

HOW

to

FORGIVE

*~ Learning to Give
the Gift We Receive*

R. Herbert

A Tactical Belief Book

HOW to FORGIVE

Learning to Give the Gift We Receive

R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

You may not know at this moment when you will need to exercise forgiveness, but you can be certain that sooner or later you will need to forgive someone for something. Perhaps right now there is an old hurt that you have never been able to completely forgive, or perhaps the need will not arise until tomorrow or next week, but whenever the need to forgive comes up or to prepare you for when it does, this book is designed to help you.

Many religions include teachings on forgiveness, but we will look at the subject from the perspective of Christianity, which offers more reasons to forgive, more guidance to forgive, and more help to forgive than any other. Forgiveness lies at the very heart of the Christian faith, but even if you are not a Christian or even particularly religious at this moment in time, you need to be able to forgive others for your own sake just as much as for the sake of others – as we will see.

The truth is, forgiveness is something that all humans need, but it is a two-way street and a gift that must be given if it is to be received. Logic alone tells us this. No relationship or society can function if people expect forgiveness for their own mistakes but refuse to give it to others – or presume that they themselves would never make a serious mistake needing forgiveness. On the other hand, just as the word “forgive” is based on the word “give,” when we forgive we give someone a gift – and that person is often ourselves as much as it is the other individual.

That is a lesson that has been written throughout history in the lives of people like Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom who personally forgave the guard of the concentration camp in which she was held, or Nelson Mandela who forgave his captors and helped bring about reconciliation between the races in South Africa. These Christians and countless others who have practiced forgiveness – whether people of faith or not – have found that

doing so can bring peace and eventual happiness and often, also, reconciliation and restoration of relationships.

The fact that you are reading this book probably means that you are desirous to forgive others, but perhaps you have not felt ready or able to do so, or you feel unsure if you have forgiven properly and as you should. Whatever the case, this book will walk you through the reasons why we must forgive, show you why no hurt is too bad to be forgiven, and show you the steps to full forgiveness. First, in “Part One: Opening the Mind,” we deal with the all-important matter of understanding forgiveness. In “Part Two: Unlocking the Heart,” we look at the core of forgiveness – choosing to forgive – that we all must accomplish. Finally, in “Part Three: Extending the Hand,” we look at the ways in which forgiveness can and should be applied whenever possible.

If you are not sure if you want to read a whole book on this subject – short as this one is – we suggest you look down the contents pages and select and read any chapter that has a title that speaks to you. Sometimes we need to see only a single part of the picture to realize that we need to see more of it. On the other hand, reading all of the following chapters, and in order, has its benefits. They are designed to systematically walk you through the process of forgiving – to help you see why and how we all need to give one of the greatest gifts that we can receive!

PART ONE:
OPENING THE MIND
(Understanding Forgiveness)

1. WHY WE MUST FORGIVE

Before we can begin to look at the “How’s” of forgiveness, we must have a clear understanding of the “Why’s.” There are many reasons why we should forgive others, and some of the most important are summarized in the following points. For the Christian, the first reason alone should be enough to convince us that we must forgive, but we also should be mindful of the other points. In this chapter we will only briefly mention some of the most important scriptures on this topic, but these verses will all be looked at more closely as we go through the book. For now, here are nine reasons we need to forgive, in simple summary form:

1. *God tells us to forgive.* Forgiveness is one of the clearest doctrines of Scripture. The New Testament alone contains dozens of verses that instruct us to forgive others who have hurt us in some way. These scriptures make it clear that we are not encouraged to forgive, rather we are commanded to do so: “...forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone” (Colossians 3:13, etc.). This first point cannot be overstressed – we must never forget that at its heart and core, making the decision to forgive someone is primarily about obeying God.

2. *We will not be forgiven if we will not forgive.* This point is just as clear in the Scriptures as the first one. In fact, most verses in the New Testament that deal with forgiving others make exactly this point: “... Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37); “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6:14); etc. Jesus gave a specific parable – that of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) – to stress this truth (see the Appendix).

3. *We must learn to love those who sin against us just as God loves us.* Another way to say this is that God loves both the victim and

the perpetrator of any sin. That is not saying God will not judge the perpetrator, but that he loves the individual and we must also. This is part of the command Jesus gave us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27-36). Ultimately, we cannot forgive others if we do not love them, and we cannot love them if we do not forgive them. A large part of forgiveness is about learning to be like God.

4. *We cannot accept only part of Christ's sacrifice.* If we go on holding a grudge against someone who has wronged us, feeling that we “cannot forgive them,” we are saying in effect that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient to cover that person's sin. The apostle John reminds us: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). We will look at “difficult to forgive” situations in the next chapter; but we must realize that we cannot accept Christ's sacrifice for ourselves and not for others.

5. *Forgiveness is not rejecting justice.* Sometimes people feel that to forgive a serious sin against us would be to fail to accept, or even to reject, proper justice. But this is not so. Forgiving someone does not take away the need for legal or other forms of justice where such steps are appropriate. Our response is separate from that of society or even that of God – who makes it clear that he will judge all things (Ecclesiastes 12:14, Acts 17:31, etc.). But that does not take away our need to forgive. God expects us “to act justly and to love mercy” at the same time (Micah 6:8), meaning that we can forgive – without justice being denied where divine and human law show it is appropriate.

6. *If we do not forgive, we suffer physically.* When God forgives us, it is for our sake. When God tells us to forgive others, it is also partly for our sake. Failure to forgive can be a mental, emotional, and spiritual cancer that slowly destroys our peace of mind, happiness, and even health. Several medical studies have shown that maintaining an attitude of forgiveness toward an offender can

actually lead to improved function of the cardiovascular and nervous systems, and that the more forgiving people are, the less they suffer from a wide range of illnesses (see for example, C. Van Oyen, et al., “Granting Forgiveness or Harboring Grudges: Implications for Emotions, Physiology and Health,” *Psychological Science* 12 [2001]:117-23).

7. *If we do not forgive, we suffer spiritually.* Apart from causing physiological and psychological damage to ourselves, an attitude of unforgiveness, if we let it, can also be extremely destructive to our spiritual lives. Failure to forgive always leads eventually to spiritual bitterness – a situation that must be avoided at all costs: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone ... See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Hebrews 12:14-15). Most importantly, failure to forgive others ultimately destroys our relationship with the One who died for our sins. By learning to forgive, we accept Christ’s sacrifice for ourselves as well as for others – and we strengthen rather than destroy our relationship with him.

8. *Forgiving others frees us.* “Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.” Corrie ten Boom’s memorable words remind us that an unforgiving attitude invariably harms us far more than the person we are having difficulty forgiving. Unforgiveness becomes a prison from which we cannot escape, and delaying granting forgiveness is tantamount to throwing away the key. As has been so truly said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.” This principle is clearly seen in the life of Nelson Mandela who, after his unjust imprisonment for many years, wrote: “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” Forgiving others truly does free us.

9. *Forgiving is restorative.* When we forgive those who offend or hurt us—no matter how bad the hurt—we restore ourselves, perhaps our relationship with the other individual, and certainly our relationship with God if we have become embittered or poisoned by hate. The Bible shows this wide-ranging restoration in a number of places, perhaps none better than in the book of Job. When Job’s friends sinned against him by judging him and refusing to offer support and comfort in his terrible trial, we are told that God was angry with them and commanded that they ask Job to pray for them (Job 42:7-9). But we should never overlook an important part of that account. God did not restore Job himself till he had shown he had forgiven his friends by sacrificing on their behalf: “*After* Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10, emphasis added). Our own situations may not be so dramatic, but forgiving is always the restorative as well as the right thing to do.

In the next chapter we will see why no hurt is too bad or even too frequent for us to forgive.

2. IT'S NEVER IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGIVE

Sometimes we do not forgive quickly – or in extreme cases, at all – because we feel it is impossible. This feeling can be the result of one of two things. Sometimes, people feel that those who have wounded them in some way are simply “too bad” to be forgiven and the offense is too great. More commonly, people feel they cannot forgive because they simply cannot bring themselves to do so – even admitting sometimes that they feel too weak or otherwise unable to bring themselves to an attitude of forgiveness. We will consider both of these situations in this chapter.

Too Bad to Be Forgiven?

It is an amazing truth that anything and anyone can be forgiven if we are willing to forgive. That does not mean justice should not still be applied, or that people should not be punished when punishment has been mandated by society. But that is a separate issue. What we must always remember is that in God's eyes we have all sinned (Romans 3:23), and ultimately all sin is worthy of death (Romans 6:23). Viewed this way it does not matter whether the sins of others are “worse” than ours – the penalty and punishment that was placed on the Son of God on our behalf is just as great as that placed on him by the worst of sinners (Romans 5:8).

C. S. Lewis is often quoted in this regard, and his words are always worth remembering: “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” As Christians we must always ask ourselves: “Has the person who has done something to us really done anything worse than we have done to the Son of God?” The answer to that question is always no. Unwillingness to forgive things because they are “just too bad” is usually rooted in either a lack of understanding of our own

sinfulness or a lack of awareness of what was involved in the forgiveness of our sins. The Bible does speak of “unforgivable sin,” but what that sin is, and who is guilty of it, is for God to decide. Our responsibility is always to forgive – without exception. This may seem terribly hard in many cases, but the Bible is unequivocal on the matter.

Even people who have suffered beyond our comprehension have found that they were able to forgive incredible things. Second World War Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom's experience in forgiveness is just one example that we talked about in Chapter 1, but people continue to find in every generation that it is possible to forgive what is seemingly unforgivable.

In 2014, *New York Times* photographer Peter Hiogo went to Rwanda to gather photographic evidence of the forgiveness of the atrocities that had occurred twenty years earlier between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples – the two cultures involved in the 1994 Rwandan genocide that took one million lives in a country only half the size of many US counties – often with incredible barbarism and cruelty. Hiogo found amazing evidence of reconciliation in the way Hutus and Tutsis now live side by side – even among many individuals who had thought they could never forgive the atrocities committed by their neighbors.

One such person is Immaculee Ilibagiza, a Tutsi woman who hid, along with seven other women, in a small room in a Hutu pastor's home while violence raged all around them and the rest of Ilibagiza's family was wiped out. Her story is not in itself unusual for this terrible genocide, but this woman's coming to forgive is something that can teach us all lessons. Ilibagiza has told how, after the killings were over she met the man – now imprisoned – who had killed her family members. Understandably, this young woman initially believed she could not forgive this person, but she was convicted by Jesus' command to forgive and his words in the Lord's Prayer where we request to be forgiven – as we forgive others:

I remember asking God, “I can’t forgive; what do I do now?” Something in me said, “Pray with all your heart, mean every word you say...” And that’s how I started to pray. Forgive? I thought. No, I can’t say that. I thought I would remove that from the prayer. But after that, I recognized that Jesus gave the prayer, that he is God and I am human. I make mistakes, but he doesn’t make mistakes. And then I had to go to my knees and beg God, “Help me. I don’t know how, I need you, and I can’t say you are wrong here.” And that was the beginning of forgiving. There was a moment of understanding that came like a flash of light ... you think about Jesus dying on the cross when he says, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” It was like he was saying, “They don’t get it.” I still get tempted today about anger... But when I feel that anger that takes away my peace, I beg God to help me. I know for sure that forgiveness is possible.

Unable to Forgive?

Like Immaculee Ilibagiza, many people who have much to forgive often feel that they are not up to the job – that they simply do not have the strength or the desire to face such a task and may go for years feeling they are “unable” to forgive. But the truth is that it is always possible to overcome these feelings of being overwhelmed by the situation and to come to forgive. God does not expect us to do what we cannot do. If forgiving is more than we feel we can do by ourselves, we can and should ask God’s help. Just as the father who asked for his son’s healing told Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24), so we must sometimes tell God, “I forgive, help my lack of forgiveness.”

Refusing to forgive someone or delaying forgiving them “till the hurt subsides” are equally mistakes. Invariably, the longer we leave something unforgiven, the less likely we are to ever forgive it. We will look later at the matter of how it is sometimes impossible to forget truly terrible things that are done to us or to those we love,

but God has given us a way to deal with such situations if we are willing to forgive. Just as the apostle Paul admitted to having been instrumental in the mistreatment and perhaps deaths of many Christians before his own conversion (Acts 8:3), we must remember that God can turn around the lives of even hardened individuals just as he turned around our lives. To feel “unable” to forgive is to deny another the same opportunity of forgiveness for which we ask.

As we stressed in Chapter 1, forgiving others does not necessarily take away the need for legal or other forms of accountability that may follow someone’s hurtful actions, nor the fact that the person will ultimately be judged by God (2 Corinthians 5:10) just as we will be. But there is nothing in the Bible that suggests for a moment that we may find ourselves unable to fulfill the command to forgive that God has given us. We can always forgive if we choose to do so, and if we ask God’s help where we need it.

We may not have thought about it this way, but saying that we are unable to forgive can also be a subconscious way to try to punish the offender. We must always be alert to this aspect of human nature; the words of the apostle Peter should show us how important it is to reject such an attitude:

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:8-9).

If it is blessed to receive forgiveness (Romans 4:7-8), it is perhaps even more blessed to give forgiveness (Acts 20:35) – and we can always give forgiveness, just as we can always ask for it.

3. WHAT IF THEY ARE NOT SORRY?

After the basic fact that we should forgive others, the most important aspect of forgiveness we need to understand is regarding whether we should forgive those who are not sorry and who continue to hurt us or others. This is a difficult question for many people who want to do the right thing, but who realize that the Scriptures themselves may not seem to be clear on this point.

First, let us consider the biblical indications that we should forgive others whether they are repentant or not. The Gospel of Mark records Jesus' words: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). This command does not specify that the other person must be sorry for what they have done for us to forgive them and it meshes with the evidence that Jesus asked for forgiveness for those who crucified him – who clearly were not sorry for what they had done (Luke 23:34).

On the other hand, the Gospel of Luke seems to paint a different picture when it tells us that Jesus said:

... If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them (Luke 17:3-4).

This passage, which clearly speaks only of forgiving those who repent, appears to be backed up by another equally clear scripture:

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to

the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-18).

These scriptures may also seem to fit the fact that God does not forgive an individual until he or she repents of their wrongdoing (Luke 24:47, etc.) – so “Why,” a Christian might ask, “should we?”

Resolving the Difficulty

To see past this apparent contradiction and to understand what our responsibility is toward those who sin against us, we must understand that forgiveness has two aspects, a mental and a physical part – that of the “heart” and that of the “hand” – that involve our attitude and our actions. In every situation we must forgive in our heart, but in some situations we do not proceed to the level of forgiving with our actions by resuming normal interaction as though nothing had happened.

The words of Jesus in Mark 11 and his words on the cross represent the essential first part of forgiveness – that of attitude. Often, people praying cannot *act* in a forgiving manner toward those who have sinned against them but who are elsewhere – any more than Christ could *act* on his forgiving attitude while he was hanging on the cross. On the other hand, the situation described by Jesus in Luke 17 is one regarding our *actions* of forgiveness. In that circumstance the person who has been wronged is interacting with and discussing the matter with the individual who has offended. Matthew 18 specifically tells us that if interaction shows a person is unrepentant, the aggrieved person should treat them in a certain way – meaning *act* toward them in that way.

Once we understand the two parts of forgiveness, we see there is no real contradiction between Jesus’ statements. On the one hand we must always have an attitude of forgiveness – regardless of whether the offending person is sorry or not (Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3-4). On the other hand, if the person is not repentant or does not show any sign of being sorry for what they have done, we need

not feel constrained to act as though nothing has happened and put ourselves in a situation where we, or others, are repeatedly hurt (Matthew 18:15-17).

For example, if a Christian woman is hurt by spousal abuse, or her children are hurt by someone, the Scriptures are clear that she must forgive the injuring individual in her heart. But she need not place herself or her children in danger by acting as though nothing has happened and staying in the situation. We must always accomplish the first *necessary* part of forgiveness by forgiving in our hearts and minds, but we may not always be able – or it may not be wise – to proceed to the second *ideal* half of forgiveness – resumption of normal interaction with the offending person (Proverbs 22:3, etc.).

There are a number of biblical instances of this principle in action. For example, we find that although David clearly forgave King Saul for trying to kill him (2 Samuel 1:17-27), nevertheless he did not return to normal interactions when he realized that Saul still desired his death (1 Samuel 20-23). Both wisdom and the Scriptures show that we should be equally careful.

As for the fact that God does not forgive unless a person repents (Acts 3:19), that does not apply to our own situations. We must always remember that God has the power and the wisdom to know if a person truly is repentant or not. We cannot read the minds of others and we cannot judge a person's motives in the way God can. People can say "Sorry" and may not mean it, while others may not express themselves well, but they may be sincerely sorry. Precisely because we cannot always discern the attitude of another and the reality of a situation perfectly, we must always forgive in our hearts and minds as God clearly instructs us – knowing that ultimately God will judge whether the individual was repentant or not.

Understanding this principle is of the greatest importance in our Christian lives. Knowing that forgiving others involves unconditional forgiveness from the heart, but conditional forgiveness "of the hand" can help us fulfill God's will in our lives in a balanced and wise manner – just as God intended.

4. ARE YOU CONFUSING TRUST WITH FORGIVENESS?

A final aspect of forgiveness we should consider before we begin to look at “how to forgive” is that of the difference between forgiveness and trust. Everyone understands the difference between the two words and the concepts they represent, yet it is easy to confuse them in actual life. Sometimes people feel that trust is part of forgiveness and that they must trust those they forgive. In other situations people feel that although they should forgive, they do not ever need to trust the person again.

Both of these extremes can be wrong. We always have to forgive, but we do not have to trust those who hurt us and show no sign they are sorry. On the other hand, once we have forgiven we should strive to allow trust to be rebuilt whenever possible. The difference lies in the fact that forgiving someone who has wronged us is our responsibility; reestablishing trust is most often the responsibility of the person who wronged us.

In real life, people get hurt repeatedly – that fact was the basis for Peter’s question to Jesus: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). The problem is a very real one because humanly, repeated wrongs done against us can make forgiveness progressively harder. That is why Peter suggested we only forgive up to seven times – a “manageable” number of wrongdoings. Jesus’ answer, of course, was that we must not put a limit on the number of times we forgive someone (Matthew 18:22). But his answer has no application to staying in a situation where we would continue to get hurt if that is avoidable. Nor does it mean that we should trust the wrongdoer if it would be unwise or dangerous to do so. Remember again the Scripture’s counsel: “The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.” This clear wisdom is expounded twice in the Bible (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12) for a reason.

Forgiveness and Trust Are Different

Not understanding these basic truths prevents many people from restoring relations after forgiving those who have hurt them and causes many others to suffer unnecessarily when they do. In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says: “Many people are reluctant to show mercy because they don't understand the difference between trust and forgiveness. Forgiveness is letting go of the past. Trust has to do with future behavior.” Warren is surely correct in this, for while forgiving must be immediate on our part, trust must be rebuilt over time and depends on the behavior of the one forgiven. As Warren puts it, trust requires a track record: “If someone hurts you repeatedly, you are commanded by God to forgive them instantly, but you are not expected to trust them immediately...” Our forgiveness of others must always be unconditional, but our trust of others can and often should be conditional – it has to be earned.

As we saw in the last chapter, forgiveness doesn't mean we have to see change in the other person in order to forgive them – that would be an entirely wrong approach. We must forgive whether an individual changes or not. But we need not trust them if they have not changed. Trust develops slowly – and it must be remade over time. Think of the example of Jesus asking Peter three times, “do you love me?” (John 21:15-17) after Peter's betrayal. Peter had failed Jesus three times, of course (John 18:15-27), and perhaps there is a lesson in Christ's repeated questions that we should see recurrent or ongoing evidence of change before we fully trust again.

A simple analogy is that being hurt by another is like receiving a cut to our body. Forgiving the person acts like the stitches that close our wound, but spiritual and emotional healing, just like physical healing, still require time. Even when we fully understand the difference between granting forgiveness and trust, we must always remember that allowing time for trust to be repaired does not mean allowing ourselves a period of time to brood, feel sorry for ourselves, or to allow resentment or anger to continue to develop.

That would be like allowing an infection to take hold in the cut that should be healing. Granting ourselves time to trust again should always be based on our complete and unhindered forgiveness of the other person – that is the only way we will, in fact, heal.

We should always be open to allowing trust to be rebuilt whenever this is possible. Forgiveness is a possession we all have that we are able to give to others. But trust is not a possession, it is a process that we allow to develop once our forgiving makes trust possible again. This is a topic to which we will return later, but now, in Part Two, we are able to begin to look at some important aspects of the actual act of forgiving.

PART TWO:
UNLOCKING THE HEART
(Choosing Forgiveness)

5. WHAT FORGIVING “FROM THE HEART” MEANS

Although we cannot properly forgive others without understanding the concept of forgiveness and its importance, that intellectual knowledge is not, of course, forgiveness itself. If we are to move from understanding forgiveness to granting it, we must move from the mind to the “heart” – from simply accepting the idea of forgiveness to embracing it and making it truly a part of us. In other words, we must move beyond an understanding of forgiveness to an attitude of forgiveness.

This is what Jesus meant when he warned that we will not be forgiven “...unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35). The Greek expression “from the heart” used in this verse and others (1 Peter 1:22) means exactly what it means in English: to truly and deeply forgive. But how exactly do we know if we measure up to that standard – how do we know if we really are forgiving someone “from the heart”?

The answer is relatively simple. Jesus spoke of forgiveness “from the heart” in concluding his parable of the ungrateful servant who did not forgive others as his king forgave him (see Appendix), so his point was obviously that we must forgive as our King forgives us. The Scriptures contain many verses showing the manner in which God forgives us – far too many to include here – but we will simply look at three examples from the Old Testament prophets.

The Way God Forgives

The Book of Micah contains some wonderful words revealing God’s attitude in forgiving: “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but *delight* to show mercy” (Micah 7:18, emphasis added). This is the very opposite of reluctant forgiveness.

We delight to do something we enjoy, that we love to do, and although humanly we may not look at forgiving as an enjoyable activity, this is exactly the attitude we need to have if we are to forgive from the heart.

The prophet Isaiah helps us to expand on this understanding: “let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will *abundantly* pardon” (Isaiah 55:7 ESV, emphasis added). Other translations convey the word Isaiah used of God’s forgiveness with “freely,” “generously,” “richly,” and “bountifully.” This is clearly the opposite of forgiveness that is limited in any way.

Another prophet, Hosea, recorded a prayer God commanded ancient Israel to pray that claims a specific attribute of God’s forgiveness: “Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us *graciously*’...” (Hosea 14:2, emphasis added). God invites us to receive his *gracious* pardon and this is the opposite of grudging forgiveness. Humanly it is all too possible to reach “surface forgiveness,” but because it is not from the heart it is expressed ungraciously and sometimes even unkindly. Hosea shows us that God does not do that, and if we want to forgive from the heart, neither must we.

These three passages only begin to cover the many ways in which God expresses his forgiveness, and it can make for an extensive and very profitable study to look at other examples found in the Scriptures. Even without in-depth study of such verses, it is worthwhile to keep the principle in mind and look for the key descriptive word whenever we read biblical verses that speak of God forgiving or pardoning.

However, the three examples given above make the point. God delights to forgive and he forgives abundantly and graciously. These qualities, and many more, show us what it means to “forgive from the heart.” Combined with Jesus’ statement in Matthew 18:35, they show that just as God himself forgives from the heart, he expects us to do no less!

6. EXCUSES, EXCUSES!

Most Christians need both fewer and more good excuses. To understand the apparent contradiction in that statement, we need only remember C.S. Lewis' wise words that: "In our own case we accept excuses too easily, in other people's we do not accept them easily enough." In other words, while humanly it is easy for us to excuse our own faults, excusing and forgiving even the small faults of others seems so much harder.

The excuses that we make for our own behavior could be the subject of a book themselves, but in this chapter we need to look only at the kind of excuses we need more of – the excuses we grant other people for their behavior. Of course, we are not talking about excusing heinous crimes and sins, but the everyday failings of different types that we and other people all have. It is these small things that we need to learn to excuse more consistently in other people – not just because the offenses are so often small, but also (and more importantly) because in real life interactions they are so frequent that it is imperative we learn to handle them successfully as Christians.

Not surprisingly, the Bible addresses these small, but nevertheless potentially relationship-damaging, faults that we all have to some extent or another. You may not recall a specific verse regarding forgiving the "small things," but there is one nonetheless. In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul wrote: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). If we look closely at this verse, we find that Paul is, in fact, talking specifically about both small and large problems that need to be forgiven. When he writes "forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone," he is talking about grievous or serious issues that need to be forgiven. But notice that directly before giving this command he gives another: "Bear with one another..."

These brief four words (only two words in the Greek in which the New Testament was written) are where forgiving the small things comes in. The word Paul used for “bear with” is *anechomenoi* – a form of the Greek word for “tolerate,” “put up with,” or even “endure.” Now think about this. We do not say we “put up with” or “endure” things we like, we speak of putting up with things we don’t like and that we find difficult to deal with – ranging from unpleasant tasting medicine to the sometimes hurtful remarks or behavior of other people.

This is what “forbearing” in the King James Version, or “bearing with” in many modern translations, means. It means we are to “put up with” and “endure,” if necessary, the small faults of others as part of forgiveness. The *New Living Translation* conveys the sense of what Paul wrote very well: “You must make allowance for each other’s faults ...” (Colossians 3:13 NLT).

“Making allowance” for other people’s faults is where our need to excuse others comes in. We must be willing to “make an excuse,” as it were, for someone’s minor faults that affect us. We must presume until and unless it is proven otherwise that they didn’t realize the effect of their behavior, or that there were extenuating circumstances, or that we ourselves may have caused the person’s behavior more than we realized.

Making excuses for others involves willing ourselves to live in a positive attitude toward them, presuming the best and hoping the best in each situation where we potentially might be offended by some small thing. That is part of loving others as we should, and Paul talks about this specifically in his great chapter on love where he tells us that love: “... always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

We might presume that “hopes” in this verse means “hopes regarding future things”, but biblical scholars agree that is not Paul’s sense in this statement. His use of the word in this context is clearly referring to the conduct of others; to our putting up with things, enduring things if necessary, because we hope or presume for the best in the situation.

That is why Paul places the word “hopes” in this sense between “trusts” and “perseveres” in verse 7. When people do things that hurt us in minor, but perhaps frequent or unthinking ways, we need to trust that the hurt was unintentional, to hope for the best by being willing to mentally grant them an excuse, and to persevere with them in patience.

But do we do this? Are we as good at coming up with excuses for other people’s behavior as we are for our own? It is a serious question worthy of some careful thought. In reality, we probably all need to be better at thinking of excuses for others because doing that on a daily basis can be an effective part of forgiving. The excuses we grant others help us to forgive the small things, and forgiving small things becomes practice for forgiving larger things. We all need more of those excuses in our lives – as part of the forgiving to which we are called.

7. DID YOU GET THE MESSAGE?

The concept of hearing the message that God sends to the world is a fundamental aspect of Christianity (John 10:27, Romans 10:17, etc.), but our responsibility to hear is not just limited to hearing what God says. Sometimes, our responsibility is to hear one another, and that is nowhere more true than in the area of forgiveness.

Twenty-two year old “Abby” told her pastor that she was having a hard time forgiving her boyfriend, Michael, for something he had done. “I’ve talked it over with him,” Abbey stressed, “but he hasn’t said he is sorry.” After discussing the situation together, the pastor helped Abbey to see that Michael may not have used the word “sorry,” but that he clearly regretted his mistake.

Fortunately for Abby, her pastor understood that people do not always apologize or express regret in the same way. Abby, and many of us, can make the mistake of feeling that a friend, mate, co-worker or anyone else has not really shown remorse or asked for forgiveness if they have not done it in a way we were expecting or hoping. In fact, our idea of what qualifies as asking forgiveness can sometimes hinder us from hearing the message when someone is, in fact, trying to make amends.

The more badly we feel we have been wronged, the more difficult it is sometimes to see when people are sorry. Individuals who have hurt us may even apologize, yet their “I’m sorry” seems too simple and disproportionate to the pain they may have caused us. But we should remember that there is no “preapproved” script for asking forgiveness.

Imperfect Messages

The biblical example of Joseph comes to mind in this situation. After he had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, but had

gained a high position there, Joseph eventually received a message from his brothers that their father had given them:

“... I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept (Genesis 50:17).

Joseph’s response to his brothers’ sorrow was exemplary – he not only verbally forgave them, but also showed by his actions that his forgiveness was sincere (Genesis 50:21). But think about the message Joseph heard and how he could have reacted. Joseph could easily have felt: “How come my brothers don’t say they are sorry directly – they do it through our father?” “How come they don’t mention my coat that they wrecked – do they think that wasn’t important to me?” “What about the fact I could have died in slavery; do they think ‘treating me badly’ really covers it?”

In other words, if we look closely, the message Joseph heard from his brothers was far from perfect, yet Joseph heard the message and forgave. Sometimes we need to do that as well, without preconceived ideas of what the message should be. Otherwise, there will always be a danger that if we don’t hear the exact words we are looking for, we may not get the message that is there – especially because human anger and disappointment can render us temporarily “deaf” to such messages of remorse.

Learning to Listen

Sometimes it takes careful listening and digging deeper into the signals people are sending in order to hear the message that is there. Some people are not as good with words as others. But if we are listening and we sense that someone is trying to make amends for a problem that has come up, we can always ask if that is what the other person intends.

But we should never presume that there is no message just because we are not hearing it loudly enough to meet our own expectations. And it is vital that we do “get the message” in such circumstances. Ultimately, forgiveness is a part of the love to which we are called in this life. As the apostle John wrote: “For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another” (1 John 3:11).

8. FORGIVENESS IS MORE THAN A FEELING

“I was deeply hurt by management decisions at the time,” a young intern confided to a Christian friend. “But I feel more at peace since I forgave them and moved on – though I still avoid those people.”

That is a common enough situation in the lives of many people who have had similar experiences, but true forgiveness of those who have wronged us in some way must never be confused with an emotion or feeling. Forgiveness certainly must be centered in the heart and mind – we must have both the desire and the will to forgive – but it is not an emotion. Forgiveness is something we choose and that we do, not something we feel.

The distinction is an important one because even individuals who sincerely want to forgive others may short circuit their efforts because they “feel” forgiveness toward someone, but do not always apply it. We see this important truth in the fact that, whenever possible, forgiveness involves action.

In the Old Testament, two Hebrew words are used for the concept of “forgiveness” – *salah* and *nasah*. The first word, *salah*, is used in many scriptures showing God’s pardon (Psalm 25:11, Isaiah 55:7, etc.), but it is only used of God and the verses that use it do not apply directly to our forgiving others. The word *nasah*, on the other hand, is used of human forgiveness (Genesis 32:20, etc.). When we look at this word we find that it is a totally active one. Its primary meaning is to lift or to carry a load, and when used in the sense of “forgiveness” it means the lifting up of a burden of guilt or wrongdoing from someone and carrying it away.

For example, in the book of Genesis when Joseph forgives his brothers for their mistreatment of him, he metaphorically lifts the load of their actions from their backs and carries it away. But Joseph does not just feel kindness to his brothers; his “carrying away” of what they have done is actively expressed – we are told

that he promised to provide for them and that “he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Genesis 50:21). That is active forgiveness demonstrated not only in inner thought, but also by outward actions.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same active nature of forgiveness. Although there are several Greek words that were used of the concept, the most important and frequently found is the verb *aphiēmi*. This word has a broad range of meaning – it can signify to “forgive” or “write off” a debt, to allow an action to occur, to leave, to let go, to send away, to abandon or even to divorce someone. Diverse as these meanings may seem, they are all active expressions and all clearly involve an action rather than just a feeling. We must remember this when we read, for example, the words Jesus told his followers to pray:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:12-15).

In each case, the same Greek word (a form of *aphiēmi*) is used of our forgiving others and God forgiving us. We all know that when we ask God’s forgiveness we not only look to him to wipe away our error and to think kindly toward us, but also to express that forgiveness by continuing to work with us and bless us. We should expect no less of our forgiveness of others. If God simply said “you are forgiven,” but did not act in a forgiving manner to us, we would all feel unforgiven. Jesus reminds us that God’s forgiveness of us will be as active as our forgiveness of others.

So both the main Hebrew and Greek words associated with forgiveness in the Bible require action, not just feeling, in their fundamental meanings. These words underscore an important truth that we must always keep in mind: emotional feelings may be associated with forgiveness, but they are never forgiveness by

themselves. True and full forgiveness requires that we *do* something. Once we understand this, we are able to progress beyond simply deciding to forgive someone a wrong they have done against us to the next vital part of forgiveness. We will look at how we do that in the next chapter, “The Second Step of Forgiveness.”

PART THREE:
EXTENDING THE HAND
(Applying Forgiveness)

9. THE SECOND STEP OF FORGIVENESS

Once we have reached the point of choosing forgiveness and have forgiven someone for a wrong they have done us, we can begin to move forward. Here it can be helpful to remind ourselves of advice the apostle Paul gave to the Corinthian Christians. The church at Corinth apparently included an individual who had caused some problems for the brethren in that city. We don't know exactly what the problems were, but we do know that once the matter was sorted out Paul reminded the other believers of an extra step in the process of forgiveness that we often overlook.

When we forgive someone who has done something against us, we often jump from the act of forgiving in our own mind to trying to “forget” the incident as well as we can (as we will discuss in Chapter 11, “What Forgiving and Forgetting Really Means”). But this jump overlooks a part of the process of forgiving that Paul chose to stress. Notice what he told the Corinthian church regarding the one from whom they had become alienated:

If anyone has caused grief...The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him (2 Corinthians 2:5-8).

Notice that Paul immediately follows the admonition to forgive the individual with one to “comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” This clearly indicates that the individual was already sorry for whatever it was he had done, and Paul seeks to limit or to end the ongoing sorrow. But Paul doubly stresses this admonition to accept the forgiven individual in this

circumstance by telling the Corinthians to: “reaffirm your love for him.”

Reaffirming in Order to Restore

Forgiving someone a serious hurt can be difficult enough, and we are sometimes satisfied to just reach a point of sincere forgiveness in our heart and mind. But Paul shows we must resist the temptation to then continue in a kind of hurt distancing of ourselves from the individual we have forgiven. Humanly this can be both a desire for people to sympathize with us, or it may be a way of making sure the one we have forgiven is aware of how much they have hurt us.

Paul’s words to the Corinthians show that if the person does show real sorrow for what they have done to us, it is then our responsibility to help reestablish our relationship. An accepting relationship is not only one that accepts the other person, it is one in which we no longer appear pained, mournful or otherwise upset. What Jesus said about fasting – that we should not “appear to be fasting” (Matthew 6:16) might also be said about forgiving. We should not “appear to be forgiving” on the surface, yet still be withdrawn and unhappy; we should have an attitude of “anointing our head and washing our face” (Matthew 6:17) – of rejoicing rather than mourning! Our behavior speaks volumes and no matter what we say, if we continue to be withdrawn from the other person, they will surely know that they are not truly accepted.

That is why Paul tells us to “reaffirm” our love for the individual, and we can see that he meant this important principle as a firm admonition for us rather than just something he was offering as “good advice.” Notice what he says in his following words: “For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything” (2 Corinthians 2:9 ESV). Paul clearly equated his readers’ acceptance of this principle of reconciliation after forgiveness with their spiritual obedience.

Being as conscious as he was of his own need for God's forgiveness and acceptance (Acts 9:4, 1 Timothy 1:15-16), Paul probably understood as well as anyone that the second step of forgiveness is just as important as the first. Having himself been fully accepted by Christ after his persecution of the Church, Paul reminds us that forgiveness without acceptance of someone who is repentant is meaningless and hollow. Only as forgiveness is followed by acceptance – whenever that is possible – is forgiveness complete. That acceptance in turn makes the final step of forgetting the problem so much easier.

10. ACTIVE AND PASSIVE FORGIVENESS

Most people tend to think of forgiveness in a somewhat limited way as a “black and white” or “on-off” situation – we either forgive those who wrong us or we do not. But even as Christians, we do not always realize that there are different degrees of forgiveness and that we must be careful not to accept something that feels like forgiveness on our part, but really is not as full as it could be.

In the last chapter we saw how we should not appear to behave as though we are still hurt after we have forgiven someone, but that is not in itself a positive step – it is simply moving from a negative situation to a neutral one. Full forgiveness always strives to go further. The simplest way to understand this is to realize the difference between what we might call active and passive forgiveness.

Passive Forgiveness

When we find it difficult to forgive someone, we sometimes forgive them passively. This means that we may stop ourselves from talking and thinking negatively about the person and certainly from considering any kind of revenge or “getting even” with them. Yet the level of forgiveness stops there – at a kind of “letter of the law” level. We tell ourselves that we have forgiven the person who offended us, but we may settle into a kind of indifference toward the individual. We do not see the person who has wronged us as either a friend or an enemy, but we feel content in not actively being negative about him or her. Unfortunately, if we fall into this kind of passive attitude, we may never cross over into a more positive attitude that applies full forgiveness toward the repentant person.

How do we know if we are guilty of this kind of minimal, “passive” forgiveness? We can often determine this by considering

how we react to the person. Do we tend to keep interaction with them to a minimum, or at least to a lesser degree than before they hurt us in some way? Do we avoid positive or supportive interaction with them? If someone else says something complimentary about the person, do we simply smile and not comment? Any of these reactions can indicate that our relationship with the person who hurt us is a passive compromise and not the result of full forgiveness.

Active Forgiveness

Unlike passive forgiveness, true active forgiveness goes beyond emotional and spiritual indifference to compassion. That is why full forgiveness is so hard to accomplish when we have been deeply hurt. It's not human to want to help a person who hurts us – especially if the person who hurt us clearly did so intentionally. Yet completely forgiving someone means that, regardless of what they have done, we have real concern for them and, where possible, we are willing to treat them in the same way we did before they hurt us.

That is the kind of forgiveness demonstrated by Christ in his words on the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34); by Stephen regarding those who killed him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60); and by countless Christians who have been wronged since that time. Such prayers show us how we can know that our forgiveness is active and not passive: we do not pray for those we only nominally forgive. If we can pray for those we need to forgive, we are already actively forgiving them.

As we have stressed throughout this book, forgiveness does not mean we have to stay in abusive or hurtful relationships or situations. We must certainly forgive endlessly and without restriction (Matthew 18:21-22), but sometimes it is necessary to forgive from a distance in order to stop the wrongful cycle of persecution, hurt or harm (Acts 12:17). But whether we are able to stay in situations or it is wiser to remove ourselves from them, our

forgiveness must always be active to be full. Our forgiveness should always be accompanied with active love: "... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). Anything less is passive forgiveness.

11. WHAT FORGIVING AND FORGETTING REALLY MEANS

We all know the old saying that we should “forgive and forget” and although that exact phrase does not appear in the Bible, it does summarize a goal that is in harmony with the biblical principle of complete forgiveness.

We have looked at many of the scriptures telling us that we should forgive others when they harm us in some way, but what about the “forget” part of the equation?

The Bible does indicate that we should forget as well as forgive, whenever possible, if we are to imitate God. Isaiah shows that “forgetting” what he has forgiven is part of the very nature of God: “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25). In one scripture which appears in both the Old and New Testaments, God’s forgiveness and forgetting are shown together: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34 and Hebrews 8:12).

How do we apply this? It is sometimes hard enough to forgive others, but how are we to possibly forget things they may have done to us – especially if they were truly evil things? We may not be able to selectively “delete” such events from our memory and may never be able to forget memories we have of ways in which others have hurt us – in the same way that we may still have scar tissue from an old physical wound. But we should realize that psychologically and spiritually, continually remembering hurts keeps old wounds open and means we may suffer endlessly from the actions of others. So we should certainly make every effort to forget – and we can ask God’s help with this, just as we might ask his help to forgive. Yet for some who have been hurt badly by others, even despite their best efforts and sincere prayer, forgetting seems impossible. Such people may say “I have forgiven them, but I just can’t forget what they did.”

Remembering Goes beyond Thinking

The answer to these situations where it seems impossible to “forget” – despite our full desire to forgive – is that we must understand what the Bible means by “remember” their sins no more. In biblical Hebrew the word *zakhar* (which we translate “remember”) has a broader meaning than just remembering in the sense of “not forgetting.” *Zakhar* also includes the results of remembering – the actions we do as a result of remembering.

It is in this sense that the Bible tells us God “remembered” Noah after the Flood (Genesis 8:1) or God “remembered” Abraham (Genesis 19:29). In cases like these the Bible is not telling us that God suddenly thought about his servants whom he had forgotten for a while. It is telling us that in “remembering” them God did something about them – causing the flood to recede on the one hand, or rescuing Lot as Abraham had asked on the other.

To take one further example, to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10) does not mean to think about them, but to help them – the biblical idiom “to remember” in most cases is talking about the actions we do as a result of remembering.

So God doesn’t expect or require us to do the psychologically impossible. He just requires that we don’t remember the sins of others against us in the sense of not acting on the memory – not holding the sin against them or punishing them in any way for it – just as he does not punish us when he does not remember our sins, as we saw in Jeremiah 31:34 and Hebrews 8:12.

God requires that we forgive those who sin against us, and he requires that we do not actively “remember” those sins. In the same way he doesn’t want us to act on “remembering” our own sins by painfully reliving them or being haunted by them in discouragement. God knows that it is psychologically and spiritually healthier for us to forget our own sins and the sins of others, once forgiven.

But even when the memories of wrongs linger despite our best efforts, we should not feel guilt for what we may be unable to totally

forget – we should know that God simply requires us not to act negatively on those memories. But in the more general sense of “forgetting” past wrongs – letting them slip from our memory – we can be encouraged by the example of the apostle Paul who had suffered many abuses, but who stressed that, as much as possible, we should forget what is behind us and concentrate on what lies ahead (Philippians 3:13).

12. FOUR TESTS OF FORGIVENESS

In the previous chapters of this book we have looked in detail at what true and meaningful forgiveness is, and how we need to go about it. But how can we know if we have been successful in reaching full forgiveness of those who have wronged us? As Christians we know that this is a vital question not only for the sake of those we may be trying to forgive, but also for our own sakes. In the words of Jesus: “... if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25). For the Christian forgiveness of others is a command, not a choice we are given.

But as we have looked at the “Why’s” and “How’s” of forgiving, we have frequently admitted that the path to forgiveness is often not an easy one. Long after we have been hurt, cheated or abused by others – and long after we have tried to forgive and forget the injury – we may still have vivid memories of the hurtful situation, or ongoing reminders of what happened to us.

Usually, as we saw in the previous chapter, those memories are natural and with God’s help we can learn to live with them till they do fade over time. But sometimes the recurrence of our retained memories of wrongs done against us may be clues that we have not in fact fully forgiven. How are we to know the difference – whether we have fully forgiven or not? Given what Christ said regarding the forgiveness of our own sins, it is imperative not only that we forgive, but also that we know we have done so.

How Can We Know if We Have Forgiven?

How can we know we have truly forgiven someone? The apostle Paul’s writings touch on four principles that we can use in our own lives in making sure we have forgiven someone who has offended us. We can access those principles by simply asking ourselves four questions.

Whenever you think of what others did to you ...

1) *Do you think of how much you need forgiveness yourself?* This may seem backwards at first, but it is a baseline principle. Paul wrote: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Ultimately, we may never really forgive someone unless we come to see that the person’s betrayal of us is no worse than our own betrayal of God in every sin we have committed. We can never presume that someone else’s sins are worse than ours, because only God knows the heart and mind – just as Jesus said that even persecutors who kill the people of God “... will think they do God a service” (John 16:2). Remember this was exactly Paul’s own situation before his conversion. Paul reminds us that: “... God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all” (Romans 11:32).

2) *Do you think about the fact that despite their faults, God loves those who have hurt you just as he loves you?* (Matthew 5:45, Romans 5:8). If you cannot see those who have offended or hurt you as individuals who are loved by God, you may well not have forgiven them. Forgiveness involves reaffirming in our own minds the spiritual potential of the wrongdoer. When we forgive we stop defining the wrongdoer by the wrong he or she did and begin to see the person as an individual not totally unlike ourselves. Only when we can really think of the offender as having sinned against us through weakness, a failure of empathy, or a lack of understanding can we begin to see them with the kind of compassion that is necessary for forgiveness to be real.

3) *Do you think of ways you might be able to help them?* Jesus commanded his followers to “... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Paul specified a way we might do that when he wrote: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14). Of course, in keeping these

commands in mind, we can substitute “hurt,” “injure,” “mistreat,” “abuse,” or anything else someone might do against us. But the end result is the same: we must bless such people. To love and bless someone means taking the opposite approach from resenting them and refusing to get over a wrong that they have done to us. This aspect of forgiveness often involves thinking of ways we might initiate or increase reconciliation with the other person, when this is possible. But in every case we must come to the point where we love the person who harmed us, and we are willing to pray for them and bless them in any way that we can.

4) *Do you think that the offense – whatever it was – is ultimately not as important as you originally thought?* This is a shocking concept for many people and perhaps the hardest stage of forgiveness to reach. But when we truly and deeply forgive, we begin to understand that the ways in which others have injured us are not important in the eternal scheme of things. God has created a world in which many bad things happen – as he knew they would – because the end result of what he plans for us will be worth even the greatest sufferings of this life (Romans 8:18-30). With this level of forgiveness, we come to the point where we can often downplay the other person’s offense against us almost as though it did not happen.

Notice something Paul said in this regard to the Corinthians: “... And what I have forgiven – *if there was anything to forgive* – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake” (2 Corinthians 2:10, emphasis added). Notice the significance of Paul’s words when he says “... if there was anything to forgive...” Paul knew there was indeed something for the Corinthians and for him personally to forgive, and he specifically discussed this sin in his first letter to them. Here he shows us the attitude of downplaying the offense, after forgiving the individual who had sinned, as though it was not ultimately important. If we know and trust the word of God, we know that eventually our hurts in this life will not matter (Revelation 21:4).

Choosing Forgiveness

When the first thought we have about a person who hurt us is not the pain they caused in our life, we are certainly beginning to forgive. But the process must be completed. We must ask God's help to reach the point where we always think more about how we need forgiveness than we do regarding the sins of another against us. We must reach the point where we firmly accept that God loves the offending person just as fully as he loves us – whatever our opinion of their failures. We must come to the point where our thoughts about the person include thinking of ways we might pray for them and bless them, and where we come to realize that in the larger picture of God's plan for all humanity, what others have done to us is ultimately not important compared to his plan being fulfilled in our – and their – lives. When we can do these things, we can know we have forgiven.

APPENDIX:

PUTTING A PRICE ON FORGIVENESS

It might seem strange to talk of putting a price on forgiveness, yet that is exactly what Jesus did in his parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35). In that parable Jesus painted a detailed word picture of a king's servant who owed the ruler ten thousand "talents" (vs. 24).

A talent was not a unit of currency, but a unit of weight. The NIV translates this verse "ten thousand bags of gold," but it is far more likely that silver would have been the precious metal involved in the transaction. A talent was a substantial weight and usually referred to silver – though even ten thousand talents of silver would represent an almost unimaginably large amount. In fact, ten thousand talents of silver would be too large to have normally been a personal debt. The word "servant" used in the parable could refer to a king's high-ranking servant who had control of massive amounts of money as part of his work.

By contrast, the second servant in the parable who owed the king's servant money was doubtless a far less powerful individual who had borrowed "one hundred denarii" (KJV "a hundred pennies," NIV "a hundred silver coins"). We read in the parable that the servant who owed a huge amount that was forgiven was himself unwilling to forgive the individual who owed him a much smaller debt.

To get a true sense of the relative amounts Jesus spoke of, notice that in another parable – that of the men working in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) – Matthew specifically records that an acceptable rate of pay for a laboring man was one denarius per day (vs. 1, etc.). So the debt of the minor servant who owed the king's servant one hundred denarii was the equivalent of a hundred days' pay – some four months of wages calculated on a six day workweek – and certainly not a small amount.

But to get a sense of the debt for which the king's servant was responsible, we must realize that a "talent" of silver was equal to approximately six thousand denarii in value, or about six thousand days' pay for an average laborer. This means that the servant's debt of ten thousand talents was the equivalent of some sixty million days or two hundred thousand years' pay (at three hundred workdays per year).

So the price of the forgiveness given by the king to his servant in Christ's parable was an astronomically high one – far beyond the realm of any possibility of being repaid. It is easy to think that this parable was only teaching that our neighbor's spiritual debts to us are far less than what we "owe" God as a debt of forgiveness. While that is true, the parable also has greater depth.

Clearly, the king in the parable represents God, and the king's servant represents us as debtors to God through our sin, while the minor servant represents those who are "indebted" to us through sins against us. But we should remember that the amount owed by the minor servant – a hundred days' pay – was not a trivial amount. It is important to realize that Christ was not downplaying the "debts" or sins of others against us – rather his parable admits that those who sin against us may indeed sin to a substantial degree, leaving us significantly hurt.

But the parable also puts that hurt in perspective by showing that the astronomically high debt we have incurred through our own cumulative sins far outweighs whatever may have been done against us – no matter how bad it was. As it is given in Christ's example, the story shows a ratio of one million to one – the sins of others against us represent one millionth of our own sins against God. That is why Jesus ended his parable by saying that the unmerciful servant was severely punished by the king, and by declaring: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (vs. 35).

Ultimately, however, Jesus' parable is not about numbers or balance sheets. Its primary message, of course, is that we ought to forgive as our King has forgiven us. And we should not forget the

context in which the parable was given. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus told this story in response to Peter asking how many times we should forgive those who sin against us: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king...” (Matthew 18:21-23).

According to Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question, the forgiveness given to us is extravagant both in amount and in repetition, and finally it is extravagant in terms of the attitude with which the forgiveness is given. True forgiveness, Jesus tells us, is so extravagant that it cannot be repaid; it is so extensive that it does not run out in our lifetime; and it is so truly meant from the heart that no price can really be placed on it.

AFTERWORD

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