

Forgiveness

Part II

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In Part I of this teaching we examined Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, unforgiveness as sin, the consequences of unforgiveness, and the fact that forgiveness requires an act of our will. Let's continue now with forgiving even when it's not easy.

Forgiving When It's Not Easy

I think there are generally two types of offenses, personal and impersonal. An example of an impersonal offense is when someone cuts you off in traffic or is carelessly rude to you. The trespasser doesn't even know your name. The offense was not in any way personal. Then there are the personal offenses. These can be either intentional or unintentional but they are aimed at us personally. By and large, I think it's easier to forgive impersonal offenses. It is also usually easier to forgive a personal offense if the offender comes to you first and asks your forgiveness. In the parable of the prodigal son, even though the father had already forgiven his son, we can visualize any parent forgiving a truly repentant child in that situation, can't we?

But what about the times when the other person still harbors unforgiveness in his heart toward you? Or how about the situation when the other person doesn't even know they hurt you. Or, what about the times when the other person believes that all the repentance should be on your side? It's a lot harder to forgive in these situations, isn't it? But we still have no choice. We cannot wait around until the other fellow repents first. That is looking for vindication. We must forgive, no matter the attitude of the other person. Remember, forgiveness is for *us*. It sets us free! The Holy Spirit will work on that other person, not to worry!

How Do We Forgive Someone?

1. I believe the best way to forgive someone is to speak words of forgiveness aloud.
2. I also think it's best when we have a witness who hears us speak the words of forgiveness. That person is not only our witness but is also one who can stand with us in prayer. Remember the principle that when two agree on something, it is done in the spirit realm? (Mat 18:19,20) That is what takes place when we speak the words aloud and we have a mature believer who witnesses our act of forgiveness and joins us in agreement about it. It is done. We never need go back and forgive that person again. We may need to remind ourselves again and again that we have already forgiven the trespasser, but the deed is done. There is a big difference between standing on an act already done in the spirit realm and redoing the same act over and over again.
3. It's a good idea to write down, either in our Bible or a journal, or somewhere, the person's name you forgave and the date you forgave him or her. That way you have a record of it. If your own mind, or the enemy, tries to continue to remind you of the wrong, or the old negative thought patterns come into your head, you can go to the writing and affirm that you are no longer in bondage to the old unforgiveness in your heart.

Does the Act of Forgiveness Require Us To Do Anything?

There are times when, as part of the forgiveness process, the Holy Spirit will tell us to do something. That may include going to the person and asking for forgiveness. We must be Spirit led in this process. It may be that the other person doesn't even know they have offended you. Your going to them to ask forgiveness may be just a subtle way of showing them that they have hurt you. In other words, your motive must be right if you do go to someone. The Holy Spirit will always guide you if you just ask Him.

There also will be times when there is no way that you can do anything beyond the act of forgiving. The trespasser may be dead or moved away. If this is the case, then you have done all you can do and you should rest in that.

Once We Forgive, Are We to Forget the Wrong?

I have heard teaching to the effect that, if we have truly forgiven someone, then we should not even remember the wrong done to us. I don't agree with this teaching. In fact, I think this teaching confuses the principle we find in Jeremiah with our own human minds. Jeremiah 31:34 states, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more." (NIV) This verse tells us that when we repent of our sin, God no longer remembers it. Hallelujah! That's wonderful news. But this is forgiveness from God to man.

When the sin is between men, the memory of the sin, even though forgiven, still lingers. William Charles Morro states, after pointing out that God no longer remembers our sin,

"Ideally this same result is attained in human forgiveness, but actually the memory of the sin remains with both parties as a barrier between them, and even when there is a complete restoration of amity the former state of alienation cannot entirely be removed from memory."**Error! Reference source not found.**

In other words, we are not required to try to forget what happened. But we are required to let go of the anger, the hurt, the use of the incident as a weapon against the other person, and so on. I do believe that, if after forgiving that person, we bring up the incident again and again, then true forgiveness has not yet occurred. If it has been total, if we do mention the incident at some future time, there is no bitterness or meanness in our voice or heart about it.

Even When We Have Forgiven, Consequences May Still Flow

Once we have truly forgiven someone, then we are free to move in grace toward that person. In other words, God's grace in us replaces the unforgiveness and bitterness in us. That grace can freely flow through us to the trespasser. However, even after we forgive, there are often consequences which affect those involved. The difference is that the consequences lose their penal

quality. Rather, they take on the nature of discipline as we see laid out in Hebrews.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:7-11 NIV)

These verses tell us that God disciplines us and, among other things, that discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. It may be that in a relationship, especially within the local church body, even though forgiveness has been completely given, there needs to be a period of discipline for the trespasser.

Part of the process of discipline often includes setting boundaries of behavior, both for ourselves and the one who has trespassed against us. Now remember, we have already forgiven that person so forgiveness is not the issue. The issue becomes the setting of rules of behavior, those things which you will accept and those things you will not accept. For example, if a husband is continually verbally or physically abusive, past acts must be forgiven, but the wife is certainly free in the Lord to tell her husband that she will not accept any more abuse. Now, I realize that there are cases where it may be impossible to set and keep boundaries, such as when there is no economic freedom to leave an abusive situation. But, by and large, as a principle, discipline and behavior boundaries are acceptable to the Lord. Indeed, at times I believe they are what the Holy Spirit is trying to get us to do.

Setting Boundaries of Behavior Within the Church

Let's look at two passages which assist us in the principle of setting boundaries of behavior within the local church.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he 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 he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." (Mat 18:15-17 NIV)

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? (1 Co 5:9-12 NIV)

When we first read these verses, they seem harsh and vindictive, don't they? But, remember, forgiveness of past acts is not the issue. I believe these passages presuppose that the leadership of the church and/or those harmed by the hurtful behavior have already forgiven the trespasser. So these passages also presuppose that the leadership is moving in grace, not to penalize the trespasser. Yet these Scriptures tell us to set boundaries of behavior within our churches. If someone is unrepentant of gross and hurtful sin, then ultimately that person must be sent from the fellowship. Why? One of the responsibilities of the leadership of a church is to protect the sheep. If that means ultimately breaking fellowship with a believer, then it must be done. Note that I said it is the responsibility of the leadership of the church, not the individual sheep. Presumably the leaders are spiritually mature enough not to misuse this authority.

Once We Have Forgiven, Are We Required to Always Reestablish the Old Relationship?

Let's now examine the question, "Once we have forgiven someone who has hurt us, are we always required by the Lord to go back to the old relationship?" I believe the answer to this question is, "No." Certainly we are required to forgive and to keep our heart right toward that other person. And, in a family or church setting, I believe we are required to establish, at a minimum, a superficial, pleasant relationship. This may be no more than saying, "Hello, how are you?" when we encounter them at church.

But there are times when the breach is so great that the Lord does not require us to try to go back to the old ways in the relationship. For example, two friends in a church may be so close that they share all the intimate details of their lives, past and present. If one of the friends tells others, or goes to the pastor and tells the pastor without informing the friend first, then that is a true betrayal of the friendship. I believe in those instances the person betrayed is not required to go back to the old intimate friendship. In fact, I don't see how that could be possible because the trust that was once there is gone. We must extend grace and forgiveness to that old friend, but we are free to avoid getting so close again.

Forgiveness Is Usually A Process

When someone has hurt us deeply, it's not only hard to forgive but, to be honest, I think it's hard to keep our thoughts and emotions from going back to the old, unforgiving thought patterns. Remember God's instruction to Cain when he was so angry with Able. He told him that sin was crouching at his door and that he, Cain, must master it.

Often, mastering this sin of the root of bitterness and unforgiveness (which we have been carrying around for so long), takes a lot of work and it takes time. But be encouraged, we know we can do it. How do we know? Because Scripture promises us that if we take hold of our will, emotions, and thoughts, we can master them. Look at the following verses.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* (2 Cor 10:3-5 NIV, emphasis added.)

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:22-24 NIV)

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:2 NIV, emphasis added.)

We have already referred to Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (NIV) In all these verses Paul is really commanding us to stand firm. He tells us that we are to use our will to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. He is even telling us that we are responsible for not letting ourselves be burdened again by that yoke of slavery.

My wife, Carolyn, often tells this story. She was at a women's retreat years ago and the speaker was talking about taking our thoughts captive. She said we all have negative thought patterns which become sin if we harbor them. The speaker said it's like we can mentally get on a sled and tumble down into the bottom of a dark pit in our minds in a matter of a minute or two. To be honest, I'm sure this has happened to all of us. But the woman telling the story said, "Ladies, we have to get off the sled at the top!" What words of wisdom. We, as an act of our will, must get off that sled before it takes us down into the pit of unforgiveness and bitterness. I promise you that if you do this on an ongoing basis, eventually you will have the renewed mind of Christ and the old thought patterns will fall away. Hallelujah!

God Will Always Do His Part

I am absolutely convinced that once we recognize these thought patterns in our minds, if we ask the Holy Spirit to help us take them captive to Christ, He will. It's one of those prayers that you know God wants to answer. God provides the supernatural grace, ability, and power to complete the process of forgiveness. Look at the following Scriptures concerning God helping us.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phi 1:3-6 NIV)

". . . for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phi 2:13 NIV)

"For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. . . ." (2 Chr 16:9 NIV)

He said: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your

positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'" (2 Chr 20:15-17 NIV)

Once we do our part by taking up our positions and standing firm, then the deliverance will be the Lord's work on our behalf. God is telling us to trust in Him and His mighty power to accomplish the work.

The Enemy's Part in Unforgiveness

Let's examine the part the enemy of our soul plays in this whole area of forgiveness. Remember, any demonic force against us, no matter how strong, only has the power of the lie, the power of persuasion, and the power to ride our flesh. Why does the enemy work so hard to defeat us in this area of unforgiveness? Because once we're saved, the enemy can't get our souls and he knows that. But if he can't get our soul, then he tries to neutralize our message, the message of Jesus Christ. That way, if he can tie us up in bitterness and unforgiveness, he may have lost our soul, but he has a chance of keeping all the souls we could reach with the good news of the gospel, if only we weren't so wrapped up in this sin. Never forget John 10:10.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (Jn 10:10 NIV)

Paul tells us that some of the acts of the sinful nature are hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, dissensions, factions and envy. (See Galatians 5:19-21.) But Paul also tells us,

"The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom 14:17 NIV)

So while the enemy tries to ensnare us with his lies to rob us of our rightful place in the kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit brings us righteousness, peace, and joy in the kingdom. Which would you rather have? Is it worth it to hang on to a hurt, to hang on to that bitterness in your soul, that unforgiveness, and thereby give up God's righteousness, peace, and joy? No way!

So how do we fight the enemy? At least part of the answer, in addition to taking every thought captive by our own will, and so on, is to put on the armor of God in Ephesians 6:10-18.

Notice that these verses tell us that, after we have put on the whole armor of God, the real battle is to pray! "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." (Eph 6:18 NIV) In other words, we are to pray all the time while continuing to be alert to the enemy's snares.

Make no mistake about it, those harmful, sinful thought patterns in our minds are strongholds of the enemy! They are the demonic world's open door into our minds. But we have weapons with diving power to demolish every stronghold of the enemy! (2 Cor 10:3-5) So the sooner we get rid of them, the sooner we move into that righteousness, peace and joy which awaits us as we take our rightful place in the kingdom of God.

Blaming God for Personal Tragedy

I want to address one last aspect of this teaching: the problem of blaming God for some hurt. I have observed over the years that people view God in one of two ways when they experience adversity. One person would never think of blaming adverse circumstances on God. Another person, in the same circumstances, will include God as at least one agent causing the hurt. This latter way of thinking results in blaming God, either for the act or for not preventing the act or circumstance that caused our hurt.

In the believer's life, it is certainly true that God has allowed the circumstance because God controls or permits the major events surrounding our lives. But the Christian who blames God is in doctrinal error. In fact, that person is in sin. Why? Because to blame God implies that God has done something wrong. God is never wrong.

Paul spoke to this perplexing reality when he wrote,

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. . . . But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Rom 9:14-16,20,21 NIV)

If we, especially as believers, harbor any kind of blame towards God for past hurts, it is imperative that we get our thinking straight. We must begin by asking God's forgiveness for attributing wrong doings to Him. Then we need to move on into right thinking, taking every thought captive.

God's Plans and Purposes

The right way of thinking through this issue is encompassed in Daniel 3. In that chapter King Nebuchadnezzar threatens to throw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fiery furnace if they refused to bow down to his idols. Their reply encompassed an understanding of, and a submission to, both God's power and His purposes.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown

into the blazing furnace, *the God we serve is able to save us from it*, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. *But even if he does not*, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Dan 3:16-18, emphasis added.)

These men understood that God had the power to save them. But they also affirmed that they understood that He has purposes that at times override our desires or what we want to happen. So, as believers, regardless of our personal desires, we must affirm God's love and plans for us no matter the circumstances.

An Act of Faith

This often requires that we move in faith: faith in God's love, God's mercy, God's word, and God's plans and purposes for each of us.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa 55:8,9)

Looking forward, allow me to close with this wonderful Scripture. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jer 29:11)

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Volume II, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI., page 1134.

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