

# Forgiveness

It is a sad fact that many of us will fall out with someone (and perhaps many people) in our lifetime and these relationships are never fully restored. Instead of addressing the issue that caused the rift between us, many of us live with resentment and unforgiveness. Rather than seeking reconciliation, we settle for disunity. However, this is not God's best for us – he wants us to live in the freedom of forgiveness and not to be chained to a past we can't undo.

My story (Sara) is that I have lived with unforgiveness. Someone offended me by the things they said and their actions towards me. My dislike of this person began to grow and grow. I knew that the Bible said that I had to forgive them, but I found that I could not. It is easy to justify these feelings, you have been treated unfairly and someone needs to pay. But what you find is that you are the way who ends up paying. I find these words below to be very true:

Jesus recognized that forgiveness is the only way to inner freedom. Without forgiveness we will always be dominated, and in many ways controlled, by the very ones who have hurt us.<sup>1</sup>

If only we could forgive people easily. If only our hurt could roll off us like the proverbial water off a duck's back. However, for most people this is not the case. We all have a past that we cannot change, and some of us stay shackled to it through unforgiveness. There is only one antidote to the pain and the hurt and that is to forgive.

Understanding that as a Christian I needed to forgive was difficult. Peter in the Bible asks Jesus how many times he had to forgive. Perhaps he was hoping for a definitive answer where he could justify himself if he felt unable to forgive. Jesus does give him a definitive answer, he says: You must forgive 'seventy-seven times'. However, Jesus was challenging Peter to be generous hearted and willing to forgive a countless number of times. Jesus always knows what is best for us and he knows that to harbour unforgiveness is not good for others and is not good for ourselves.

I found myself becoming ill and depressed with the pain of the hurt. I could not move on from the pain I felt at the offence. The words spoken would go round

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<sup>1</sup> Virgilio Elizondo

and round in my head like a stuck record. We often forget that we have an adversary, Satan, who comes and reminds us of how unfairly we have been treated. And if unkind words were uttered, Satan is happy to repeat those to you so that you start believing that they are true. He doesn't want us to be full of joy, happy and free. Jesus warned us of his schemes: 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). Jesus wants us to live a life of freedom (Gal. 5:1). A life where we are not worried about if we bump into such and such a person, or whether they will be at a family party, or at an event that we attend. To be able to wake in the morning, and to know that as far as we are able we are in good relationship with everyone, is freedom indeed.

There can be many reasons why we are unable to forgive. Sometimes we are unable to let go of the anger of what has happened to us. We wish for justice, we want to see the perpetrator suffer as we have suffered. Sometimes we feel we are not the person we were before the offence and feel unable to forgive. (Sometimes humans commit the most terrible crimes against each other, and in these cases there is usually a long journey to arrive at the place of forgiveness, which may involve counselling and prayer). However, conversely, human beings can be offended fairly easily and sometimes people are even at a loss to remember what caused the rift, but they just know they do not wish to forgive and be reconciled. You can see this in family feuds that have gone on for decades and no one is sure anymore of what caused the disagreement, but the feuding still carries on.

There is often confusion between justice and vengeance. Vengeance involves taking pleasure in seeing someone who hurt us suffer. Justice, on the other hand, is a fair penalty for any injustices they have committed against another. Even when justice has been served, a person will only feel real release when they have forgiven the person from their heart, and does not feel elated that they are now suffering. Vengeance never lets go and that is why family feuds can go on for generations. 'Vengeance by its nature cannot bring resolution.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Smedes. Smedes has written an excellent book called *The Art of Forgiving* if you wish to read more on this subject.

## **So what is forgiveness - what does it mean to forgive?**

Forgiveness can be defined in several ways, or perhaps it might be better to say that it can be defined at several different levels. At one level a dictionary definition describes the basic principle:

If you forgive someone who has done something bad or wrong, you stop being angry with them and no longer want to punish them (Collins Dictionary)

The biblical view of forgiveness goes further, because it has an important objective associated with it, and that is for reconciliation to occur between the offending parties. (This is not always a wise course of action where there has been abuse, or addiction for instance, and in these instances, it is better to heal alone).

### **Why should we forgive?**

Forgiveness is good for everyone's sake:

#### **For God's sake**

God teaches us through the Lord's Prayer that we should forgive those who have wronged us, because we have received forgiveness from our Father. For this reason we are commended by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians to forgive:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Eph. 4:32 NIV)

#### **For the sake of the offender**

Perhaps the person who has offended you is not a Christian. By offering a forgiving heart and extending a hand toward them, with the hope of reconciliation, you are imitating God's grace. This may be the very thing that convinces them of God's love for them.

If they are a Christian, then we are giving them opportunity to grow in grace and we are assisting them in their Christian walk. The Bible encourages us to 'consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds' (Heb. 10:24). We all need help along the way to glory, and we all make mistakes.

## **For our own sakes**

There are many physical and psychological benefits in being able to forgive which are well documented - here is a list compiled by the Mayo Clinic:

- Healthier relationships
- Improved mental health
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- A stronger immune system
- Improved heart health
- Improved self-esteem

In addition to all this the Bible teaches another compelling reason to extend the grace of God to others, and that is because of the negative effect that unforgiveness has on us:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled (Heb. 12:14-15 ESV)

The grace of God is experienced through forgiveness. Where there is no forgiveness there is no grace, and this makes us susceptible to what the Bible calls a root of bitterness - feelings of resentment, bitterness and revenge that are difficult to get rid of once they have taken hold. These feelings are like roots, they start out being small and insignificant, but grow almost imperceptibly into something that entangles and suffocates, and which are extremely difficult to remove. This is the danger of unforgiveness. Nelson Mandela once said:

**Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies**

It is to escape this poison - the constraining, entwining and strangulating grip of this root of bitterness that we should seek forgiveness at all costs; forgiveness is the pathway forward leading to a future free from bitterness and pain, and back into freedom.

## **What does it mean to forgive?**

Forgiveness is fundamentally a change in the way that we think about those who have done us harm. It is a process that takes time, and it is a process that involves bringing our thinking into line with God's way of thinking – viewing these people in the same way that God sees them, which in effect means learning to love our enemies. Jesus teaches us:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:43-45 NIV)

It is as we make the conscious decision to 'love our enemy' that the process of forgiveness starts. Again this is a process that mirrors God's love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. It involves us choosing to behave in way that is completely counter intuitive and does not come naturally. How can we love those we hate? How can we love our enemy? Only by asking God to change our hearts. And he does this by giving us the same Spirit as he has – through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within our hearts.

## **How to forgive**

Here are five steps that are worth following in the process of forgiveness:

1. Firstly, consider what has taken place. Assess the situation honestly in your mind. Has the person who has injured you done this deliberately or have they said or done something in an unthinking moment? Is it possible that a misunderstanding has taken place, or did they know what they were doing? Did they merely annoy you or truly wrong you? Ask God to give you clarity on the situation. Once you are clear in your head what has happened, you are ready to move onto the next step.
2. Bring the situation to God. This is the time when it is so tempting to keep mulling it over in your mind and tell whoever is willing to listen how you have been wronged. As explained above, this will only lock you in a psychic imprisonment where no peace or release can be found. Be

completely honest, tell your Father exactly how you feel – the anger, the resentment, the pain and bitterness – whatever it is you are feeling towards the person that has offended you, tell God everything. Pour your heart out to him. Do not think that God will be angry or reject you in any way because of the things that you are thinking – on the contrary, our honesty and vulnerability are the tools he works with.

3. When you have made an honest assessment of the situation, you can decide how best to go forward. Perhaps if the offence is a recent event, and they are a brother or sister in Christ, then you can follow the example shown in Matthew 18:15-17 of how to deal with someone who has offended you. Firstly, you go to the person who has offended you and you are honest with them that they have hurt you. Sorting things out quickly stops the festering in your mind, and prevents the offence becoming larger and larger. So, we should go quickly after the offence has happened and explain how we have been hurt by their words or actions. Matthew 18:15 goes on to say, 'If they listen to you, you have won them over.' They may not have any idea that they had harmed you in any way and it gives them an opportunity to apologise and for your relationship to be restored. Hopefully this will give them a chance to reflect on how they deal with others and opportunity to be able to grow in being more sensitive in their conversation and actions. You can be praying for them that they may grow in grace. If the one who has offended you is not prepared to listen, Matthew 18:16 suggests seeking help from a wise person in the church who can go with you to help resolve matters. Sometimes a mediator is needed. This has been my experience. They can be useful, as they will have an objective view, and they can arrange a meeting where the two parties are able to express how they see things with a view to being reconciled. If the person who has offended you is a non-Christian, then you need wisdom as to how, and when, to seek reconciliation. This wisdom can be received through prayer, which is covered in the next two points.
4. Sometimes the situation has gone on for too long, and the breakdown in relationship is so fractured, that it would be too painful to face the person who has offended you.<sup>3</sup> So what do you do in these situations?

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<sup>3</sup> Again, as a reminder, it is not always appropriate to seek reconciliation with the person who has injured you if this will result in continued abuse

One of the best pieces of advice I received to overcome unforgiveness was to pray for the person who had hurt me. I was advised to pray blessing on them every day for their health, finances, marriage, job, everything. It was difficult to do, as I really felt I did not want them to be blessed. At these times you ask for God's grace to carry on, for your heart to be changed, and for the ability to be able to forgive the person who has injured you. As I persevered my attitude toward the person did change. I was able to see them as a fellow human being who makes mistakes similar to me. They were not the terrible monster that they had become in my mind, actually there was a lot of good in them. They were flawed like I am, but still loved by God. I needed to love them too. After praying for about six weeks in this fashion, I bumped into the person who had injured me. He expressed how sorry he was that he had hurt me. God had been moving in his life and changing him too! We were able to move on toward an evening where we met and were reconciled.

5. If possible, reconciliation should always be the aim of a broken relationship. If you still have contact with the person who has hurt you, and you feel that if you meet you are at a stage where you wish for a good relationship going forward, then prayerfully ask for wisdom how to proceed. Perhaps a mediator being present would be helpful. Or maybe sending a letter first explaining how you have forgiven them for how they have hurt you and that you wish to restore relationship with them. Whichever way you proceed, you need to be sure that you are not seeking opportunity to bring recriminations against them, but sincerely desire to be able to move on in friendship knowing that there are possibilities of a good relationship with them in the future. Trust needs to be restored, but these are the first steps to allow the possibility of a future relationship.

Forgiving does not usually happen at once. It can be a long process, especially when the wounds are deep. You think you have made progress, but then someone says something, or you see an image that reminds you of how you have been wounded. It's at these times you have to remind yourself that you do not wish to be shackled to the past; that you wish to breath 'the fresh air of grace'.<sup>4</sup> You have forgiven this person and will not let your mind dwell on the hurt anymore. We must expect some lapses, but when they happen, we look to

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<sup>4</sup> David Atkinson

a Father who cares for us, and remind ourselves that he has a good plan for us and desires for us to be free of anxiety. Our wounds will heal eventually, we will still have the scars, but we will not feel the pain, despair or anger of that initial hurt again.

## **Forgiveness and justice**

One difficulty we face when seeking to forgive is the strong sense that the offending party is being allowed to commit crimes for which they will not be fairly punished, and that by forgiving them they are being 'let off the hook', or 'getting away with it'. We tend to think that by extending forgiveness that their actions are in some way being excused, overlooked or forgotten about, or that by forgiving we are trivialising the scale of the offenses that have been committed against us. Forgiving will be very difficult while we are thinking like this, and it will take some time before we can move forward from this sort of thinking into a position of being able to forgive.

We need to understand that forgiveness itself does not change the seriousness of actions taken against us. Wrong behaviour committed is still wrong, injustices committed are still unjust. What we are doing when we choose to forgive is that we are breaking the cycle of offense and retribution. By conceding the need to retaliate and choosing not to be offended we effectively weaken, and hopefully totally nullify, the power of the sin of someone else's wrong behaviour – a power that could have devastating effects in our lives - but through forgiveness can be gone forever.

As far as justice and vengeance is concerned, if we are followers of Christ then we can be encouraged by trusting in the character and nature of God – our God who is holy and just, and completely faithful in all of His ways. The Bible teaches that one day all people will stand before him and have to give an account of their lives – there are no exceptions (Rom. 14:10-12).

We can leave people who have unfairly treated us and show no remorse in God's hands. We can trust him that he will make retribution for every wrong action, intention and motive. We need to move on from allowing this person to continue hurting us. The Bible encourages us:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Rom. 12:17-21 NIV)

This last verse 'do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' summarises in just a few words the underlying principle behind forgiveness – that the evil done against us can be overcome, its harmful effects can be neutralised and healed. This is all possible through the out working of a greater power, the force of 'good', which is unleashed through the process of forgiveness.

Don't settle for disunity over forgiveness. We can miss out on good friendships with people who we once loved and whose friendships we valued. These can be restored. Don't give up on them. 'When we forgive, we bring in light where there was darkness.'<sup>5</sup> We allow the possibility of a relationship to be restored to its former closeness. And it opens a door for the friendship to grow.

Remember that Christ wishes for you to be free. He doesn't want you to be chained to the past. A wise Priest said these words:

Only in the forgiveness of the ones who have hurt a person can one find the inner healing and liberation that enables one to be his or her true self.<sup>6</sup>

These words are so true. I became depressed and a different person when I lived with anger, hatred and unforgiveness in my heart. But when I forgave, my head cleared, and I can now look forward to a future of possibilities in God. Please don't be robbed of the joy of walking in the freedom of forgiveness. Our Father God wants us to walk in the joy of knowing that we are forgiven, and he wants us to extend that same grace to others. We can experience a lightness of

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Smedes

<sup>6</sup> Virgilio Elizondo

Spirit as we allow the past hurts and pain to be healed and broken relationships restored.