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Forgiveness: What It Is Not

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FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT IS NOT

There is a story about a man who was bitten by a dog that was discovered to have rabies. The man was rushed to the hospital, and tests revealed that he, too, had contracted the dreaded disease. The doctor came in to see the man and said, "I am sorry to say you have rabies. Your situation is incurable and terminal. All I can suggest is that you get affairs together as quickly as possible." Well, the man was stunned. Finally, after a few moments, he summoned the strength to ask for a piece of paper and a pen, and he began to write furiously. About an hour later, the doctor came back to check on his patient. The man was still writing. The doctor said, "Well, I'm glad to see you're getting your will together." The man looked up and said, "Doc, this ain't no will. It's a list of all the people I'm going to bite before I die."

Our natural reaction is to act like this man. When people wrong, hurt, betray, and destroy us, we want to get even with them and believe we are justified in doing so. But is that the right thing to do? At what cost to ourselves are we willing to pay to get even?

In the previous article, we looked at the unpayable debt we owe Jesus for our salvation. In this article, we will study what forgiveness is not. In the next one, we will look at what forgiveness is.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

Forgiving is not the same thing as excusing. Forgiving

does not mean tolerating bad behavior or pretending that what someone did was not so bad. Forgiving someone who breaks our trust does not mean that we give him his position back, such as a job. Forgivers are not doormats; to forgive a person is not a signal that we are willing to put up with what others throw at us.¹

God did not excuse Moses when he struck the rock of Kadesh (when he was told to speak to it; Num. 20:1-13), but still, He forgave him.

Forgiving is not forgetting. Scripture writers sometimes use the language of "forgetting" to describe how God deals with our sin: "And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:17, KJV; see also Ps. 103:12). This doesn't mean that God has a memory-retrieval problem. It means that He does not bring up our past sins and hold them against us. John MacArthur makes the observation that God does not forget our sins. He is omnipotent. He chooses not to remember our sins and does not use them against us.² The Bible says that love "does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Cor. 13:5, NIV). Forgiving is what's required precisely when we *can't* forget. Forgiving is not a way to avoid or forget pain but to heal pain.³

Forgiving is not the same thing as reconciling. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two separate things. Forgiveness takes place within the heart of one human being. It can be

granted even if the other person does not ask for it or deserve it. When we wait for someone to repent before we forgive, we are surrendering our future to the person who wronged us.

Reconciliation requires that the offender still be alive and be sincerely repentant for the wrong he or she committed. Reconciliation requires the rebuilding of trust, and that means good faith on the part of *both* parties.

Even though King Saul tried to destroy David, David responded with kindness and forgiveness to Saul's household. When David became king, he showed kindness to Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth. He restored to him and his family the land owned by the former king and paid to have the land cared for and farmed. David also made a place for Mephibosheth at his own table so that he was accepted as part of the king's family (2 Sam. 9). David forgave Saul without ever reconciling with Saul himself.

If you live on this earth for any period of time, you will have your own list of people you want to bite and get even with before you die! Perhaps there's a fellow church member who relentlessly criticizes you or a coworker who constantly berates you. Maybe a close friend betrays you. You cannot control the offenses that come into your life, but you can control what you do with those offenses. You can hold on to them until they metastasize into a tumor of bitterness and

destroy you and your family, or you can make the choice to let go of those offenses and forgive. I personally believe that the single greatest choice we as Christians make is whether or not to forgive those who wrong us.

The apostle Paul says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:31, 32, NIV).

This is only possible when God makes us into new men and women by giving us new desires and attitudes toward people (Eph. 4:31, 32). EO

¹ <https://billygraham.org/answer/forgiveness-does-not-mean-excusing-wrongdoing/>, Accessed June 14, 2017.

² John F. MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998), 189.

³ Leroy T. Howe, *Guilt: Helping God's People Find Healing and Forgiveness*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 89.

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