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Forgiveness: What it is

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A close-up photograph of two hands, one from a darker-skinned person and one from a lighter-skinned person, gently cupping a glowing, translucent heart. The heart is the central focus, emitting a soft, warm light. The background is a soft, out-of-focus orange-brown color.

FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT IS

What is forgiveness? What exactly do we do when we forgive? What are the stages of forgiveness?

Webster defines forgiveness this way: “to give up resentment of or claim to requital, to grant relief from payment of, and to cease to feel resentment against (an offender).”

I have defined forgiveness as giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me. It is impossible to live on this fallen planet without getting hurt, offended, misunderstood, lied to, and rejected. However, learning how to respond properly by forgiving, being healed, and looking at the offender through God’s eyes and wishing him or her well is one of the basics of the Christian life.

The apostle Paul defines forgiveness as follows: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, no longer holding people’s misdeeds against them (2 Cor. 5:19, REB).¹ The word “misdeeds” can be translated as offenses or harmful acts for which the perpetrators are obligated to atone.² But, in this case, it was God in Christ who atoned for them and reconciled the world to Himself. Forgiveness was His decision to relinquish His claim of retribution and judgment on us and to declare us righteous. That is what we need to do for others.

When we forgive, we are to wipe the slate clean, to pardon, to cancel a debt. It is important to remember that forgiveness is not granted because a person deserves to be forgiven; instead, forgiveness is an act of love, mercy, and grace.

How we act toward the offender may change. It doesn’t mean we will put ourselves back into a harmful situation or that we suddenly accept or approve the person’s continued wrong behavior. It simply means we release this person from the wrong he or she committed against us. We forgive

the offender because God forgave us (Eph. 4:31, 32; Rom. 5:8).

There are three stages to forgiveness.

1. *The first stage of forgiveness is to surrender our right to get even.* It is a decision not to inflict a reciprocal amount of pain on everyone who has caused hurt. “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone” (1 Thess. 5:15). When I forgive you, I give up the right to hurt you back. I set you free from the prison I have placed you in within my mind. By the same token, we discover that we are set free from the prison of pain and grudges we have created for ourselves.³

Joseph was treated very badly by his brothers and sold into slavery, ending up in jail. Then he became second in command to the pharaoh in Egypt. He was in a position to get even with his brothers, but he chose to forgive them (Gen. 50:15-21; see also Gen. 45:1-28).

2. *The next stage of forgiveness is accepting the humanity of the person who has wronged us.* This involves a new way of seeing and feeling. What happens when we are deeply hurt is that we equate the totality of the person with the wrong he or she has done. Instead of seeing this person as a human being, we look at him or her as the scum of the world.⁴

When we forgive others, we begin to see more clearly. We do not ignore the hurts, but we see beyond them. We rediscover the humanity of the one who hurt us. “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16). The one who hurt us is no longer just an uncollected debt of pain. He or she is lonely or hurting or weak or near-sighted—just as I am. He or she is also a bearer of the image of God—just as I am.

In the eyes of the church, Saul was a persecutor to be feared. After his conversion, God used Ananias to change the perspective of the church to see Saul/Paul as a chosen vessel for the Gentiles (Acts 9:10-19).

3. *The third stage of forgiving is when we revise our feelings and start wishing the offender well and to hope good things for him or her.* You can hear someone say a kind word about this person without inwardly screaming for rebuttal time. You genuinely hope that things are well between the offender and God, and that all of his or her relationships are healthy. Of course, this does not happen all at once. And it usually doesn't happen once-and-for-all; you will have some backsliding, some moments when you would like to hear that this person has gone through unexpected pain or trouble. However, the trajectory of your heart is headed in the right direction. When you start praying for good things for someone who hurt you badly, you can pretty much know that the Great Forgiver has been working in your heart.⁵

Even though Jesus was treated badly and crucified, He prayed for His enemies (Luke 23:34; see also Matt. 5:43-48). When we forgive, we walk in step with the forgiving God.

FINAL THOUGHT

We will forgive to the extent that we appreciate how much we have been forgiven. The best incentive to forgiveness is to remember how much God has already forgiven you. Think

of how many sins He has covered for you. Think of the punishment you deserved that did not happen because of God's grace. Jesus said, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). Your willingness to forgive is in direct proportion to your remembrance of how much you have been forgiven.

Mark Twain said it this way: "Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet gives to the heel that has crushed it." You are never more like Jesus than when you forgive. You will never be set free until you forgive. Go ahead and release the burden of unforgiven offenses, and you will be set free. EO

¹ This is the *Revised English Bible*.

² Leroy T. Howe, *Guilt: Helping God's People Find Healing and Forgiveness*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 99.

³ Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 3-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness*, (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House—A Strang Company, 2002), 174-177.

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