

CARING ENOUGH TO **NOT** FORGIVE SERIES #5
 “Don’t Forgive - When ‘Forgiveness’ Ends Open Relationship”
 Colossians 3:8-17, Romans 12:15-21
 March 29, 2023

“On a crowded London commuter train, an early morning rider shoved and insulted a fellow passenger. It was the kind of unfortunate and mindless moment that usually remains unsolved. But later that day, the unexpected happened. The person who had acted so poorly on the train walked into a job interview only to discover that the person who greeted him for the interview was the person he had mistreated earlier that day.” (Mart DeHaan in *Stand Strong, 365 Devotions for Men by Men* [Our Daily Bread 3/29/18])

Take a few moments at your tables and discuss what you would do if you were the offended job interviewer. What would you do to the one who mistreated you? Would you hire that person?

(Discussion at the tables, then in large group.) So what would you do?

If we say that we have forgiven another person for what they have done to us, we’ve basically given our word that the situation is complete. Everything is finished and there is nothing more to worry about. However if we have not developed trust in that forgiveness and open relationship has not been restored, then the communication we have with that other person is halted, any understanding between us is irritating, and there is no full acceptance of that other person.

If you hired this person in the opening story, would you be able to work with the man without holding any grudges, or keeping that incident over him for future use? Or would you need to see some real changes in the life of that person before you would hire him?

Forgiveness is not working with another person on conditional conditions. There might be love shown to the person, being able to have them work for you, and respect shown to that person, but forgiveness would not be full until the relationship is repaired and the negotiations between you were brought to a trusting level.

You see, forgiveness is a release from all of the negative emotions that develop from the wrongdoing of the other person. Forgiveness releases the fear, or anger, or suspicion, or loneliness, or alienation, or mistrust. When trust is restored between the two persons involved in the wrongdoing, then

all of the emotions that come with that wrongdoing melt away and the relationship is renewed, recreated from what it was, to what it has become. Different, but genuine, nonetheless.

However, release in quick “forgiveness” does nothing to alleviate all of the emotions. If the goal of your forgiveness is to just quickly end the confrontation, then your forgiveness is not really forgiveness, but just a way to move on. By releasing someone through “forgiveness” without really working through the wrongdoing to bring resolution, only forfeits peace and faith in that person. There will be an opportunity lost to provide full growth, and many of the emotions you have will continue to linger in your life when it comes to that person.

“Forgiveness” is the quick and easy way for the person wronged to disband with any real attempt to bring resolution to the situation. The wrongdoer has not learned anything about the way they have acted toward you, and the suspicion within you continues. True forgiveness must have the hard work of confronting the offending person, realizing the hurt that has been caused, and repentance being offered so that a new beginning can take place. Remember, forgiveness always works toward full resolution to the situation, not just a quick release of the offender involved. So don’t offer “forgiveness” with the intent to just release the other person from the responsibility of their actions.

You see, too much of what is being called “forgiveness” is not really forgiveness. Reconciliation is the true goal of forgiveness. Yet we are told that we must forgive another for their sins against us. Yes, that is true, but it is not to be a cheap version of “forgiveness” that leaves us just as angry or empty or fearful as we were before the “forgiveness” was given.

It is easy for us to misunderstand Jesus’ command for us to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. The act of forgiveness is not the end goal here. It is not just for us to release the other so that we can get on with life or business as usual. Real forgiveness is to bring about changes in the relationship so that the wrongdoers (that means both parties) are no longer the same, but both recognize their part in the situation and real change takes place as repentance brings about the willingness to change one’s behavior so that the wrongdoing stops. Jesus didn’t say, “Just say that you forgive the

person in order that you can move along in your life.” No, He demands that we bring about a proper resolution to the problem of sin between us. “Forgiveness” is not to save ourselves from the emotions that come from the wrongdoing, but the real intention of forgiveness is to regain a brotherly or sisterly relationship with that person.

“Any view of forgiveness that focuses primarily on getting release for one’s own conscience (saying ‘It’s obviously not my problem, I’ve forgiven him’), or escape from guilt (saying ‘It’s clearly **his** attitude that separates us, I’m forgiving’), or freedom from responsibility (or saying ‘There’s nothing more I can do than what I’ve done, he’s forgiven’), is too easy, too cheap. It’s not really forgiveness. The goal is community restored, not private perfection maintained.

“When ‘forgiveness’ ends open relationship, leaving people estranged, don’t rust to it, it’s not forgiveness; it’s a face-saving, self-saving, time-saving escape.”¹ But it’s not forgiveness.

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan, 1997), Philip Yancey shares an example of uncommon forgiveness that helps us to see the need for reconciliation to be a part of the process of truly forgiving one another. He says, “In 1987 an Irish Republican Army bomb went off in a town west of Belfast. Eleven died; 63 were wounded. Gordon Wilson, a cloth merchant and devout Methodist, was buried with his 20-year-old daughter under five feet of concrete and brick. “Daddy, I love you very much,” were Marie's last words, grasping her father's hand.

From his hospital bed, Wilson said, “I've lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie back. I shall pray every night that God will forgive them.”

Once recovered, Wilson crusaded for reconciliation. Protestant extremists who had planned to avenge the bombing decided, because of the publicity surrounding Wilson, that such behavior would be politically foolish. Wilson wrote a book about his daughter and spoke out against violence, constantly repeating, “Love is the bottom line.”

He met with the Irish Republican Army, personally forgave them, and asked them to lay down

¹ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 70)

their weapons. "You've lost loved ones, just like me," he told them. "Surely, enough blood has been spilled."

When he died in 1995, all Ireland and Britain honored this ordinary citizen for his uncommon forgiveness.² Though he forgave quickly, Gordon Wilson didn't leave it at that, but worked at bringing reconciliation between the two fighting groups, striving for peace in Ireland. Though he had plenty of reason for retaliation, he desired reconciliation more than retribution.

True forgiveness works to bring about restored relationships. "Out-thinking, out-maneuvering, out-forgiving or out-living others is a dodge from the real goal. Forgiveness presses toward restoration. When what was estranged is brought back into fellowship again, when what was fragmented is whole again, when what was alienated is reunited, then [true] forgiveness has come."³

Forgiveness is not just to make us feel better about ourselves, but to reach out to the other and work out the differences between us. We see that in Colossians 3:8-17. (READ Colossians 3:8-17).

We're to get rid of the ugly emotions and activities that consume us when wrong is done to us. Anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language are often a part of our response to others who treat us badly. But instead of doing these things, we're to confront them in their wrong, and seek to work through the problem to bring peace. Paul tells us that we are to "*bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity*" (Col. 3:13-14). There's the goal of forgiveness - perfect unity. Forgiveness opens the channels of trust, love, acceptance and real Christ-like behavior.

God calls us into community with each other through love for one another. This allows us to work with each other to reconcile our differences, accept the rebuke of others for the wrongs we've done to them, and then to diligently seek peace with one another again in a loving community. It is in

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 203)

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 70)

community that we truly come to know God and to experience and demonstrate God's love through forgiveness toward one another.

When one hurts us or brings pain to us, instead of estranging them, we are to work toward restoring the relationship through the process of forgiveness. Not quickly and easily saying that we forgive another just to get them off our back or out of our conscience, but to do the tough work of working toward a settlement of the problems between us. Cutting off another from the community does not achieve reconciliation. Neither does isolation or avoidance. None of those things creates unity or peace, but rather prolongs the hurt or pain, and continues the struggle between you.

So Paul talks about our willingness to really forgive another person. It's not what makes us feel better that matters, but what unites us instead. So when he writes to the Romans, He encourages us to live with the character of Jesus and be willing to do the work of forgiveness. Follow along as I read Romans 12:15-21.

Did you catch Paul's directives to work at forgiving each other? "*Live in harmony with one another (16)...do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone (17)...live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge...(19).*" These are the steps toward reconciling with your brother or sister when wrongs come between you.

But I want you to look carefully at verse 20. When I first saw this, I really rejoiced, until I fully understood what Paul was really saying. "*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.***" That last line excited me, because this, according to my first reading, was the way that we could really take revenge on our enemies. Heaping burning coals on someone's head was a real interesting concept for me. I thought, "Finally, a way to get back at them for all the hurt they've given me."

But read it carefully! Feed the enemies - give them water when they are thirsty. We're to do good to them. Actually, what Paul is telling us to do is to model real love so that forgiveness starts within our hearts. Instead of hurting them in return, love on them and meet their every day, their every

minute needs.

But the pouring of burning coals on their heads really excited me. While I was wanting to return hurt for hurt, Paul is telling us to make sure that they have what it takes for life to happen. Burning coals provides fire - fire provides heat and the ability of cooking - and that lets them really live.

The image comes from the Old Testament way that people would carry fire with them to insure that they could have heat and capability of cooking food for life. They would carry the burning coals of the fire on containers on their heads from one place to another to insure safety and livelihood for their family. By us pouring burning coals on the heads of people - our enemies - it's not to bring hurt to them, but **to provide life to them**. In that way we are "*not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (3:21).

That's what forgiveness does - it gives new life, not hurt or pain. Reconciliation does not seek to count anyone as an enemy, for treating difficult folks with kindness and generosity and love makes them friends, so there is no longer any need to see them as enemies.

So if your "forgiveness" ends the relationship, don't stop there. If your "forgiveness" denies the anger that drives you to pursue resolution, don't settle for it. If your "forgiveness" happens without repentance and foregoes resolving the hurtful situation, don't give in to it. If "forgiveness" puts you one-up, don't give it one-way, but work equally with the other person to bring reconciliation and community once more. That's the goal of forgiveness. Let's pray.

Father, give us the courage to diligently seek the forgiveness of others as you have forgiven us. You keep seeking us out, calling us by name, inviting us back to You, asking us to repent of our wrongdoing against all Your commands so that You might love us and bless us and welcome us into Your kingdom. Help us to do the same with those who hurt us so that we might no longer call them enemies, but family once more. Guide us and enable us to forgive fully so that all people see You through us. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.