

CARING ENOUGH TO FORGIVE SERIES #2  
“Forgive - By Reaffirming Love”  
Leviticus 19:15-18, John 15:9-14, Romans 13:8-10  
March 4 & 5, 2023

In his book, *Character Forged from Conflict* (Bethany, 1999), Gary Preston gives us this powerful image of forgiveness. He says, “There's a story about a traveler making his way with a guide through the jungles of Burma. They came to a shallow but wide river and waded through it to the other side. When the traveler came out of the river, numerous leeches had attached to his torso and legs. His first instinct was to grab them and pull them off.

“His guide stopped him, warning that pulling the leeches off would only leave tiny pieces of them under the skin. Eventually, infection would set in.

“The best way to rid the body of the leeches, the guide advised, was to bathe in a warm balsam bath for several minutes. This would soak the leeches, and soon they would release their hold on the man's body.

Preston says, “When I've been significantly injured by another person, I cannot simply yank the injury from myself and expect that all bitterness, malice, and emotion will be gone [instantly]. Resentment still hides under the surface. The only way to become truly free of the offense and to forgive others is to bathe in the soothing bath of God's forgiveness of me. When I finally fathom the extent of God's love in Jesus Christ, forgiveness of others is a natural outflow.”<sup>1</sup>

When we've been hurt by the words or actions of another, the first tendency for us is to become angry with the other and let that anger carry us on into hatred of them. We wade into the waters of revenge, but as Christians, we know that Jesus commanded us to forgive one another for the sins committed against us, just as God has forgiven us of the sin we have committed against Him. So we come out of the murky waters of revenge only to have the leeches of bitterness and anger and other emotions clinging to us. If we try to remove those emotional leeches from our souls quickly, there will

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<sup>1</sup> (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 96)

always be little pieces left within us that will bring about spiritual infection of our lives, thereby crippling us in our faith journey, and preventing us from finding complete love for the other person.

The process of forgiveness is not just a “one-step process” of the removal of the hurt or pain, because there is always resentment and animosity left in us that we must deal with. The emotions we feel toward the other person who has hurt us are not easily let go of, much like leaches, and we tend to become infected with spite and hostility toward the other for what they’ve said or done to us or to ones we love. On our own we cannot forgive in a way that brings us peace. And we cannot simply wrench the injury and hurt from our lives and expect peace to occur. We have to work through several steps to find complete forgiveness. We have to let Jesus be a part of the healing

But “forgiveness, which is a complex and demanding process, is often reduced to a single act of accepting another. In spite of the pain, hurt, loss and wrongdoing that stand between us, we are encouraged to forgive in a single act of resolving all by giving unconditional inclusion. Such a step becomes too large for any human to take in a single bound. Forgiveness is a journey of many steps, each of which can be extremely difficult, all of which are to be taken carefully, thoughtfully, and with deep reflection.

“Rather than a single step, a whole flight of steps confront us if forgiveness is to truly occur. Each builds on what precedes; each makes possible that which follows.

“**Step one** moves from devaluing the wrongdoer to *valuing* the person again.”<sup>2</sup> If we continue to hate the other because of the hurt they have created in us, there will be no opportunity to find forgiveness, for they will remain the enemy, only worthy of destruction in our minds. We must begin to see them as another person of value, a brother or sister in Christ, who has made wrong decisions or done wrong things to bring hurt into our lives. Each one of us has eternal worth to the Lord our God and He expects us to hold each other as having value and worth in our lives AND ALSO in the lives of those who have hurt us, caused us pain or done wrong against us. We all have value to God.

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<sup>2</sup> (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 31-32)

In order to begin the forgiveness process, we must choose to value each other in equal regard. As long as we harbor those pieces of bitterness and anger and malice within us, love cannot begin to reappear, and forgiveness will be lost, and the leaches of hatred will consume us. Recognition of the other person's equal worth opens up the possibility of reconciliation and redemptive change to begin. As we see others with equal worth, then we can begin to see them differently, think and feel differently about them, and then act differently toward them. But this is only the first prerequisite for forgiveness.

**Step two** moves us from the neutral recognition of the other person's worth to the possibility of loving the other as a precious person again. Once we can acknowledge the other as one of equal worth, then we can start seeing them more as a fellow human again. Once we can see another as equal in value, we can begin to think better of them as one who needs support and encouragement and appreciation. This then changes our feeling about the person, opening up opportunities for us to express our thoughts once more. That creates the desire in us to want to grow closer to them again, to trust them once more, and to accept them again. And all of these things stimulate the way that we act toward the other person, beginning loving reconciliation.

Our emotions toward the other are only able to change as we begin to lovingly see the other as a valuable person again. We heard Leviticus 19:15-18 give us the regulations as to how we are to see another, respond to one another and to treat one another as people of worth before the Lord.

**Step three** moves us to recognize that the past is the past, and that we cannot change prior events, but we can *cancel* our demands about what we think needs to change. This reality has to be present before we can begin the process of forgiveness. If there was such a thing as a time machine, we could all go back in time and redo the wrongs we did to others. But we can't do that, so we must give up the past as what has already happened, and focus our attention on what must change IN US to help change the other person who has done wrong, too.

These first three steps are preliminary steps for us to get into the right frame of mind so that forgiveness can begin. These are essential: Value the other, love the other, and cancel our demands on

the other. These three are loving steps that have to be fulfilled before forgiveness can really begin.

When the process ends with restored perceptions of value, love, and respect for the reality of what has happened, then the heart of authentic forgiveness begins. Without these three steps taking place first, there will be no forgiveness.

**Step four** of the forgiveness process continues then with the hard work of *moving through* the anger and pain between the affected parties in order to bring about trust once more. Risk is taken to see if there is genuine intention on both parts, stepping forward to build authentic relationship once more through repentance and love.

This is a difficult step, because it demands that we once more interact with the other person and begin to open our lives to become vulnerable to being hurt again. If hurt and pain happens once more, it is likely that we are going to take a few steps backwards in the process of forgiveness. But if our vulnerability rewards us with greater trust and respect from the other person, it is likely that we will see the genuine repentance of the other and we can continue to see them as a person of value, we can grow in our love for them, and we can continue to look to the future rather than remember the past.

Now, “we’ve all seen a bell in a bell tower. These hang up high and have a rope attached to them. To ring the bell, the rope must be pulled down a few times. There is a constant pulling and constant ringing of the bell. Now, after the pulling is over and the person pulling the rope lets go, the bell will keep swinging. The bell does not stop swinging just because the rope is not being pulled anymore. It will swing for a while before it slows down and eventually stops.

“Forgiveness is the act of letting the bell rope go. It means that you choose to no longer hold the rope. A lack of forgiveness is when you constantly pull the rope. Each ring of the bell reminds us of each wrong inflicted on us by another. Our constant pulling of the rope keeps the wrongdoing on our minds. Now, if we choose to let go by a decision of the will, our emotions will still hear the bell for a little while. But, if you let the rope go and leave it alone, after a while, the bell will slow down until it stops.

“Don’t let the fact of the feelings of the pain get in the way of your forgiveness. You are responsible for not constantly ringing the bell. If you don’t pick up the rope, the sound will die down. Sometimes forgiveness is hard because we’ve been ringing the bell for so long that we don’t know how life is without the bell. Sometimes we leave the bell alone for a while, but then we pick up the rope and we start all over again.”<sup>3</sup>

And that is the importance of the Epistle lesson today from Romans 13. Hear these crucial words of the Apostle Paul. (READ Romans 13:8-10)

Love for the other person enables forgiveness to continue, even if we are hurt again. When we can look at another and love them as we would love ourselves, they become equal to us with regard to a person with value in the sight of God. Even though hurt or pain might be a possibility in the future, we are to love the other in a way that will help them to genuinely want to do better in the future.

But as we’re seeing on Wednesday nights, there are counterfeits of forgiveness that may look like genuine forgiveness, but are only the shadow-sides of forgiveness.

“Benevolent-forgiveness offers one-up or one-way forgiving that gently reminds the other of who is doing the forgiving in this situation as in most others. Obedient-forgiveness extends firm and faithful respect, but the heart is not there since getting it right is often more important than regaining the sister or brother. Sacrificial-forgiveness yields in forgiving by absorbing the pain, accepting the hurt, bearing the anger of both self and other and setting the other free with no strings attached, no questions asked, no real equality or mutuality asked for or expected, and no truly open and trusting relationship achieved. Equal regard seeks forgiveness that is as mutual, reciprocal, and equal in trust, risk, openness, and willingness to welcome what the future may bring as is possible for the person involved.”<sup>4</sup>

Loving the other as we love ourselves, seeing them as another person of worth to the Lord God, enables us to keep trying in the relationship, opening ourselves up to the possibility of being hurt again, but striving to bring reconciliation with the other through genuine repentance and reconciliation.

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<sup>3</sup> (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 110, #322)

<sup>4</sup> (David Augsberger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 41)

And that is **Step five** in the process of forgiveness - *letting go* of any certainty of future behavior, but open to allow the future to include spontaneity, even with the possibility of future failure in the relationship again. Since none of us is perfect, there is bound to be another time when we say or do things that bring hurt or pain into the lives of those around us. Instead of expecting perfection in your relationship with the other for the future, we have to recognize that building trust with each other and growing in love again with the other is that key step in keeping the relationship growing stronger along the way. It's "*forgetting the past and pushing on toward the upward call in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Forgiveness is a constant process, dealing with the wrongdoings of those around us and creating opportunities for building into the relationship with the other to make it stronger. But we have to give up our future expectations with regard to the behavior and words of the other, and risk openness to them with the hope that the hurt and pain gradually fade away, and mutual respect and dignity can be achieved between the two of you.

**Step six**, then, moves us into the final stage of forgiveness, "touching each other deeply, and to feel moved by warmth, love, and compassion again so that both can celebrate the relationship in mutual recognition that a right relationship has been achieved."<sup>5</sup>

That is the desired condition of any relationship, to have the warmth of love and compassion shared between the two that enables a deep intimacy with one another. It is the very sentiment of Jesus to His disciples in John 15:9-14. Hear them once more, they are so good. "*As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love. If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you...*" (15:9-12).

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<sup>5</sup> (David Augsberger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 31)

Forgiveness takes a lot of hard work, but it rewards us with a greater love for one another as much as it is in a greater love for Jesus Christ. He is the One who makes forgiveness possible for us, and it is through His example that we can forgive others. It's never easy to forgive another, but it all starts out of love for the other one. And who knows but that they might not ever have been shown such great love in their life as to have been forgiven before. Who knows the depth it might change a person as we show love and forgiveness to each other.

“Rev. Walter Everett answered the phone, unprepared for the words he heard: ‘Scott was murdered last night.’ Walter’s anger toward his son’s killer raged through him like a violent riptide, growing even worse when a plea bargain resulted in a reduced sentence for the attacker.

“Everett says, ‘My rage was affecting my entire life. “How am I going to let go of this anger?” I wondered. The answer came the first time I saw Mike, almost a year after Scott’s death. Mike stood in the court prior to his sentencing and said he was truly sorry for what he had done.

“Three-and-a-half weeks later, on the first anniversary of Scott’s death, I wrote to Mike. I told him about my anger and asked some pointed questions. Then I wrote, ‘Having said all that, I want to thank you for what you said in court, and as hard as these words are for me to write, I forgive you.’ I wrote of God’s love in Christ and invited Mike to write to me if he wished.

“Three weeks later his letter arrived. He said that when he had read my letter, he couldn’t believe it. No one had ever said to him, ‘I forgive you.’ That night he had knelt beside his bunk and prayed for, and received, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

“Additional correspondence led to regular visits during which we spoke often of Mike’s (and my) growing relationship with Christ. Later I spoke on Mike’s behalf before a parole board, and he was given an early release. In November 1994, I was the officiating minister at his wedding.

“When asked about his early release, Mike says, ‘It felt good, but I was already out of prison. God had set me free when I asked for His forgiveness.’

“Can I truly forgive?” Walter Everett asks. “I had wondered if it were possible. But I’ve

discovered the meaning of the Apostle Paul's words: 'For freedom Christ has set us free.'"<sup>6</sup>

As hard as it is for us to forgive, love for the other person is a key ingredient to the process. When we can recognize our own forgiveness from God the Father through the love of Jesus Christ for us, we can begin to see the need for us to reaffirm love to those who have wronged us and created hurt, pain and anger within us.

It is so important for us to remember that in forgiving others of their sins against us, no matter how egregious and horrible, we free not only them of their sin, but we free ourselves of the hate and bitterness and malice that can grow within each of us. As we humble ourselves before the marvelous love and forgiveness of the Lord our God, we are able to extend that same love and forgiveness to those around us, for as we have been forgiven, so we are to forgive.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, I invite you to give to the Lord your hurt and anger and pain that you have experienced from those around you. Begin the forgiveness process by seeing them as valuable people of worth to the Lord, consider them as equally precious to the Lord and love them, and then release the demands of the past. Then begin to work to trust that person again, allowing their genuine repentance to open up the future possibilities of a new relationship, and then celebrate the love of God as you grow closer again. Let's pray

Father, You know how hard it is for us to forgive each other of the wrongs we do to one another. Continue to guide our hearts away from hate and bitterness and strife so that we can experience Your love once more. Give us the courage to ask You for forgiveness of our sins, and then grant us the strength to begin to forgive the sins of others. Help us to see them as precious people who need love so that we might change their lives as we forgive them and then establish a relationship with them. There is so much need in our world for forgiveness today. Lead us as Your people to begin the process through Your Holy Spirit, so that a revival might begin even here with us today. Thank You for Your great love for us, for we pray this in the Name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 315)