

## Forgiveness: What It Is & Isn't And How To Apply It

In his book, *Whatever Became of Sin*, Karl Menninger wrote:

On a sunny day in September, 1972, a stern-faced, plainly dressed man could be seen standing still on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest him, intone loudly the single word, "GUILTY!"

Then, without any change of expression, he would resume his still stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture. Then, again, the inexorable raising of his arm, the pointing, and the solemn pronouncing of the one word, "GUILTY!"

The effect of his strange *j'accuse* pantomime on the passing strangers was extraordinary, almost eerie. They would stare at him, hesitate, look away, look at each other, and then at him again; then hurriedly continue on their ways.

One man, turning to another who was my informant, exclaimed: "But how did *he* know?"

No doubt many others had similar thoughts, How did he know, indeed? "Guilty!" Everyone guilty? Guilty of what? Guilty of overparking? Guilty of lying? Guilty of arrogance and hubris toward the one God? Guilty of "borrowing," not to say embezzling? Guilty of unfaithfulness to a faithful wife? Guilty only of evil thoughts—or evil plans?

Guilty before whom? Is a police officer following? Did anyone see? Will they be likely to notice it? Does he know about it? But that isn't technically illegal, is it?

I can make it up. I will give it back. I'll apologize. I wasn't myself when I did that. No one knows about it. But I'm going to quit. It's a dangerous habit. I wouldn't want the children to see me. How can I ever straighten it out? What's done can't be undone."<sup>1</sup>

For years, secular psychologists, in their sincere desire to care for the soul, have overlooked one of the most critical characteristics of a healthy individual – the ability to give and receive forgiveness. Today, more and more books are being published in the secular press on the importance of forgiveness and how important it is to a person's mental health.

Unforgiveness is like a cancer, and like any cancer, it attacks and feeds off its host until it finally kills the body. When we refuse to forgive, such a spirit eats away at us until it

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<sup>1</sup>Menninger, Karl. (1977). *Whatever became of sin*. DesPlaines, IL: Bantam Books, Inc. pp. 1-2.

destroys our very soul. In reality, when we have been sinned against and fail to forgive, the offender wins twice. He triumphs first by the harm he has initially inflicted, and he wins a second time when we carry the wound around that continues to eat at us from within. When we forgive, we release ourselves to grow and heal. When we forgive, we become survivors who are then able to go forth and lead healthy and productive lives. When we fail to forgive, we remain victims.

In concluding our discussion on loving our neighbors as ourselves, it must be said that one of the greatest ways we can truly love another is by granting forgiveness when we have been wronged. Nothing is as freeing to the receiver, but perhaps even more liberating to the offended as is the act of forgiving. Earlier we defined our neighbor as more than simply being the person who lives next door but as any individual who has a need that we can meet.

One of the greatest needs in the world today is that of giving forgiveness. What better way to love a neighbor who has offended us than by granting true forgiveness to him. Already I can hear you saying, "But you don't know how I have been hurt." Before addressing hurts, let's first examine what it really means to forgive and how to do it.

### What Forgiveness Is

There is a lot of misunderstanding in the world, and in the Church, about what it means to forgive. As we address this issue of forgiveness, we will examine what it means to forgive, but also what it does not mean. In this chapter, we will also consider some practical ways to forgive our neighbors, whether they be a spouse, family member, co-worker, or others with whom we come in contact.

Dr. Everett Worthington, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, has frequently said, "Definitions are the fountainhead of knowledge," and I believe this to be true. In order to intelligently discuss forgiveness, it is important to first define what forgiveness actually means. Dr. Warren Wiersbe wrote, "Good definitions must set limits, but they must also leave room for expansion."<sup>2</sup> In considering a definition on forgiveness, it must relate to one's experience because experience is crucial to understanding. The goal of defining forgiveness is to aid our knowledge, set certain limits, but especially to be practical for our life's experience.

For the sake of discussion, we will define forgiveness as follows:

Forgiveness is the *process* of relinquishing the right of revenge *and* canceling

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<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, Warren. (1986). Real worship: It will transform your life. Oliver Nelson: Nashville. Pp. 20-21.

the debt against the offender(s) so that a healthy relationship can be renewed *if* trustworthy behavior is established.<sup>3</sup>

This definition contains several important words. First, forgiveness is a *process*. In most cases, forgiveness will not be immediate, and especially when the hurt caused by the offense is deeply felt. Often when forgiveness is quickly given, it is not sincere, or the individual is not fully aware of what he is actually forgiving. In such cases, the person granting the forgiveness probably has not considered all that is involved in forgiving the other person. When someone forgives “too quickly” he may continue to carry a grudge, or bear the residual emotional effects of the wrong that was committed against him. Before forgiveness is granted, the ramifications of what is involved need to be understood so the offense can be dealt with in an appropriate way.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he wrote that when it came to God’s plan for forgiving man it was not immediate. He says:

*when the fulness of time came*, God sent forth His son....in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.<sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness will many times involve a process, and there can be problems when we grant forgiveness too quickly.

Second, forgiveness involves not only a process but both a canceling of the debt, *and*, no longer seeking revenge. Although some people may seek revenge or “their pound of flesh”, this is generally not the case with most. The real problem most of us experience is the difficulty that exists in being able to fully “cancel the debt.” By canceling the debt, I mean the offended person comes to a place where he is no longer willing to draw special attention to the wrong incurred. He is no longer affected by the offense that occurred. The offense is now going to be dropped, and no importance is placed on it any longer. Both the relinquishing of revenge, and the canceling of the debt, are to be present if forgiveness is truly extended. When forgiveness is real, we can sincerely desire the blessing of God upon that individual.

Finally, true forgiveness has as its desired outcome that there to be a restored and healthy relationship *if*, mutually trustworthy behavior is evidenced. Reconciliation, as we will see shortly, is dependent upon being able to trust the other person. Forgiveness and reconciliation, although related, are not the same things. There are certain acts where reconciliation may not be possible, but even in cases where there can be no reconciliation, there is to be forgiveness. When forgiveness is real, such a desire for restoration should be present.

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<sup>3</sup>Worthington, E.L. (1997). Promoting forgiveness in clinical practice. Presentation made at the American Association of Christian counselors., Dallas, TX.

<sup>4</sup>Galatians 4:4-5

Consequently, we are to apply forgiveness to all offenses that are committed. The offense may involve inter-generational family issues such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. The offense may stem from marital breakdowns as a result of adultery, chemical, emotional, or financial abuse. And the offense may be the result of other interpersonal difficulties such as those experienced in our business dealings, in our associations with friends, or those we come in contact with at church.

Forgiveness is a process that involves canceling the debt, and not seeking revenge for the wrong(s) committed. When forgiveness is true, it results in a desire for a conciliatory relationship with the offender, if mutual trust can be re-established.

### The Reason to Forgive Others

All of God's exhortations compelling us to forgive others are based on the fact that He has forgiven us in Christ. Because He has forgiven us of everything we have committed against Him, we are to forgive every offense that has been committed against us. Forgiveness from God is not conditional, it is not based on anything we have done to earn it. The total canceling out of our debt by God was extended in grace and is an act of mercy to us. The more we truly understand how much we are indebted to God in forgiving us, the more we realize our obligation to forgive others. But, the more we are aware of how much we have been forgiven, the more we will be able to forgive others too.

Jesus addressed this whole idea of being obligated to forgive others when He told the story of a man who owed an enormous sum of money. The amount the man owed by today's reckoning, was in the millions of dollars. This man was called before his creditor and told to pay up or go to prison. He pleaded with his master to have mercy on him, and Jesus said the lender "felt compassion," and forgave him the tremendous debt he owed.

Upon leaving the master's presence, the forgiven man went out and saw someone who owed him only a small amount of money. This man who had just been forgiven millions, told his debtor to pay up or go to jail. When the man said he did not have the money and pleaded for mercy, the forgiven man had the other mercilessly thrown into prison.<sup>5</sup>

The point Christ was making is perfectly clear. How could a man who had just been forgiven so much be so unwilling to forgive someone else so little? What was true of that man is often times so true of so many individuals who call themselves Christians. Since we have been forgiven so much by the Lord, how is it possible for us not to be willing to forgive those who have done, by comparison, so little against us?

When it comes to forgiving others, I am aware there are many who have personally been sinned against greatly. I am not minimizing what you may have experienced, nor how great the hurt and pain must be that you bear. Having worked as a counselor for

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<sup>5</sup>Matthew 18:19-35

many years, I have been exposed to what I consider to be horrific accounts of inhumane acts. I have heard and observed individuals who have had what I consider to be despicable deeds committed against them. These were acts that violated trust and betrayed those individuals to the core of their beings. But as grievous and despicable as those acts have been, they pale in comparison to the way each of us has offended and transgressed the holy nature of God.

In our finite and human nature, we will never fully comprehend the extent to which Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself in order to forgive us. Although we have been sinned against, it cannot compare to the way in which each of us has sinned against God. And just as God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus, so we are to forgive others. Christ has said, "to whom much has been given, much will be required."<sup>6</sup> If this statement speaks to anything, it certainly applies to forgiveness.

The ultimate basis for the reason we are to forgive others is grounded in the nature of who God is and that He has forgiven us. The example of Jesus Christ and of the way in which He has forgiven us forms the motivation and justification for the call by God to forgive others. Because of the One who forgives us and the amount to which we have been forgiven, we have no other recourse but to forgive those who have offended and betrayed us.

### What Forgiveness Is Not

In understanding what forgiveness is, it is equally important to realize what it is not. By doing so, I believe we come to a more accurate understanding of what it means to truly forgive.

### Forgiving Is Not Reconciling

To forgive someone does not mean we necessarily reconcile with them. Forgiveness is an unilateral act, and it is dependent only on the one who has been offended. To forgive another person is the responsibility only of the individual who has been violated. It is not dependent upon the offender wanting, asking, or deserving to be forgiven. If I have been wronged, it is incumbent upon me to forgive the offender, whether he wants to be forgiven or not. This is my Christian obligation. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is a bi-lateral act. It is the process where at least two parties attempt to re-establish a working relationship through the display of mutual trustworthy behavior. Forgiveness is a gift a person gives to the offender; reconciliation is a re-establishment of a relationship where the trust was once broken.

The Apostle Paul indicates this difference between forgiveness and reconciliation when he writes, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup>Luke 12:48

<sup>7</sup>Romans 12:18

verse indicates that with some people it may not be possible to experience peace, but “so far as it depends on you.” see if it can be done. As a result, we are to make every effort to reconcile with those who have wronged us when it is possible.

There are some who may say that based on this verse, when a person has wronged me who is a difficult individual, I don't need to pursue reconciliation because it probably won't work anyway. But this verse is not a quick excuse for “writing somebody off” because we do not like them or think it will take too much effort to get along with them. What this verse is telling us is that there are some people with whom it is not possible to carry on any type of a relationship. To persist in pursuing peace with such a person or person will lead only to further conflict.

There may be times when to continue pursuing reconciliation should stop.<sup>8</sup> Still, we are to have hearts that desire reconciliation when it is possible. Whether reconciliation is achievable or not, we are to forgive so that by canceling the debt and not seeking revenge we can sincerely ask God's blessing upon them.

Certain acts, although they should be forgiven, may be of such a nature that reconciliation is impossible. In certain cases, to pursue reconciliation would be unwise and even foolish. The following example will hopefully illustrate what I'm talking about. Let's take the case of a young girl who is 15. She is too young to drive, but she is responsible enough to baby-sit. She has been asked by a couple to come over to their house and sit with their children while they go out to dinner. The girl's parents take the teenager over to the couple's house with the understanding they will bring her home when they return from the restaurant. While returning home, the father takes the baby-sitter in his car back to her house. On the way to her home, he sexually abuses the young girl.

As believers in Jesus Christ, this girl's parents are to forgive what this man has done to their daughter. At the same time, to attempt reconciliation and allow her to ever baby-sit for him again would be unwise, foolish, and totally irresponsible on the parents' part. Such an act by this man should also be reported to the authorities and not go ignored. To report what he did to the authorities does not negate the forgiveness the parents should extend. Yet, to ignore taking action would be imprudent on the part of those parents to the man, his wife, and to society. Even though the parents may want revenge, and in the eyes of the world such a desire would seem justified; as believers in Christ, the desire for retribution is waived in order that forgiveness may take place.

### Forgiving Is Not Forgetting

There are those who believe that if I do not forget the wrong committed against me, I have not really forgiven the one who has harmed me. To defend this position, people

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<sup>8</sup>Proverbs 14:7; Titus 3:10; 1 Corinthians 7:15

teach that we are to forgive in the same way God has forgiven us, and this is true. They go on and say that because God forgets our sins when we committed them, we are suppose to forget the sins of others. But such a teaching is not biblical.

The only Scriptural reference that comes close to teaching we are to forget in order to forgive is found in Jeremiah chapter 31. Verse 31 of that chapter says, "Behold days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...."

This is the same covenant that Jesus referred to in the Gospels when He established the Lord's Supper. As the Lord took the bread and the wine, He said, "This *is* the new covenant." <sup>9</sup> Jesus was saying in effect that the covenant promised in Jeremiah is now being fulfilled as illustrated by the Lord's Supper. This very bread and wine are a symbol of His body and blood that was given for us so that we could be forgiven. When Jesus referred to this passage and the covenant described in Jeremiah, He was saying this new covenant of forgiveness has now come into effect.

Jeremiah continues in verse 34, by quoting God as saying, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will *remember* no more." Ah! You see, it does say He forgives and forgets! But actually that is not what Jeremiah is saying at all. Bear with me while I try to explain what this verse is saying. I am not trying to make this a case of semantics, for more than semantics are involved here. When we understand what the Lord is saying in this passage, we will better understand what it means to really forgive.

In describing the New Covenant, God is telling us that in regard to our sin, He is going to *remember* it no more. The same Hebrew word used here in Jeremiah to remember, is also found in Exodus 20:8. In that portion of Scripture, God is setting forth the Ten Commandments and says, "*Remember* the Sabbath, and keep it holy." Think about this for a moment. What is God saying about the Sabbath? Is He concerned the Jewish people will forget that Saturday comes after Friday? Of course not. The point is that when it comes to the Sabbath,

place more importance on that day than any other in the week,  
draw special attention to it,  
make a big deal out of it.

This is the significance of the word *remember* in regard to the Sabbath. The very same idea is present when God says He is not going to remember our sin. What God intends for us to know about our sin when He says He is not going to remember it any more is that He is no longer going to:

place more importance on it than anything else,  
draw special attention to it,  
make a big deal out of it.

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<sup>9</sup>Luke 22:20

David continues this thought concerning forgiveness when he says in the Psalms,<sup>10</sup> “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” In the act of forgiving us, God removes our sins from us a distance that is immeasurable. It is interesting that the Psalmist did not say “as far as the north is from the south.” That would be a distance that could be measured. If one were to begin walking north, he would eventually come to a point where he would again begin walking south; and if one were to walk south, he would eventually begin walking north again. But no matter how far east one walks, one can always go a little further east. No matter how far west one walks, he can always go a little further west. The distance between east and west is immeasurable, and that is the distance by which God separates us from our sins.

God does not forget our sin. He is omniscient and knows the beginning from the end. Because of this, He does not forget anything. Yet He does choose not to remember our sins by saying He will no longer,

draw special attention to them,  
make them more important than anything else we do,  
and that He will.... pass over them.

God the Father no longer remembers the sin of the one who is in Jesus Christ. He removes it from us as far as the east is from the west. As He has forgiven us, so we are to forgive others.

### Forgiving Is Not Conditional

When we forgive, the forgiveness we grant is not to be conditional. Although reconciliation, as we have previously seen, is dependent upon how the other person acts, forgiveness is dependent only upon the one who has been offended. Whereas reconciliation is a bi-lateral transaction, forgiveness is uni-lateral. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote:

And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, *just as God* in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore, *be imitators* of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, *just as Christ* also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to forgiving others, Paul makes it clear that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven by God in Christ Jesus. We are to imitate Christ. How did He forgive us? It was not based on anything we have done, and there was nothing we had to do in order to deserve it. Our forgiveness was all of grace or unmerited favor. The forgiveness we have received is unconditional. This is the type of forgiveness we are to give to others.

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<sup>10</sup>Psalm 103:12

<sup>11</sup>Ephesians 4:32–5:2



Luke informs us that when Jesus was hanging from the cross, some of the last words He uttered were, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."<sup>12</sup> Christ said this to the Roman soldiers who were not believers and who had nailed Him to that cross. These very soldiers were in the process of gambling for his clothing as He hung from the cross. Jesus also said this to the religious leaders who had plotted His capture, orchestrated His mock trial, and directed His execution. Christ said this to many of the by-standers and passerbys who were hurling their abusive insults to Him. It is evident that none of these individuals wanted, desired, or even sought Jesus' forgiveness. Yet, He freely gave it to them as He hung there naked, maligned, and dying. As Christ forgave them and continues to forgives us, so we are to forgive others.

But there is another reason why we are to forgive the person or persons who have wronged us, and that is not just for their benefit, it is for our benefit too. As we have already discussed, when we fail to forgive, the one who has offended us offends us twice. First, the offender offends us by what he initially did. Second, he offends or wins a second time by perpetuating in us a resentful spirit; a root of bitterness if you will that exists because of our unwillingness to forgive. If this root of bitterness and offense is not addressed, it will fester and the unforgiving heart, which formerly was a heart of flesh, will become a heart of stone.

George Washington Carver was born a slave into a family of slaves. He was never afforded the privileges in life that most of us today take for granted. As a young child, he was once traded for a horse. Yet, Carver possessed a brilliant mind, and he became a renowned scientist. He was the first African-American to graduate from what is now Iowa State University, and he put himself through college working as a janitor. After graduating from college, Carver became an inventor and discoverer of many things. George Washington Carver was also a Christian. He once said, "I will never allow another man to destroy my life by making me hate him."

As we mentioned earlier, unforgiveness is a disease, and it is like a cancer. When we fail to forgive, that cancer of unforgiveness grows until it emotionally destroys the one who has been unwilling to forgive. When this happens, the offender wins twice. True forgiveness is not conditional, but neither is it dependent on the offender desiring, seeking or deserving to be forgiven. Until we forgive, the offender destroys our lives again and again until we choose to release the offender from what he has done to us.

I once heard a business man say that when you begin to sell your business you need to clear your books of any and all unpayable debts. The reason he gave is that no one wants to purchase a business that carries with it a lot of debt. What is true in business is equally true for individuals. When we carry the garbage and debt of unforgiveness, it is nothing more than a burdensome weight we carry around.

### Forgiveness Is Not Condoning the Wrong that Has Been Done

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<sup>12</sup>Luke 23:34

There are situations when an individual may feel that to forgive is to condone the wrong that has been committed against them. Many have felt that to forgive is to give the other person the upper hand. Nothing could be further from the truth. When we forgive, we neither assume the weaker position or condone the wrong that has been committed. To forgive is to take the role of one in authority because it is only the right of the greater to forgive the lesser.

If someone owes or is indebted to me, they possess the lesser position. I am not indebted to them, but they are to me. It is only the one who forgives that truly has the real position of power. The greater is not the one who is being forgiven. This is the case with God as He forgives His creatures. When we grant forgiveness to others, we are never more like God ourselves. To realize that we are being like God when we forgive can, and should, be very liberating to the one who is doing the forgiving.

When we forgive, we are in no way condoning the offense that has been committed any more than God condoned our sins when He forgave us through Christ. The Lord never said, "Oh, that's OK; it's no big deal; don't worry about it." When God forgave us, it required the inestimable sacrifice of Jesus the Christ dying on the cross. Throughout all eternity, the wounds in Christ's feet, hands, and side will be reminders of the gravity of the sin that we have committed against Him. But like Jesus, when we forgive, we do not condone the sin that has been done, but we are acknowledging the wrong and willfully choosing to cancel the debt.

This willful decision to forgive others is done first because of the fact we have been forgiven by the Greater, and second, because by forgiving the other, we are freeing ourselves from being wounded a second time. To forgive another person does not make them right, but it does make us free.

### A Way to Help Us in Forgiving Others

Having looked at what forgiveness is and what it is not, we need to consider now a way to go about forgiving others. I have found that it is not the offense itself that makes forgiving difficult, but rather the amount of loss I associate with the offense that makes the forgiving so hard to do. Usually, the greater the financial, physical, or emotional loss attached to the offense, the greater the difficulty we will experience in forgiving. For the rest of this chapter, I want to share with you one way that can be helpful in forgiving others. I have personally found this to be helpful in working through and forgiving others when I have been deeply hurt myself.

### Recall the Hurt

In examining the process of forgiveness, it is many times helpful to take a pad and list all of the ways you have been hurt. The purpose of this exercise is not to dredge up the past or to wallow in self-pity.<sup>13</sup> The reason for making such a list is to enable you to

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<sup>13</sup>This practice of making a list and recalling the hurt was developed by Dr. Everett Worthington and presented at the AACC World Conference in 1999 in Dallas, TX.

move from the past into the future and to pro-actively work through the process of forgiveness. There are several benefits to making such a list.

The first benefit is to be able to see what it is you are actually forgiving. As we have said earlier, many times individuals are far too quick in saying they forgive someone when they do not even know what they are forgiving. As a result, such forgiveness will often be shallow and ineffective. It is not that such an offer to forgive is insincere, as it is the person who is doing the forgiving does not really know what offense or offenses he is relinquishing.

Second, by developing such a list, you are now able to see what issues you can forgive immediately, and what things you will have to work on for the future. If there are ten ways you have been harmed, violated, or mistreated, and you can immediately forgive four of the ten, then do so. The remaining six become those issues you actively work on for the future.

### Empathy: The Key to Understanding, the Key to Forgiveness

Of all the aspects necessary in forgiving someone else, empathy is without question one, if not the most, difficult attributes to master. While empathy may be difficult to practice, the ability to empathize is also the most critical aspect to possess if forgiveness is to be effective. Empathy is integrally related to self-awareness. The more aware we are of our own emotions, the more understanding we will be of others. In the 1920s, E. B. Titchener, an American psychologist, sought a word that would describe an individual's ability to perceive the subjective experience of another person without actually feeling it. Such an idea is based on the Greek word, *empathia* from which we get our English word, empathy.<sup>14</sup> He sought a concept different from that of sympathy. Sympathy is the ability to *feel* what another person feels. Empathy is the ability to *understand* what someone feels. The two concepts are very different in their meaning and in their application. Montaigne, the French philosopher addressed the important correlation of empathy and forgiveness when he said, "To know all, is to understand all, is to forgive all." Without understanding, it is virtually impossible to forgive.

Those who cannot empathize with their offenders will find it difficult, if not impossible, to forgive their offenders. For forgiveness to be effective, the individual must possess some grasp of understanding of where the offender is coming from and be able to focus on the person rather than on the offense that has committed against him. Instead of seeing only the person who has violated, betrayed, or harmed you, there needs to be an understanding of how this person has been violated, betrayed, or harmed himself.

To illustrate why empathizing can be so difficult, simply visualize an individual who has hurt you deeply in the past. Now try to see them not as the violator, but as one who has been violated. This is often a difficult exercise to perform because it is not easy to focus

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<sup>14</sup>Goleman, Daniel. (1997). Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. NY: Bantam Books. P. 98-99.

on how the offender has been hurt when you have been so hurt so badly by him yourself. It is when you can move beyond your hurt and understand how he has been hurt, that the task of forgiving becomes much more achievable. This in no way involves condoning what the other person has done. At the same time, to empathize is crucial in forgiving another.

### Giving What You Have Received

Once you have recalled the hurt and have developed an understanding of where the offender(s) is coming from, the next step is to look to yourself. What is required in doing this is to recall a time when you offended someone and they forgave you. That person may have forgiven you for words ill-spoken or for lies that were told, a debt that went unpaid, or for something you did that resulted in their harm. Take that experience of having been forgiven by him and then apply it to the one who has offended you.

The problem for a lot of people is that when they are asked to remember a time when someone told them they were forgiven, they simply cannot remember anyone actually ever saying to them, "I forgive you." This only goes to underscore the tremendous need for forgiveness in the world today. But even if you cannot recall an experience of having been forgiven yourself, this does not mean you cannot forgive someone else.

When I was a boy in junior high school, I got into a fight with a another boy for a comment he made. Over the years, I have greatly regretted my reaction and for beating him up. I have conscientiously made an effort to find out where he is, but all to no avail. If I could meet him, I would want to tell him how sorry I am for what I did. I have often thought what it would be like to ask for his forgiveness and to hear him say, "I forgive you, Hal." It is such an experience like this that I many times fall back on and use to forgive someone else. Perhaps there has been a time when you have wronged someone, a parent, a child, a friend, and you would want to hear them say, "I forgive you." Take that feeling and give it to the one who has wronged you. This is what it means to give forgiveness.

### Forgiveness Is a Matter of the Will

The act of forgiveness involves a conscious and volitional decision of the will. Once the hurt has been recalled, you have empathized with the offender, and you have recalled how you have been forgiven yourself or how you would like to be forgiven, the next step is to volitionally forgive the other person.

When it comes to this aspect of forgiveness, it may involve going directly to the person and verbally forgiving them or stating your forgiveness in a letter. In some cases the offender may be deceased, or he may be impossible to contact. In other cases, to approach the person may not be safe for you as an individual. In situations such as these, the best course of action may simply be to write out the words in the form of a letter and symbolically forgive the individual without ever mailing it. Whether the act of

forgiveness is actual or symbolic, the need to forgive should be acted upon. The willingness, and the act of forgiving is empowering.

One other comment needs to be made as it relates in actually telling someone they are forgiven. To tell another person they are forgiven can bring immense benefit to the one who is doing the forgiving. At the same time, if the purpose of telling another they are forgiven is not to release them of their wrong, then our motive in talking with them is probably impure. To tell someone we forgive them merely to throw back up in their face what they have done is in reality a means of seeking revenge. This is not forgiving others as Christ has forgiven us.

### Keeping Our Feelings in Check

Often when there has been a conscious commitment to forgive, there will be times when the wrong committed will come back, and the memory of the offense will be as real in our minds as the day the hurt first took place. Such thoughts or memories of a child's waywardness, the details of a spouse's unfaithfulness, or the harsh treatment delved out by a cruel parent can pop back up as if it were being experienced for the very first time. What can make forgiving even more difficult is when the person we have forgiven continues to offend. Scripture is clear that we are to forgive seventy times seven<sup>15</sup>, but it also teaches that we are to leave the presence of such people lest we begin to learn their ways<sup>16</sup>.

When memories of past offenses occur, this does not necessarily mean you have not forgiven the offender. Our minds are powerful things, and events and experiences can become imprinted strongly upon them. When a commitment to forgive has taken place, and flashbacks or memories occur, the issue may not be whether the forgiveness was real, but possibly that the hurt and pain continues to exist. To have such thoughts and

feelings is not necessarily a sign of unforgiveness, but to nurture such thoughts of pain is.

Martin Luther once said he could not keep the birds from lighting in his hair, but he could keep them from building a nest. The same is true with the re-occurring thoughts and feelings of wrongs that have been committed against us. Forgiveness is not forgetting, but it does involve canceling the debt and relinquishing the right for revenge. There may be memories of the act that were committed, but when those arise, we are to take them captive and put them away.

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<sup>15</sup>Matthew 18:21-22 There is debate about whether Christ was saying we are to forgive seventy times seven or seventy times seventy. But if one is counting, one has not really forgiven.

<sup>16</sup>Proverbs 14:7, Proverbs 22:24-25

There is a passage found in the book of Micah where the prophet is talking about God and says:

Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, *Thou wilt cast all their sins in the depths of the sea.*<sup>17</sup>

Corrie Ten Boom commented about that verse as it relates to forgiveness. She said God has cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea and over the water He has hung a large sign that reads, "Forbidden to Fish." The Lord responds to our sins by not fishing for them or even bringing them up. In this way, we too, are to deal with the sins of others, as well as those of our own. Just as God has hung up a sign that reads, "Forbidden to Fish", so we are to do the same with those acts that have been committed against us. When the thoughts of those past offenses pop up, this is not necessarily a sign we have not forgiven, but it may well be an indication that the hurt is still being experienced.

Those memories of violation, betrayal, and pain can return, and when they do we are to push them down and not allow ourselves to entertain them further. In so doing, we are not "stuffing or ignoring our feelings," but rather taking every thought captive. This is what is meant by keeping our feelings in check.

When it comes to loving our neighbors as ourselves, there is perhaps no better way of doing this than by granting forgiveness to those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is one of the greatest needs that exists in the world today and especially in, and by, the Church of Jesus Christ.

I once heard the following, and I believe it was Francis Schaeffer who said it.

When we fail in forgiveness, we fail in Christlikeness. When we fail to forgive, we have no message to preach, no good news to share, and we offer no reason for the unbeliever to consider Christ. If I'm unwilling to practice forgiveness then the world has a right to question whether I am a Christian and more than that, the world has a right to question whether Jesus was sent from God and whether Christianity is true.

One of greatest gifts we as Christians can give to others is the greatest gift we have received ourselves – The gift of forgiveness. The real message of the Church of Jesus Christ to the world today is that we have been forgiven, and others can be forgiven too. This is the essence of the Christian faith, and this is the one aspect that separates Christianity from all other faiths. Christianity alone addresses the issue of sin and forgiveness, and offers a way for individuals to be fully forgiven that is not dependent on their own works, but on the finished work of Jesus the Christ. When it comes to loving

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<sup>17</sup>Micah 7:18-19

our neighbors as ourselves, this is one way we have been commanded to love by the One who has forgiven us.