

Forgiveness & Reconciliation

For local church use.

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Reprint: 2014
(First print: 1997)

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First Print: 1997

eBook Edition: 2014

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CONTENTS

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Part I:	
The Difference between Forgiveness & Reconciliation	6
Part II:	
Signs and Symptoms of Unforgiveness	8
Part III:	
Understand & Experience Forgiveness	11
Part IV:	
Forgiveness - A Division of Labour	15
References	19

PREFACE

Since the production of the first edition of “Forgiveness and Reconciliation” in 1997, the writer has had the joy of witnessing individuals and couples receive the fruits of their forgiveness for those who have wronged them. As they obey Christ in taking the step of forgiveness, children have been reconciled with their parents; husbands and wives, with their respective spouse; pastors with peoples; others, with colleagues, relatives and friends.

There have also been times of sorrow when she has to witness persistent unwillingness in some who are not ready to forgive others as Christ has forgiven them. Many continue to live under the burden of their brokenness. We pray that one day they will know the depth of God’s grace (undeserved and un-earnable mercy) upon them and will be willing to forgive their “oppressors” for His and their own sakes. The joy and freedom of being forgiven for resentment can only be experienced by those who have obeyed Him in forgiving others and self.

May God our Father bless you as you share His grace of forgiveness with others.

INTRODUCTION

A subject such as “forgiveness” seems hardly worthy of mention in some Christian circles. To some believers, once we have dealt with the basic question of salvation by Christ’s death on the cross for us, to be forgiven by others for our sins against us appear to be minor issues.

Yet, in the life, teaching, and mission of our Saviour, Jesus, as well as in the Old Testament messages, forgiveness is the heart of the whole gospel. Without God’s forgiveness of our sins through His Son’s death and resurrection, we cannot be reconciled with God our Father. Without our forgiving one another as fellow humans, we cannot be friends with each other too.

Again and again, I watch conscientious brothers and sisters in Christ cry as they recount the hurts others have inflicted on them through the years. There seems no solution to the feeling of being trapped in the vicious cycles of their emotional wounds and wrong habits. Generally, three groups of people in such a condition have emerged:

One consists of those who unashamedly assert that they cannot or will not forgive their “oppressors”. The wrongdoers must pay the price for such a “crime” against them. They want to continue to collect debts from those who have hurt them.

Another comprises those who sincerely want to forgive their “oppressors” but do not know how to go about it. This is because they do not really understand what it means when God forgives them their sins. Therefore, they do not know what it means to really forgive their “enemies”.

The third is made up of Christians who believe that they have forgiven their “oppressors. But they cannot comprehend why the hurts keep returning despite their good intentions to be good to those who have hurt them.

Therefore, this is written with the hope of persuading the first group to forgive, to teach the second group the meaning of forgiveness and to reassure the third group that God approves of their willingness to forgive, and will eventually replace their negative feelings with positive feelings for those who have hurt them before.

May you sense the presence of the ultimate Forgiver, Jesus Christ Himself, as you read on. May you experience His freedom in you as you practice forgiveness to those who have wronged you, in obedience to Him. May you also gradually entrust your past, present and future to Him “ for He careth for you”.

PART I: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORGIVENESS & RECONCILIATION

- Forgiveness is a one-way street of grace extended by the person wronged to the wrongdoer.
- Reconciliation is the two-way street of friendship between two persons or parties who were once at enmity.

Jesus Christ forgave those who murdered Him before they even knew that they had sinned against Him.

Reconciliation, however, is effected only when a sinner acknowledges his sins, receives God's forgiveness and thus becomes His friend.

In the same manner, God expects us to take the initiative to forgive our wrongdoers even if they do not know that they have wronged us.

Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation e.g. an abused person may not be able to meet her abuser who has not repented.

Nevertheless, always seek for reconciliation if the person is alive. But wait for God's timing. Do not put false guilt on the forgiver by asking him to guarantee reconciliation.

We need to be patient with others as God is so patient with us.

Look at what the Son of God did for us on the cross and consider the time lapse before we sinners, one by one down the generations, received Him as our Saviour and Friend.

Please make brief notes as you read. This will help you put into practice what the Lord may be saying to you.

PART II: SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF UNFORGIVENESS

Read Hebrews 12:1,2

Since hurts in our lives act as weights and unforgiveness is a sin, they cause damage to our whole persons one way or another. Therefore, we are encouraged to get rid of them, to let go of them...so that we can increasingly live the abundant life that Christ has given to us. Below are some means of diagnosing unforgiveness.

Hurts are like the germs that cause the boils of painful feelings in our lives.

Forgiveness is like the prick of a doctor's blade to release the pus of painful feelings caused by the infection in the boils.

Therefore, as linings of the boils keep the pus in our bodies, and make them painful to touch, so unforgiveness will harbour the hurts in our lives, even if they are buried too deeply for us to consciously feel the pain. Just as an internal abscess may at times be detected only by other signs e.g. a fever, so unforgiven wrongs may show up now and then in ways beyond our expectations.

1. We cannot look the person in the eye when we meet him. In fact, we will try all we can to avoid seeing him. If we have to talk, our voices and postures may betray us...we may feel tense, harsh, haughty, artificial. We build a fence around us so that he cannot come nearer than we decide to let him.
2. We cannot rejoice with the person when he is blessed. We find it difficult or unwilling to pray for his good.
3. Instead, we secretly wish that God will teach him a lesson e.g. by sending someone else to do something bad to him so that he will feel as hurt or more hurt than we did when he wronged us, even if he did it unintentionally. In other words, we want to collect debts from him instead of cancelling his debts by accepting the fact that, on the cross, Jesus has died for his sins as well.
4. Instead of being angry with the person and thrashing out the wrong with him, we have controlled our anger so long that it is submerged beyond recognition until, one day, we suddenly explode in rage over some small disagreement with someone else whose looks, behaviour or personality resembles that of the wrongdoer.

This symptom is more difficult to diagnose if one has not been alerted to the possibility before.

Usually, this shows up with someone who is close to us e.g. a spouse, a child, a boss, an employee, or even a pastor who is commonly a symbol of authority over us. In Asian culture, we are discouraged from talking things over with those in authority over us, especially when they have wronged us. Thus, this is one of the commonest sources of hidden and pent-up anger, leading to the sin of resentment [and, often, a personality disorder characterised by moodiness]. Subconsciously, that resentment in us is temporarily released, and we may find out, to our horror that:

“It can’t be me doing something like that in public!...but...but...It Is Me!”

If this type of reaction occurs once, we may be able to ignore it. But if it keeps repeating itself, it is advisable to seek counsel, pray and ask the Lord to reveal the cause(s) of such a behavior so that we are able to deal with the specific problem in us. Keeping short accounts is wise in the Lord.

PART III: UNDERSTAND & EXPERIENCE FORGIVENESS

Jesus Christ does not give us, His followers, any choice about forgiving those who have hurt us because:

Forgiveness is the Heart of Healing and Holiness. It is the Heart of the Whole Gospel.

Our unwillingness to forgive others destroys the bridge over which the Father's forgiveness comes to us. Christians usually generalise forgiveness by words such as, "Of course, as a Christian, I have already forgiven them; whatever is in the past is past." This manner of thinking and speech concerning forgiveness is unreal and therefore does not work. We still carry its load.

Read Luke 6:37, Matthew 6:9-15 and Matthew 18:21-35.

Forgiveness is NOT:

- Overlooking the wrong, like covering it with a blanket e.g. “Nothing bad happened.”
- Excusing or whitewashing the wrong e.g. “She did not mean it.” but . . . ; e.g. Joseph saw his brothers’ wrong as wrong ... no more and no less
- Explaining away the wrong and excusing the wrongdoer because of his weakness. The need to psychoanalyse wrongdoers is particularly strong in close relationships e.g. parents/ siblings/ teachers/ pastors/ church leaders; e.g. “He touched me because he loved me” when molested by a brother.
- Taking the blame e.g. a woman who, as a child, was sexually assaulted by her father and then was blamed by her mother for seducing him! Many Christians think that they are being good by taking the blame wrongly. It is a neurotic attitude caused by false guilt.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us assess what the wrong done to us is all about and really feel the pain caused by that wrong. Otherwise, we may be praying for healing for something that does not exist, and miss the wrong that needs to be forgiven.

Forgiveness is:

- Facing the specific wrong (which is realism). Advice: Write down the 'hit' and 'hurt' list. You may tear it up later, after you have forgiven. Start now if names come to your mind.
- Facing your hurts and pains (which are results of wrong done to you)
Q. "How did you feel about it at the time?" e.g. rejected, humiliated and shameful, unfairly compared, neglected/deprived, unjustly treated, put down, betrayed, abandoned.
- Facing your anger and resentment (which are your responses to the wrongs and wounds). Ephesians 4:25-31... "Be angry...but don't sin." Don't deny your resentment by resorting to Christian clichés like, "Of, course, as a Christian, I have forgiven him." If you bury the hatred, you bury the possibility of healing.
- Facing the Cross. Ephesians 4:32 "...and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Christ has taken the guilt, punishment, and shame of our sins for us. In a similar way, when we forgive, we take the guilt, punishment and shame for the other person's sins on ourselves and then hand them over to Jesus, the ultimate Forgiver. Suffering love is the only way to

forgive. *Let us "Do unto others what God has done to you."* "Since God has written off the big debt I owe Him, how can I collect the small debt from others?"

In forgiving others, we are merely practising justice in the eyes of God since Christ has paid the debt of the wrongdoers' sins against us. Further, when we forgive our debtors in Jesus Name, we gradually recreate new images of the forgiven persons in our minds. In God's generous grace, they are given another chance to become the persons God intended them to be. Testimonies abound that the oppressors often receive His salvation and/or become more transformed into Christ's likeness.

PART IV: FORGIVENESS - A DIVISION OF LABOUR

1. It is a crisis...the human part...the will

Q. "Are you WILLING to forgive the person?"

If not, Q. "Are you willing to be made willing by God?"
Read Mark 9:14-29

2. It is a process...God's part...the feeling. The process of the healing takes time. The exercise of the will is a matter of a spilt second, like the launching of a rocket. The healing of feelings creeps in like a slow cargo train.

Remember:

God does NOT put guilt on us for time needed to change our feelings. Therefore, we need the 5 R's once we have been forgiven, in order to resist those "feelings" attacks:

- **Recall:** that negative feelings are from Satan (Rev. 12:10)
- **Reiterate:** that you have forgiven...that is why forgiving before a few witnesses (in a private meeting) is helpful. They affirm you and hold you accountable to your decision. Forgiveness works in the context of His community (James 5:16).
- **Refuse:** the guilt of feeling that you have not forgiven
- **Remember:** that God is faithful in changing you
- **Rejoice:** because God is pleased that you have forgiven the other person and is present at every step of the healing process.

Forgiveness may include:

1. Abandoning or putting off the old and accepting the new...worldview, relationships, lifestyles e.g. if someone who wronged you is very rich, you may want to be richer in order to get even with him. This may lead to money neurosis.
2. Assuming responsibility for that which you are responsible currently...can't blame others for your situations anymore. Listen to the new voice of the Holy Spirit, not the tape recorded in the past...e.g. "It's your fault..." You need to change tapes.
3. Receiving God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9) We need to forgive ourselves as God has forgiven us the sin of resentment. If not, we mean that our standard is higher than God's e.g. a girl raped by a boyfriend at one occasion may be unable to forgive herself for her part in that relationship even after she has repented of her part that led to the abuse.
4. Using symbolic visual aids e.g. flush the 'hit' and 'hurt' list down the toilet. Use sanctified imagination but don't go overboard.
5. Making restitution e.g. returning something or reconciling with someone. Await God's time in this. You may have to live with a no-win situation with a lot of tension e.g. continuing to live with your in-laws who have wronged you.

6. Developing a 50/20 Vision...Discover God's purpose in all things (Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28).
7. Facing resentment against God. This is particularly common in those brought up in Christian families, and even more so in some pastors' families because God has often been misrepresented by those who are supposed to know and love Him. It is such an exhilaration and joy to be forgiven of this sin by our merciful God.

As you forgive others their sins against you, may the God of mercy and forgiveness minister His healing grace to you. Shalom!

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