

CARING ENOUGH TO NOT FORGIVE SERIES (#3)
“Don’t Forgive - When ‘Forgiveness’ Distorts Feelings”
Ephesians 4:14-16, Galatians 1-6
March 15, 2023

Let’s do a quick review of where we are in the series, Caring Enough to NOT Forgive.

1) Don’t Forgive - When ‘Forgiveness’ puts you ONE-UP. This is when ‘forgiveness’ is conditional, when you have to jump through hoops to stay in the “grace” of the one forgiving. One is in a superior position, while the other is in the inferior position. Don’t “forgive” that way. Work it out in a two way, equal relationship.

2) Don’t Forgive - When ‘Forgiveness’ is ONE WAY. This is when only one of the two involved in the trouble is the one doing the forgiving. It’s lonely, and there is no resolution to the problem. One swallows the pain just to stay together. It doesn’t work because separation continues. There has to be a two way working out of the problems so resolution and reconciliation can occur.

Tonight we’re looking at another imitation “forgiveness,” forgiving at the cost of our feelings. Let me give you an example of what I mean. A woman writes: “The day he walked out on me, I knew it was over. Twenty-three years of tension, frustration, misunderstanding, anger, guilt and all that, had come to a sudden halt.

“I packed up his clothes, pictures, and piles of junk. I put them in the back room and closed the door. Somewhere inside of me another door went shut too. That was the end. Case closed. I’ve not needed to go back and sort it out since then. A week later he showed up at the kitchen door - he wanted to come back. I told him it was too late. I had forgiven him all the misery he caused me the day I closed the storage room door. Just like that!

She says, “Forgiveness is like turning a key in the lock. You never go back to look at it again. It’s closed. Forever.’

“From this woman’s point of view, the marriage ended cleanly in the closing of an emotional door. Tidy in housekeeping, she was also tidy with memory-keeping. Past, present and future, like three distinct rooms, can be entered or ignored at will. After 23 years of occupancy, the family room is

now closed. Lock and key ‘Forgiveness’ seals away her past in a mausoleum of obsolete memories. Once laid to rest, it will not be revisited, reviewed or reclaimed for any possible learnings.

“There are more accurate names for this variety of ‘forgiving.’ Clinically, it can be called isolation (where a part of the self is isolated, sealed off, unavailable), denial (where a wealth of feelings, thoughts, memories are denied and disowned) and repression (where impulses, insights, and inner wisdom is repressed so it cannot come to awareness).”¹

This is another form of distorted ‘forgiveness’ that the world practices so readily. It is the act of evading real forgiveness by avoiding the other person and putting our own feelings to rest, quietly letting go of any emotions we might have for that person. But let’s look a little closer at these distortions of feelings. (Refer to figure 5)

Denial is the category name for a slew of tactics we use to avoid the two-way working out of real forgiveness. There is isolation, repression, reversal, undoing, and projection that all deal with denial of the whole situation. These tactics work to remove all of our emotions from our consciousness in the attempt to deny that there was a problem there in the first place. We put them out of our minds so that we no longer have to deal with them and we can “recover” from the pain that they left us with.

Denial basically says that there was no problem, no struggles, no hurtful interactions, and in fact, no relationship with that other person. We just dump any history we have with that one and completely block it out of our memories. We go about rewriting our life’s history so that the other is no longer there, no longer able to hurt us or interact with us.

But relationships are at least two-person systems, so if we are going to try to erase the other’s hurtful behavior, or intolerable actions, or even the person themselves out of our life, we often use maneuvers that happen automatically without realizing that we’re doing them.

Yet, the question comes back to us, “Is this forgiveness?” If it is, it’s a temporary resolution, because trying to remove them from our lives creates a deadness within us, and our feelings become

¹ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 39-40)

frozen, often not just at the person we have a problem with. And inevitably, there are all sorts of unresolved tensions, fears, frustrations and resentments that occur within us. So as much as we'd really like to isolate the problem and the person and put it all into a storage area in our memories and lock the door for safe keeping, forever to be forgotten, the unresolved emotions will begin to erupt in our lives, causing distancing of other relationships as well.

Isolation of feelings and thoughts is something we learn from early childhood, and then is reinforced with each experience of separating the awareness of a situation from the emotional impact it has on our life. But as we are trying to separate ourselves from the anger or hurt that a situation may create, we are often filled with resentment of the one we're really trying to forget. It's a child upset about the greater amount of attention his sister is getting, trying to wall off those emotions, but building that wall with resentment. He's forced to be there, but doing his best to block out his sister from his life. (Refer to Figure 5).

You see, it's trying to put all of those wrongdoings in a strongbox or vault and locking them up. The "lock and key forgiveness" attempts to separate the life from the emotions. I did this as a young person to the point that eventually one small word or action would set off this huge eruption of emotions that I'd tried to keep bottled up, and it would spew all over the ones who happened to be around me at the time. Not a pretty sight. I almost worked myself into ulcers trying to keep the hurt and anger and frustration and pain locked up.

I had done it with the intention of being a good religious person. I found myself saying, "I've no right to be angry about it, no matter how much it hurts. God loves you and I must too. I forgive you for the bitter - I mean better - days to come. I pray for the grace to accept what comes in life. Sure, there are difficult times, but that doesn't matter. I don't let them affect my feelings. That's just the way things are." If God had not interceded in my life as a young adult, I would probably not be here today, because when my walls of anger finally burst, I probably would have killed someone, or just gotten my brains beaten out of me by blowing up at the wrong person.

“Quarantining the negative feelings is no guarantee that they will not return to haunt future relationships. In fact, the reverse is most often true. Out of the slush funds of our unfinished feelings come old dated emotions to filter our new learnings and infiltrate our present feelings. Forgiveness is not isolating: it is integrating”² all of the old stored emotions into the current relationships. We have to stop trying to isolate our emotions from the situation, but rather work through them with the other person so that they don’t translate themselves into disruptive emotions in current relationships.

If you find yourself stuffing your feelings when problems occur, you are one who is repressing the feelings. This is turning our negative feelings inward so that they will not be seen in our every-day life. It’s as if a thick screen of denial appears that hides our emotions from those around us, but they’re still lurking there within us, even showing up in any positive words we might say about the person in question. While we offer “forgiveness,” the resentment and caustic emotions show up in our words and actions, even if we’re attempting to be nice and loving toward that person. (Refer to Figure 5).

It’s like a little boy trying to stop the floodwaters spurting out of a dyke. He puts a finger here to stop that flow and another leak appears over here. He puts another finger in that leak only to have another one show up over here. With every attempt to stop the flow of floodwater, it becomes quickly evident that he doesn’t have enough appendages to stop everything, and suddenly the whole thing comes crashing down around him. This kind of “forgiveness” will quickly consume you and overwhelm you.

“Any forgiveness which is won by repressing one’s feelings and responding according to external authority will not result in reconciliation of both persons as whole persons. Forgiveness happens as past resentments are owned, not disowned; are recognized, not repressed; are released, not retained; and are woven into new bonding relationships with others.”³

But we also use reversals in the attempt to deny our emotions. It’s the attempt to show loving concern about a person to divert our real feelings toward their wrongdoing. Being concerned about a person instead of being angry with them is a reversal of emotions. The person represses the negative

² (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 43)

³ (David Ausgburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 45)

emotion and instead, attempts to show the opposite emotion of love toward the person who has hurt or disappointed them. It's the showing of a façade of exaggerated cordiality, while the lava of anger is being held in check, diverted into doing something nice while all the resentment continues to build, all for the reason of not showing their own negative emotions. (Refer to Figure 5).

While this brings a quick payoff to the person, in that they are doing something right instead of showing their emotions, this reversal usually begins to degrade their own soul to the point of self-destruction. Their life becomes hypocritical, crying out against the wrongs of others, while at the same time practicing the very thing they publicly declare as wrong in their private life. Unless that person openly accepts their part of the situation, and begins to see the other as a valuable person, and then begins to address the wrongdoing with the other, that repression and reversal will tear them up from the inside out.

“All of these strategies are ways of refusing to come to terms with one's past and its impact on present relationships. (We think) By denying that wat was, was, and what is, is, I can stop time for myself and create a world that is less painful, less vulnerable, less threatening.”⁴

But it doesn't work! Trying to deny our feelings distorts not only the situation but also our own lives, just for the sake of looking like you still have it all together. Denial of emotions and feelings works hard to put an impermeable membrane between our thoughts and feelings, but only betrays the resentment we still hold inside. (Refer to Figure 5).

True forgiveness is integrating our thoughts and feelings together, recognizing our care for the other person, but also addressing the hurt or pain that has been caused by the wrongful experience. (Refer to Figure 5). It is the desire to work it out, to reconcile so that the relationship can continue to grow in love closer to each other. Let's pray.

Father, give us the courage and strength to face the trials and struggles in our lives so that we do

⁴ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 46)

not deny their existence in our life, but allow them to help us to grow together in love. Give us eyes to see how we are only hurting ourselves by trying to deny the feelings we have when wrong is done to us. Instead of trying to hide those feelings, help us to open up and own those feelings so that we might begin to reach out toward the other and seek reconciliation in love. That is the only way we can find true peace in our lives. Guide us by Your Holy Spirit so that we might begin the restoration process in our lives. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.