one of us will have many situations arise in life where we are much more concerned about someone's obligation to us than they are! But if we hold on to the offense, we in effect become an **emotional hostage** to our offender.
- Comedian Buddy Hackett once said, "I've had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you're carrying a grudge, they're out dancing."
- One of the best reasons for forgiving someone is not what it does for them, but what it does for you! Letting go of a rattlesnake might help the snake, but it benefits you as well!
- **Hebrews 12:1b (NLT)** Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us.

3. Forgiveness is an antidote to needless suffering.

- Can you imagine the relief the servant must have felt as he left the palace, knowing that his million-dollar-debt had been forgiven? But suddenly, an evil thought entered his mind ...
- **Matthew 18:28-35 (NLT)** ²⁸ "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. ²⁹ His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient and I will pay it,' he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full. ³¹ "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him what had happened. ³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny. ³⁵ "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."
- Did you notice the "zinger" that Jesus adds at the end of this story? THAT'S WHAT MY HEAVENLY FATHER WILL DO TO YOU IF YOU REFUSE TO FORGIVE! The laws of God decree that **those who refuse to forgive enter their own private torture chamber, sentencing themselves to a lifetime of needless pain.**
- John MacArthur observes, "Unforgiveness is a toxin. It poisons the heart and mind with bitterness, distorting one's whole perspective on life. Anger, resentment, and sorrow begin to overshadow and overwhelm the unforgiving person – a kind of soul-pollution that enflames evil appetites and evil emotions."
- **THE BIBLE'S TERM FOR UNFORGIVENESS IS "BITTERNESS."** The Greek word translated "bitter" comes from a word meaning "sharp" or "pointed." Just as there are certain tastes and smells that are "sharp" to the senses, all of us can recall offenses committed against us that may have occurred years ago but still hurt us when we turn them over in our mind. Don't risk poisoning your life by holding on to a grievance!
- **Hebrews 12:15 (AMP)** Exercise foresight and be on the watch to look [after one another] ... in order that no root of resentment (rancor, bitterness, or hatred) shoots forth and causes trouble and bitter torment, and the many become contaminated and defiled by it.

- **WITH EVERY OFFENSE COMES A CHOICE!** We can hold on to it and become bitter, or we can release it and become better.
- James Garfield had been president of the United States for less than four months when he was shot in the back with a revolver on July 2, 1881. While the president remained conscious, the doctor probed the wound with his little finger, unsuccessfully trying to detect the bullet. Over the course of the summer, teams of doctors tried to locate the bullet. The president clung to life through July and August, but in September he finally died – not from the gunshot wound but from infection. The repeated probing of the wound, which the doctor thought would help the president, ultimately killed him.
- CONTINUALLY RELIVING THE HURTS WE'VE EXPERIENCED INFECTS NOT ONLY OUR LIFE, BUT THE LIVES OF THOSE AROUND US. ONE OF THE STRONGEST ARGUMENTS FOR FORGIVENESS IS THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNFORGIVENESS!
- Frederick Buechner observes, "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

4. Forgiveness is the obligation of the forgiven.

- The Bible teaches that there is an inseparable link between receiving and granting forgiveness. Jesus' parable teaches us that our personal sin against God has produced an obligation we could never hope to repay. **BUT THE KING FORGAVE US!**
- But Jesus' parable also has stern words for us in our relationships with those who wrong us. We may have every RIGHT to "collect the debt they owe," but we have a higher OBLIGATION to release them from that debt, considering that we have been forgiven so much.
- **FORGIVENESS IS THE OBLIGATION OF THE FORGIVEN!** It must be astonishing to God sometimes that those who have been forgiven so much would refuse to forgive so little.
- While the pain that someone has inflicted on you is REAL, it is also NEGLIGIBLE compared to the wrong you have committed against God. **That is the ultimate reason why you should forgive!**

FORGIVENESS AND FORGETTING

"If you have really forgiven someone, you should be able to forget what they have done to you."

- Contrary to what many people believe, **FORGETTING IS NOT A TEST OF GENUINE FORGIVENESS!** Attempting to force oneself to forget a hurt simply results in bitterness or guilt, because we continue to remember in spite of ourselves!
- Someone may struggle on either side of the "forgetting issue" ...
 - If God has really forgiven me, why do I keep remembering my sin? Maybe I haven't genuinely repented!
 - If I've really forgiven my offender, why can't I forget what they did to me? Maybe I haven't genuinely forgiven him!
- **BUT DOESN'T GOD FORGET OUR SINS? AND ISN'T HIS FORGIVENESS OF US A MODEL FOR OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS?**
- **Jeremiah 31:34c** ... *for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*
- The Hebrew word "zakar" (remember) in this verse has the significance of "causing to remember, mentioning, recalling, reminding, recording." In other words, **it's not that God CANNOT remember, it's that He CHOOSES NOT TO remember.**
- 2 Corinthians 5:10 tells us that Christians will have their deeds, both good and bad, evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That means that God will obviously remember our bad deeds in a LITERAL sense, but He will not remember them in a JUDICIAL sense. He has chosen to eternally erase the consequences of actions that we have repented of!
- **Romans 4:7-8 (NLT)** ⁷ "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. ⁸ Yes, what joy for those whose sin is no longer counted against them by the Lord."
- **BUT YOU ARE NOT GOD!** Your memory fails you often, sometimes by forgetting things you want to remember, and sometimes by remembering things you want to forget!
- **Forgetting is a function of the brain; forgiving is a function of the spirit.** Our brain is capable of storing at least 600 memories a second (1.5 trillion bits of information in a 75-year lifespan). Although we may not be able to recall certain events in our life, those experiences are nevertheless permanently recorded in our memory and could resurface at any time.

- **Thus, any time we encourage someone to “forget” an event, we’re asking them to do the impossible!** In fact, struggling to forget a past event can have just the opposite effect, searing the thought more deeply in our memory.
- **FORGETTING OFFENSES IS NOT HUMANLY POSSIBLE ... AND NEITHER IS IT PROFITABLE!** In fact, remembering our past failures causes us to ...
 - express gratitude to God
 - extinguish pride in ourselves
 - exhibit grace to others
- **HOW CAN I HANDLE MEMORIES OF A PAST HURT?**
 1. Do not cultivate the memories.
 2. Recall your own failures.
 3. Remember your decision to forgive.
 4. Realize that healing memories takes time.
- **Illustration:** Corrie Ten Boom (author of “The Hiding Place”) had been unable to forget an atrocity committed against her while she had been a prisoner of the Nazis in a concentration camp during World War II. For years she was even robbed of sleep, just thinking about the event. She finally sought counsel from a pastor who said, “Up in that church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But do you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there’s a final dong and it stops. The same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They’re just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down. But once the force – your will – has gone out of them, the thoughts will diminish in frequency and intensity.” **LET GO OF THE ROPE THROUGH FORGIVENESS!**

HOW CAN WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE TRULY FORGIVEN OUR OFFENDER FROM OUR HEART? Here is a three-point checklist for your heart from the story of Joseph:

1. **True forgiveness resists unnecessary embarrassment.** In dealing with his brothers’ offenses toward him, Joseph sought to protect them from needless humiliation. He knew they would be living in Egypt for a long time, so he dealt with their sin privately instead of allowing it to spread through the Egyptian grapevine. There are rare cases where offenses must be reported to others. However, if we’ve truly forgiven another person, we’ll try and keep their sin against us as confidential as possible. Mature Christians don’t need to run to others or to the Pastor with every little hurt – they deal with it privately!

- **Genesis 45:1 (CEV)** *Since Joseph could no longer control his feelings in front of his servants, he sent them out of the room. When he was alone with his brothers, he told them, “I am Joseph.”*

2. **True forgiveness relieves people of unhealthy sorrow.** The Bible teaches that there are two types of sorrow that accompany sin. One is a godly kind of sorrow that leads to change. The other is an unhealthy sorrow that leads to paralyzing self-pity and despair.

- **2 Corinthians 7:10 (AMP)** *For godly grief and the pain God is permitted to direct, produce a repentance that leads and contributes to salvation and deliverance from evil, and it never brings regret; but worldly grief (the hopeless sorrow that is characteristic of the pagan world) is deadly [breeding and ending in death].*

If we’ve truly forgiven someone, we don’t desire to see them squirm in misery forever, because that is not in THEIR best interest (as much as it might be enjoyed by US!). It is obvious that Joseph had risen above his past, because he allowed his brothers to rise above their past! **If you can’t let others forget it, then you haven’t forgiven it!**

- **Genesis 45:5 (CEV)** *Don’t worry or blame yourselves for what you did. God is the one who sent me ahead of you to save lives.*

3. **True forgiveness CONTINUALLY releases our offender from their obligation to us.** Years after Joseph’s initial confrontation with his brothers in Egypt, he had to face the forgiveness issue again, when their father Jacob died at the age of 147. Joseph’s brothers immediately began to worry that he might unleash years of stored up vengeance against them, now that Jacob was no longer around to intervene. But Joseph had truly forgiven them; he had no desire for revenge.

- **Genesis 50:19-21 (NLT)** ¹⁹ *But Joseph told them, “Don’t be afraid of me. Am I God, to judge and punish you?”* ²⁰ *As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil. He brought me to the high position I have today so I could save the lives of many people.* ²¹ *No, don’t be afraid. Indeed, I myself will take care of you and your families.” And he spoke very kindly to them, reassuring them.*

Forgiveness isn’t a one-time action of the heart, but a continual choice of the will. FORGIVENESS IS SURRENDERING THE RIGHT TO HURT YOU FOR HURTING ME. Joseph knew what it was to spend time in a physical prison, so he was determined not to spend time in an emotional one! He chose to release his brothers permanently, knowing that in the process he was also releasing himself! He never wanted to go back to either jail again!

Settle it in your heart forever that forgiveness is a LIFESTYLE!