

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

By Richard D. Dobbins

Forgiveness - a word that can bring a wide range of emotional response. What does the Bible say about forgiveness? What are the implications for followers of Jesus? This article can give guidance to the Christian life and help you begin the process of forgiveness. This originally appeared in the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

Forty years ministering as a Christian therapist has taught me there is nothing more healing for the emotions than forgiveness. You may be the offender and a source of pain for someone who was once close to you. You may be suffering pain inflicted by someone close to you. Either way, forgiveness can heal the hurt and bridge that distance.

God models the healing forgiveness He wants us to extend to each other. He bridged the distance to us through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 1:4-6, Paul reminds us God chose to forgive us for the pain our sins cause Him even before He created the earth: "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (NIV).

You and I tend to have a nearsighted view of forgiveness. We simply see it as an action. God presents forgiveness as an act, a process and a state.

FORGIVENESS IS AN ACTION

God's forgiveness is an act of His divine will. God chose to forgive us.

We sometimes deceive ourselves into believing an offense has been so painful and unfair that we can't forgive. Honesty requires us to admit that when we don't forgive it is not because we can't - it's because we won't. Forgiveness is a conscious and deliberate act of the will.

FORGIVENESS IS A PROCESS

When someone we have forgiven hurts us again we sometimes retract the forgiveness we previously extended. We revive the anger and hostility we felt before we forgave them. It

is as if our forgiveness is based on an agreement that they will never hurt us again.

Because we so often choose to retract our past forgiveness of others it is easy for us to assume God also retracts the forgiveness previously extended to us when we offend Him yet again. God does not act that way.

Stop and consider what this means.

When we assume God retracts His forgiveness we place ourselves under the compounding burden of the sin we last confessed as well as the burden of our fresh offense. This unnecessary self-condemnation steals our peace and robs us of joy.

But God does not heap upon us the guilt of past forgiven offenses when we choose to do them again. This grace is difficult for us to grasp.

In Ephesians 4:32 Paul admonishes us to extend the same kind of forgiveness to each other that God has extended to us in Christ: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

God wants us to have the ability not only to forgive each other, but also to keep on forgiving each other for the past when new offenses arise. This is a very difficult but rewarding challenge. Those who can forgive others as freely as they have been forgiven by our Lord are more likely to enjoy good mental health than those who let others' continued offenses create bitterness in their lives.

FORGIVENESS AND TRUST ARE SEPARATE ISSUES

Have you heard this line of reasoning? "If you have really forgiven me, you will trust me. Until you trust me again, I won't believe you have forgiven me."

This is an attempt at manipulation. Forgiving someone who has hurt you does not

mean you should expose yourself to being hurt again.

Suppose I had my hand in a doorjamb while talking to someone and a “friend” decided to close the door on my hand as some kind of sick joke. Would the Lord require me to forgive the joker who closed the door on my hand? Yes. Would He require me to put my hand back in the door again? Absolutely not.

My spiritual obligation is to forgive. Whether I reinvest trust in the person who hurt me depends on that person’s behavior - not on mine. Only when he has responsibly changed his behavior am I obligated to trust him again.

But even if his behavior makes it impossible for me to trust him with my hand again, I must forgive him, for Christ’s sake...and mine.

FORGIVENESS FREES YOU FROM ANGER AND PAIN

People who cannot grant forgiveness to those who have wronged them become crippled by their own overwhelming anger and hatred toward their offender.

Of course, we naturally believe that clinging to our anger and hatred is the only way of defending ourselves from being hurt by close relationships in the future. But protecting yourself from being deeply hurt again by hanging onto anger and hatred is like trying to cure your headache by cutting your head off. There has to be a better way of getting that job done.

After all, when you refuse to forgive those who have hurt you, you create three more potential sources of pain for yourself. First you incur the nagging guilt that you are consciously disobeying the Word of God. Second, the anger, hurt, resentment and bitterness rooted in the relationship continue to grow and fester in your spirit. Third, you sentence yourself to loneliness by refusing to trust another close relationship.

WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE AND READINESS TO FORGIVE ARE DIFFERENT

Over the years, in helping people to forgive those who have hurt them, I have sought to enable them to differentiate between the willingness to forgive and the readiness to forgive. Make no mistake about it, the Bible requires believers to be willing to forgive those who have wronged them. And the readiness to forgive will follow if the person is willing to forgive.

When I walk someone through the forgiveness process, I often ask, “Do you want to be well badly enough to forgive that person?”

The purpose of that question is to move the recovering individual closer to being willing to forgive. Separating the issues of willingness to forgive and readiness to forgive helps a person deal with each step more effectively.

I sometimes remind a patient of what Jesus had to say in Mark 11:25: “And when you stand praying if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Instead of simply confronting someone with Jesus’ remarks, I explain the practicality of this requirement. After all, this command was not given to bring added pain into the lives of Jesus’ followers. Its main purpose is to force us to deal with the primary source of our problems.

Until we forgive those who have wronged us, we are preoccupied with disturbing thoughts about those people. As a result, we relive repeatedly the pain of our past. This makes it more and more difficult to put our pain behind us and get on with the rest of our lives.

Forgiveness releases us from all this. Only by forgiving the person who has hurt us can we really get him or her out of our lives. As long as we harbor resentment and anger toward them, they will continue to spoil more and more of our lives. When Jesus commands us to forgive those who have hurt us, He is actually looking out for our own best interests.

Readiness to forgive requires us to drain all the infection out of these painful sores of the soul - not just to grow scabs on them. We

need to pray through the pain from our past and commit it to God.

Once we have prayed through the pain of a broken heart and surrendered our bitter feelings to the Lord, He relieves us of all that poison in our souls. We are truly renewed.

Notice God does not ask us to forgive others because they deserve to be forgiven. We forgive because Jesus has forgiven us. When we obediently forgive, we are released from the burden of our destructive emotions. We are free to live again.

WE NEED TO FORGIVE OURSELVES

Many people I counsel make the mistake of worshipping the idol of “the me that might have been.” All of us at times wonder what life might have been like had we not made Mistake A or B. If we aren’t careful we can waste precious moments of life wishing we could undo some sin of our youth.

We can become preoccupied with fantasies of what life might be like today were it not for the tragic consequences of poor choices made in our earlier years. Preoccupation with this idol of “the me that might have been” keeps us from discovering “the me that you can still be” in Jesus.

I remind people I counsel of Jeremiah’s trip to the potter’s house. Here’s how the prophet records it: “This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.’ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him” (Jeremiah 18:1-4).

When we make major blunders in life, things can never be like they might have been had we made wiser decisions. Yet, the future can still be bright for us if we forgive ourselves and put our lives in the Lord’s hands.

Once you put the pieces of your broken life into the nail-scarred hands of the Son of God, He will help you put those pieces back together. Your future will be different from

what it might have been, but it will still be wonderful.

The healing power of forgiveness can transform your life. Surrender your grievances against others to God. After all, no one can hurt us as much as our sins hurt Jesus, but He has chosen to forgive us.

Surrender the mistakes of your past to Jesus. He wants to help you forgive yourself and open up a great new future for you through the healing power of forgiveness.

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