

Overcoming Offenses ¹

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I know a man who became angry with his father over something his father did when he was young. Tragically, he was so offended he never reconciled with his father, not even when the father was dying. All those years of a potentially warm, loving father/son relationship were lost all because this son would not allow himself to overcome his father's offense.

Webster's dictionary defines an "offense" as "causing displeasure or resentment in another, intentionally or unintentionally, by wounding his feelings or by a breach of one's sense of propriety: to create resentment, anger, or displeasure."²

Why are we so sure we will be offended? Because Jesus told us so. "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" (Mat 18:7 NKJV)

Jesus' statement tells us two things. The first, as we have already said, is that people will offend us from time to time. The second thing Jesus says is that He will eventually confront and hold accountable the offender. Remember, He said, "woe" to the one who offends. It's pretty scary when Jesus Himself promises that there will be woeful consequences to the offender.

This is important because it reinforces the biblical principle that we are not to try to retaliate against someone who offends us. Holding the offender accountable is the Lord's business, not ours. Paul reminds us of this when he wrote, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else." (1 Th 5:15 NIV)

But if we can't strike back in any way, where does that leave us? It leaves us hurt and trying to deal with the offense in a biblical manner, that's where! Yet depending on our previous relationship with the person offending and what he or she has done, this can be a very difficult thing to do.

We Must Forgive

Our part in these circumstances is to forgive the person who has offended us. As Christians we're all pretty familiar with this principle of forgiveness so it doesn't come as any great surprise. Many of us even know the passage in Matthew when Peter asked Jesus how many times we are required to forgive. He answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Mat 18:22 NIV)

Sources and Kinds of Offenses

¹ In 2003 we wrote a two part article entitled, *Forgiveness*, which should be considered a companion teaching to this article and can be found and downloaded from our website at www.hundredfold.org.

² Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language*, Second College Edition (1980), page 987.

In order to work our way through this complex and difficult set of principles surrounding the complete process of forgiveness, I want to try to categorize the sources of offenses as well as the degree of offenses that occur.

Sources of Offenses

I divide the different people groups who can offend us into strangers, acquaintances, friends, and those we deeply love. Why are these categories important? Because we react differently when a stranger does something that offends us as when someone we love offends us. For example, if we are walking along the road and some stranger in a car cuts us off, it makes us angry, it offends us but we quickly get over it. It was a momentary offense by someone we don't even know. But if a member of our own family insults us or our children, and then that person goes around telling the rest of our family how terrible we are, we are much more offended and it is much harder to get over the offense.

Kinds of Offenses

Then there are the different kinds of offenses. They can be momentary like the person cutting us off in traffic. They offend us but they really don't affect our life much. However, there are those offenses and hurts that are so deep that they are life changing events. And these offenses can come from any of the four groups of people I mentioned earlier. For example, a complete stranger who is driving while drunk can hit your child and kill her. That is a terrible life changing offense. Or your spouse can commit adultery and then decide to leave you and your children for another. This offense comes from a loved one and is certainly life changing in its consequences.

Dealing with Deep Life Changing Hurts

I am going to address the rest of this teaching to the kind of hurts that wound us in our inner most being. They usually come from a person to whom we have committed great personal and emotional trust. This person can be our child, our spouse, our parent, a long time friend, a long time employer, a pastor, and so on. I am talking about those offenses that so change our life that we struggle for a long time to overcome them. These offenses, as horrible as they are, must be overcome. If we let them remain inside us, they will rule our lives and rob us of so much of what the Lord wants for our lives.

The Process of Forgiveness

When we have been deeply hurt, one of our first human reactions is to start to build a wall around ourselves. But the problem with this wall is that we are on one side all alone and the rest of the world is on the other side. So we end up with only superficial relationships and living a very lonely life. Worse yet, we are at risk of becoming bitter and

distrustful of others, even our Christian brothers and sisters. And, of course, we lose the joy of the Lord.

But Jesus has a better plan for us. Indeed, if we implement His plan, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we will once again become free to love and to experience that joy our Lord has promised us. Let me divide this plan into different phases.

Phase One

I believe phase one is that period of time when we are so hurt, so devastated, that we can't even think straight about the offense or the one who caused it. In our humanness we are simply unable to think rationally of forgiving. In other words, our humanness or our soul overcomes and dominates our spirit. (Remember our souls are made up of our will, our emotions, and our intellect. Our spirits are that part of us that can connect with and respond to the spirit realm.) This phase may last a few days, a few weeks, or even some months. (Note that I'm not saying years!) God understands this and I believe that He, in His love and mercy, grants us this time period to stabilize.

Phase Two

Phase two begins when the Lord starts to remind us of His word. His Holy Spirit starts to speak to us through Scriptures about forgiveness. We become aware that God is calling us to forgive the person who caused us so much pain. Now I know that, as Christians, we have likely been aware of these Scriptures all along but somehow our human flesh just hasn't been ready to process them properly. Well, in phase two, the Lord begins to say enough of that. He begins to call us to that forgiveness required by every believer if we are going to move on in our Christian walk.

Phase Three

Phase three can best be described as when the Holy Spirit simply says to us, "Now! Now is the time to forgive." No more holding onto the hurt. It is at this point that God wants us to begin to cooperate with Him to get free of the unforgiveness and bitterness we have harbored inside.

We Have Two Choices

First Choice - Refuse to Forgive

Here in phase three we have two choices. We can yield to the Holy Spirit's call and forgive or we can dig our heels in and simply refuse to forgive. If we want to hold onto that unforgiveness and hurt, we say something like, "No, Lord, I won't forgive! You don't understand how much he (or she) hurt me. You don't understand what he has done to my family. I will never forgive him for that."

Well, we all know that our Lord gave us a free will so, sadly, we are free to refuse to forgive. But look at the consequences of that refusal. First, forget the joy of the Lord.

Why? Because our refusal to obey Scripture is now sin. Forget spiritual growth. We will be stuck at the point we are now until we allow the Holy Spirit to cleanse us of this bitterness and anger.

If we refuse to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, we will not experience that Romans 14:17 righteousness, peace, and joy. And Galatians 5:1 makes it clear that we must stand firm in the freedom of Christ or we will be overcome again by a yoke of slavery. In this instance, if we refuse to forgive, our yoke of slavery is that awful unforgiveness and bitterness.

Second Choice - We Choose to Forgive

Our second choice is to yield to the Holy Spirit and choose to forgive the offender. Notice I said we *choose* to forgive. This choice to forgive is an act of the will. This act of the will is usually the first step in our getting free of unforgiveness. Our emotions, etc. follow our will.

I recently heard a statement from someone that contained a great truth. He said, "I refuse to let anyone live inside my head rent free!" What he was saying is that he wasn't going to let anyone tie up his mind, emotions, etc. to rob him of the good things in life. I don't think he was a believer but he sure spoke a biblical principle, he just didn't know it!

So now we have told the Lord that we will forgive. At this point we are making a decision to obey Scripture regardless of our feelings. We do it in obedience to what the word of God tells us to do.

So what is next after we have decided to follow Scripture and forgive? We must speak the words of forgiveness. I think it's better to speak them aloud. And it's better if we have a fellow believer present who is our witness in the spirit realm. We can say something like, "Lord, you know I am still hurt but your word tells me that I am to forgive those who have offended me. So, in obedience to your word and your will, I forgive (insert name) for all the wrong and hurt he has caused me."

I believe that these words, this act of forgiveness, need happen only once. In the spirit realm, the forgiveness has taken place. We don't need to keep going back and saying that we forgive so-and-so over and over again. But we wake up the next morning and the old feelings of hurt are back. The old thoughts are back. What are we to do? Well, as our old feelings of hurt resurface and our minds go back to the offense, we need only remind ourselves and the Lord that we have already forgiven that person. When I am in this position, I usually say something like, "Lord, here I am again. I still feel the hurt. But in obedience to your word, I forgave brother so-and-so last week (or last month, or mention the certain date on which you spoke forgiveness). So, Lord, thank you that it is already done. Please continue to bring my mind and feelings into conformity with my willful act of forgiveness. And thank you, Lord, for that righteousness, peace, and joy you promised me as I obey your word. Amen"

You may need to pray this prayer over and over again. Indeed, you may find yourself saying it 20, even 30 times in one day, depending on the level of offense and how long you have lived with it. But it's worth it. It's part of God's plan to get us free of unforgiveness. And we are fulfilling Jesus' command to be like the man in Matthew who was not only a hearer of the word but also was one who put it into practice. (Mt 7:24-27)

Finally, by forgiving the one who has offended us, we are freeing the Holy Spirit to show us our part in creating the offense. If we contributed to it in any way, then we are required to repent of our part and ask the Lord's forgiveness for our own sin. This really sets us free!

Phase Four

Now we are ready to enter into what I call phase four. But you ask, "What's this phase four? I've forgiven the person who offended me. My feelings are no longer negative toward him. I harbor no grudge against him. What more do I have to do?"

That's a good question. And the answer is in Luke 6:27,28.

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."(NIV)

We read these verses and say, "Oh, no! It was hard enough to forgive him. I thought I was through with the forgiveness process. Now I see I must also love, do good to, bless, and pray for the person who wronged me!"

Once again, we realize that there is nothing in our humanness that wants to do these things. Mostly we just want to forget the whole thing and get on with life. But remember, we are to be obedient to Scripture, not our own feelings or our own thoughts. So let's examine what Jesus meant when He spoke these words.

Love Your Enemies

I think that by telling us to love our enemies *Jesus wants us to open our heart to the person so that the love of God can flow through us to them.* For example, I know of a young woman who was on the youth staff of a large church several years ago. One of the mothers had a very willful daughter who went into full rebellion against her parents and the church. The mother blamed this youth worker for, "not spending enough time with my daughter." She complained to the pastor about this young woman. The pastor was supportive of his youth worker but it was still hard for her to be around the mother. Eventually the mother and her kids left the church. About a year later, the young woman ran into the mother at a store. She planted a smile on her face and went up to the mother and greeted her warmly. The mother responded in kind and they had about a two or three minute friendly but superficial conversation. The young woman told me about the incident and how happy she felt afterward. I explained to her that she had truly opened up herself and allowed Jesus' love

and warmth to flow through her to the mother. I don't think the young woman was suddenly filled with love for this woman. Yet it was very healing for them both. Notice that the situation really had not changed. The relationship was not reestablished but something had broken and there was a new freedom in both the young woman and, I'm sure, in the mother, too.

So how do we begin to get this love flowing? I think we begin by telling the Lord that we are willing to love that person with Christ's love. Again, we are using our will to choose to allow Christ's love to flow through us. We also need to tell the Lord that this love can take any form the Lord chooses. Remember, this is the love of the Lord we are talking about, it's not our human love or the human emotion of love. We have a wonderful example of this forgiving love in the person of Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa. He was imprisoned for much of his adult life by those in control of his government yet he chose to forgive and embrace his former captors. To me, that must have been the Lord's supernatural love working through him to those who had hurt him so deeply. What an example he is to the rest of us!

Finally, as we shall see, when we pray for, bless, and do good to one who has offended us, that flow of God's love through us just seems to come supernaturally.

Do Good to Those Who Hate You

In the original Greek text the emphasis of this phrase is more on what you say about the person than on what you actually do for them. The Greek meaning is, "to speak well of them," (or to not say anything negative about them.)

I believe the Lord honors us as we make the effort to speak well of people or refrain from saying bad things about them even when we know they have wronged us. I remember several years ago getting involved in a situation where a senior pastor fired an associate pastor without any warning or valid reason. Carolyn and I counseled he and his wife to say nothing negative about the senior pastor even though we thought the firing was unjust. They took our advice though it was very hard for them to not defend themselves.

As a result of their obedience to these principles, the Lord quickly led them into another ministry, one for which the young man was better suited, and today the Lord has raised them up higher than they ever could have imagined when he was an associate pastor in that local church! There is a second and more obvious meaning to this concept of doing good to someone who has offended us. By this I mean we may actually be called to do something good for the offender. For example, the Holy Spirit may guide us to give his family food, money, to help him get a job, or whatever. As we all know, acts of kindness toward someone can be a great way of healing any offense of the past. And Romans 2:4 tells us that kindness does lead to repentance. If we are in doubt about doing something like this, or if it seems too hard for us to do, seeking counsel from our pastor or an elder can be very helpful.

Bless Those Who Curse You

I believe this verse's primary meaning is that we are to ask the Lord to bless the person who has offended us. When I find myself in this situation, I usually don't try to tell the Lord how to bless the one who has offended me. He knows them better than I ever could. He knows what's in their heart, what they've gone through, and what their needs are, both spiritual and temporal. So when I ask the Lord to bless them I can be assured that the Lord will do it perfectly.

One reason I leave the type of blessing to the Lord is that I think we humans automatically think of all the "good" things God can bring into their lives, things like lots of money, good health, a loving spouse, and so on. If we are a person of great mercy, as we pray blessings on that person, it may well be our heart's desire to see those kinds of blessings come to the offender. But what if the person who offended us is living a life of sin? The prophets among us will come along and say that we cannot pray those kinds of blessings on a sinful lifestyle. For example, what if someone is a believer yet consumed with the love of money? In that case praying financial blessings on the offender doesn't seem to be the mind of the Lord to me. Perhaps the greatest blessing the Lord can bestow on that person is to cause him to *lose* all his money! I have known of many cases where the Lord had to strip someone of everything he owned to get him to finally yield lordship of his life to Jesus.

Or perhaps someone is addicted to alcohol. The Lord's blessings probably won't include an abundance of money to buy more alcohol. In fact, the Lord's blessing could be having that person caught in a criminal act and put in jail for a season thereby giving him a chance to repent. So I think we can rest in simply asking the Lord to bless the person.

Pray For Those Who Mistreat You

Finally, Jesus tells us we are to pray for those who have offended us or mistreated us. Thus we must intercede in prayer for this person. In doing so we want to pray into the mind of the Lord. We can ask God to forgive them for their trespasses against Him, against us, and/or against others. We can pray the Lord's righteousness, love, mercy, provision, and

so on for them. Or, if we really don't know how to pray, as we have already seen, we can simply ask God to bless them and leave the kind of blessing to God. I have heard it said, "You can't stay mad at someone you are praying for!" I think this is so true. Praying for someone who has hurt us really sets us free!

Conclusion

Jesus, in His own horrible human pain and humiliation, prayed that our Father in heaven would forgive those who crucified Him. (Luk 23:34) Can we do any less? So once again our ever faithful and loving Jesus has shown us the way through this difficult process of complete forgiveness. Once we have emerged on the other side of this journey, we can truly rejoice in our victory and new found freedom. Praise His name!

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