

RAY PRITCHARD

The
HEALING
POWER
OF
FORGIVENESS

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Verses marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Verses marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Verses marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Verses marked MSG are taken from The Message. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Italicized text in Scripture quotations indicates author's emphasis.

THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Copyright © 2005 by Ray Pritchard

*To George and Joan Theis
with love and affection*

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Steve Miller, Bob Hawkins, Carolyn McCready, and Terry Glaspey of Harvest House Publishers. Thanks for sharing the vision for this book. I am grateful to the elders, staff, and congregation of Calvary Memorial Church for their continued encouragement. I especially thank my wife, Marlene, who never doubted this book would finally be written. Most of what I know that really matters I learned from her and from our three sons—Josh, Mark, and Nick.

Contents

A Prayer for You	7
1. Healing the Hurt We Never Deserved.....	11
2. Father, Forgive Them.....	27
3. Breaking the Cycle of Bitterness	49
4. A Lesson from the Lord's Prayer.....	67
5. Seventy Times Seven	85
6. Judge Not!.....	101
7. Overcoming a Judgmental Spirit.....	115
8. How to Behave in a Cave.....	129
9. Hot Coals	141
10. Questions and Answers	153
11. The Final Step.....	169
Notes	189

A Prayer for You



I'd like to begin this book by praying for you before you read it. That may seem unusual to you, but I hope you won't mind if I say a prayer on your behalf. This book is about forgiveness. The only reason most people will read it is because they have some forgiving to do, and they don't know how to do it, or whether they should do it, or where they should begin.

Staying angry is easy. Forgiving is difficult. Alexander Pope, the English poet and essayist, famously remarked, "To err is human, to forgive divine." The first part is definitely true. We humans get straight As in messing things up. We're all on the honor roll of stupid statements, cutting remarks, unkind comments, and broken promises. And all of us have been on the receiving end of cruel mistreatment. We've hurt and been hurt. To use biblical terminology, we've sinned and been sinned against.

Sinning comes naturally. Forgiving is another story. After writing this book, I am more convinced than ever that the key to forgiveness lies in the middle syllable. Forgiveness is something we give to those who don't deserve it. It is grace pure and simple. If people deserved forgiveness, they wouldn't need it. Therein lies the fundamental problem that this book will not completely solve. Why in the world should we forgive people who do horrible things to us? What possible motive could we have to forgive people who hurt us deliberately and repeatedly? For instance, what about the woman who told of being abused by a family member as a child? The abuse continued from her childhood years into her late teens. The person who did it does not admit it. Why should she forgive him? And what exactly does forgiveness look like in that situation?

Some people would argue that forgiveness is impossible or inappropriate in such a situation. I reply that forgiveness—properly understood—is both possible and necessary. But that doesn't make it easy. Having written this book and wrestled long and hard with a long series of real-life situations, I conclude that forgiveness is not so much an event as it is an ongoing condition of the heart. It's a journey, not a destination. No one makes that journey easily or quickly.

And no one makes that journey without God. That may be the most important truth you take away from this book. True forgiveness is impossible without God. Since the heart of forgiveness is a gift we give to others who don't deserve it, no one will have the grace or strength or courage to give that gift unless God gives them the ability. Here we confront a familiar paradox of the Bible. We are commanded to do that which only God can do for us. If God does not do it for us, we will never do it on our own. Yet we are commanded to forgive as Christ forgave us (Ephesians 4:32).

Alexander Pope was right. Forgiveness is divine. That means you'll never give it to others unless God gives it to you first.

Forgiveness isn't about you.

And it's not about the person who hurt you so deeply.

Forgiveness is about God.

We forgive because God has forgiven us.

We forgive because God has commanded us to forgive.

We forgive because God has given us the strength to forgive.

We forgive because God will take care of judging the other person.

We forgive because God means more to us than staying angry.

We forgive because God matters more than the pain we feel.

We forgive because God can be trusted to do right.

We forgive because God is God and we are not.

So we need God's help desperately if we are going to forgive. Without God, this book will not help you at all. With God, this book could change your life. It's that radical and that simple.

I make no promises about this book except that it is biblical and it comes out of real life. I write as a pastor, not a professor or psychologist. Almost every day I talk with someone who struggles with hurts from the past and wonders what to do about them. In pointing people back to the Bible, I am pointing them back to God, the only real source of deliverance. With that in mind, here is my prayer for you:

Father, I thank You for every person who picks up this book and reads it. I know my words have no power in themselves to change anyone. You alone know the thoughts and intents of every heart. You alone can change the heart. You alone can lift the clouds of darkness and despair. But You

can do it! I pray You will open the eyes of the heart so that Your truth will be received with gladness. I especially ask on behalf of those who have been cruelly mistreated by others and who may doubt that lasting forgiveness is possible. Set them free, O Lord! Give them hearts to believe in You. Show them Your power to deliver from anger, bitterness, revenge, and a critical spirit.

Lord, I pray that those who read my words will be driven back to Your Word. Help them to search out the Holy Scriptures so they will be convinced of what You have said. May they be protected from the attacks of the evil one, who wants to keep them in bondage through an unforgiving spirit. May doubt, distortion, deception, and discouragement be replaced with freedom, deliverance, certainty, and deep inner peace. May Your Spirit grant courage to those who right now feel they can never forgive. Show them a better way. May You pour out so much grace that they will be overwhelmed by Your grace and overcome by Your goodness. And now I pray for myself and for all who read this book...that we together might become great forgivers. We can't do this without You, Lord; but with You, all things are possible. Be glorified in us by the grace we extend to those who have hurt us. This is a great miracle we ask. Do it, O Lord. This is our prayer. In Jesus' name, amen.

One

Healing the Hurt We Never Deserved



*When I learned to forgive,
it was like a million pounds were lifted from me.*

REBA McENTIRE

*R*AY, HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT PREACHING ON forgiveness?”

The question came from George Theis. My answer was immediate. No, I hadn't given any thought to preaching on forgiveness. Over the years, I had touched on our need to forgive others in various sermons, but never as the theme of a sermon series. “You need to read a book by R. T. Kendall called *Total Forgiveness*, and then you need to preach on forgiveness to your congregation.” George Theis is the former executive director of Word of Life, an international youth ministry. Our conversation took place while I was preaching at Word of Life Florida for a week. People often recommend books to me, and most of the time I don't ever get around to reading them. But George Theis is not the sort of man who would recommend a book lightly. He told me that he had been recommending the book to others, and had been preaching its message himself with great impact in various churches.

So I said I would read it, which I eventually did. I found the book powerful and convicting. In the first chapter Pastor Kendall tells of a time when someone very near and dear to him hurt him greatly. He doesn't say who it was or exactly what he did—only that the pain was deep and the hurt profound because he had looked to this person as a surrogate father figure. The anger that he felt overwhelmed him. At length he talked it over with Josif Tson of Romania. After he poured out all the sordid details of what his so-called friend had done to him, he paused, waiting for Pastor Tson to say, “R. T., you are right to feel so angry. What happened to you was awful.” But he didn't. After listening to all the details, Josif Tson said simply, “You must totally forgive him.” Pastor Kendall was dumbfounded. So he started to tell the story all over again, this time adding more details. Josif Tson interrupted with words that would change R. T. Kendall's life: “You must totally forgive him. Release him, and you will be set free.”¹

I read through the book and immediately decided to preach on forgiveness to my congregation. The response overwhelmed me. In the 26 years I have been a pastor, no sermon series I have ever preached anywhere at any time has generated the sort of response I received to my sermons on forgiveness. Later I preached those messages at Bible conferences around the country, and the response was the same. God's people are so hungry to hear about forgiveness that it is as if they have never heard about it before.

Many Christians live in great pain because they have never discovered the liberating power of forgiveness. Here are a few examples:

A man called me on the phone and said, “Pastor Ray, could I come see you?” Then he told me his story. “My wife left me for another man, and when she got tired of him, she decided to come back to me. Everything seemed fine for a few weeks, then she left me again for the same man and stayed with him for a while. Then she came back a second time and I thought everything was fine. Then she left me again and she's been with him for a while. She just called me up and said, ‘I want to come back.’ Pastor, I'm not

sure I want her back. I can trust someone who wrongs me once or even twice, but I'm not sure I can trust that person the third time."

A woman sat in my office and said, "I think I'm going to kill myself." "Why?" "I don't have any reason to live anymore," she replied. All her friends had deserted her. She couldn't get a job. She didn't have any money. Everything that she valued in the world was gone. She told me about her children—how they had deserted her, how they couldn't care less what happened to her. "When I told my son I was thinking about killing myself, he said, 'Mom, why don't you just go ahead and do it and get out of our hair.'"

A man in my church looked at me and said, "Pastor, you wouldn't believe what I have been through." Then he told me a story I found hard to believe. It involved a brutal divorce after many years of marriage, a financial collapse, the loss of his job, the end of his career, and lies told about him behind his back that have ruined his reputation. He told of people he had once trusted who had stabbed him in the back. He looked at me and said, "Pastor, do you want to know the worst of it? The people who have done this to me are Christians."

Sometimes I wish I could invite people to come into my office for a week just to sit in the corner and listen to the individuals who share their hearts with me. And listen to all the phone calls and read the letters I get and the e-mails that arrive day and night. Each week brings an unending series of heartbreaking problems. Divorce. Broken homes. Broken marriages. Broken promises. Children estranged from their parents. Parents estranged from their children. Longtime friends who don't speak to each other anymore. People who have lost their jobs because someone cheated them. People who have lost their fortunes because someone did them wrong. Families that don't even speak at Christmastime because they hate each other so much.

For all these heartaches, there are many answers and there is only one answer. There are many solutions you can carry out and one solution you must carry out: *Release them, and you will be set*

free. The very moment we hear or read those words, however, the mind begins to argue:

“But you don’t know what he did to me.”

“They lied about me over and over again.”

“She intended to destroy my career—and she did.”

“You can’t imagine the hell I’ve been through.”

“If you knew what this has done to my family, you would be angry, too.”

“They deserve to suffer like they’ve made me suffer.”

“I’m going to make them pay.”

“My daughter was raped. How do you forgive that?”

“I was sexually abused by a priest. How do you forgive that?”

“I will never forgive those people. Never!”

C. S. Lewis made this telling remark: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.” He’s right, and in order for us to understand the message of forgiveness, we need to answer a few preliminary questions.

Questions About Forgiveness

1. *Why do we need forgiveness?*


If you know a bit about church history, you know that before Martin Luther became the father of the Protestant Reformation, he was a Catholic priest. As part of his training, he spent years studying Greek, Hebrew, Latin, the church fathers, and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. By all accounts, he was brilliant, devout, and very devoted to his studies. But his soul was deeply troubled. Burdened with the haunting sense that his sins were not forgiven, he felt that God’s judgment hung over him like a heavy weight he could not lift. Being a priest only made matters worse. No matter what he did, he never felt the assurance

that his sins were forgiven. In desperation, he went to Rome, hoping to find answers, but he came away even deeper in despair.

Several years later, while studying the book of Romans, he encountered the phrase, “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17 KJV). Slowly his eyes were opened and he saw clearly that God forgives us not because of anything we do, but solely on the basis of what Jesus did for us when He died on the cross and rose from the dead. He called that truth “the gate to heaven.” So it is not surprising that Luther said that the phrase “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” was the most important article in the Apostles’ Creed. He wrote, “If that is not true, what does it matter whether God is almighty or Jesus Christ was born and died and rose again? It is because these things have a bearing upon my forgiveness that they are important to me.”

Psalm 130 points us in the right direction. This psalm has a long history in the Christian tradition. It’s called *De Profundis*—a Latin phrase that means “out of the depths,” taken from verse 1, which says, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.” The whole psalm teaches us that we will never fix ourselves because we lack the inner resources to solve our own problems. That flies in the face of Oprah and Dr. Phil and a host of other self-help gurus who say that the answer is within us. The Bible says the opposite is true: *The problem is within us. The answer lies outside of us.* As long as you think you can solve your own problems, you can only get worse. When you finally say, “Lord, please help me. I can’t do it on my own,” you’re a good candidate for salvation. Verse 3 of Psalm 130 goes on to say, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand?” Novelist Franz Kafka wrote in his diary that the problem with modern people is that we feel like sinners, yet independent of guilt. We sense that *something* is amiss in our lives, *something* is wrong. We live in a society that tells us to get rid of guilt by getting rid of the rules that make us feel guilty. So we do our best to ignore pesky things like the Ten Commandments. All those “Thou shalt nots” make us nervous. And why not? Guilt comes when you break the rules, and you know it. So the best way

to get rid of guilt is to get rid of the rules—or so we think. We do away with the rules, but the rules won't go away because they weren't written by man in the first place. *It's as if they are written in indelible ink.* Even when you try to erase them, the image keeps coming back. So we cheat and steal and lust and sleep around. We lose our temper and then make excuses. We whisper about the sins of others and wonder why we can't sleep at night. We blame everyone else for our problems, but we won't take a good look at the person in the mirror.



*We need forgiveness and
cannot live without it.*

So why don't we confess our sins and find the forgiveness we need? We fear punishment. *We're afraid that if we own up to our own stupidity, the Lord will punish us.* So we lie about our lies and we cover up our cover-ups. We pretend that we didn't do what we know we did. No wonder we're so messed up. We think guilt is a bad thing so we avoid guilt at all costs. Our children learn to make excuses by watching us make excuses. We blame everyone except ourselves. But Psalm 130 liberates us from that self-destructive cycle. Verse 3 says that God doesn't keep a record of our sins. In the original Hebrew text, the verse literally says God doesn't keep an eye on our sins. That is, He's not looking for a reason to send us to hell. Many people picture God as a cranky old man with a long white beard who hopes to catch us messing up so He can send us to hell. But that's not the God of the Bible. He is willing to forgive those who repent of their sin and cry out for mercy.

We need forgiveness because we are sinners who try to change the rules so we can dodge the guilt question. And because the

rules can't be changed, we end up extremely messed up on the inside. Here is the bottom line: *We need forgiveness and cannot live without it.* Without forgiveness, we are hollow men and women, empty and conflicted on the inside. The one piece of good news is that God doesn't keep an eye on our sins. If He did, we'd all be in hell already.²

2. What hope do we have of forgiveness?

By that I mean this: What are the chances that we can be forgiven? Is it just a distant dream, some kind of long shot? If the Vegas bookies laid odds on our forgiveness, what would the number be? Fifty thousand to 1? One hundred thousand to 1? One million to 1? Look in the mirror and consider your own soul. If you do, the outlook will not be hopeful. The first part of Psalm 130:4 brings us some very good news: "But with you there is forgiveness." Or to say it another way, God makes a habit of forgiving sin. He does not delight in punishing our sin. He looks for chances to forgive us because forgiveness is in His nature.

That's a significant insight because it affects how you see God.

He is eager to forgive.

He is ready to forgive.

He wants to forgive you.

Exodus 34:6-7 calls Him "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

If you are in the pit, you need to know that sin is real. You can't break the rules and get away with it forever. But whenever you are ready to come clean, the Lord is right there waiting for you. It's never easy to confess your sins, but listen to the invitation given in Isaiah 55:7: "Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." Okay, so maybe you don't like that word "wicked" or the word "evil." Maybe that sounds

harsh to you. But that's God's description of the whole human race. That's what you and I are apart from God's grace. We are wicked and evil. Get used to it, because that's the plain truth about all of us. Don't get hung up on the negative words and miss the invitation. Turn to the Lord, and you will find mercy and pardon.

Picture two doors, each with two words emblazoned across the top:

Door #1	Door #2
Evil	Mercy
Wicked	Pardon

Now which door do you like better? Answer: We all like mercy and pardon better. God says you have to go through the door marked Evil and Wicked to get to the door marked Mercy and Pardon. You have to go through the first door to get to the second. But someone says, "I'm going to skip Door #1 and go directly to Door #2." It doesn't work that way. You can't skip Door #1. And you can't climb through a window, either. The only way to reach Door #2 is to go through Door #1 first.

When you go through Door #2, you discover that "he will freely pardon." Freely means without cost. No charge. You want mercy? You've got it. You want a pardon for all your sins? You've got it. You can go in evil and wicked, and you can come out with mercy and a full pardon from the Lord. That's the best deal in the world.

3. What happens when we are forgiven?

The last part of Psalm 130:4 has the answer: "Therefore you are feared." Another way to say this is, "Therefore we worship you." Once we are forgiven, that vague feeling of unease is removed. Our slate is wiped clean. The prison cell door swings open and we walk out. We're free at last. Sometimes that's the hardest part to accept. Recently I received a letter from a prisoner who had read one of my books. Because of the heinous crime he had committed, he is afraid to go to church because he worries that people will find out what he did and thus shun him. That kind of shame

works in all of us to keep us in bondage. The devil whispers to us, “You’re no good. If people knew what you were really like, they’d have nothing to do with you. How can you call yourself a Christian and treat your wife that way? Your children that way? Your husband that way? You hypocrite.”

The only way to deal with Satan’s accusations is go back to the character of God: “With You there is forgiveness.” Have you ever worried about the day when you stand before the Lord? Some Christians fear that God is going to push a button and project all their sins—even the sins of the mind—on some huge screen for the entire universe to see. We fear that all our ugly words and deeds, all our secret sins that no one else knows about, and every dark thought filled with anger, lust, pride, hatred, rage, and greed will be displayed for the millions to see. How could we endure such a moment? And how could God ever welcome us into His kingdom after putting our depravity on public display?

There are four different words for *forgiveness* in the Bible—three Hebrew words and one Greek. The first Hebrew word means “to cover”—like using a rug to cover the dirt on your floor. The second word means “to lift and take away”—which happens when you remove a stain from a carpet. The third word means “to pardon” or “to wipe the record clean.” The fourth word means “to let go” or “to send away,” as when you release a prisoner from jail.³ When you put these words together, you get a graphic picture of forgiveness. God covers our sin, He removes the inner stain, He wipes our personal record clean, and then He releases us from our guilt so that we are set free.

If You, O Lord, kept a record of sins—if You gazed on our sins—who could stand? No one. We’d all be doomed and damned. That’s the whole point of Psalm 130. We cry from the depths of shame and guilt, and God says, “Good news. With Me there is forgiveness.” The Bible uses a number of images to describe how God deals with our sins:

- God blots out our sins as a thick cloud (Isaiah 44:22).

- God forgets our sins and remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34).
- God puts our sins behind His back (Isaiah 38:17).
- God buries our sins in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).
- God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

When God forgives, He forgets our sins, clears the record, and erases the tape so that when He pushes the button, nothing shows up on the big screen in heaven. Our sins are forgiven, forgotten, removed, buried, and blotted out. They can never condemn us again. Let that thought grip your soul, and you will never be the same. But how could it be this way? How could God forgive us? Why doesn't He look at our sins? Here's the answer: A long time ago, God fixed His gaze on the cross of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are honest enough to admit that we are wicked and evil, a stream of mercy flows out from the cross of Christ and our sins are covered by His blood. We discover, in one shining moment, that with God there is forgiveness.

4. *Why should we forgive others?*

Consider these words from the lips of our Lord:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said it very plainly:

If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15).

The apostle Paul put forgiveness into a slightly different framework in Ephesians 4:32:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

He made a similar statement in Colossians 3:13:

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

When Peter (a man who knew from experience the value of forgiveness) wrote his first epistle, he summed up forgiveness this way: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

There is another way to express that truth, and it’s found in the “Love Chapter”—1 Corinthians 13. While describing the greatest virtue, Paul declared that “love...keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5). That little phrase deserves a closer examination. Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, says it this way: “Love... doesn’t keep score of the sins of others.” Love doesn’t keep score because love has a bad memory. It finds a way to forget the sins of others.

Finally, the greatest, most profound statement on this topic in the entire Bible—the finest, purest, highest example of forgiveness—came from Jesus Himself. When He hung on the cross dying, condemned to death by evil men who plotted to murder Him and produced lying witnesses to convict Him, as He surveyed the howling mob assembled to cheer His suffering, Jesus the Son of God, the One who knew no sin, the only truly innocent man who ever walked this sin-cursed planet, uttered some words that still ring across the centuries: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Those 12 tortured words sweep away all our shabby excuses. They reveal the barrenness of our heart; they rip the cover off our unrighteous anger and show it for what it is. Many of us say, “If only the people who hurt me would show some remorse, some sorrow, then maybe I would forgive them.” But that rarely happens, and we use other

people's inaction as an excuse to continue in our bitterness, our anger, and our desire to get even.

Consider Jesus on the cross. No one seemed very sorry. Even as He said those words, the crowd laughed, mocked, cheered, jeered. Those who passed by hurled insults at Him. They taunted Him. "If you are the king of Israel, come down from the cross and save Yourself." Let us be clear on this point: When He died, the people who put Him to death were quite pleased with themselves. Pilate washed his hands of the whole sordid affair. The Jewish religious leaders hated Him with a fierce, irrational hatred. They were happy to see Him suffer and die. Evil was in the air that day. The forces of darkness had done their work and the Son of God would soon be in the tomb. No one said, "I was wrong. This is a mistake. We were such fools." And yet He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

That is precisely what we must say if we are going to follow Jesus. We must say it to people who hurt us deliberately and repeatedly. We must say it to those who intentionally attack us. We must say it to those who casually and thoughtlessly wound us. We must say it to those closest to us, to our husband or wife, to our children, to our parents, to our friends, to our neighbors, to our brothers and sisters, to our fellow Christians.

5. *What does it mean to forgive someone?*

At this point it is necessary to clear up some misconceptions about forgiveness. In some ways it is easier to say what forgiveness is not than what it is. These misconceptions matter because sometimes when we say we can't or won't forgive, we are actually talking about something other than biblical forgiveness. Let me list a few things forgiveness does *not* mean:

It does not mean approving of what someone else did.

It does not mean pretending that evil never took place.

It does not mean making excuses for other people's bad behavior.

It does not mean justifying evil so that sin somehow becomes less sinful.

It does not mean overlooking abuse.

It does not mean denying that others tried to hurt you repeatedly.

It does not mean letting others walk all over you.

It does not mean refusing to press charges when a crime has been committed.

It does not mean forgetting the wrong that was done.

It does not mean pretending you were never hurt.

It does not mean you must restore the relationship to what it was before.

It does not mean you must become friends again.

It does not mean there must be a total reconciliation as if nothing ever happened.

It does not mean that you must tell the person you have forgiven them.

It does not mean that all negative consequences of sin are canceled.

A Matter of the Heart


I received an e-mail from someone who lives in a distant state. Recently he has come to grips with the fact that a neighbor abused him when he was a child. That trauma plus the fact that he was raised in a family where his parents could not express love to their children played havoc in his adult life. This is part of what he wrote:

But just this year, through prayer and a Christian counselor, I am beginning to “let go” of the past. It is still very difficult to overcome the anger and maybe even the hatred I felt toward my father. It took me going to the

cemetery to visit my father's and mother's graves and having about a two-hour conversation with them that began to let the anger go that had kept me in a state of sadness most of my adult life.

He went on to say that for many years he focused on helping others because he knew how to “fix” people and “fix” problems. “Until the facts of my childhood awoke and slapped me in the face and I couldn't ‘fix’ it. If it were to be ‘fixed,’ then God would have to do it.”

And the first step was learning to forgive.



*Forgiveness allows you to
let go and move on.*

That story is very helpful because it demonstrates that forgiveness is essentially a matter of the heart. This is a hugely important point because most of us think forgiveness is primarily about what we do or say. But it is quite possible to mouth kind words of forgiveness while harboring anger and bitterness within. Forgiveness begins in the heart and eventually works its way outward. There is a profound sense in which all forgiveness, even forgiving someone who hurt you deeply, is between you and God. Other people may or may not understand it, or recognize it, or own up to their need to receive it.

Forgiveness, in its essence, is a decision made on the inside to refuse to live in the past. It's a conscious choice to release others from their sins against you so that you can be set free. It doesn't deny the pain or change the past, but it does break the cycle of bitterness that binds you to the wounds of yesterday. Forgiveness allows you to let go and move on. And this story illustrates that

you can forgive even when other people make no confession. You can forgive without a restoration of the relationship. You can forgive when the other person has done nothing to earn forgiveness because forgiveness is like salvation—it is a gift that is freely given, it cannot be earned. You can forgive and the other person may never even know about it. You can forgive without saying, “I forgive you” because forgiveness is a matter of the heart.

That brings me back to the statement by C. S. Lewis: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.” Then it becomes difficult.

Three Levels of Forgiveness

The late Lewis Smedes said there are three levels of forgiveness. *First, we rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us.* That simply means that without diminishing their sin, we admit they are sinners just like we are sinners. *Second, we surrender our right to get even.* This is hard because it is natural to want someone else to pay for all the pain they caused us. But in the end, we must leave all judgment in the hands of our just and merciful God. *Third, we revise our feelings toward the other person.* This means giving up our hatred and letting go of our bitterness. Ultimately, it means taking Jesus seriously when He said, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44 NKJV). You’ll know you have reached the final level of forgiveness when you are able to ask God to bless those who have hurt you so deeply. This is indeed a high standard—so high, that without God it is impossible. That’s why Smedes calls forgiveness a miracle. He’s right. Forgiveness is nothing less than a miracle of God.⁴

And it is the miracle we desperately need.

Two Final Thoughts

This is only the first chapter. There is much more to be said and much more we can learn together about the miracle of

forgiveness. For the moment let's wrap things up with two final thoughts:

1. *Forgiveness is not an optional part of the Christian life.* It is a necessary part of what it means to be a Christian. If we are going to follow Jesus, we must forgive. We have no other choice. And we must forgive as God has forgiven us—freely, completely, graciously, totally. The miracle we have received is a miracle we pass on to others.
2. *We will forgive to the extent we appreciate how much we have been forgiven.* The best incentive to forgiveness is to remember how much God has already forgiven you. Think of how many sins He has covered for you. Think of the punishment you deserved that did not happen to you because of God's grace. Jesus said, "He who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). Your willingness to forgive is in direct proportion to your remembrance of how much you have been forgiven.

In order to experience the healing power of forgiveness, we need two things: soft hearts and courage. Some of us have been deeply hurt by what others have done to us. People have attacked us, maligned us, mistreated us, abused us, sexually assaulted us, ridiculed us, belittled us, publicly humiliated us, physically beaten us, and they have done it deliberately, repeatedly, viciously. In response we chose to become hard on the inside to protect ourselves from any further pain. But that hardness has made it difficult for us to hear the gentle call of the Holy Spirit. We need soft hearts to hear His voice. And then we need courage. The timid will never forgive. Only the brave will forgive. Only the strong will have the courage to let go of the past.

Two

Father, Forgive Them



Sins cannot be undone, only forgiven.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

*L*ast words matter.

When loved ones die, we want to know if they had any final words. It's true that a dying person often doesn't know that their last words are really their last words, so the last statement they make may seem trivial. But there are times when a person's last words linger in our minds long after they die. That's especially true if their last words summarize who they were and what they lived for.

Just before he died, P. T. Barnum asked, "How were the circus receipts in Madison Square Gardens?"

A few seconds before Pat Garrett gunned down Billy the Kid in a dark room at Fort Sumner, he heard Billy the Kid ask, "Who is it?" The outlaw never knew who killed him.

After being shot by a soldier who fired into a burning barn where he was hiding, John Wilkes Booth cried out, "Tell mother, tell mother, I died for my country... useless...useless..."

Elizabeth I, Queen of England (1533-1603), declared, “All my possessions for a moment of time.”

Author and poet Edgar Allan Poe said, “Lord, help my poor soul.”

Union general John Sedgwick died at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. While looking over a parapet, his men urged him to take cover because there were Confederate sharpshooters in the area. His final words were, “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this dist—.”

When actor and comedian Charlie Chaplin lay dying, a priest said to him, “May the Lord have mercy on your soul.” Chaplin quickly replied, “Why not? After all, it belongs to Him.”

When his housekeeper asked if he had any last words, Karl Marx brusquely replied, “Go on, get out! Last words are for fools who haven’t said enough!”

But he was wrong about that. Sometimes last words tell us a great deal about the person who is dying. That is certainly true of Jesus Christ. As He hung on the cross, knowing that death was near, He spoke to the crowd that had gathered to watch Him die. Amidst that howling, restless, angry mob, He had very few friends. Some had come out of morbid curiosity. Others had come to cheer the death of this Galilean rabble-rouser. And some came because they hated Him and wanted to be there to make sure He suffered before He died.

Killing Time

It’s Friday morning, a few minutes before 9:00 AM. Killing time. Outside the Damascus Gate is a road, and on the other side of the road is a flat area near the spot where the prophet Jeremiah is buried. Up above is a rocky outcropping that, if studied at a certain angle, looks like a skull. You can see eroded into the limestone two sockets for the eyes, a place for the nose, and maybe a place for the mouth. Skull Hill, they called it. Golgotha. It was the place where the Romans did their killing. And Friday was the day and nine o’clock was the time. The soldiers were ready to do their

dirty work. They were Roman soldiers. This place called Judea was foreign territory to them. They weren't from Israel. They weren't followers of the law. They were simply soldiers who had a job to do. And it happened to be that they were on the death squad. They were in charge of crucifixions.

On this particular Friday morning, their workload was a little light. Only three this week. They usually didn't know the names, and it didn't matter. They were just the executioners. From their point of view, it didn't pay to stop and think about what they did. That was for someone up the ladder. Guilt or innocence wasn't their business. They'd go crazy if they started worrying about things like that. They just had a job to do. And to do their job, they needed two things. They needed toughness and they needed good technique. If they did a sloppy job, they were certain to hear about it later.

Mob Psychology

So it's 9:00 AM and up the road comes a group of people. The soldiers know that two of the men being crucified are just average, ordinary criminals—the kind you find in any big city anywhere in the world. They are no big deal. But the third man—the one from up north, the preacher from Nazareth—His case is different. They don't really know who He is. They know He's important because they sense the buzz in the crowd. There are more people than usual. By the way, this was one of the fringe benefits (if you want to call it that) for being on the crucifixion squad. You never worked alone. There's something morbidly fascinating about watching someone else die. The people of Jerusalem, at least some of them, loved to come out and watch the crucifixions. Well, maybe they didn't love it, but they couldn't stay away. Some strange magnetic force drew them back to Skull Hill again and again. And today there were more people than usual—a bigger crowd, noisier, rowdier, milling to and fro, waiting for the action to begin.

As the parade of people draws closer, the soldiers see it's led by a brawny foreigner carrying a cross. *That can't be the one we're going to crucify*, they thought. Sure enough, it turns out he was a man by the name of Simon—Simon of Cyrene. The crowd swirls around him and behind him is a stooped figure, a man not quite six feet tall. Now walking, now crawling, each step an agony to behold. Half a man, half a creature from the worst nightmare imaginable. He had been beaten within an inch of His life. His back was in shreds. His front was covered with the markings of the whip. His face was disfigured and swollen where they had ripped out the beard by the roots. And on His head was a crown of thorns six inches long and piercing His skin. A shell of a man. A man already more dead than alive. The soldiers weren't unhappy, because sometimes people got a little feisty when you tried to nail them to the cross. No, they didn't mind getting a person who was almost dead because it meant their work would be easier.

They set the cross on the ground and placed the body of Jesus on the cross. He moved, He moaned, He didn't do much. One hand over here, one hand over there. Wrapping rope around this arm and around that arm. Rope around the legs, probably bent and partially resting on a small platform. They drove the spikes on the forearm side of the wrist so that when the cross was propped up and the weight of the victim pulled downward, the spike wouldn't rip all the way through the hand. A spike in both wrists and then a spike through the legs. With the ropes in place, they begin to pull the cross up. Jesus' blood spurts from the raw wounds. Steady now, boys, steady. Don't drop it. It was a terrible thing to drop a cross before they got it in the hole. When the cross stood vertical, they then dropped it into the hole and it fell with a thud. And there was Jesus, naked and exposed before the world, beaten, bruised, and bloody. The soldiers stood back, satisfied. A job well done.

"Get the dice," someone said. "Let's roll dice for His clothes."

What Did Jesus Mean?

What happened that day at Skull Hill was unforgivable. That's the definition of what unforgivable is. When you crucify the Son of God, you have done that which is beyond forgiveness. It is truly unforgivable. And yet Jesus said, in His first words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). No one standing near the cross expected Him to say that. A dying man might scream or curse or utter threats, but you never heard a word of forgiveness when a man was being crucified. Yet that is precisely what Jesus offered to the men who were murdering Him. He offered them forgiveness. He prayed that they might be forgiven. He asked His righteous and holy Father in heaven, the Lord of all the universe, to forgive His murderers while they were murdering Him.

Before we consider what these words say to us today, perhaps it will help to consider what these words do *not* mean:

1. *They don't mean that God grants forgiveness apart from repentance.* That would contradict the rest of the Bible. God does not forgive our sins without true repentance (Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31). The word *repentance* literally means "to change the mind." It has to do with the way you think about something. You've been thinking one way, but now you think otherwise. That's repentance—a changing of the mind. Without that "change of mind" about your sin, there can be no forgiveness.
2. *They don't mean that the people who put Jesus to death were not guilty of a horrible crime.* Remember, you don't forgive innocent people. You only forgive guilty people. By the way, this sufficiently answers those who talk about "forgiving" God. You can't "forgive" God because He has done nothing wrong. But the Jewish and Gentile leaders who conspired together to put Jesus on the cross were definitely guilty. As Peter said in Acts 2:23 (κτϒ), with "wicked hands" they put Jesus to death.


3. *They don't mean that all the people who put Jesus to death would automatically be forgiven and go to heaven.* From later accounts in the book of Acts, we know that some of the people who joined in the death of Christ later came to trust Him as Lord and Savior. But not all did. Many continued in their unbelief and never came to saving faith. Whatever else Jesus' words in Luke 23:34 mean, they can't be taken as a blanket granting of forgiveness and salvation to everyone involved in His death.
4. *They don't mean that ignorance of what we have done somehow excuses our sin or lessens its impact.* Even in a human court, "ignorance of the law is no excuse." You can't say, "I didn't know it was wrong to steal that car," and expect the judge to say, "That's okay. I'm going to let you off because you didn't know it was wrong." You will still go to jail because you should have known what the law said.

It's also helpful to consider how Jesus responds to His own crucifixion:

- He doesn't offer a word in His own defense.
- He doesn't condemn Herod or Pilate or the Jewish leaders.
- He doesn't proclaim His innocence.
- He doesn't turn against God.
- He doesn't attack His attackers.
- He doesn't attempt to save Himself.
- He doesn't blame anyone—though many were to blame.

Instead, He prays. The last phrase of Isaiah 53:12 explains the significance of Jesus' cry from the cross: "For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." No longer can His hands minister to the sick, for they are nailed to the tree. No longer can His feet take Him on errands of mercy. No longer

can He take little children in His arms. No longer can He reach out to touch the lame and cause them to walk again. There is no time left for Him to instruct His disciples. Soon He will be dead. As His life ebbs from His beaten and bruised body, as the blood drips to the ground, He does the one thing He can do. He prays.



If we have any concept of grace at all, we understand that grace extends to the worst of sinners.

His prayer is very brief and very specific. He prays that God would forgive His murderers, “for they do not know what they are doing.” Among the many lessons we may glean here, none is more important than this: *No one is beyond the reach of God’s grace.* I suppose most of us would agree with that statement in an abstract sense. If we have any concept of grace at all, we understand that grace extends to the worst of sinners. But that concept becomes very difficult when we have to forgive those who have sinned greatly against us.

- How does a wife forgive her husband for repeated adultery?
- How does a father forgive the man who raped his daughter?
- How does anyone forgive Hitler or Stalin or Saddam Hussein?

Exactly what does it mean to forgive the unforgivable? That’s the problem posed by Jesus’ first cry from the cross. It’s hard enough to fully understand what He meant; it’s even harder to know what those words should mean for us. And yet we know, if we know anything about God, that forgiveness lies at the heart of

God. “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). Consider that word “abounding.” Other translations use the words “abundant” or “rich” to describe the extent of God’s forgiving love, conveying the idea that His love is both deep and broad. His love goes to the depth of our sin and it covers the full extent of our sin.

He forgives because that’s the kind of God he is.

There is another way to say it. He forgives people we wouldn’t forgive if we were God. And He saves people we would immediately send to hell. We know that His ways are not our ways, and no place can we see this more clearly than in His willingness to forgive even the worst sinners. That leads me to a question that is not just theological or historical, but a question that many of us wrestle with every day: How do you forgive the unforgivable? How do you forgive someone who has done something so terrible that it defies any attempt at human forgiveness?

Forgiving the Unforgivable

As we consider the account of Jesus’ crucifixion, and especially Jesus’ remarkable words regarding forgiveness, two observations come to mind that will help us understand how to forgive the unforgivable.

1. You must give up trying to force people to understand how much they hurt you.

This may be the greatest barrier to forgiveness. Many people who have been deeply hurt say, “I would be willing to forgive if only the one who hurt me knew how badly he hurt me.” But this is an impossible standard, and as long as you hold to it, you will never forgive. And you will have a rock-solid excuse to live in bitterness for years. You can always blame it on “those people.” If only *they* would come to their senses (but they won’t). If only *they* would see the light (but they don’t). If only *they* would understand

how many nights you stayed awake because bad memories wouldn't let you go to sleep. If only *they* knew about your tears. You would forgive if *they* knew, if *they* understood, if *they* had some concept about what *they* did.

But if you are going to forgive, you must give all that up. Until you do, forgiveness will remain a distant dream, and you will remain chained to the past. You cannot set yourself free until you release others from the burden of understanding all that they did to you.

Here is the simple truth: They don't know what they did to you.

Some people, when I make that statement, immediately offer an objection: "You don't understand. They knew exactly what they were doing. They knew what they were doing before they were doing it. They knew they were going to hurt me and they went ahead and did it anyway." When she told that lie she knew what she was doing. When he double-crossed me he knew what he was doing. When he stepped out on me he knew what he was doing. When he broke the marriage vows he knew what he was doing. She knew what she was doing. They knew exactly what they were doing. How can you even bring up that subject? They knew they would hurt me and they did it on purpose. How can you say they didn't know what they were doing?

Consider Jesus. Who was He talking about when He said, "For they do not know what they are doing"? Who does the word "they" refer to? Perhaps the Roman soldiers. Did they know what they were doing or not? Well, yes, they knew they were crucifying a man. Did they know who He was? No, they didn't really know who He was. If anybody really didn't know what they were doing, it was the Roman soldiers. It was just a job to them, just the next grisly item on the Friday agenda. To them, crucifixion was what their commander ordered them to do. "Hand me the nails. Crucify this guy and get him out of here." This was just a job to them. Surely they didn't really know what they were doing.

Who else could "they" refer to? What about Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor? Did Pilate know what he was doing? Or to use

a modern phrase, What did he know, and when did he know it? Pilate knew Jesus was called the King of the Jews. He knew Jesus claimed to have authority from heaven. He knew Jesus was unlike anyone else who had ever come before him. That's what Pilate knew. And what he knew scared him to death, and he tried to wash his hands of it. But he didn't know the whole story.

What about Caiaphas, the high priest? Caiaphas knew that Jesus was called the Son of God, the Messiah. What did Caiaphas do? He said, "He has spoken blasphemy!" (Matthew 27:65), and agreed with the other priests that Jesus was "worthy of death" (verse 66). What about Annas, also a high priest? The same. What about Judas? Didn't Judas know what he was doing? He was with Jesus for three-and-a-half years. But it's clear that Judas was totally confused about who Jesus was. He knew Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah, but it appears Judas thought Jesus was going to roll into Jerusalem, take over the place, and set Himself up as King. Judas was baffled because Jesus didn't fit his preconceptions about what the Messiah was going to do. That's one of the reasons Judas betrayed Him—because he was confused and disillusioned and disappointed at the end. And so it goes with everyone connected with the crucifixion of Jesus. Each person knew a little bit of the story, but none of them really had the big picture. We can certainly say the Jewish leaders *thought* they understood Jesus, but they didn't.

Does that mean these men (and their followers) are not guilty? Not at all. Each person involved in the death of Jesus is morally culpable. There is plenty of guilt to go round. Judas was guilty. Pilate was guilty. Caiaphas was guilty. Annas was guilty. The Roman soldiers were guilty and so were the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, and the scribes who conspired to put Jesus to death. And what about the mob? Yes, they were guilty. And what about the spectators who came to cheer and laugh and to mock? Yes, they were guilty, too.

But still, we can't escape those haunting words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know *what* they are doing." The word

“what” is the key to understanding Christ’s statement. The key is not *the fact* they do not know. The key is *what*. They do not know *what* they are doing. They know what they are doing, but they do not know what it really means. They know what they are doing, but they don’t know who the man on the cross really is. They know what they are doing, but they don’t grasp the ramifications. That is, they are guilty of killing a man, but they are guilty of much worse than they know. They are guilty of killing the Son of God Himself. When Jesus cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” He was really saying, “Father, forgive them, because they need forgiveness more than they know. Forgive them, because they are in desperate need of forgiveness and they don’t even know it.”

The same is true about the people who hurt you. They need forgiveness more than they know. It’s true they knew what they were doing when they made that telephone call, wrote that letter, or said words that tore into your heart. They knew exactly what they were doing, but they didn’t know the enormity of it. They didn’t know how bad and terrible it was. They can never know down deep how badly they hurt you. And yet they need your forgiveness more than they need anything else in the world. They need it more than they know, and they will probably never change until they get it. And some of them won’t change even after they get it. But still, you have to forgive them.

Sometimes we refuse to forgive because we want the other person to feel what we felt when they hurt us so badly. That does not work, and will never work. If you wait until people truly understand what they did to you, in most cases you will wait forever. Even when they confess and seek forgiveness, you may feel that they still don’t truly understand. But withholding forgiveness will not help them understand. They cannot crawl into your skin and feel as you felt. They can never enter into your pain. Your sorrows are yours alone. So if you make your pain the price of forgiveness, you will never forgive because no one else can ever pay that price.

- You do not forgive because they understand what they did.
- You do not forgive because they have suffered as much as you suffered.
- You do not forgive because they “deserve” forgiveness.
- You do not forgive to gain some personal advantage over them.
- You forgive in spite of what they’ve done.
- You forgive because of God’s grace.
- You forgive because that’s what Jesus did on the cross.
- You forgive because that’s what Jesus did for you.


You can forgive the unforgivable if you remember that the people who have hurt you so deeply don’t, at the deepest level, know what they have really done to you. Forgiveness is what they need, and you are the only one who can give it to them.

I have discovered that I need to apply this truth myself. Not long ago some dear friends were very upset with me. They were friends I had known for years. We had been through a lot together, and now they were unhappy with me. Both the husband and the wife sent me very hard e-mails. One was so harsh I simply could not answer it. The conflict had to do with disagreements and misunderstandings and things wrongly said or done. It had to do with perception and expectations and promises made or not made, and deep wounds and bruised feelings. And I was not the only one in the middle of that mess. My dear friends were unhappy with me and I with them, but there were others involved also, and the feelings ran deep. So I had my share of sleepless nights and anxious moments.

As with most relational conflicts, there weren’t just two sides. There were many sides, and there was plenty of fault to go around. In hindsight, I can see that I made the situation worse at several points because of what I said or did. And I was unhappy about what others had said and done. As time went on, one great truth

floated to the surface: *In order for healing to take place, everyone involved must be willing to forgive and be forgiven even while knowing they have not been fully understood.*

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if we just keep talking, we'll eventually solve all our problems. But that's not true. Sometimes talking only makes matters worse, especially when we say, "But I just want you to understand where I'm coming from," which, being translated, means, "I want you to see what a fool you've been and how wrong you are because when you see that, you'll see things my way and you'll admit I was right all along." Sound familiar? We have thoughts like that all the time. But as long as we insist on always being right, we will never be set free.



*As long as you demand that
you be right all the time,
you will never get well.*

In one of his books, Bruce Larson mentions visiting a halfway house in Western Ontario in Canada. It was a place where people with severe emotional struggles could come and find healing. The main meeting room was the living room of an old farmhouse. A beautiful sign above the fireplace caught his attention. It read, "Do you want to be right or well?" What a great question. Each one of us faces that same choice. As long as you demand that you be right all the time, you will never get well.⁵

Would you like to be healed?

Would you like to get better?

Would you like to see the power of the Holy Spirit released in your life?

Would you like to see God do something miraculous in the relationships that matter most to you?

If so, then here is a place to begin. If you willing to give up your right to always be right, the healing can start now.

Conflicts cannot be resolved until we realize that we have some forgiving to do and we need to be forgiven. Grace cannot be extended as long as we demand to be fully (or even mostly) understood. At some point we must release those who have hurt us, even though we know they don't know or understand all that they have done. And we must confess our sins even though we know our explanation will not be accepted or fully understood. And perhaps we won't even be believed. But that doesn't matter. There are some things we must do regardless of what others do. And we need God's help if we are ever to have the courage to do what is right.

If we probe a bit deeper in Luke 23:34, we discover another truth that flows from these amazing words of Jesus. The first truth we examined touches on how we view others; this one touches on how we view ourselves.

2. God forgave you when you were unforgivable.

This is where the words of Jesus become very personal. We're included in His prayer. When He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," who was included in "them"? The soldiers, the mob, the women, the disciples, Pilate, Caiaphas, Annas, Judas, Peter, and all the Jewish leaders. But that's not all. You were included in the "them," and so was I. He was praying for you, and He was praying for me. "No. No. You don't understand. I'm not like those people. I'm different. I'm not that bad. I'm not the kind of person who could crucify anyone. I'd never do anything like that." Oh, yes you are, and yes you would, and yes you have many times, and yes you will again. You're not as good as you look. If you had been there, you would have been holding the nails. If you had been there, you would have been clapping and cheering. If you had been there, you would have been saying, "Crucify Him. Crucify Him. Stick it to Him again.

Another nail. Let Him have it.” We’re not that much different. We’re not that much better.

At this point we discover a hard reality that keeps us from forgiving the people who hurt us. At the root it is this: We think we’re better than they are. We think we would never hurt anyone the way they have hurt us. “I’m just not as bad as that. I’d never treat anyone the way they treated me.” We get angry because we think that we would never do to another person what they have done to us. How foolish. How false. How deluded we are when we think that way. It is our false pride that keeps us from the hard step of forgiving others.

Not So Good, Not So Nice

Consider for a moment the deeds of Jeffrey Dahmer, the notorious serial murderer. After he was arrested and imprisoned, he professed faith in Jesus Christ. That is, he claimed to have seen the error of his ways, confessed his sins, and cried out to Jesus for forgiveness. We’ll never know the full story of what happened because he was beaten to death in prison not long after that.

When we think about Jeffrey Dahmer and the possibility that he might truly have become saved after committing such heinous crimes, our first response may be to say, “There is grace even for people like Jeffrey Dahmer.” That statement, true as it is, reveals at least as much about us as it does about him. All of us would like to think (and in fact do think) that we are “better” than he was. Or we’re not as “bad” as he was. I make no bones about the fact that I think I am “better” than Jeffrey Dahmer. I’ve never done the things he did. I’ve never even thought or dreamed or imagined any of them. So when I say there is grace “even” for the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer, while I’m willing to include him in the circle of those God might save, I’m not putting myself on his level. I truly believe I’m better than he was.

But it’s not enough to say there is grace even for the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer. In truth, there is grace *only* for the Jeffrey Dahmers of this world. They alone can be saved. Right now you might be

thinking, “This sounds crazy.” Something deep inside the human heart resists this conclusion. How can it be true? Does it mean God somehow “favors” the perverse, that grace is a reward for truly terrible sin, that the greater your sin the more likely you are to find God’s grace? That can’t be right, can it? Read on, and you’ll see what I’m getting at.

No Hope for “Semi-Sinners”

Too many religious people are like the Pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector” (Luke 18:11). He might as well have said, “I thank God I’m not like Jeffrey Dahmer.” Well, it’s true—he wasn’t like Jeffrey Dahmer. And he didn’t experience God’s grace either. He went home still in his sins while the hated tax collector ended up justified by God. As long as you think you are better than other people, you are not ready to be saved from your sin because you have not yet considered how great your sin really is. Jesus did not come to save “semi” sinners or “partial” sinners or “not-so-bad” sinners. As long as you feel the need to put some kind of qualifying adjective before the word *sinner*, you aren’t ready to come to Jesus. You won’t see your need for the grace of God.

To put the matter this way is not to deny the real moral differences among people. Is there no difference between Jeffrey Dahmer and Mother Teresa? Of course there is. One was a sadistic killer, the other an instrument of God’s mercy to multitudes of hurting people. But our perspective is all-important. Let’s suppose we throw Jeffrey Dahmer into the deepest pit on earth. Then let’s travel to the top of the Sears Tower in downtown Chicago. There we will look over the railing and jeer at Jeffrey Dahmer and congratulate ourselves for being so far above him.

Now consider what God sees. From heaven, as He looks down, it is as if earth is a trillion miles away. What happens to the distance between us and Jeffrey Dahmer? It vanishes from God’s point of view. That’s why Romans 3:22-23 says, “There is no

difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We’re all in the same boat—like it or not.

Wanted: A Righteous Man

During a sermon one Sunday, I said that there are no righteous people in Oak Park, Chicago (where our church is located), nor are there any righteous people anywhere else. None at all. The next Sunday a woman shook my hand and said she wanted to ask me a question. She began, “Last week you said there was no one righteous in all of Oak Park.” Her statement was correct. I had said that because apart from God’s grace, there is no righteousness to be found anywhere. With a face marked with intense concern, she asked, “But Pastor Ray, if you aren’t a righteous man, where can we find one?” Her question was honest and sincere. I didn’t say what I could have said: “If you only knew me like my family knows me, you wouldn’t ask that question.” Instead, I told her to listen to my sermon and she would find the answer. I recounted the story to the congregation and said I would show them the only righteous person in Oak Park—or anywhere else, for that matter. Pointing to the cross on the wall behind the pulpit, I declared that Jesus is the only righteous man who ever lived.

And compared to Jesus, I am just as guilty as Jeffrey Dahmer.

*Out of the worst evil
God brought forth
the greatest good.*

Jesus Christ was pure, holy, and perfect in every way. He never sinned, not even one time. Though He was severely tempted, He never gave in. All the rest of us fall so far short that we cannot begin to be compared to Him. He is the only righteous man ever to walk this earth. And we crucified Him. His reward for doing

God's will was death on a bloody Roman cross. Here is the wonder of grace at work. From the murder of a perfect man came God's plan to rescue the human race. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; *and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*" (Isaiah 53:6). Out of the worst evil God brought forth the greatest good. And only God could have done it. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). When I preached this sermon, I paused in the middle of quoting Romans 5:8 and had the congregation repeat the word "sinners" several times. That's what we were when Christ died for us. Note the little word "still." We were "still" sinners when Christ died for us. He didn't die for us while we were still "church members" or "good people" or "law-abiding citizens" or "nice neighbors" or "high achievers," but He died for us while we were still lost in our sin and far away from God. That's the truth about all of us. Christ died for sinners because it is only sinners who can be saved.

It's not as if we are all good and the people who hurt us are all bad. It's not as if we are all pure and they're all evil. It's not as if we've got all of life wired together and they're just a bunch of fools. It's not as if we're totally in the right and they're totally in the wrong. That's not the way the world really works. It's not as if we know all the answers. We're not as good and righteous as we think we are. Eventually the searing truth hits home even though we would rather avoid it. We get mad just like they do. We lose our temper just like they do. We write stinging letters just like they do. We say stupid things at Christmastime just like they do. We slap our friends just like they do. We hurt our children just like they do. We crucify our enemies just like they do. We break our promises just like they do.

If the truth be told and told fairly, we're just like them. But even that's not quite right. We are them and they are us, and if we don't see that, we've missed the real point of Jesus' first cry from the cross. If we think we're so much better than the people who have hurt us so deeply, we are self-deceived. If only we could see

that we're all in the same boat together. We're all truly sinners in one way or another. We all fail in many ways. They fail in one way and we fail in another.

When Chuck Colson received the 1993 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, he spoke to an audience at the University of Chicago on "The Enduring Revolution." In describing the plight of modern society, he mentioned four myths that define our time—"the four horsemen of the present apocalypse." The first myth has to do with the goodness of man.

This myth deludes people into thinking that they are always victims, never villains; always deprived, never depraved. It dismisses responsibility as the teaching of a darker age. It can excuse any crime, because it can always blame something else—a sickness of our society or a sickness of the mind.⁶

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur was a witness during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the architect of the Nazi's "final solution" during World War II. Eichmann presided over the slaughter of millions. "The court was hushed as a victim confronted a butcher." Suddenly Dinur broke into uncontrollable sobs and collapsed to the floor. When asked later to explain his actions, he said, "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . . Exactly like he." The reporter who interviewed Dinur concluded that the most chilling fact about Adolph Eichmann was that he was normal. "Eichmann is in all of us."⁷

An Oasis of Forgiveness

It would keep us from being so angry if we could see ourselves the way we really are.

We aren't as good as we think we are.

We don't know as much as we think we do.

We don't really have it all together.

If we would ever admit the truth, we would find it easier to forgive the people who have hurt us in an unforgivable way.

The secret of forgiveness is to understand that in the ultimate sense, between you and the person who hurt you, there's really no difference at all. None whatsoever. It is possible to forgive the unforgivable, but you've got to realize before you do it, that Jesus forgave you when you were unforgivable. When He prayed that prayer, He wasn't just praying for the people back then, He was also praying for all of us 2,000 years later.

I believe it is enormously significant that the first word from the cross is a word of forgiveness. That teaches us Jesus came to establish a church marked by forgiveness. He is, at heart, a man of forgiveness. He came into this world to establish a church that would be an oasis of forgiveness, and to bring to the world a race of forgiving men and women.

One final word must be mentioned about Jesus' words in Luke 23:34. "Not only was this a prayer for forgiveness and a great forgiveness at that—it was also a forgiveness prayed for at an enormous cost."⁸ Forgiveness does not come cheap. It will cost you greatly to forgive those who have hurt you greatly. Jesus paid the price in blood. Forgiveness is a gift we *give* to others. Even if they repent and ask for forgiveness, their repentance does not "earn" our forgiveness. Forgiveness is free, but it is never cheap. Perhaps the greatest irony is that when we pay the cost of forgiveness, we are the ones who are set free.

Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven

Would you like to become more like Jesus? I suggest you start where Jesus started—by forgiving the people who have hurt you deeply. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that this is easy. To forgive us cost Jesus His life. To forgive others will cost us greatly, too. We will have to give up our anger, turn away from our bitterness, and decide by a conscious choice that we will forgive those who have sinned against us. And very often we will have to perform that act of forgiveness over and over again until

we learn the grace of continual forgiveness. I am sure that I am writing to someone who has reserved in the temple of his heart a room that is not open to the Holy Spirit. It is a private place, a citadel locked from the inside, a hidden storehouse of hatred and revenge. It is a dark room filled with pain and anger and you keep it locked because you don't want anyone else to know the room is there. And maybe you even pretend to yourself that the room doesn't exist. It is a room that God will not enter without your permission.

It's very possible you are nursing hatred and bitterness and a desire to get even with someone who hurt you terribly. And you may say, "But I'm justified in it. They did me wrong." And you may be entirely right about that. But I ask you: How can God's Holy Spirit do His work and bestow His blessing in a life filled with anger? If God is ever going to use you in powerful ways, and if your life is ever going to change, that door must be opened by you because it is locked from the inside. I can't open it for you, and God won't. He is the perfect gentleman. He waits to be invited inside.

No one is more miserable than the person who harbors secret hatred and wishes for revenge. And no one is happier than the person who finally opens the door to the Holy Spirit and says, "Come in and do Your work in me." In the moment when you say that, healing begins on the inside. Instead of hatred there is love. Instead of bitterness, kindness. Instead of revenge, forgiveness. If I am describing your life, then God's word to you is, "Open the hidden door and let My Spirit come in."

Every year in January we talk about turning over a new leaf. For many people that means taking all the leaves from last year and raking them over into this year. We don't turn anything over; we just carry our burdens and hurts from one year to the next—haunting memories, injured feelings, and thoughts about the past that we can't get out of our minds. Some people live for years under a terrible burden of pain from the past. At some point, we need to let go.

Here's a simple exercise that may help. Take a sheet of paper and write Jesus' words at the top: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." On the left side of the paper, write a list of the people and memories from the past that have hurt you so badly. Make it brief and simple; no one ever needs to see this list. When you are finished, add one word, in large letters, to the right of each item on your list: Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven.

And when you're finished, take that paper and rip it up. Don't keep it. Rip it into a dozen pieces, then flush the pieces down the toilet. Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven...Forgiven. Let go of those awful memories once and for all.

This isn't a magical exercise that can suddenly take away your pain, but it is a practical way of coming to grips with the first words from the cross. Do you want to be set free? Would you like to come closer to Jesus Christ than you've ever come before? Then start where Jesus began on the cross—by becoming a great forgiver.

All of us know that it is easier to talk about forgiveness than it is to do it. Yet if we are honest, we all know how much we suffer when we forget to do what Jesus did on the cross. We need courage to take the giant step of forgiveness. And however painful forgiveness may be, it is infinitely better than refusing to forgive. Besides, Jesus forgave us when we were unforgivable.

Three

Breaking the Cycle of Bitterness



Only the brave know how to forgive.

LAURENCE STERNE

*O*n Thursday morning, November 21, 2002, as the sun rose over the horizon in the port city of Sidon in southern Lebanon, Bonnie Penner Witherall was up early. On this day she was going to work at the prenatal clinic that offers medical services to the Muslim women from a nearby refugee camp. Tensions were running high because of events elsewhere in the Middle East, and Americans in general and missionaries in particular had been warned of potential danger. Bonnie and her husband, Gary, both had come to Lebanon with a burden to share Christ in the Muslim world. For several years they had studied Arabic so they could communicate with the people they hoped to reach with the gospel.

At approximately 8:00 AM, Bonnie answered a knock at the clinic door. Authorities can only surmise what happened next. Evidently a man hit her in the face and chest, and then shot her

three times in the head, killing her instantly. When Gary heard the news, he ran to the clinic. By this time the police had come and the gunman was nowhere to be found. Gary tried to fight his way into the room where his wife lay in a pool of blood, but the police wouldn't let him enter. In one of the cruel ironies of our modern world, someone took a picture of Bonnie after she died, and that gruesome picture somehow ended up on the Internet.


The next day, the *London Times* carried a report on the murder of Bonnie Penner Witherall. It quoted Gary Witherall as saying he had forgiven his wife's killers: "God led us to Lebanon and we knew that we might die.... It's a costly forgiveness.... It cost my wife." On the long flight home while accompanying his wife's body to America, Gary came to a simple conclusion: "God said there's a seed that's been planted in your heart. You either hate and be angry, or you forgive. I said I have to forgive."

Whenever tragedy strikes, two enormous questions loom before us: Why did this happen? and Where is God in all this? Many times the second question is harder than the first. Most of us instinctively know we'll never have a final answer to the "Why?" question this side of heaven. We rarely fully know why things happen the way they do. The answer to that question remains in the heart and mind of God. But we can get some help with the second question: Where is God in all this? I am convinced many of us go wrong at this point because of bad theology. Let me say that another way: I am convinced good theology is the answer to the deepest questions of life. Not that good theology can tell us all we would like to know—it can't. But understanding who God is, who we are, and how God works in the world (which is what good theology is all about) gives us a framework for responding to life's darkest moments.

New Help from an Old Sermon

Back in the early 1830s, a man named Charles Simeon of Cambridge, England, published a sermon on Genesis 45 that provides some unique insights into how God works through evildoers to

accomplish His purposes. He gave his sermon the unwieldy title, “God Viewed in Joseph’s Advancement.”¹⁰ Though the title sounds odd to our ears, the truth it contains speaks to our twenty-first-century questions. Much of what I’m going to share in this chapter comes from Charles Simeon.



*God gets involved even when
we think nothing is happening.*

Simeon begins by speaking of the “hidden secrets of divine providence,” which sounds like a phrase that would come from a television special on mysterious phenomena. What Simeon meant was that there is far more going on in the universe than we ever dreamed possible. If the total knowledge of reality were to equal a line that stretches for 100 yards, then we perhaps see an inch or two at most. No matter how much we think we understand, there is much more we don’t understand because our vision is so limited.

With that in mind, how does God accomplish His own designs for us? Sometimes He uses adversity and mistreatment. When we are going through the ordeal of being unfairly attacked, when we are being lied about, when our reputation is being publicly smeared, when our friends betray us, when a husband or wife abandons us, it may appear impossible that such things could accomplish anything good, but they do. The key is the word *appear*. What we see is far less than what God sees. And the good that may come from the treachery of others is not planned by the hand of man, is not seen in advance, and is not seen at all except by faith.

Simeon used a fascinating word to describe how God brings good out of the evil of others. He says that God “interposes” Himself in the midst of the circumstances of life. That is, God gets

involved even when we think nothing is happening. The end result (sometimes seen many years later) is easily and naturally seen to promote our good and God's glory. And we look back and say, "It had to happen that way."

Exhibit A: Joseph

In the entire Bible, there is no better example of this principle than the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. It all begins when Joseph has a dream that someday he will be exalted above his brothers and even above his parents. Naturally his brothers aren't thrilled to hear this news, and soon their hearts burn with envy, jealousy, and malice against Joseph. When an opportunity presents itself, they throw Joseph into a pit, intending to leave him for dead. They end up selling him into slavery to a caravan of Midianite traders. Then they go back home, tell their father Jacob that Joseph is dead, and forget all about him. Meanwhile, Joseph is purchased by Potiphar (who was the Pharaoh's head of security). Potiphar makes Joseph head over his household, where Joseph rises to prominence and is the victim of an attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife—who later falsely accuses Joseph of rape. After being thrown in jail, Joseph meets a baker and a cupbearer and correctly predicts that the former will die but the latter will be released. He asks the cupbearer to remember him upon his release, but the cupbearer forgets—until Pharaoh has a dream he can't interpret. The cupbearer remembers Joseph, who is released, correctly interprets the dream, and is elevated by Pharaoh to the number-two position in Egypt. When a terrible famine strikes the Middle East, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt looking for food. They meet Joseph, but don't know it's their brother. Joseph implements a series of tests so he can determine their sincerity. Eventually the moment comes when Joseph decides to reveal his identity.

Joseph sends the Egyptians away, and in privacy, alone with his brothers, tells them who he is. They are understandably terrified to meet the brother they sold into slavery 22 years earlier. Now he has them firmly in his grasp. He can order them killed, and it will

be done. Or tortured. Or thrown into jail. Or fined. Or anything else he desires to have done to them.

If anyone had a “right” to be bitter, it was Joseph. He has “lost” 22 years of his life. The temptation to get even must have been great. But this is how he summarizes the whole affair:

I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt” (Genesis 45:4-9 ESV).

There is enormous irony in his words. The very thing used against him (their betrayal) results in his exaltation so that he can now save the brothers who betrayed him. The central truth is in verse 8: “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Those are the words of either a madman or a man of faith. He mentions God five times in his statement so his brothers won’t miss the point. “I know what you did. I haven’t forgotten your treachery, but that’s not the issue. You did what you did because you wanted to hurt me, but God allowed it to happen so I would end up a ruler in Egypt, and so at the exact moment you would need me, I would be here to save you and your descendants.” His vision of God was so great that it dwarfed his view of the sin of his brothers.

How God Involves Himself with Evildoers

Given Joseph’s amazing words, we cannot help but ask: How does God involve Himself with evildoers? What did Joseph mean

when he said to his brothers, “It was not you who sent me here, but God”? After all, if not for their betrayal, he never would have ended up in Egypt. How does a holy God accomplish His plan for us through the deeds of evil people? It’s easier to answer that question in the negative. God is not the author of evil, nor does He tempt us to do evil (James 1:13-15). What the brothers did to Joseph was unquestionably evil, but He does not dwell on that. There is a sense in which we must say that God is not the cause of evil or a partner in evil, but in some manner—which is hard to put into words—He is involved in the evil deeds of evildoers. He does not cause sinners to sin, but what they do fits into His ultimate plan.

1. He allows them to reveal what is in their hearts.

Joseph’s brothers were motivated entirely by envy and malice. They couldn’t stand the thought that their little brother would one day rule over them. God simply gave them a chance to reveal the envy that was already there. As long as they were under Jacob’s direct control, Joseph was safe. But when they were out gathering the flocks, and Joseph came to find them, their latent envy boiled to the surface. At first they planned to let him die in the pit, but God interposed, and the Midianite traders came along. As the story unfolds, others enter the picture. First Potiphar, and then his wife. Later the baker and the cupbearer, and still later, the Pharaoh. They all acted according to their own inclinations, but all in accordance with God’s plan. God didn’t cause the brothers to envy nor Potiphar’s wife to lust. The brothers and the wife did that on their own. He simply gave them a chance to act on their evil intentions. In so doing, He allowed them to reveal the evil that was already in their hearts. This is what Jesus meant when He said to Pilate: “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11 ESV).

2. He permits Satan to instigate them to evil.

Satan is a roaring lion who prowls the world, looking for those he can destroy (1 Peter 5:8). But though he possesses great power,

he can do nothing without God's express permission. In Job 1, it is God who tells the devil to consider His servant Job. And Satan cannot afflict Job beyond the limits established by God. The devil is powerful, but he is not omnipotent. He has great knowledge, but he is not omniscient.

A few hours before Peter betrays Jesus, Jesus told Peter that Satan had requested permission to sift him like wheat—meaning that Satan could not tempt Peter to evil without God's permission (Luke 22:31). Satan operates within limits imposed by God. This is both a comfort and a warning. It is a comfort to know that our temptations do not happen by chance yet are permitted by our heavenly Father. The warning is that God still holds us accountable for how we respond. None of us can escape judgment by saying, "The devil made me do it." Satan may have tempted you, but you did the sinning all by yourself.

3. He withdraws His restraining grace.

Restraining grace simply means God doesn't let circumstances get as bad as they could be. But when God removes His hand of grace, things fall apart quickly. Romans 1 tells us God exercises judgment on unbelieving humanity by giving men and women over to further sin. Sometimes God's harshest judgment on sinners is to do nothing at all. He simply says, "If you want to destroy your own life, go ahead. If you want to destroy your own family, go ahead. I won't stop you. You've already rejected Me, so I will now respect your decision. If you wish to plunge off the cliff, go ahead, but you'll find out how sharp the rocks are at the bottom of the ravine."

If men despise God's mercy, they are left with nothing but His judgment. He blinds the eyes of those who choose not to see, and He hardens the hearts of those who prefer to go their own way.

4. He uses the deeds of evildoers to accomplish His own purposes.

Sometimes God uses the deeds of evildoers to further His own plans in the world. When Christ was born, the Father used the

paranoia of Herod the Great to guide the magi to Bethlehem. Later, God used Herod's slaughter of the innocents to lead Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus to Egypt so that the Scripture could be fulfilled that says, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:13-15).

We see this even clearer in the events surrounding the death of Christ. Who killed Jesus? For 2,000 years men have argued that question. Did the Jewish leaders kill Jesus? Clearly, they wanted Him dead and plotted to make it happen. What about the Romans? They were the only ones with the legal power to put someone to death. How about the centurions? They were the ones who performed the literal act of crucifixion. And in a larger sense, is not the whole sinful world of humanity guilty of His death? Did not our sins put Him on the cross? There is plenty of guilt to go around in the death of Jesus Christ. But what about God? Though He cannot be "guilty" of the death of Christ, was not the death of Jesus part of the Father's plan from the beginning? The answer is yes. Jesus was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). How do we reconcile the plan of God with human guilt in the death of Christ?

Here is Peter's answer as he preached in Jerusalem to some of the very men who participated in the death of our Lord: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23 ESV). Jesus' death was not some afterthought with God, as if it happened because events suddenly spun out of control. He died according to the "definite plan and foreknowledge" of God, and He could not have died otherwise. But His death took place at the hands of "lawless men" who stand guilty before the Lord. Even though we may not fully see it, there is perfect harmony between God's predestination and the free moral choices of sinful men. In the case of Christ, God used the evil deeds of wicked men who crucified the Son of God in order to bring salvation to the world.

How Knowing This Helps Our Faith

So far, it may seem as if I am trying to impugn God by somehow making Him responsible for the evil in the world. But the truth behind Genesis 45 needs to be tattooed on our souls. We desperately need an infusion of good theology so that when trouble comes our way (and it comes to all of us sooner or later), we won't buckle under the pressure and watch our faith suddenly disappear. Understanding that God is intimately involved in even the worst things that happen relieves us from worry and doubt and fear. Does it justify sin? Not at all. Knowing this truth brings good to our soul and great honor to our God.

1. We know our troubles did not happen by accident.

When we focus on immediate causes, we end up in despair, anger, and bitterness. It's easy to think only of the people who have hurt us deeply—parents or children or grandparents or friends we thought we could trust, or church members who let us down, or people at work who stabbed us in the back. The list goes on and on. But as long as we focus exclusively on the people who hurt us, we are doomed to dwell in the swamp of bitterness. Far better it is to understand that our enemies (who often are our closest friends) are actually instruments in God's hands. They are His rod to correct us and to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ. Having said that, I hasten to add that God's purposes and theirs are vastly different. Our enemies mean to harm us, drag us down, hurt us deeply, and discourage us so we give up. Not so the Lord. He allows our enemies to taunt and torment us, but His purposes are higher and better and nobler. Ultimately, He allows their unkindness to humble us, to break us of our pride, and to cause us to cry out to Him for mercy and deliverance. What they intend and what God intends are two different things. Never forget that fact.

Charles Simeon said that when God is finished with our enemies, He will cast them into the fires of eternal judgment. Those who hurt us will end up in hell forever. He cites the fact this is how

God dealt with the pagan nations that brought judgment against Israel in the Old Testament. The major and minor prophetic books are filled with warnings to those nations that their own day of reckoning will someday come. And come it did—for the Assyrians, Babylonians, Edomites, Egyptians, and all the other nations used to chastise God’s people.

How does this principle apply today—especially when those who torment us may themselves be born-again Christians? The answer is simple, though the precise application will vary. God knows how to discipline His children, and that includes believers who take unfair advantage of us or go out of their way to mistreat us. The day will come when they will be brought low before the Lord. Count on it. Those who misuse others will someday be called to account for it—if not in this life, then in the life to come. The scales of justice will be balanced in the end.

And in the end, we will be improved, our faith will be stronger, and our reliance on the things of this world will be lessened. The Lord will be our portion. A man told me that after going through a hard time, he finally came to the place where he had to say, “Lord, I am satisfied with you.” Once he said that, he gained a new perspective on his troubles and his life began to change. When hard times come, we should say, “It is the Lord; let Him do what seems best to Him.” After Job had lost virtually everything, he declared, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21 ESV). This is true for all once we can view the hand of God in our trials.

2. We can see good where others can only see evil.

More than anything else, this was the secret of Joseph’s willingness to forgive: *He saw God everywhere*. Because he had such a profound sense of God’s presence, he understood that every event in his life must somehow be ascribed to the hand of God working behind the scenes. Thus he could say to his brothers, “It was not you, but God who sent me to Egypt.” The same is true for his seduction by Potiphar’s wife, the false rape accusation, and the

years he spent in prison. All of it related back to God's purposes for his life. To make the point clearer, we should understand that Joseph means to say more than simply "God was there" when all the bad circumstances happened. That is true, of course, but it does not communicate the full sense of his words. Joseph means to say, "God was in charge of the whole process." It's not as if the brothers sold him into slavery and then God intervened to bring about a good result. Joseph's words demand something more than that. Joseph means that everything that happened—the good and the bad—was part of God's ultimate plan for his life. He was sent to Egypt to save the lives of his own family—the very brothers who had betrayed him. This was God's plan from the beginning, and that fact alone explains all that happened to him. What a profound view this is of the sovereignty of God.

Now, how much of God's plan did Joseph understand in the beginning? Zero. When he was in the cistern, he had no clue that one day he would be the number-two man in the most powerful empire in the world. When he was working for Potiphar, he had no clue that soon he would be in prison. When he was in prison, he had no idea he would one day interpret Pharaoh's dream. When the cupbearer forgot him, he had no reason to think he would ever be remembered again. Even during the "seven fat years" and the first part of the "seven lean years," Joseph had no idea God would use him to deliver his family. We can only imagine Joseph thought he would never see his brothers or his father again. He was in Egypt, they were in Canaan, and there was no reason for them to go to him, or for him to go to them. As the long story unfolds, Joseph had no more clue about the big picture of his life than we do about the big picture of our lives. As far as he knows, he was sold into slavery by his brothers, purchased by Potiphar, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, thrown into prison, delivered from prison, and promoted by Pharaoh. Now he's virtually the prime minister of Egypt. By itself, it's an amazing story no one could have predicted. And until the first visit from his brothers, he had no clue about what God might be doing in his life.

That's the way life is for all of us. As I write this, I am sitting at my desk typing these words into my computer. Outside the sun is shining. It's a clear, cold day in Oak Park. So far the phone has not rung even once. Life is peaceful and good. As I look at my life, I'm not aware of anything major (either good or bad) that is about to happen to me. But my perception bears no relation to God's plan for me. God doesn't consult me in advance about His plans for my life. Looking back, I can see how circumstances and events have fit together in a certain way to bring me to where I am right now. But as I look into the future, I can't predict what might happen next week, or next month, or next year. Looking back, I can say that "all things work together for good." Looking ahead, I am trusting God will make my path straight and lead me in the way He wants me to go.

Years ago I spoke to a man whose wife had been in and out of drug rehab several times. Her struggles with drugs and alcohol (and his struggles with anger) had reduced their marriage to a shambles. It may have been the most hopeless marriage I ever saw. But through nothing less than a miracle from God, they somehow pulled through and survived a crisis that lasted for the better part of a decade. One day the man looked me in the eye and said, "I now understand that it had to happen the way it did." It takes great faith in God to make a statement like that, and it could only be said at the end of the ordeal, for in hindsight he could see that even the worst moments were leading to something much better.

3. We have a reason to forgive those who hurt us.

Of course, sometimes those "much better" moments never come. Not every story has a happy ending. Sometimes there is no reconciliation, and sometimes the mistreatment continues unabated. But if we believe in the sovereignty of God, we have a reason to forgive those who hurt us. I'm not saying we should forget what they did to us. We can't really forget because the memories are with us forever. But we *can* forgive even when we

can't forget. To forgive means to choose not to remember. To pardon means to clear the record so we no longer cling to the hurts of the past. This is possible only when we come to see our enemies as agents of the Lord, sent by Him (or allowed by Him to come) for reasons that we may never fully understand. If this sounds impossible to do, please recall Jesus' words from the cross; "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

4. We have a new admiration for God's wisdom in all things.

Life is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. And we are like children trying to put the puzzle together with only a handful of pieces and without the box that has the picture on the cover. We're left trying to fit our little handful of pieces together and trying to figure out the big picture at the same time. No wonder we struggle to figure out what life is all about. As the years pass we pick up more pieces to the puzzle, and things that once troubled us now seem to fit into place. And we have a new appreciation for the wisdom of God because nothing is ever wasted. Everything "fits" somewhere.

*God is painting a masterpiece
in your life, and before He is
finished, He will use
every color on His palette.*

Or we are like ants crawling across a painting by Rembrandt. When we come to the darker colors, it seems as if the entire painting is dark, somber, forbidding. Everything around us is dark brown or dark blue or midnight black. But if we could only stand back from the painting, we would see that the darker hues are

offset by lighter colors—red, green, yellow, blue, and orange. It is the darkness of the darker hues that makes the brighter colors stand out so vividly. So it is with life itself. We may spend days or weeks or years in the dark tones of life. Sickness, heartache, tragedy, mistreatment, and betrayal may cause us to think there are no lighter tones. But God is painting a masterpiece in your life, and before He is finished, He will use every color on His palette. If you do not see the final product on earth, you will see it clearly in heaven.

During my college years I worked briefly at a carpet mill in Chattanooga, Tennessee. My job was fairly low-tech—mostly pushing a broom and keeping the walkways clean. In my spare moments I loved to watch the huge carpet machines at work. As you stood in the back of a machine, you could see huge spools of yarn—dozens of them, of every conceivable color—spinning rapidly as the yarn went into the machine. From the back side, the yarns and machine seemed to be a meaningless jumble of colors and noise. Nothing made any sense—all you could see was a mass of colored yarns making their way at high speed into the mechanical weaver.

But when you walked to the front of the machine, an entirely different sight greeted you. There you could see carpet slowly emerging—row by row, all the colors perfectly in place, arranged in order as if by magic. But it wasn't magic at all. Someone had programmed the machine to take that tangle of threads and transform it into a pattern of exquisite beauty.

In this life, we stand, as it were, at the back of the machine, looking at the multicolored yarns of circumstance. Some are the dark colors of sadness and confusion, others the bright tones of happiness and success. On this side there seems to be no pattern—only colors and noise. Now and again God gives us a peek at the finished product and we are aware that something beautiful is being produced in us by the Master Designer. *But in this life, we never see the big picture.* That will all change when we get to heaven. Then we will see that everything that happened to us had

a purpose—even those things that seemed to bring nothing but pain and heartache. Those dark tones that seem so pointless now will become a vital part of a pattern so beautiful that if we were to see it now, it would take our breath away.

How can we live with hope in a world where tragedy is never far away? The answer is simple, though not easy to put into practice. We live this way by faith. We choose to believe that God is at work in everything that happens to us. And we choose to believe that even when nothing makes sense to us. Faith like that is made strong when it is based on the Word of God. And that's why the story of Joseph is so important.

The world says, "Seeing is believing." If I see it, I will believe it. But that principle is reversed in the spiritual realm. God says, "Believing is seeing." We will see God's hand once we believe it is truly there. First Peter 2:19 says we can endure unjust suffering when we are "conscious of God."

How can anyone submit to unfair treatment graciously? How do we continue to praise God when we (or our loved ones) are being mistreated? *We endure unjust suffering for one reason and one reason only: because we are conscious of God.* Let's flesh this out in a series of statements:

- a. I am where I am right now by God's appointment.
- b. If God wanted me to be somewhere else, I'd be somewhere else.
- c. When God wants me somewhere else, I'll be somewhere else.
- d. Because God is good, it must be for my good to be where I am right now.
- e. The fact that I can't see any good in my present situation doesn't mean it isn't there. It just means I can't see it right now.
- f. I don't have to understand the big picture in order to believe there is a big picture.

- g. God's promises cover the details of my life even when the details seem random and out of control.
- h. God sometimes allows things to happen to me that seem unfair and even harsh.
- i. I won't understand those things while I am going through them.
- j. The one thing I can do is endure them patiently, because I believe God is right there with me every moment of every day.

It all depends on whether or not you are conscious of God. Do you believe God has you where you are for a purpose—even if you can't see what that purpose is? If you answer yes, then you will endure suffering even though it is painful and frustrating. If you answer no, then you will almost certainly try to bail out of your situation and you will probably become bitter and angry in the process.

How This Applies to Us

Charles Simeon concluded his sermon with two points of application that bear repeating:

1. How happy is the Christian in this world!

The unsaved have no hope in this world. To those who don't know Christ, bad things happen with no ultimate purpose. Not so for those who know the Lord. As the Christian navigates a tempestuous ocean, he does so knowing that an all-wise, Almighty Pilot is at the helm. Even when the waves rise around him and threaten to cast him into the deep, he has no fear. Though he does not know what will happen in the short run, he is certain that in the long run God's plan for his life will be worked out perfectly. Therefore, he is satisfied and has perfect peace in his soul.

2. How happy will he be in that future world!

The Christian firmly believes that Romans 8:28 is true in every circumstance. He believes that all things work together for his

good and for God's glory because God has said it is so. Thus he walks by faith, not by sight. He firmly believes that someday he will see all the links in the chain of circumstances that led him from earth to heaven. And in that day he will bless the Lord for His sovereign wisdom displayed in every circumstance of life. With that confidence, he can rest in the Lord now, knowing all will be well later.

The Costly Act of Forgiveness

Charles Simeon ended his sermon with these words: "Let us commit ourselves entirely to God, and be satisfied with His dealings toward us." And "what we know not now, we shall know hereafter." I am struck by the phrase "be satisfied with His dealings toward us." How many of us can say we are satisfied with the Lord and how He has dealt with us?

On Sunday, November 24, 2002, Gary Witherall spoke at a memorial service for his wife held at the church building that adjoined the clinic where she was murdered three days earlier. Addressing the 400 mourners who packed the chapel (and others who stood outside in the rain), he explained again why they had come to Lebanon and how he felt about what had happened:

"So many people think my wife's death was a waste...but we believe that coming here with the message of Jesus would never be a waste. It is a message worth laying our lives down for," he said. Sobbing, he added, "Whoever did this crime, I forgive them. It's not easy. It took everything that I have but I can forgive these people because God has forgiven me."¹¹

Forgiveness is never easy. In a situation like this, it would appear to be impossible. But Gary Witherall has discovered the truth of the sovereignty of God. Good theology has rescued his soul in a moment when most of us would give in to despair and bitterness. The road of forgiveness will seem like weakness to those who don't believe in God, but as hard as it is, it is far better

than giving in to bitterness that corrodes the heart and destroys the soul. Those who believe in God's sovereignty can overcome bitterness through the costly act of forgiveness.

In the end, forgiveness is not about us, and it's not about those who hurt us. Forgiveness is all about God. Until we grasp this, forgiveness will remain a terrible burden we cannot begin to bear.

Four

A Lesson from the Lord's Prayer



It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.

MOTHER TERESA

*T*he fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer seems simple enough, but simple things can sometimes be very deep. In this petition, Jesus said, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Everyone agrees this is a difficult word from the Lord. It is hard to understand, and even harder to apply. Our basic problem is this: It appears that the Lord has drawn something into this prayer that does not belong there. We would understand this petition perfectly if it read, "Forgive us our debts" and just stopped right there. That would make sense. We all understand that we need to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. We know that confession and repentance are part of what prayer is all about. But why does Jesus add "as we also have forgiven our debtors"? At first glance, there doesn't seem to be any connection between the first part of the petition and the second part.

Grace or Works?

It seems as if Jesus is saying, “The way you treat other people is the way God will treat you.” On one level that thought is puzzling; on another it is profoundly disquieting. On still another level, it appears to present a major theological difficulty. Not long ago I was invited to appear before our high school youth group for an event called “Stump the Pastor.” The teenagers were asked to write their questions ahead of time—and they were encouraged to be both creative and obscure. Several of the students excelled in the latter category by asking questions such as, “Who or what was Ziv?” and “Who is listed as the seventh-to-the-last ancestor of Joseph?” But one question dealt with this very petition. It read something like this: “Why does Jesus say we should pray to be forgiven as we forgive others? Why would Almighty God tie Himself to what we do on earth?” That’s a good question, isn’t it?

So this petition is puzzling, difficult, and one that bothers every sincere thinker. It makes you wonder what Jesus really meant. Is Jesus teaching that God’s forgiveness is conditional? Is He telling us that *our* forgiveness from God is somehow predicated on *our* forgiving other people? It does appear, at first reading, that is indeed what He is teaching. If so, is this not teaching us that forgiveness is a work by which we gain God’s favor? What, then, happens to the great biblical doctrine of the grace of God? When it comes to forgiveness, who takes the first step—God or man?

Indeed, this is a difficult text of Scripture. Because it is, let me state my conclusion at the very beginning of this chapter. This verse means exactly what it says. The teaching of this verse can be summarized in one simple sentence: *Unless you forgive, God will not forgive you.* I repeat, this verse means exactly what it says. There is nothing hidden here; there is nothing tricky here. Jesus *is* saying that unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven.

Signing Your Own “Death Warrant”

Augustine called this text “a terrible petition.” He pointed out that if you pray these words while harboring an unforgiving spirit, you are actually asking God not to forgive you. Ponder that for a moment. If you pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors” while refusing to forgive those who have wronged you, this prayer, which is meant to be a blessing, becomes a self-inflicted curse. In that case you are really saying, “O God, because I have not forgiven my brother, please do not forgive me.” That is why Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great English preacher, said that if you pray the Lord’s Prayer with an unforgiving spirit, you have virtually signed your own “death warrant.”

During one period of his life, John Wesley was a missionary in the American colonies—primarily in the area that would become the state of Georgia. There was a general by the name of Oglethorpe with whom Wesley had some dealings. General Oglethorpe was a great military leader, but he had a reputation as a harsh and brutal man. One day he said to John Wesley, “I never forgive.” To which Wesley replied, “Then, sir, I hope you never sin.”

I received an e-mail from a man who has wrestled at length with the issue of forgiveness in his own life. Looking back on his own life, he discovered a powerful connection between forgiveness and being set free from a debilitating addiction:

Your sermon reminded me that forgiveness is an act of the will, a choice that I make each time someone hurts me. That choice also has nothing to do with my “feelings,” whether or not I want to forgive, or “feel like” forgiving. Most alcoholics/addicts have a very hard time with this, and it has been proven in hundreds of clinical tests that most of us with this problem have resentment at the core of our drinking. A case in point: When I joined AA I discovered I had a fierce resentment against my ex-wife. As my sponsor used to say, “Boy, she’s livin’ rent free in your head.”


One of the other pearls that he cast before this swine was that “having a resentment is like drinking poison and praying for the other guy to die.” The logic of that stupidity finally rang

home with me. I guess prior to that the cheese had slipped off my cracker, but good.

The great danger was that if I did not forgive her, I could not be released from this prison and might drink again. Christ ordered us to do this. “If you keep My commands, you are My disciples. *Then* you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” This promise is conditional and doesn’t apply to me if I don’t keep His commands. Period.

Solution: I was told to pray for her every day and every time during every day that I thought of her for 90 days and to report to him every day what I had learned from this exercise. I discovered that somewhere between the thirtieth and sixtieth days, the resentment left me and for the most part has been gone ever since. When I think of her now, it’s mostly in gratitude for the good years and kids we had together and to remember how my own irresponsibility in drinking led to the demise of that relationship. Those were my own bad choices.

Since then, the Lord has restored what the locusts had eaten and then some. When the ugly specter of previous resentment returns, I have to pray for her again. Works every time...even though sometimes I have to pray for the willingness to be willing.



To refuse to forgive someone and then ask God for forgiveness is a kind of spiritual schizophrenia.

The Key Word

When we pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” we are asking God to forgive our sins according to the same standard we have used in forgiving the sins of others. There are 11 words in the text, but only one of them is important

for our purposes. It's the little word "as." Everything hangs on the meaning of that word. "As" is the conjunction that joins the first half of the petition with the second half. When Jesus says "as," He is setting up a comparison between the way we forgive and the way God forgives us. This text says that we set the standard and then God follows the standard. We establish the pattern and then God follows that pattern in the way He deals with us. When we pray this prayer, we are really saying, "O God, deal with me as I deal with other people. Deal with me as I have dealt with others." More specifically, we are saying, in effect, "God, I did some favors for my neighbor, and my neighbor is ungrateful to me for all I have done. I am angry with my neighbor and will not forgive him for his ingratitude. Now deal with me as I have dealt with my neighbor." We set the standard, and God follows our lead.

To refuse to forgive someone and then ask God for forgiveness is a kind of spiritual schizophrenia. You are asking God to give you what you are unwilling to give to someone else. The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer says you cannot have it both ways. Do you want to be forgiven? You must forgive others. Unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven.

Junk Food of the Soul

There is another way to say this. The way we treat others has a direct impact on our relationship with God. As long as we harbor relational sins and wrong attitudes, we will never grow spiritually. These relational sins are like junk food of the soul. They choke off our craving for the Word so that instead of growing, we stay just as we are. As long as you treat people unkindly and gossip about them and harbor bitterness, you will never grow spiritually—not even if you come to church four times a week and go to Bible study every other day. Your relational sins will choke off God's Word in your life. That explains why some people come to church for years and never get better. They're harboring a relational garbage pit on the inside. They make excuses for their envy, they ignore their gossip, they make light of their

cutting comments, and they justify their meanness toward others. And they don't grow because they can't grow. When your horizontal relationships with others are messed up, your vertical relationship with God will never be right. God has wired us up so that the horizontal and the vertical go together. John says it very plainly in his first epistle: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). We cannot say, "I hate you" to a friend or family member and then say, "Lord, I love you. Please bless me right now." God says, "No deal." It doesn't work that way.

Snack food has a way of messing up our appetite. It happened to me twice recently. One Thursday afternoon, I drove out to a sporting goods store looking for some cold-weather gear for my bike riding in winter weather. I didn't find what I was looking for, but I wanted to make the trip to the store worthwhile, so I bought a bag of trail mix and ate it on the way home. For supper, my wife Marlene had fixed a wonderful meal, but I could hardly eat because I wasn't very hungry. Then the very next afternoon, I ate a late lunch. I'm not sure why I did this, but I drove up to a popular hot dog stand. I went alone, which I shouldn't have done because when you go by yourself, you are tempted to eat too much. And that's what happened to me. While I was standing in line I thought to myself, *You should order some extra fries*. The fries at this stand are fabulous—the workers slice the potatoes while you watch, and they throw the slices right in the hot oil. Then they put the fries on top of the hot dog and serve this greasy dish in a brown paper bag. It's a little bit of heaven. But they serve plenty of fries with the hot dog, so you don't really need extra fries. But I ordered them anyway...and ate every one of them. About an hour or two later, Marlene called and said she was preparing a special supper because it was Friday night and our son Mark was going to be gone for the evening. Marlene is a marvelous cook, and she wasn't happy to hear that I wasn't hungry. But that wasn't her fault. It was mine—for eating too many greasy French fries.

That's what happens when you eat too much junk food or too many snacks—messes up your appetite. And the same thing happens to you spiritually when you indulge in relational sins. When you're angry or upset or critical or mean or unkind or when you speak cutting words, that's a poison in your soul that chokes off your desire for God's Word.

When your horizontal relationships are out of whack, your vertical relationship is out of whack also.

Taste and See

Do you see how it all comes back to God once again? Loving your brothers isn't about you or them. Forgiving those who have hurt you isn't about you or them. It's about God.

- When we are angry and bitter...
- When we envy others...
- When we criticize those who aren't like us...
- When we pass along rumors...
- When we cling to hurtful memories...
- When we argue with those who call us to forgive...
- When we respond harshly to those who bother us...
- When we lose our temper...
- When we answer hastily with foolish words...
- When we judge others harshly...
- When we answer our spouse with harsh, cruel words...
- When we are impatient and irritable toward our children...
- When we have no time to be kind to the less fortunate...
- When we go through our day with a perpetual scowl...

When we act in these ways, it is always because we have forgotten the goodness of the Lord. Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good." God tastes better than sin! Revenge is sweet, but God is sweeter. Sin brings pleasure for a moment, but with God there are eternal joys. You got a taste of God's goodness when you came to Christ. Do you remember what that felt like? Do you

remember how wonderful it was to have the load of sin lifted off your shoulders? Do you remember what it felt like to finally be free? Some of us have forgotten what that felt like, and we have forgotten where we came from, and we have forgotten the pit we were in before Jesus rescued us. And when you forget God's goodness, it's easy to become critical and judgmental of others. Your bitterness will kill your appetite for His sweetness, or His sweetness will dispel your bitterness. You can't have both at the same time!

After I shared this truth with my congregation, a man said to me, "I need to go buy a broom." When I asked why, he said, "So I can sweep some junk out my life." I think a lot of us need to do some soul-sweeping. And if you've been eating too much spiritual junk food, you need to pray, "Make me hungry for you, O Lord!"

All in the Same Boat

Not long ago our church hosted a concert benefiting Break-through Urban Ministries. They do an incredible job of reaching people in the inner city of Chicago. Over the last few years, we've had a chance to partner with them and see firsthand the power of Jesus Christ to reclaim broken lives. The benefit featured the choir from Landmark Baptist Church in Chicago, plus our own Celebration Choir, plus the musical group Proclaim. Near the end of the concert, as Proclaim was about to sing its last song, Keith Johnson (a member of our church) gave a mini-sermon on the importance of caring about the hurting people of the world. He and a few others go out to the west side of Chicago every Friday night to witness to the prostitutes to bring them to Jesus. Some of the women who have been reached for Christ now attend our church. It's not easy for them to come here, but they do, and I'm glad they are here because their presence demonstrates the power of the gospel and helps us move one step closer to being a truly Christian church. Their presence reminds us that when it comes to salvation, we're all in the same boat. We're all sinners desperately in need of God's grace. It's just that some of us have more "respectable" sins, that's all. But apart from Jesus, we'd all be going to hell. During his little

mini-sermon, Keith said, "I'm so glad to be part of this ministry that reaches out to people who don't look right or act right and sometimes don't smell right. But that's okay, because someone reached out to me when I was in need of a Savior."

And that touches a problem facing many evangelical Christian churches. We've forgotten what we smelled like before Jesus saved us. We didn't smell very good on the inside, and maybe we didn't smell so good on the outside, but someone came to us with the good news and led us to Jesus. We've forgotten how we used to stink in the eyes of the Lord. We've forgotten the pit we were in when God found us. We've forgotten what it means to be lost. It's time that we started remembering the goodness of the Lord.

When you remember the Lord's goodness to you, you won't have the time or the inclination to look down on others or harbor hatred or bitterness or envy or malice in your heart. What is the answer? Try harder? Be nice to each other? No, the answer is not in you at all. The answer is God! Every part of your life as a Christian is about God—who He is, and what He has done for you. Has the Lord been good to you? Have you tasted His goodness in your life? Has God rescued you? Did He answer your prayers when you cried out to Him?

If so, give thanks and remember His goodness. Rejoice in it, and let it be the foundation of your life. And you will find your anger and malice and envy and all those other junk food relational sins slipping away. So let me repeat the phrase I've used several times in this chapter, only this time with a twist: *The horizontal is the key to the vertical, and the vertical is the key to the horizontal.* It's all about God. We look down on others because we have forgotten how bad we smelled before we tasted God's goodness. Remember His goodness to you, and you'll start treating people with true brotherly love, and then you'll grow.

An "Unforgiven" Christian

But does the Bible really teach that God's forgiveness of us is somehow linked to our forgiveness of others? Yes, indeed it does.

Let's go back to the words of Jesus. The fifth petition, which we've already examined, is in verse 12. Now let's drop down two verses. The Lord's Prayer is over, but Jesus is still speaking:

If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15).

I want to call one crucial fact to your attention: Jesus had just given the Lord's Prayer, and the only part He singles out for additional commentary is the fifth petition. All the other petitions are left alone. I believe He offered further commentary because He knew we would feel uncomfortable with this part of the Lord's Prayer. He knew we would try to wiggle out from under it. That is why in verses 14-15 He spells it out so clearly—so that no one can doubt it.

What happens when a believer holds a grudge? What happens when he refuses to forgive? What happens when a Christian harbors anger and ill feelings toward those who have wronged him? Is he forgiven? Yes, in the sense that he is justified before God. Yes, in the sense that when he dies, he will go to heaven. No, he is not forgiven in the sense of having daily cleansing and sweet fellowship with the Lord. He is "in Christ" and "out of fellowship" with the Lord. He is walking in the flesh. He has given Satan a foothold in his life (Ephesians 4:26-27). He is walking in disobedience before the Lord, and he opens himself up to divine chastisement by the Lord (Hebrews 12:4-11).

As strange as it may sound, there is such a thing as an "unforgiven" Christian. This is not a statement about ultimate destinies. To be "unforgiven" in this sense means that the channel of God's grace is blocked from the human side. In particular, it means you have chosen to hang on to your bitterness and to forfeit your daily walk with the Lord. You would rather be angry than joyful. You have chosen resentment over peace. Your grudges have become more important to you than the daily blessing of God. You would

rather live with the “hidden torturers” than experience the freedom of forgiveness.

If you are a Christian—a genuine believer in Jesus Christ—unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven. Why? Because God has already forgiven 100 percent of your sins by the blood of Jesus Christ. How dare you, then, be unforgiving to someone who hurt you. That’s really the issue. How dare you be unforgiving after what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross.¹²

*The more you see the seriousness
of your sin before God, the less
the sins of other people
against you will bother you.*

What happens when we refuse to forgive? Here are ten consequences of an unforgiving spirit (I compiled this list using material from R. T. Kendall, Waylon Moore, and Bob Leland):

1. Our fellowship with the Father is blocked.
2. The Holy Spirit is grieved.
3. Your prayers will not be answered.
4. God leaves you alone to face the problems of life in your own power.
5. The devil gains a foothold through your bitterness.
6. You force God to become your enemy.
7. You lose the blessing of God on your life.
8. You waste time nursing a wounded spirit.
9. You become enslaved to the people you hate.
10. You become like the people you refuse to forgive.

The Real Condition of Forgiveness

The real condition of the forgiveness of sins is a repentant heart. Would we not all agree on that? Before you can be forgiven, there must be true repentance before God. And what is the mark of a penitent heart if it is not a forgiving spirit toward other people? As John Stott puts it, “God forgives only the penitent and one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit.”¹³ How can you even talk about wanting your sins forgiven if you’re holding grudges against other people? You’re asking God to do for you what you are unwilling to do for others.

Our real problem at this point is not theological, but personal. We don’t see ourselves as very great sinners; therefore, we do not appreciate how greatly God has forgiven us. And when your own sins seem small, the sins of others against you will seem big indeed. The reverse is also true. The more you see the seriousness of your sin before God, the less the sins of other people against you will bother you. To paraphrase the Puritan preacher Matthew Henry, “He who relents is he who repents.” Don’t talk about repentance unless you are willing to forgive your brothers and sisters. Otherwise your repentance is just hot air and empty talk. True repentance starts with a change of mind that leads to a change of heart that leads to a change (in this case) in the way we view those who have sinned against us.

Many years ago I pastored a small church in Southern California. I went there two months after graduating from seminary, and stayed for about five years. In seminary we were told that it was typical for a church to grow for about six months after a new pastor arrives, and then the growth normally levels off. That’s exactly what happened here. The church grew for a few months, and then the growth leveled off. And it stayed level. Very level. Extremely level. Nothing I did seemed to make any difference in the growth of the church. After a few years I began to think about leaving. One Wednesday afternoon I was in my office at church doing some work when the phone rang. The call came from the pastor of a very large church on the West Coast. His call was

unexpected and unsolicited. It was “the call” that every young pastor dreams about. Someone had given him my name because he was looking for a pastor to join his staff and share in the preaching responsibilities at his church. It was a dream job in every way. He said he wanted to come and chat with me in person. Then he asked the size of my congregation. When I told him, there was a short pause. He asked me to send my resumé and then said, “I’ll get in touch with you soon.”

I couldn’t wait to go home and tell my wife the good news. That very day I put my resumé in the mail along with some printed sermons. After mailing the material, I began to dream about all the possibilities. The sermons I would preach, the vast crowds that would attend, the doors that would begin to open. Even though several decades have passed since that phone call, I can still remember and even feel inside the incredible excitement, the euphoria I felt at the moment. My life was about to radically change for the better...or so I thought.

A few days passed with no word from the pastor, and I thought to myself, *He’ll call me soon*. After a week or so, I decided he was probably busy but would get around to calling soon. After all, pastors of large churches have a lot to do, and he probably was busy. More days passed, and I began to get concerned. Every day I waited for the mail to arrive, and anxiously flipped through the junk mail, hoping for a letter that never arrived. Days slowly turned into weeks, and as time went on, my joy turned to concern, and my concern turned eventually into frustration. After a month had passed, my frustration turned to despair.

After still a few more weeks, the realization hit me: *He’s not going to get back in touch with me even though he said he would*. And my despair turned to anger. Who did he think he was to treat me that way? Maybe I pastored a small church, but I hadn’t asked him to call me. That was his idea. I didn’t ask him to recruit me with promises of a bright future. He was the one who said, “I’ll get in touch with you soon.” The truth was hard to face:

He wasn't going to write.
He wasn't going to call.
He wasn't going to talk to me at all.

I sank into a deep depression. Looking back from the vantage point of many years' hindsight, it now seems silly that I was so concerned. But back then I felt betrayed by someone who had entered my life, made a promise, and then had not even bothered to call back to say, "I'm not interested." Even if he had decided I wasn't qualified, didn't I at least deserve the courtesy of a phone call?

I was inconsolable. My wife tried to encourage me, but to no avail. Worse, this wasn't the kind of problem I could share with anyone else. It was too embarrassing to mention to my friends in the ministry. And I felt used and useless. Plus, at that point in my life, I simply wasn't mature enough to understand that these things happen all the time.

People make promises they don't keep.
People say they will call you but they don't.
People intend to stay in touch but soon forget you.
People ask for help and then never say thanks.
People tell stories about you and then deny it to your face.
People fail all the time in a million different ways.

People are people. We all fail in many ways. We overlook it when *we* do it, but we're shocked when *someone else* (especially someone we thought we could depend on) turns out to be human.

Months went by, and I never heard back from the man. Eventually I got over the disappointment, but the anger stayed with me for a long time. It was a low-level sort of anger that made me short-tempered, snippy, cranky, and generally a miserable grouch. Looking back, I am amazed that my wife stayed so positive while I wallowed in my self-pity. And beneath it all was a deep reservoir of self-doubt. This whole episode made me wonder about my

long-term prospects as a pastor. Perhaps I had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. The dejection from thinking I might be inadequate was even worse than the residual anger I felt.

The turning point came rather unexpectedly. One afternoon Marlene and I went to a dollar store to do some shopping. Even though I can't remember the name of the store, as I type these words I can clearly picture myself going up and down the aisles. Marlene was shopping, and I was idly looking at the shelves. And of course, I was still thinking to myself about what had happened months earlier. For the five-thousandth time, I was replaying it all in my mind. At that moment, God spoke to me. I can't think of a better way to describe this even though I didn't hear an audible voice. But in that dollar store, as I meandered through the aisles, the God of heaven and earth spoke to me. He said something like this: "Ray, wake up. You've been stewing about this for far too long. You've done the same thing yourself to other people a thousand times." There it was. That was the bottom-line truth that would set me free. What that big-church pastor had done to me wasn't so unusual. I had done the same thing over and over and over again to other people. God continued:

"You've made promises you didn't keep."

"You've started projects you didn't finish."

"You've let people down who depended on you."

"You've not made phone calls you said you were going to make."

"You've led people to believe things you knew weren't true."

"You're as bad as he is."

Then the thought came: "No, you are worse. He sinned against you once. You sinned twice. You've done the same thing he did. And you're bitter at him because he's a sinner just like you."

Just like that, I felt a massive weight lifting from my shoulders. Once I could face the truth, then I could be set free. And the anger and despair and depression left my soul. I started laughing and

singing right there in the dollar store. It was a moment of self-revelation. I saw myself as the great sinner that I am, and that sight set me free. It was no burden for me to forgive the pastor of the large church when I realized that he might pastor a larger church, but in my eyes I was a larger sinner.

There is one more detail to this story. Two months later I received a letter from the pastor who had forgotten about me. He apologized for his oversight and offered a reasonable explanation. It truly was just “one of those things.” I haven’t had a negative thought about him since that day in the dollar store over 20 years ago. Once I saw myself as a sinner, it was easy to forgive him.

Needed: A Serious Moral Inventory

There is a vital link between the way you treat other people and the way God in heaven is going to treat you. Let’s face it: We don’t like that. We’d much prefer if we could just have our relationship with God insulated and encapsulated so we could treat other people any way we like. Jesus says, “No deal. You can’t have it that way.” *Unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven.* This is a hard word, isn’t it? But it is a hard word of grace. Many of us desperately need to take inventory of our hearts and ask ourselves some serious questions:

Am I up-to-date on my forgiving?

Am I holding a grudge against anyone?

Am I harboring any bitterness against any person?

Am I talking too much about what others have done to me?

Have I forgiven those closest to me who have hurt me so deeply?

Someone says, “But I can’t forgive.” No, don’t ever say that. The word *can’t* is a cop-out. The issue is deeper than that. You won’t forgive. Don’t make excuses and don’t play games. If you are a true Christian, a genuine believer in Jesus Christ, your sins have been

washed away, and you can forgive. What God has done for you, you can do for others.

As long as you refuse to forgive, you're better off not praying the Lord's Prayer. Because unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven. As long as you hold on to your resentments, you are still chained to the past. You only hurt yourself and block off the channel of God's blessing in your life. Although there is freedom in Christ, the unforgiving Christian knows nothing about it. He is still in bondage to the remembered hurts from the past. And until those chains are broken by a decisive act of forgiveness, he will remain a slave to the past.

I have said several times that this is a hard word, and indeed it is. But it is also a cleansing word that cuts through all our flimsy excuses and leads us to a fountain of grace where we can be healed, made whole, and restored to a right relationship with our Creator. Our God freely forgave us while we were His enemies. Can we not do for others what He has done for us?

The word of the Lord remains. Unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven.

Five

Seventy Times Seven



*Forgetting is something that time takes care of,
but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer
is qualified to make the decision.*

SIMON WIESENTHAL

*M*any years ago I preached a series of sermons called “The Marriage Clinic.” Instead of picking the topics myself, I gave the church a ballot with a list of suggested topics and asked the people to choose the ones they wanted most to hear. The series was so popular that I decided to do it again the next year, only this time I called it “The Family Clinic.” Once again I gave the congregation a ballot listing various topics relating to the family and asked the congregation to vote for the ones they most wanted to hear.

Interestingly, only one topic was selected both times. All the other topics were picked only once—either for the marriage series, or the family series. The topic was “How to Handle Anger and Bitterness.” That puzzled me for a while. I hadn’t expected it to be so popular. So I asked Marlene why so many of our people wanted to know how to handle anger and bitterness. She replied with characteristic wisdom, “It’s probably because they have a lot of

anger and bitterness.” She was right. In the years since then I have learned that most Christians struggle with these emotions. They want to know how to handle them because they have so much of them stored up inside.

This then brought to mind the lady who came to see me because her husband was an absolute bum. He wouldn’t get up in the morning, he wouldn’t get dressed, he wouldn’t keep a job, he wouldn’t help around the house, he wouldn’t talk to his wife, and he wouldn’t go anywhere or do anything. He just sat around the house all day long. “Pastor, I’m thinking about getting a divorce,” she told me.

Then I remembered another woman who came to see me. She was one of the pillars of the church. After 35 years of marriage, her husband had an affair with his secretary, committed adultery, and carried in his wallet pictures of the child he fathered. She told me, “It’s getting to the point where I may just blow up any day. I don’t know how much longer I can take this.”

Several years after that I received a letter from a dear friend in a distant state who was caught in a difficult marital situation. She wrote, “I surely need to review your forgiveness sermon. I try to keep up to date on my forgiving, but find my heart pretty cold and stony.”

Can This Marriage Be Saved?

In the years since then, I have spent hundreds of hours talking with husbands and wives about their marriages. Usually by the time a couple goes to see a pastor, their marriage is already in a state of serious distress. They come with stories of marital unfaithfulness, emotional or physical abuse, financial mismanagement, verbal abuse, communication breakdowns, disagreements over childrearing, petty grievances that have become huge differences, lack of love, loss of respect, widely differing expectations, and a host of other problems. More than that, they come because those problems have built up to the point where they threaten the continued existence of the marriage.

Every couple has the same questions: Is there any hope? Can our marriage be saved? Should we give up and get a divorce, or is there a better way? The problems I just mentioned are notoriously difficult, and none of them lend themselves to easy or quick solutions. I have also learned over the years not to make promises I cannot keep. While I do not believe divorce is ever mandated, I also understand that sometimes it cannot be avoided. In today's legal climate, one person can file for divorce and there is little the other person can do to stop it. Sometimes marriages end, even the marriages of Christian people who at one time were both faithful in the church. There is no getting around that fact, and there is no use in pretending it is not true. Each case is different and each marriage has its own unique set of factors that must be carefully analyzed. But over the years I have discovered that whenever a couple has trouble in their marriage, they must eventually face the issue of anger and bitterness. If they refuse, they may make changes that work good on the surface, but the underlying problems will not go away.

Forgiveness is not some kind of miracle cure that can solve all the problems of your life. But it is a foundational issue we must deal with. When we have anger and bitterness stored up inside us, we must learn how to forgive. And we may even need to forgive over and over again. There is no escape from the need to forgive because on this side of heaven, there is no escape from living in a sinful world. Whenever sinners live together, they will sooner or later (probably sooner) do things that irritate, upset, and hurt each other. Forgiveness makes it possible for irritations to be overlooked and deep hurts to be healed.

“How Long Do I Have to Take It?”

In one of His most famous parables, Jesus told a story about forgiveness that makes it very clear how forgiveness is to be carried out. The story, found in Matthew 18:21-35, is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Here we see the apostle Peter come to Jesus with a question we have all asked at one time or another. Somebody had done him wrong, and Peter had forgiven him. The same fellow did it again, and Peter had forgiven him again. He did it again, and Peter forgave him again, but this time Peter got mad.

So he comes to Jesus with a question we can all understand. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” Peter wanted to know how much guff he had to take from somebody. When do you quit turning the other cheek? When is it okay to blow your stack?

Now, Peter didn’t wait for an answer. He was ready to suggest one. He asked, “Up to seven times?” We might think Peter wasn’t being very generous, but in that place and time, he was. The rabbis taught that you had to forgive a man three times, and then you could retaliate. So Peter thinks to himself, *Well, I’ll just double that and add one*. Seven, after all, is the perfect number. To be honest, forgiving a man seven times is commendable. Most of us get frustrated if we have to forgive someone twice. By human standards, Peter’s suggestion to forgive seven times was extravagant.

No More Mr. Nice Guy

Peter’s heart was in the right place, but his attitude was wrong. He wanted to put a legal limit on forgiveness. He wanted a number, a limit, a place where he could finally say, “No more Mr. Nice Guy.” But look at Jesus’ answer in verse 22: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (ESV). That clunk you hear is Peter falling over in a dead faint. He couldn’t believe his ears. Seventy times seven? That’s 490 times! Jesus said, “Peter, you’ve got it all wrong. You don’t count the number of times you forgive someone. *Forgiveness is unlimited.*”

Now, 70 times seven does not mean we’re to keep count. Rather, it means there is no limit to the number of times you should forgive someone else. By the time you’ve forgiven someone 490 times, you’ve gotten into the habit of continual forgiveness.

The truth of unlimited forgiveness is hard for us to grasp, so Jesus told a story in verses 23-35 to help illustrate that truth. The story begins: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.” Here’s a great king who one day decided to call in all his debts. So he sent out his soldiers, and back they come with this man. When the king asks, “How much does he owe?” his accountants check the books and answer, “Ten thousand talents, your majesty.”

To give you some perspective, a talent was an enormous amount of money. A man might work all his life and make ten talents, or possibly 30 talents. But here’s a man who’s run up a debt of 10,000 talents. In today’s terms, that might come to \$25 million. How did he run up such a big debt? Perhaps he was the governor of a province and had skimmed off the tax revenues, secretly amassing a huge fortune. The day of reckoning has come, and the man is flat broke. He spent it all; he doesn’t have a penny left. So the king says, “Sell his wife, his kids, his house, and while you’re at it, sell him.” Not that this man was worth that kind of money; the king merely wanted to get back whatever he could.

Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief

At this point the servant does what any of us would have done: He falls on his knees and begs, “Be patient with me...and I will pay back everything” (verse 26). But this is no time to make excuses. Unless something happens fast, this man is dead meat. That’s why he’s begging. And he even makes the ridiculous promise to pay it all back. He couldn’t do it in a million years! But somehow this touches the king’s heart. The Bible says the king was moved with compassion. And he not only releases the man, he also forgives the debt. He wipes the slate clean and erases the book. Now the man owes him nothing. This is the great miracle of the story. The king forgave this enormous debt, this unbelievable amount of money. And the man walks away scot-free.

Soon afterward, this forgiven man spots a man who owed him some money—100 denarii. A single denarius was the average wage for a day’s work, so a hundred denarii would equal about three months’ pay for a workingman in the first century. If you translate that into modern terms, it might equal as much as \$10,000. That’s a substantial sum of money.

There are two crucial points to keep in mind at this point: First, 100 denarii was not a small amount, but it was not an impossibly large debt to repay. It is perfectly believable that the man borrowed the money in good faith and fully intended to pay it back over a period of months or years. Unlike the first man, when the second one said, “Be patient with me and I will pay you back,” he wasn’t being unrealistic. If the first servant would have patience, the second man would indeed pay him back in full.

Second, 100 denarii is not a small amount, but it pales in significance when compared to the debt of 10,000 talents. That’s the real point of the story. The first man could never, ever, under any circumstances pay back his debt. Without the grace of the king, he would be in prison for the rest of his life. The first debt was enormous; the second debt was not.

So the forgiven servant sees a fellow servant who owes him \$10,000, grabs him by the throat, and says, “Where’s the money you owe me, buster? I want it right now.” Verse 29 is almost a word-for-word replay of verse 26. Only this time the situation is reversed. The first servant is no longer begging; rather, he is demanding payment. Don’t let this point slip by. He had every legal right to demand payment. No one could fault him for wanting his money. That’s not the issue. The issue is that the first man wouldn’t even give the second man a chance to pay the debt. He wanted his money then and there. Well, the second servant wasn’t walking around with \$10,000 in his pocket. It would take some time to get that kind of money together.

But the first servant is unwilling to wait. Verse 30 says, “He went off and had the man thrown in prison until he could pay the debt.”

The first servant made a serious mistake—he did this in broad daylight. If you’re going to be chintzy, it’s better to do it behind closed doors. Someone who knew what the king had just done for the first servant saw this, too. Word got around, and soon everybody was talking about it. It wasn’t the fact that the first servant would not forgive the second servant that shocked them. It was that he was so unforgiving after having found such mercy himself. Eventually the news gets back to the king. And boy, does he get mad. He sends out his soldiers and they haul the man in. This time there will be no mercy. The king says, “You wicked servant...I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (verses 32-33). The king had forgiven the first servant a \$25-million debt. Forgiven him when he could have enslaved him for life. Forgiven him when he was flat broke. Forgiven him when, by every law in the land, he could have destroyed him. The first servant deserved punishment, and instead found mercy.

Shouldn’t that servant have shown the same mercy to the fellow servant who owed him a lousy \$10,000?

Consequently, there’s no forgiveness this time. The king won’t be conned again. The Bible says he called for the torturers and handed the man over to them “until he should pay back all he owed” (verse 34).

The Hidden Torturers

That’s the story Jesus told. And He didn’t leave us to wonder about the application. He gives it in verse 35: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” These words are for believers. Jesus said, “What happened to that man will happen to you unless you learn to forgive and forgive and forgive.” The torturers will come and take you away. What torturers? The hidden torturers of anger and bitterness, which eat your insides out. The torturers of frustration and malice, which give you ulcers and high blood pressure and migraine headaches and lower back pain. The torturers that


make you lie awake at night on your bed stewing over every rotten thing that happens to you. Why? Because you will not forgive from your heart.

Researchers have discovered the practical implications of Jesus' words. According to *Newsweek* magazine, forgiveness works in two different ways. First, it reduces the health problems associated with anger, hatred, and unforgiveness. "These have specific physiologic consequences—such as increased blood pressure and hormonal changes—linked to cardiovascular disease, immune suppression and, possibly, impaired neurological function and memory." Second, forgiveness promotes well-being because it allows you to build a strong social network. "Someone who nurses grudges and keeps track of every slight is obviously going to shed some relationships over the course of a lifetime." The article concludes by quoting a proverb by Confucius: "If you devote your life to seeking revenge, first dig two graves."¹⁴

"Pay Me Right Now!"

Too often we are like the unforgiving servant. We stand before Almighty God with our sins piled up like a mountain. The mountain is so tall we can't get over it, so wide we can't go around it. Our sins are like a \$25 million debt we could never pay in our lifetime or in a thousand lifetimes. And God, who is rich in mercy, says, "I forgive all your sins. My Son has paid the debt. You owe Me nothing." Then we rise from the pew and leave the church humming, "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before." Before we get to our car we see a person who has done us wrong and we want to grab him by the throat and say, "Pay me right now!"

No wonder we are tormented. No wonder we are so angry and bitter. No wonder we have problems. No wonder our friendships don't last. No wonder we can't get along. No wonder Christmas is such a difficult time of the year. We have not learned the secret of unlimited forgiveness. Verily, the hidden torturers have done their work.



*Forgiveness is wonderful
because the forgiver always
has the last word.*

If you want the theme of this chapter in one sentence, here it is: *The way to become great in the kingdom of God is to become a great forgiver.* Mark Twain said it this way: “Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet gives to the heel that has crushed it.” Forgiveness is wonderful because the forgiver always has the last word. Someone hurts you, and you forgive that person. He does it again, and you forgive again. He does it a third time, and you forgive again a third time. And so it keeps going. But you always have the last word. Why? Because a person can’t wrong you more than you can forgive him.

Difficult, But Not Impossible

We must not lose sight of what Jesus was teaching in the parable. He was not suggesting that forgiveness is easy. It’s not. To pay back a debt of \$10,000 would take weeks or months or possibly years. But it could be done. Forgiveness is difficult. It requires patience and a gentle spirit. After a relationship has been torn open, healing will not come overnight. *But it is possible.* That’s the crucial point. If two people are willing to work at it, healing and reconciliation can take place. With humility on one side and patience on the other, the hurt can be healed and the breach repaired.

But as long as we focus on the wrong people have done to us, forgiveness is impossible. Their sins against us will always look mountainous in our eyes. How could we ever trust anyone who hurt us like that? The only hope of lasting forgiveness is to shift

your focus from the sins of others against you to your own sins against God. That changes the equation because it forces us to look inside, to see in horrific clarity the depths of our own depravity. No matter what others have done to us, what we have done to God by sinning against Him is infinitely worse. Therefore, whatever it costs us to forgive someone else will be infinitely less than what it cost God to forgive us.

Finally, the parable brings home the point that whatever forgiveness costs us, unforgiveness costs far more. We pay a far higher price when we're bitter than when we forgive. Worse, we keep on paying and paying and paying, which is why some people carry grudges all the way to the grave. They are still paying for their refusal to forgive.

I Can't Go Back

Let's wrap up this chapter with a principle I call "The First Rule of Spiritual Progress." This principle is comprised of three sentences that have four words each—words which, when taken together, give you the key for moving forward with your life.

I can't go back.

I can't stay here.

I must go forward.

You can't go back to the past—not to relive the good times, or to seek revenge for the bad times. And you can't stay where you are right now. Life is like a river that flows endlessly onward. It matters not whether you are happy in your present situation or whether you seek deliverance from it—you can't stay. The only way to go is forward. *Forgiveness is God's means of letting go of the past and moving forward with God.*

When I said earlier that forgiveness is simple, I wasn't saying it is easy. If you have been deeply hurt, nothing will be harder for you than letting go. But the message of the Bible is clear: Unless you let go of the past, you are doomed to live there forever.

Here are two stories to ponder. One comes from the Civil War, the other from the Vietnam War.

Charles Bracelen Flood, in his book *Lee: The Last Years*, tells of a time after the Civil War when Robert E. Lee visited a woman who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. There she cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North or at least sympathize with her loss. Lee paused, and then said, “Cut it down, my dear madam, and then forget it.”¹⁵

Good advice from a man who knew the horrors of war and suffered the pain of defeat.

The second story comes from an interview with Pete Peterson, the first postwar American ambassador to Vietnam. Mr. Peterson’s appointment was ironic because he served six years as a prisoner of war in the dreaded Hanoi Hilton. He returned to the land where he was held captive—not for revenge, but to represent the United States. When asked how he could do this after years of starvation, torture, and inhuman brutality, he replied, “I’m not angry. I left that at the gates of the prison when I walked out in 1972. That may sound simplistic to some people, but it’s the truth. I just left it behind me and decided to move forward with my life.”

At some point we all have to decide to move on with life. Toward that end, I wish to put forward a novel idea. *You ought to forgive those who have hurt you—not for their sake, but for yours.* I suppose that’s why we don’t want to forgive. We hope that by nursing our anger we can somehow strike a blow for justice against those who have hurt us. In the end, we hurt ourselves at least as much as we hurt the other person. And often, the person who hurts us ends up winning twice—once when he hurt us, and again when we dwell on the incident.

That’s why Jesus’ parable must be understood as teaching continual forgiveness—the kind you practice over and over and over again. Remember, forgiveness isn’t—or shouldn’t be—a tool for manipulating people into having a good relationship with you. No

one can force another person to be reconciled to you. That must come from a heart prompted by God's Holy Spirit.

For God's Sake...and for Yours

Ultimately, there are two very good reasons to forgive that have nothing to do with the other person:

- You should forgive because God has commanded it.
- You should forgive because forgiveness is good for your own soul.

Any other benefits are like ice cream added to a piece of apple pie—nice, but not necessary.

In short, we should practice forgiveness for God's sake and for our own sake. That ought to be enough to motivate any of us.

Many of us need this truth because we've been living for years under the burden of remembered hurts. Some of them go back to our childhood. Some of them involve people we haven't seen for a long time. We need to take a trip out to the Cemetery of Forgiveness, make a list of the faults, sins, and failures of those who hurt us, dig a hole in the ground, and bury those faults forever. And *never* dig them up again.

Forgiveness Is Possible


I once knew of two women in the same church whose husbands had committed adultery. Neither man seemed more or less likely to do such a thing. The circumstances were different, the incidents far separated in time and place. One man confessed to his wife with tears and later sought counseling. The other man admitted his sin but never sought forgiveness. Not long afterward he died, and then she died. There was bitterness and enormous sadness on both sides. He went to the grave unforgiven, partly because he would never ask for it, partly because she never gave it. What of the other couple? Theirs was not an easy road back. But they decided together to walk the path of forgiveness. More than

20 years had passed when they told me the story. You could hear a whisper of sadness in their voices, but the bitterness was long gone. I should add that I was totally surprised when they told me about what had happened, for they had a radiant and happy relationship. I would never have imagined what they had been through if I hadn't heard it directly from them.

Another story comes to mind: A Christian man had a long-term affair that lasted for years. When the truth came out, he denied it at first, but then admitted his adultery. With great difficulty, he confessed his sin to his wife who apparently had never suspected a thing. To say she was devastated would be putting it mildly. She wept for days. How could the man she trusted betray her so deeply? How could she ever trust him again? I will never forget sitting in her home listening to her pour out her heart. Even as I write these words, I can picture the anguish etched on her face. Most of what she said I have forgotten. But one statement still echoes across the years. She had decided to forgive him. Exactly what that decision cost her, I do not know, but I do know it did not come cheap. Her soul agonized over her husband's sin as she tried to gauge the sincerity of his repentance. Was he truly sorry? Was the affair really over? How could he have been so stupid? What if he did it again? How could she forgive him for years of adultery? The answers took weeks and months to formulate in her heart. But eventually she saw clearly the path she needed to take. She would forgive her husband, take him back, and try to make the marriage work. When she tried to explain this to me, it all boiled down to one sentence: "How could I not forgive him when the Lord has forgiven me of so much?" She said it not with joy (that would be asking too much), but with a resigned faith. This was the foundation of life for her.

I remember thinking to myself that I wasn't sure I would be as generous as she had been. But then, I wasn't in her shoes. And I suppose, looking back, that I was angry with the man for his brazen deception of so many people for so long. But he hadn't committed adultery against me. And his wife, who had been so

greatly sinned against, found the strength from the Lord to forgive him. And she did it because of a profound sense of God's forgiveness in her own life. What she had received, she now gave to her unfaithful husband.



*Forgiveness is difficult,
but it is not impossible.*

Back then, I would not have held out any hope for the marriage to survive. That was many years ago. They are still married and they seem happy together. I say that from a distance because they moved away and I haven't talked to either of them in a long time. But theirs seems to be a case where love truly covered a multitude of sins. She could not have done it by herself. Only God can give that sort of grace. What she freely received, she freely gave.

Forgiveness *is* possible. Healing *is* possible. That which was so carelessly broken *can* be restored. But it takes patience, and loving hands, and a full dose of the grace of God. *Forgiveness is difficult, but it is not impossible.* Where the hurt runs very deep, or goes back many years, you will be wise to seek the counsel of other Christians at certain points along the way. Forgiveness is not a magic potion that will suddenly take the shadows out of your life. Nor is the work of forgiveness done quickly or easily. Forgiveness is not an event; forgiveness is a highway you walk every single day. But there is freedom and healing and wholeness for those who dare to make the journey.

Many of us have lived far too long with unresolved hurts going back many years. We've been angry and bitter all that time. The hidden torturers have done their work. No wonder our marriages

are so unhappy. No wonder divorce seems like a good alternative. No wonder we determine to shut a friend or co-worker out of our lives, or to seek vengeance.

But it's time to forgive.

Where should we begin?

- Perhaps forgiving from your heart means writing a letter of forgiveness to the one who hurt you.
- Perhaps it means confessing to a friend that you are struggling with issues of forgiveness.
- Perhaps it means asking God to forgive someone for what he or she did to you.
- Perhaps it means memorizing Psalm 103:12, Ephesians 4:31-32, and Hebrews 10:17 in order to get God's viewpoint on forgiveness.
- Perhaps it means listing the other person's offenses one by one and writing over them "Forgiven" and then offering the list to God in prayer.
- Perhaps it means meditating on the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer—"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).
- Perhaps it means confessing your sins to your spouse or friend—especially your sin of harboring an unforgiving spirit toward him or her—and asking for forgiveness.
- Perhaps it means confessing your anger toward God for allowing terrible things to happen to you. Your struggle with forgiveness toward another person may ultimately be caused by unresolved anger toward God. If you are angry at God, it is possible you have never yielded to Him the right not to know why someone has hurt you so deeply. Until you yield that right to God,

you will find it almost impossible to forgive that someone.

- Perhaps it means asking God to bless, in every way, the person who hurt you—emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically.
- Perhaps it means taking a step of active love toward the offender—loving him or her in spite of what he or she did or the way he or she is.

Forgiveness will mean different things to different people. The cost will differ depending on the magnitude of the offense. But the result is always the same—liberating freedom from the past and a new foundation on which to build a healthy marriage or friendship.

Whatever you need to do in order to forgive, go ahead and do it.

How many times should you forgive? Jesus said, “Seventy times seven.”

Six

Judge Not!



*There is no man so good, who, were he to submit
all his thoughts and actions to the laws, would not
deserve hanging ten times in his life.*


MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

*T*hey called him “Daddy King.” When Martin Luther King, Sr. died in 1984, he was eulogized as the father of the civil rights movement in America. One black leader said, “If we started our own country, he would be our George Washington.” In his 84 years he endured more than his share of suffering and hatred. During his childhood in Georgia, he witnessed lynchings. The first time he tried to register to vote in Atlanta, he found that the registrar’s office was on the second floor of City Hall—but the stairwell was closed, the elevator for blacks was out of order, and the one working elevator was marked “Whites Only.”

King, Sr. is mostly remembered for the accomplishments of his eldest son, Martin Luther King, Jr.—the leader of the nonviolent civil rights movement who was cut down by an assassin’s bullet in 1968. One year later, his second son drowned in a backyard swimming pool. The crowning blow came in 1974 during a church

service. As his wife played “The Lord’s Prayer,” a young man arose in the congregation and began shooting. Mrs. King collapsed in a hail of gunfire, while Dr. King watched in horror from the pulpit.

Near the end of his life, reflecting on the loss of his wife and oldest son, he spoke of the policy of nonviolence he had come to embrace. “There are two men I am supposed to hate. One is a white man, the other is black, and both are serving time for having committed murder. I don’t hate either one. There is no time for that, and no reason either. Nothing that a man does takes him lower than when he allows himself to fall so low as to hate anyone.”



*As costly as it is to forgive,
there is only one consolation—
unforgiveness costs far more.*

But how can a man not hate someone who kills his wife or oldest son? It seems natural and even proper to hate killers, doesn’t it? The answer comes back, “There is no time for that.” To hate is to live in the past, to dwell on deeds already done. Hatred is the least satisfying emotion, for it gives the person you hate a double victory—one in the past, one in the present.

No time to hate? Not if you have learned how to forgive. Forgiving does *not* mean whitewashing the past, but it does mean refusing to live there. Forgiveness breaks the awful chain of bitterness and the insidious desire for revenge. As costly as it is to forgive, there is only one consolation—unforgiveness costs far more.

I wonder how many of us have gotten in trouble because we gave in to our anger. Perhaps we have said words in a moment of tension that we later came to regret. Marriages and families have been broken, friendships ended, careers destroyed, and churches split because we lost our temper and said words or did actions we later regretted.

The Sin of Judging Wrongly

Behind our anger lies a problem we rarely talk about and therefore rarely face. *We have wrongly judged another person and have sinned in the process.* In our rush to judgment, in our haste to make sure someone else takes the blame, in our zeal to find the guilty party, we have violated the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:1: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (ESV). The words are simple and clear. They are plain and unambiguous. Because they are familiar, we tend to forget about them. Or worse, we find a way to explain them away. Perhaps it will help to hear this verse worded differently. Listen to the words as found in *The Message* by Eugene Peterson: “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment.” And this is Peterson’s version of verse 2: “That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging.” That’s not really a translation, but it is entirely faithful to the meaning of the text.

There are several ways we can approach a text like this. We could spend a lot of time talking about the illustration Jesus used in which He referred to the speck in your brother’s eye and the log in your own eye. It’s funny and ironic, and when Jesus spoke these words, I’m sure His hearers laughed out loud. I’ll return to that illustration shortly, but first, let’s focus on verse 1. What exactly did Jesus mean when He said, “Judge not”?

For starters, it helps to know what He did *not* mean. Jesus is not saying we should never pass any sort of judgment. Every day we make hundreds of judgments about the world around us. It is not wrong, for instance, to sit on a jury and render a verdict. Nor is it wrong for an admissions committee to decide which students to accept and which to reject. Nor is it wrong for an employer to decide who gets a promotion and who doesn’t. Nor is it wrong for schools to judge certain students worthy of high honor at graduation. We all have to make decisions every day that involve other people. We pass judgments on appearance, behavior, speech, deportment, attitude, work ethic, productivity, keeping or

breaking a promise, guilt or innocence, which we believe and which we do not believe.

Condemnation Condemned

What, then, did Jesus mean when He said, “Judge not”? The word translated “judge” often means “to condemn.” It means to come to a negative conclusion about another person and then to condemn him. That is what Jesus is forbidding. Let me be a little more specific about this.

First, we are not to pass final judgment on any person. Final judgment belongs to the Lord. We are not in the condemning business. If anyone needs to be condemned, God Himself can take care of that. We should have no part in it.

Second, we are not to judge the motives of others. The Bible says, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (I Samuel 16:7). Often we are quick to come to negative conclusions about others based on why we think they did something. But try as we might, we see only the outside. God alone sees the heart.

- We can judge what people *do*; we cannot judge *why* they do it.
- We can judge what people *say*; we cannot judge *why* they say it.

Only God can judge the hidden secrets of the heart; leave such judgments to Him. You don’t even know your own heart, much less the heart of anyone else. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV). Sometimes when little children have been caught disobeying and you ask them why they did it, they will reply tearfully, “I don’t know.” That’s not a cop-out; it’s a profound theological truth. We are so wicked by nature that we don’t know why we do what we do. All of us can remember times when we did or said something foolish, and looking back, we can honestly say, “I don’t know why

I did something stupid like that.” If we can’t understand our own heart, how can we ever presume to understand anyone else’s?

Third, we are not to be faultfinders. One source (www.Wordsmith.net) defines a faultfinder as “one who finds much to criticize or complain about, esp. of a petty nature,” and lists these synonyms: malcontent, scold, nag, and critic. Related words include grouch, grumbler, and bellyacher.

Proverbs 11:12 tells us, “It is foolish to belittle a neighbor; a person with good sense remains silent” (NLT). The Message is even more pointed: “Mean-spirited slander is heartless; quiet discretion accompanies good sense.” Faultfinding is the “venom of the soul.” It destroys our joy, drains our happiness, and prevents us from having close friendships. No one likes a faultfinder because no one likes being around a nitpicking critic. This sin comes partly from spiritual pride and partly from disguised envy. We criticize others in order to bring them down to our level. Or worse, we tear them down in an attempt to prove they are beneath us.

Faultfinding is a deadly disease because, if not kept in check, it turns us into cynics who persistently expect the worst from others. The faultfinder expects failure and secretly gloats when he finds it. Is it any wonder that the faultfinder almost always is a gossip and a talebearer? When he spots the flaws of others, he can’t wait to spread the news. Such a person is a spiritual vulture. Like the vultures of the air that live off dead, rotting flesh, these sad individuals thrive on the mistakes and sins of others. They fly across the landscape, keeping a close eye out for the failures of others. Then they swoop in for their daily feast.

Each Sunday morning I pray with a group of men in my church office before the first worship service. Over time, we have gotten to know each other very well. To an extent, we’ve become accustomed to each other’s prayers. I know what they are going to say, and they know what I am going to say. But one Sunday while we were praying, one of the men broke through to transparent honesty when he said, “Lord, too often I am so hard on the people closest to me.” Many of us could say the same words. Husbands

are hard on their wives. Wives criticize their husbands. Parents tear down their children and strip away every vestige of self-esteem. Friends attack friends, Christians belittle each other, and many families are held together by the glue of mutual disdain. Why is it we are so hard on those whom we say we love the most? And why are we so lenient when the person who offends us is someone we don't know? That makes no sense.

Breaking Jesus' Command

Jesus said, "Judge not." There are so many ways in which we break this command. Here are some examples:

Blowing small infractions or mistakes all out of proportion.

Maximizing the sins of others and minimizing our own.

Coming to quick, negative conclusions.

Making mountains out of molehills.

Getting involved in situations in which we should not be involved.

Passing along critical stories to others.

Having a strong bias toward finding others guilty.

Being too harsh even when speaking the truth.

Adding aggravating remarks when telling a story.

Dismissing an unkind remark by saying, "I was only joking."

Being critical, and then trying to cover up our words.

Being unkind, and then quickly changing the subject.

Telling too many people about how others have hurt or offended us.

Taking pleasure in condemning others.

Telling the truth in order to hurt, not to help.

Putting others down in order to make ourselves look better.

Note that it's quite possible to have a judgmental spirit even while telling the truth. Some people use the truth as a club to

beat others over the head. Simply saying, “Well, it was the truth, you know” does not get you off the hook.

Our judgment is wrong when it is

- needless,
- unfounded,
- hasty, or
- severe.

In the course of thinking about this topic, one fact kept bothering me: *I see far too much of this in my own life*. If I am honest with myself, I know that I’m far too quick to pass judgment on others. I see too much of myself on the aforementioned list, and that makes me feel uneasy.

Eating in Total Silence

Here is a simple guide to help guide our speech. It’s an acrostic based on the word *need*.

- N—Is it necessary?
- E—Will it encourage?
- E—Will it edify?
- D—Will it dignify the other person?

When I shared that with my congregation, one person told me that when his family eats dinner, they observe the TKN rule.

- T—Is it true?
- K—Is it kind?
- N—Is it necessary?

If a statement doesn’t meet the rule, it doesn’t get said. It would be a good idea if every family adopted that rule for their mealtime conversations—although it might mean most of our meals would be eaten in total silence! But silence is preferable to breaking the Lord’s command regarding how we speak.

And that brings me back to the speck and the log. It’s easy to see a speck in your brother’s eye, and much harder to see a log in

your own. When we deal with the faults of others, our greatest need is for clear vision. That's why Jesus said, in Matthew 5, "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck from your brother's eye." First, we must see clearly. And we cannot do so until we have removed the impediment from our own eyes.

First Things First

Christian love is not blind. God never says, "Ignore the faults of others." But He does say, "Take care of your own faults first." Look in the mirror! Ask God to show you your sins. The familiar words of Psalm 139:23-24 come to mind: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." If we would pray that way and mean it, we would do a lot more confessing and a lot less judging.

The order in which we do things is crucial. We are to judge ourselves first by asking God to show us our sins. We are to say, "Lord, show me the truth about myself." That's a dangerous prayer because if you mean it, God will definitely answer it. Go someplace quiet and ask the Lord to reveal to you the truth about yourself. When you pray that way, the answer will come. Sit and wait for the Holy Spirit to show you your weaknesses, faults, mistakes, bad attitudes, foolish words, pride, arrogance, need to be in control, need to run the world, need to tell others what to do, desire to have your own way, anger, bitterness, lack of mercy, lack of love, lack of compassion. I can say from personal experience that if you offer up such a prayer and wait long enough, the Lord will always give you the answer you need.

"Lord, I'm the One"

During a trip to Haiti several years ago, I got up early every morning and took a long walk down the rutted dirt road that led from the camp to the village. No matter how early I got up, I

always ran into Haitians walking one way or the other. Every morning I saw at least one woman carrying a container of water on her head. I saw students walking several miles each morning to go to school, and I saw old men with machetes getting ready to cut the sugar cane. Being in another country has a way of changing your perspective and helping you see things more clearly, and that's what happened to me. The Lord spoke to me about many things—especially about my life and my relationship to Him.

Also, almost every morning I would sing as I walked along the road. Usually I sang hymns, but one morning I started singing a song that I learned over 30 years ago. In fact, it was the theme song of the greatest revival I ever took part in. In May 1970, just before I graduated from high school, God visited the First Baptist Church of Russellville, Alabama, with life-changing power. There are men in the ministry today whose hearts God first touched during those amazing days. I was the song leader for the revival. Almost every night the choir sang a song by John R. Rice called “Lord, I’m the One.” Almost every night the choir sang a chorus that contained the phrase, “Lord, I’m the one.” For some reason (I think I know why), the Lord brought that little song back to my mind during our trip to Haiti.

Here is the background to all this: Sometime earlier a friend had said some very unkind words to my wife. The details don't matter, except to say that casual comments can sometimes cut very deeply. And as we all know, comments from friends generally hurt more than comments from total strangers. If you are married, you understand that you are probably quicker to forgive a comment made about you than a comment made about your spouse. I was angry, and my wife was both angry and deeply hurt, and that made the offense that much worse in my eyes. But for various reasons, there wasn't much I could do about it. We all understand that some interpersonal issues are not easily solved. So I got angry, stayed angry, and kept the matter mostly to myself. I tried to be friendly when I saw this person, but with mixed success.

Months after the incident, I didn't think about it much, but it was still unresolved in my heart. And I didn't deal with my feelings of anger until that week in Haiti. Something about walking along that rutted dirt road and seeing the Haitians who didn't know me or my wife and had never heard of the person who said those unkind words caused me to take stock of my heart. I was harboring anger, and I didn't want to face that fact. But the Lord would not let me rest until I did.

I didn't know it at the time, but the Lord was working in the same way in my wife's heart. Marlene told me later that during those weeks of being hurt, God spoke to her and said, "You are a sinner, too." And so little by little, the Lord led us to forgiveness and letting go of the hurt by showing us our sin.

When you can finally say, "I am a sinner, too," then you are set free to forgive those who have hurt you. As long as you set yourself on a moral plane above the rest of humanity, and especially above those who sinned against you, you cannot and will not forgive. It is liberating to finally say...

I have been unkind to others.

I have spoken hurtfully to my friends.

I have told lies.

I have repeated gossip.

I have spoken harshly to my loved ones.

I have broken promises.

I have held grudges.

I have been inconsiderate.

I have demanded my own way.

I have trampled on the feelings of others.

It is hard to face the truth about ourselves. Yet it's also the only way to be set free.

Years ago a friend sent me a sheet of paper from a counselor that had a saying based on the famous words of Jesus, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). The

counselor had taken the last phrase and reworded it to say, “The truth will set you free...but it will hurt you first.”

The words startled me, and then it was as if someone had turned on a light in my head. Yes, of course—it makes perfect sense! The truth *will* set you free, but it *will* hurt you first.

This is why many people have trouble growing spiritually. It’s not because we don’t know the truth. We hear the truth at church, on the radio, from our friends, from books and tapes and seminars and concerts. And we get it straight from the Bible. That’s *not* our problem. If just knowing the truth were all we needed, we’d all be candidates for permanent sainthood. No, the problem runs deeper than that. We know the truth but we don’t want to let it hurt us so we deflect it, ignore it, deny it, attack it, argue with it, and in general avoid it in any way we can. We’re like a spaceship being attacked by aliens: We put up the force field so we can deflect the incoming bullets of truth. After a while, we get so good at deflecting the truth that it no longer gets to us at all.

We hear the truth...we know the truth...but we deflect the truth so it never gets close enough to hurt. Therefore, we are not set free.

And that’s why...

We’re still angry.

We’re still stubborn.

We’re still bitter.

We’re still greedy.

We’re still arrogant.

We’re still filled with lust.

We’re still self-willed.

We’re still unkind.

A Sunday school teacher finished her lesson on forgiveness and decided to review it with the children in her class. “Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can be forgiven of sin?” After an uncomfortable silence, one child volunteered an

answer; “We have to sin.” I’m sure we’ve all fulfilled that requirement—I know I have. And precisely to the extent that I see my own sin will I be willing to forgive the sins of others.¹⁶

Judge Yourself First

Did you notice what Jesus called the judgmental person in Matthew 7:5? A hypocrite. What a terrible word that is! And that’s what we are when we judge and condemn others without first judging ourselves. The order is crucial here: First, we are to judge ourselves. We are to be hard on ourselves. We are to ask the Lord to show us our sins. Until we do that, the speck in our brother’s eye will look like a log to us. And we won’t even see the log in our own eye. Once we have allowed the Holy Spirit to do His painful surgery within, once we have confessed and repented and mourned over our own sin, then and only then are we ready to do surgery on someone else. This is how you will know you have reached that point: Your sins will bother you a lot more than the sins of others. And the failures of others won’t seem so big to you. You’ll know you’re ready to talk to a brother or sister when you don’t want to do it anymore. The person who has judged himself will display these character qualities:

- humility
- godly sorrow
- gentleness
- reticence
- patience
- discretion

Delicate Eye Surgery

To simply gaze on the sins of others is vain and empty and wrong. It turns us into judgmental Pharisees who are quick to condemn. But once we are cleansed and humbled by the Lord, then we are ready to remove the tiny speck from a brother’s eye.

And that brother will be glad for us to do it because he knows we are not there to condemn but to help.

The eye is a very sensitive organ. I know that because I've had six eye surgeries over the past few years. It takes a compassionate hand and a delicate touch to do surgery in the eye. When you have eye trouble, you need a doctor who knows what he is doing because even the slightest mistake can have catastrophic consequences. Sometimes in our haste to help others, we can cause more damage than the original speck of dirt caused.

There is a difference between someone who loves you and wants to help you and someone who puts you under a microscope only to find fault with all you do. I have found that those most critical of others tend to have the most sins in their lives. And those closest to God tend to be the most charitable. They are the quickest to forgive, quickest to restore, and the quickest to help someone who is struggling with sin.

Where do we go from here? "Daddy King" was right. We have no time to hate, no time to condemn, no time to live in bitterness and anger. How will we get from here to there? We need the help of God to do a supernatural work in our hearts. May God deliver us from a judgmental spirit.

We can judge others or we can forgive, but we can't do both at the same time.

Seven

Overcoming a Judgmental Spirit



*It is a terrible thing for a sinner to
fall into the hands of his fellow sinners.*

F. B. MEYER

Christians love to fight over their deeply held beliefs. Unfortunately, sometimes we fight over issues that don't matter much.

Once upon a time a man took a walk and came to a bridge. When he got to the middle of the bridge, he saw another man standing on the rail, obviously about to jump. The other man was distraught, so the first one said, "Don't jump. I can help you." "How can you help me?" asked the man on the rail. The first man replied with a question of his own: "Are you a Christian?" "Yes, I am." "That's wonderful. So am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "I'm Protestant." "That's great. So am I. What sort of Protestant are you? Are you Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or something else?"

"I'm a lifetime Baptist," said the man on the rail. "Praise the Lord," came the reply. "So am I. Let me ask you this. Are you Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" "I'm Northern Baptist."

“Are you Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?” “I’m Northern Conservative Baptist.” “Well, call Ripley’s. This is amazing. So am I. Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Fundamental or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed?” The man on the rail thought for a moment and then declared, “My father raised me as a Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed.” “It’s a miracle,” said the first man. “Put ’er there, pal. So am I.”

Then the first man asked, “Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Plains Region?” The man on the rail said, “That’s easy. My family has always been Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region.” “This is a miracle of miracles. I don’t often meet a brother who shares my own heritage. One final question: Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1855 or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1872?” The man on the rail replied instantly, “Since the days of my great-grandfather, we have always been Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1872.” This statement was followed by an awkward pause. Looking up, the first man cried out, “Die, heretic!” And he pushed the other man off the bridge.

We laugh at that story because in many ways it is so close to the truth. If two Christians agree on 79 out of 80 points, they will usually focus a disproportionate amount of their attention on the single point on which they disagree. And often, the smaller that final point, the more likely they are to argue about it. I don’t know what compels us to do that. Maybe it’s just human nature that leads us to focus on the trivial issues that don’t matter while ignoring the major topics on which we agree 100 percent.

This chapter is about the dangers of a judgmental spirit. Even though this problem exists both inside and outside the church, my focus is strictly inside the church. I want us to think about the tendency we all have to criticize fellow Christians who don’t do or say things the way we think they ought to be said or done. I want us to think about the terrible results that can occur when we are too

quick to offer personal judgments on believers who don't meet our personal standards. And I would like to offer some suggestions on how we can overcome the impulse to wrongly criticize our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As we begin, let's note that this problem is neither isolated nor new. Churches have struggled with this issue for 2,000 years. The New Testament makes it clear that the earliest Christians had difficulty accepting new or different people into their assemblies. When Paul wrote to the church at Rome, he devoted almost two full chapters in his letter to this difficult issue. Romans 14 teaches us an important truth about accepting other believers; let's begin with a brief look at the historical background of this text.

Historical Background

Rome was the center of the world in Paul's day. It was the capital of the empire and the seat of the Caesars. You've heard it said, "All roads lead to Rome." In the first century, that statement was very true. All roads did lead to Rome. The city had become a melting pot where people from many different cultures mingled together. As ambassadors and envoys from the various provinces came to Rome, they settled in the city, creating a complex mix of races and ethnic groups. Add to that the foreign slaves and prisoners of war who lived in Rome. When the gospel came to Rome (not long after the resurrection), it crossed many of those racial and ethnic lines. As a result, the church at Rome reflected the diverse makeup of the city itself.

This fact helps us to understand Paul's words in Romans 14. He was writing to a growing church with a wide variety of people in the congregation. Human nature being what it is, it's not surprising the various groups within the church were having trouble getting along. Romans 14 reveals conflict in the church in five different areas:

- new converts and longtime believers
- converted Jews and converted Gentiles

- vegetarians and meat eaters
- observers of special days and those who observed no special days
- total abstainers and wine drinkers

We should not assume from this list that there were only two groups in the church with these “opposite” characteristics. For example, a person could be a new believer who was a converted Gentile, a vegetarian, a Sabbath keeper, and a wine drinker. Each church member in Rome could possess a variety of these characteristics or preferences, meaning there were a lot of different possible makeups within the congregation. Evidently these believers had difficulty getting along. The meat-eaters didn’t trust the vegetarians, and the vegetarians thought the meat-eaters were compromisers. The converted Jews kept kosher, but the converted Gentiles thought that was a waste of time. The wine drinkers felt drinking wine was permissible so long as you didn’t get drunk. The total abstainers thought that was merely a convenient excuse for drinking alcohol.

In short, the church at Rome was anything but one big happy family. It was big, it was a family, but it was far from happy. Paul understood the conflict. After all, he had been raised in the womb of Orthodox Judaism. He knew all about keeping kosher, following the strict dietary laws, and living under the Law. No doubt he had struggled with many of these issues in the years following his conversion to Christ. Now he writes to help others who were wrestling with these same issues.


Biblical Exhortations

Romans 14:1-12 contains three basic exhortations:

1. *Accept one another—God has accepted you!*

The first verse gives us the theme of the entire chapter: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” The word “accept” means to open your heart and your

home to other people. “Disputable matters” are issues such as eating meat, drinking wine, and keeping special days. These matters—while important—should not stand in the way of our relationship with other believers. “Passing judgment” means to come to a negative conclusion about other Christians on the basis of their outward behavior in disputable areas. We could paraphrase verse 1 this way: “Make friends with everyone in the church without stopping to worry about whether they agree with you on everything or not.”



*God accepts people solely on
the basis of their faith in
Jesus Christ, and so should we.*

Consider this situation: It’s time for a birthday party, and you’re wondering what to serve. Maybe your idea is to cook some rib-eye steaks, lobster tail, a nice casserole, some homemade rolls, baked potatoes, and a nice dessert. (That sounds good to me!) Or maybe you prefer to buy some premium tofu, put it in a bowl, pour gravy on it (or whatever it is you do to tofu), and serve it with some bean sprouts and soy milk. For dessert you decide to take some bean curd and dip it into chocolate. That’s not exactly my preference, but it doesn’t matter at all. Here is Paul’s point: If you want to cook some steaks, cook some steaks. If you want to have tofu and chocolate-covered bean curd, have at it. It doesn’t matter to God—He’s not up in heaven checking your menu to see if it passes muster. Eat whatever you like. And don’t feel you need to explain yourself to anyone else.

The danger addressed here in Romans 14 is that the meat-eaters will look down on the vegetarians and the vegetarians will condemn the meat-eaters. But we must not fall into that trap.

The last phrase of verse 3 explains why we are to accept those whose lifestyle may be different from ours: “For God has accepted him.” God’s grace has nothing to do with eating meat, drinking wine, or keeping special days. But neither does it extend only to vegetarians, total abstainers, or those who observe no days at all. God accepts people solely on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ, and so should we. Or to put it another way, who are we to reject the person whom God has accepted? If God has accepted him, how can we reject him?

2. Have your own convictions—Jesus is your Lord.

Verse 5 tells us plainly: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” To be fully convinced means that after looking at all the evidence and considering the various views on a given issue, you have come to a settled conclusion in your own mind. *It assumes an honest investigation coupled with an open mind.*

Notice how many times Paul mentioned the Lord Jesus Christ in these verses: “He who regards one day as special, does so to *the Lord*. He who eats meat, eats to *the Lord*...he who abstains does so to *the Lord*... If we live, we live to *the Lord*; and if we die, we die to *the Lord*. So, whether we live or die, we belong to *the Lord*. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be *the Lord* of both the dead and the living.” Seven times in these verses Paul relates our lifestyle choices directly to our relationship with Jesus Christ. If we are fully surrendered to His lordship in our lives, then we are free to make up our own minds in these disputable areas.

Do you want to eat meat? Eat it, for Jesus is your Lord. Do you prefer to be a vegetarian? Have your bean sprouts and give thanks to God. Are you a total abstainer? If so, rejoice that you know Jesus Christ. Do you drink wine with your dinner? Give thanks to God that Jesus is your Lord. If He is your Lord, you can make your own decisions, knowing that He alone will be your judge.

Note that in this passage, Paul mentions a particular area of contention. One group at Rome observed certain days as holy

(perhaps the Sabbath or possibly the various Jewish feast days), while another group said that all days were alike because every day belongs to the Lord. That has many practical ramifications. If you want to go to church on Tuesday night, go ahead. Nothing wrong with that. But don't judge those who prefer to go to church on Thursday morning. When I was growing up, there was no flexibility in this regard. We "knew" that all Christians went to church three times a week—Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. And Sunday morning was always the same—Sunday school at 9:45 AM and morning worship at 11:00 AM. We never heard about having multiple worship services. Sunday evening was Training Union at 6:00 PM and evening worship at 7:00 PM. Wednesday night was a supper followed by a prayer meeting at 7:00 PM. None of this new-fangled having classes on Wednesday night. That was just the way we did it, year after year. But now churches have changed greatly, and they have services and programs at every possible hour and on different days of the week.

We see the same principle at work every year at Christmastime. At our church in Oak Park, we decorate the sanctuary and the hallways with garlands and with beautiful wreaths. We have a Christmas concert with our orchestra and choir. And we often have a Christmas caroling outreach, plus two Christmas Eve services. Normally we start singing Christmas carols soon after Thanksgiving. I'm very happy about that because Christmas has always been a favorite time of the year for me. But consider these facts: Nowhere in the New Testament are we told to celebrate the birth of Christ with a special season of the year. Nowhere are we told to have concerts and Christmas Eve services. For that matter, we don't even know for certain the precise day of Christ's birth. Scholars even argue about the exact year. And the word *Christmas* isn't found anywhere in the Bible. There is no command to sing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" or "Angels We Have Heard on High" or "Away in a Manger." Nor is there a command to recreate the manger scene. Most of what we do at Christmastime stems from long-held (and deeply felt) traditions handed down across many generations. They

are noble and worthy traditions that go far back in church history, but they don't come directly from the New Testament.

My point is, we don't have to celebrate Christmas. We could just cancel it. I am not suggesting that we could stop believing in the incarnation or the virgin birth, because those facts are among the nonnegotiables of the Christian faith. But we aren't compelled by the Bible to do all the activities we usually do. If a church somewhere decided not to observe Christmas, that church would not be doing anything wrong. And a church should not be despised for that choice any more than we should be judged because we choose to make a great emphasis in celebrating the birth of Christ each year. There is room in the body of Christ for significant differences in the way we approach the traditions of our faith.

3. Don't judge others; we will each answer to God.

Paul asks two pointed questions in verse 10: "Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?" To "judge" in this context implies coming to a negative conclusion about the way someone lives. This kind of judging leads to "looking down" on other believers—i.e., believing that you are better or superior to others because a) you do things they don't do, or b) you don't do things they routinely do. Either way, you end up seeing yourself as better than your brothers or sisters in Christ. Three different times, Paul reminded the Christians in Rome that each of them will stand individually before God. No one will answer for anyone else. God will not judge you according to how someone else lives. When you stand before the Lord, He won't quiz you about what Mr. Jones did or how Mrs. Johnson lived. You'll answer for yourself, and no one else.

Also, if God is going to judge your friends someday, why should you get involved? He knows them better than you do; He loves them more than you do; and He can read the thoughts and intents of their hearts, which you can't read at all. We're all called to focus on our own lives—and that should leave us very little time to be concerned about other people.

With all that in mind, let's now look at five important principles we can glean from Romans 14.

a. Christians Often Disagree with Each Other

This statement always comes as a surprise to new believers, but those of us who've been around for a while accept it as a given. Sometimes new Christians come into the church thinking that at last they've found paradise on earth, where everyone always agrees with everyone else and we're all happy together all the time. *It doesn't take long for that balloon to burst.* We're just normal people with a wide range of opinions, and we're joined by our common allegiance to Jesus Christ. Here's a short (and very incomplete) list of some matters that conservative evangelicals argue about:

movies	drinking wine
interracial marriage	women wearing jewelry
hairstyles	raising children
seeker services	faith-promise giving
politics	dating standards
smoking	pledging
ecumenical movement	liberal churches
borrowing money	Christian psychology
fishing on Sunday	mode of baptism
divorce and remarriage	worship styles
women ushers	timing of the rapture
pipe organs	school choice
Rush Limbaugh	age of the earth
men wearing beards	birth control

Regarding this list, keep in mind that 1) some issues that appear “silly” to you are very serious to other Christians, and 2) if we asked ten Christians to divide this list into “silly” and “serious” categories, we would get ten different answers.

b. Disagreement Is Not Always Wrong or Sinful

Many of us have a hard time with this point—especially when we feel passionately about some secondary issue. If you have

strong feelings about men wearing beards or about Rush Limbaugh, you'll have a hard time accepting those who either disagree with you or simply don't care about "your" issue one way or the other. Disagreement often reflects cultural differences more than biblical principles. Your particular set of standards may tell more about your upbringing than about what God approves or disapproves. In any case, we should not automatically assume the worst about people who disagree with us.

c. We Must Distinguish Between Primary and Secondary Issues

A primary issue is one that deals with a central doctrine of the Christian faith. This category includes the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ (including the virgin birth, the miracles, His death and bodily resurrection, His ascension into heaven, and the reality of the personal, visible, bodily return of Christ to the earth), salvation by grace through faith, the doctrine of the Trinity, the importance of the church as the body of Christ, the truth of eternal life with Christ, the resurrection from the dead, and the reality of heaven and hell. There are also foundational doctrines dealing with basic sexual morality that must be upheld. These things are primary because they describe central, defining truths of the Christian faith. To deny these matters is to put yourself outside the realm of true Christianity.

When we discuss these issues, there can be no compromise. Ultimately, you either believe in the virgin birth or you don't. If you don't, you have denied a clear teaching of the New Testament, which involves your whole view of the Bible as God's Word and ultimately calls into question your belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Regarding primary truths our *manner* must always be kind, and our *convictions* must be rock-solid. In the end, there can be no Christian fellowship with those who deny the key doctrines of the Christian faith. As Edward John Carnell said, "It is better to divide over truth than to unite around error."

Having said that, we must admit that many of our debates have nothing to do with primary issues. By definition, evangelical Christians already believe the core truths of Christianity. Our debates generally focus on secondary issues, which I would define as issues about which the Bible does not clearly speak. For instance, the Bible says nothing about fishing on Sunday. There is simply no verse that addresses that particular issue. Whatever you believe about that will have to be decided by a) inferences drawn from biblical principles, b) your personal preference, c) a combination of a) and b). The same is true for homeschooling. While the Bible has much to say about education in general, and while it clearly lays the burden of teaching children upon the parents, it doesn't tell us precisely how that responsibility must be discharged. Is it wrong to send Christian children to a public school? Since there were no first-century equivalents of either public or Christian schools, we aren't sure how to answer those questions.

Or take the hot issue of contemporary versus traditional worship. The New Testament gives us a few general guidelines for worship, but they are quite sketchy. If Paul were alive today, would he prefer Fanny Crosby over Point of Grace, or would he embrace Steven Curtis Chapman over P. P. Bliss? I know of no sure way to answer that question. Since nearly the entire corpus of Christian hymnody had yet to be written in A.D. 50, we may assume that even if they could understand the words, the first-century Jerusalem Christians would be mystified by all forms of Christian worship today. A similar analysis could be done for each debatable item on the list. Either the Bible says nothing at all, or what it does say is difficult to properly interpret. In such cases, we are free to have our own convictions, but we must hold them lightly lest we blur the line between primary and secondary issues and end up elevating fishing on Sunday to a level equal with the resurrection of Jesus.

d. Accepting Others Requires Humility Above All Other Virtues

I define *humility* as understanding that God is God and you are not. Truly humble people are free from the burden of having

to play God for other people. Once you decide that you can let God be God, then you can also relax and let Him deal with other Christians regarding these secondary issues. That doesn't mean you can't discuss these matters openly. Open discussion is a mark of a healthy relationship. Let the meat-eaters and vegetarians challenge each other's position—but only if they can do so in love and with deep respect. Humility doesn't mean no discussion; it does mean no animosity, no name-calling, no unfair accusations.

Over the years I've learned that...

- God blesses people I disagree with.
- God sometimes blesses people I wouldn't bless if I were God.

Sometimes I'm frustrated by those facts, especially when I see God blessing someone who seems to be profoundly wrong in some area. But humility forces me to admit that if God is God, He is free to bless anyone He chooses—and He doesn't have to ask my permission before doing it. A friend who led a Christian ministry told me he was having trouble with people in his organization who seemed to delight in offering negative comments on everything and everybody. He solved it by instituting this simple rule: If it doesn't apply to you personally, feel free to have no opinion about it. I have found this to be a liberating principle that has helped me a number of times over the years. Sometimes we simply have too many opinions on too many topics. Many times I have helped myself by saying, "I feel free to have no opinion about that." And I sleep well at night when I follow that rule.

e. We Can Let Jesus Deal with Those Who Disagree with Us

This is the logical conclusion of everything we have learned thus far. Paul says, "Don't judge another believer." Why? Because God will judge him. If your friend who eats meat has made a bad choice, God can make that clear to him better than you can. If he smokes, God can convict him or his doctor can convince him. If he has some strange view of the rapture, God can deal with him if he needs to be dealt with. Don't get in God's way. Let Him deal

with people who disagree with you. And in the meantime, don't forget to treat them as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Practical Application

As I come to the end of this chapter, I'd like to leave you with one very practical word of application. The next time you are tempted to criticize someone—especially someone close to you, such as a friend, a family member, a co-worker, a colleague, a church member—before you utter a word, stop and say a prayer for that person. Before you criticize, pray. Ask God to bless that person. Pray that God will guide him or her. And yield your heart to the Lord.

If you pray first, you may end up saying nothing at all. As someone has said, “Miss no opportunity to keep your mouth shut.” Or if you do speak, what you say will likely be changed because you prayed first. Pray more, and talk less...and your words will have a greater impact.

Eight

How to Behave in a Cave



*When a deep injury is done to us,
we never recover until we forgive.*

ALAN PATON

*W*hen the phone call came, I knew it would be bad news. The chairman of the elder board called to say that two of the elders had put forward a motion asking for my dismissal as pastor. The vote failed, 4-2. I found out later that the two dissenting elders thought another elder would vote with them, but he didn't. Since they lost the vote, the two elders immediately resigned from the board and announced they were leaving the church. The remaining elders sent a letter to the congregation explaining what had happened. Such letters are never easy to write because you don't know how much to say, and you can't control how people will respond, no matter how you say it. The letter was a bit ambiguous because the charges against me were not of a moral nature. A few days later the chairman showed me a notebook containing pages of comments that were made about me. But

there were no charges of immorality, heresy, false doctrine, or any sort of financial impropriety.

I never saw all of what the chairman had documented in his notebook, and now that 18 years have passed, I'm glad I never saw it. So much has happened in my life—both good and bad, happy and sad—so much water has gone under the bridge, and my life has taken so many turns I never expected that I'm glad I didn't have to read those charges against me. But I know the essence of what they said, know what those two elders wanted. They wanted me gone because I wasn't the kind of pastor they preferred.

That experience was very personal and painful. It was a rejection of me and my leadership and my personality and my style and everything about me. And the whole church ended up knowing about it. Even though the letter was veiled in what it said, the picture was still clear for everyone to see. Two of the elders wanted the senior pastor gone. When they failed, they resigned and left the church, taking a number of families with them.

The following months would see three waves of families leaving the church as a result. The first wave left with the two elders. The second wave left a few months later in sympathy with the first group. It was the third group that broke my heart. They left months later not because they agreed with the two elders, but because the church had changed and, to them, didn't feel the same anymore. They believed in my leadership, but left anyway. That was hard to take.

Eighteen years later I still don't fully understand all that had happened. The whole episode took an enormous toll on my wife and on our three children. And it left me feeling unclean, vulnerable, angry, confused, and scared. There's no fight like a church fight. When things grow ugly in the family of God, they can spiral downhill very fast. As I look back, I don't see much good from what happened during the year before the crisis and the year afterward. It was a hard, sad, difficult time.

When the two elders lost the vote and left the church, I happened to be preaching through the early years of the life of David

(1 Samuel 16–31). The Sunday after the resignations took place, I was scheduled to preach on 1 Samuel 24. I had entitled my sermon “How to Behave in a Cave.” It could not have been more appropriate. My sermon began with these words:

What a week it’s been. There’s never been one quite like it before. And I must confess that I’ve never had one like it in my years as a pastor. There were times this week when I thought the phone was going to ring off the wall.

I would also like to say a word of appreciation for all the acts of kindness, the phone calls, the notes, the words of encouragement. On Friday, an anonymous friend placed a little refrigerator magnet on my desk. It reads, “Lord, if there’s any more trouble coming, send it now while I’m used to it.” Someone even sent over a Pick-Me-Up bouquet. It worked, just like Merlin Olsen said it would.

Here’s the background of 1 Samuel 24: David is on the run from King Saul, who is trying to kill him. Motivated by anger and envy, the king knows God intends to replace him with young David, and he decides to kill David rather than give up his throne. David and his men—some 600 strong—come to a place called En Gedi, an oasis on the western shore of the Dead Sea. There, the barren mountains rise almost straight up from the shore. The mountains are limestone, laced with steep ravines, honeycombed with caverns. It was made to order for a man running from the law.

At En Gedi, David and his men found a cave large enough for all 600 of them. They were able to hide in passageways far back from the entrance. With that in mind, let’s pick up the story in verses 1-3: “After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, ‘David is in the Desert of En Gedi.’ So Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Crags of the Wild Goats. He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave.” Saul

hears the call of nature and steps inside the nearest cave. Little does he know that the man he seeks is only a few yards away, hidden by the rocks and the darkness.


The Encounter in the Cave

While Saul attends to his business, 600 pairs of eyes watch from the darkness. A whisper spreads through the men. Here's a chance for David to attack Saul. The men tell this to David, covering their desire for revenge with a thick coat of religious varnish: "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish'" (verse 4). They believe it is God's will for David to kill Saul. After all, Saul's been trying to kill David. "Do God a favor and get him right now," they tell David.

But David did something that must have seemed funny at the time. While Saul was preoccupied, David crept up and cut off the corner of his robe. Just a practical joke, really. No harm done. When Saul puts his robe back on, it's going to be shorter. But "afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe" (1 Samuel 24:5). And here is David's explanation to his own men in verse 6, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD." David's action was wrong because it made the king look bad. It was wrong because it showed a lack of respect. It was wrong because it wasn't David's place to get even. It was wrong because cutting Saul's robe was the first step toward murder. It was wrong because Saul was still the Lord's anointed. Cutting off a corner of the royal robe was an act of physical and spiritual vandalism. It was an attack on Saul and his right to be king.

While David was feeling bad, his men were mad. They wanted him to kill Saul. Meanwhile Saul left the cave to rejoin his men. He had no clue that anything unusual had happened—not until David called it to his attention. The rest of 1 Samuel 24 documents two speeches—one by David in verses 8-15 and one by Saul in verses

16-21. Verse 22 ends the chapter with these words, “Then Saul returned home, but David and his men went up to the stronghold.” (The “stronghold” is most likely a reference to Masada.)



*We have no control over how
people treat us... But we do have
control over how we respond.*

A Crucial Question About David’s Choice

The most important fact in the whole story is that David refused to kill Saul even when he had a golden opportunity. Why didn’t David get revenge while he had the chance? Chuck Swindoll calls revenge “life’s most subtle temptation,” and indeed it is. For who has not felt the sting of unfair criticism? Who has not been surprised at some time or other by unexpected conduct from one’s friends? Who has not been disappointed by someone close to them? Maybe you have been denied a promotion for which you were clearly qualified. Maybe a coach passed you over for a starting role even though you deserved it. Maybe your husband or wife has walked out on you. Maybe you have had your friends turn on you.

We have no control over what other people do. We wish we did—we wish no one would ever let us down, disappoint us, or turn against us. Yet it happens, and it happens to all of us. That’s a fact. We never know when the hammer is going to fall.

Again, this is a key principle: We have no control over how people treat us—what they say or what they do. But we do have control over how we respond.

How should we respond when we’ve been hurt? There are two options, and only two. *We can try to get even, or we can do*

what David did in 1 Samuel 24. From the first part of 1 Samuel 24, we know what David did—or more specifically, what he didn't do. When he had a chance to kill Saul, he didn't. In verses 8-15, he tells why.

Reason #1: David did not seek revenge because he respected Saul's authority over him.

In verse 8, David called Saul, “My lord the king!” He recognized Saul was still the king no matter what he did or how he did it. It was not an issue of whether or not Saul treated David right. As long as Saul was the king, he deserved respect by virtue of his position. In particular, that meant that David was not free to get even or take revenge in any form.

In the army you'll hear the saying, “You don't salute the man; you salute the rank.” The colonel may be an absolute jerk, but that doesn't matter. You salute him by virtue of his position. That's precisely the principle here. David owed Saul his respect by virtue of Saul's position as king. The matter is stated in another way in verse 10: “I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the LORD's anointed.” Who chose Saul to be king? God did. By whose authority did Saul occupy the throne of Israel? By God's authority. Therefore, to attack Saul is to indirectly attack God Himself. If a man is God's anointed—good or bad—he is not to be touched.

Please understand that David had every reason to get even with Saul. The man was a killer, a psycho on the throne, a malevolent madman whose fits of rage and paranoia drove him over the edge. David would have been doing the world a favor and no one would have blamed him for it. But still, David didn't do it. Why? Because he recognized Saul's authority over him.

Reason #2: David did not seek revenge because he was willing to wait for God to vindicate him.

David's second reason is stated plainly in verses 11-12: “Now understand and recognize that I am not guilty of wrongdoing or

rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you.” There are two interesting facts here: *First, David was not shy about pointing out the truth.* He plainly says Saul had wronged him. Sometimes in our hurry to reconcile with someone we overlook the fact that wrong was done. It’s rarely true that “we’re both right and we’re both wrong.” That implies a kind of neutrality that cancels the need to make moral judgments. Such a position is useful only for those who live in a fantasy world. Saul was wrong, David knew it, and he plainly said so.

David also understood a second fact many of us never grasp: *When it comes to revenge, God is much better at it than we are.* That’s because He looks down from heaven and sees all sides of every issue. He knows who is right and who is wrong. So often our perspective is clouded and our judgment faulty. We see our side only. But God knows all, and He will not forget to avenge the wrongs done to His children.

James Russell Lowell wrote these famous words: “Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.” That’s the way it often seems these days: Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. In this topsy-turvy world, the bad guys seem to keep on winning. But it is true, and you can count on it: God stands in the shadows keeping watch above His own.

David understood that God was ready, willing, and able to take care of him. And in God’s timing, Saul would be out of the way and David would ascend to the throne. If God had wanted Saul removed sooner, He would have done it. There were 10,000 ways He could do it. God didn’t need David’s help. Even when David was clearly the better choice for king and Saul had gone nuts, and even when God had rejected Saul, He still didn’t need David’s help.

How many sins are committed because we are in a hurry? Because we're under pressure to give in to our passions? Because in the crunch we cut corners we would never cut otherwise? How many stupid decisions do we make because we aren't willing to wait for God? We can take great personal comfort in knowing that God will take care of matters when we suffer for doing what is right, God sees, and He remembers. That's a promise you can count on.

Reason #3: David did not seek revenge because he did not want to descend to Saul's level.

In verse 13 David said: "As the old saying goes, 'From evildoers come evil deeds,' so my hand will not touch you." David was saying, "If I attack him, I'm only sinking down to his level." I've heard it said this way: Never wrestle with a pig. You're bound to get dirty, and the pig loves it. There are times when you need to walk away from an argument because if you open your mouth, you'll soon be wrestling with a pig. The saddest part about trying to get even is it makes you a perpetual victim of the person you hate. Revenge makes you go through the hurt over and over again. You never really get over it. Ultimately, it drags you down to the sewer where your enemies dwell. And the moral filth that covers them soon covers you as well. And while you are staying up late at night seething in anger, they are oblivious to what you're going through. As we learned earlier, when you give in to the temptation to get even, your enemies have won twice: When they first hurt you, and when you can't get the offense out of your mind.

Three Steps in the Right Direction

Put it all together and what do you have? David didn't take vengeance for three reasons: First, because he recognized Saul's authority over him. Second, because he was willing to wait for God to vindicate him. And third, because he did not want to descend to Saul's level. Let me repeat what I said earlier: We cannot control what people say about us or do to us. We're going

to be hurt again and again. People are going to fail us, misunderstand us, doubt our integrity, and judge us a threat. For every David, there's a Saul lurking somewhere in the shadows. While we can't control our enemies, we *can* control our response. How we respond makes all the difference in the world between walking beneath or above our circumstances.

So how should we respond to mistreatment and the temptation to get even? Here are three practical suggestions:

Watch your words

Angry people usually make statements they later regret. Under pressure, we may blurt out words that will end a friendship forever. Or we may say words that inflict a wound out of proportion to the original offense. Or we may cause the problem to escalate to the point of blowing up.

You will rarely regret the comments you *don't* make. It's only the careless comments you *do* make that you regret. When you are angry, take to heart the words of Proverbs 10:19: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

Focus on the Lord Jesus Christ

We are called to be like our Master, who, when He was reviled, reviled not again, when He was cursed, cursed not in return; when He was abused, refused to repay in kind; when He was mocked, did not retaliate; when He was hung between two thieves and crucified for crimes He did not commit, prayed for those who killed Him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Of all people, He had every right to seek revenge, but He chose instead to submit to the Father's will. When you feel tempted to give in to anger and bitterness, remember the words of 1 Peter 2:21: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

Lay your burden down

Sooner or later you have to stop fighting the battle. Sooner or later you have to put down your weapon. Some people are chained

to the past because they will not let go of remembered hurts. In the end, the desire for revenge hurts you more than it hurts anyone else. It's an all-consuming emotion that destroys you from the inside out. I read a story about a wise, older monk and his young apprentice, who were walking together along a forest trail. Their monastery had a rule forbidding all contact with women. Coming to a river with a fast-flowing current, they saw an old woman weeping near the shoreline. She asked for help, saying that she couldn't cross the river on her own. Without a word, the older monk picked up the woman and carried her to the other side. She went on her way while he and his young colleague continued on their journey. Two-and-a-half hours passed without a word being spoken, but the young monk was seething on the inside. When he could contain himself no longer, he blurted out, "My Lord, why did you carry that woman across the river? You know that we are not supposed to touch a woman." The wise, older monk looked down at the young man and said, "I put her down hours ago. Why are you still carrying her?"

Good question. Why are you still carrying the burdens from the past? Isn't it time to put them down once and for all?

Let me say frankly that it's not easy to return good for evil, to refuse retaliation when it lies within our power, to refrain from bitter words, and to appeal to our adversary's nobler side even at the cost of our own dignity. *It's not easy or natural, but we are called to exactly that kind of supernatural life.* And there's no guarantee it will work out. Sometimes our enemies remain our enemies until the day we die. That may not be good news, but it is reality.

Looking back on my experience 18 years ago with those two elders, I can't say that I perfectly followed my own advice. Sometimes in my frustration, I made comments about those two elders that I regretted later. And sometimes I focused all my attention on the crisis in the church instead of letting it go. I do remember that one of the elders had loaned me a book much earlier. When I returned it many months later, I wrote a note wishing him well.

And several weeks later, I happened to meet him while doing hospital visitation, and we had a brief but pleasant conversation. It's the only time I saw him after his departure. Looking back, I can say that walking the path of forgiveness was a journey of many months that never led to any final reconciliation. But I can testify that by the grace of God, I came to the place where what happened to me no longer filled my heart and mind. And now, after 18 years, it all seems like a distant dream. The bad feelings vanished long ago.

Time to Lay That Burden Down

Some of us are walking around with a heavy load of bitterness and frustration. Perhaps you're angry at someone who hurt you. Or maybe you are carrying a burden of third-party resentment—that is, you are angry about how someone else you care about was mistreated. It's time to lay that burden down. God never meant for you to carry it around or to think about getting even.

Right now, focus on someone you want to get even with. Think about a specific person, if you can. *It's time to let go of the matter and let God take over.* It's time to be set free from bitterness. You have to call your anger or bitterness what God calls it: sin. If you are willing to do that, then you can be set free.

Here's a simple prayer that may help you lay your burden down. I have included a space for you to insert the name of the person or persons who have hurt you in some way.

Heavenly Father, I thank You that Jesus Christ took my sins upon Himself when He didn't deserve them. I confess to You that I am resentful toward _____ . Father, I ask You to do what You know is best in this situation. Please forgive me for harboring anger and bitterness. Set me free from this bondage, and please keep me from it for the rest of my life. Teach me to forgive as Jesus, did. I pray this in the name of Jesus who forgave me all my sins. Amen.

Nine

Hot Coals



*The best way to destroy an enemy
is to make him a friend.*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Recently I came across a thoughtful quote from Booker T. Washington, founder of the world-famous Tuskegee Institute in my home state of Alabama. As a black man growing up in the segregated South, he experienced more than his share of hatred, prejudice, and unfair treatment. But as a Christian, he also knew that a man is not judged by what he goes through, but by how he responds to it. He expressed his credo in one powerful sentence: “I will not let any man make me lower myself by hating him.” Is it any wonder that we remember Booker T. Washington as one of the greater Americans this country has ever produced? You can’t always stop people from hating you, but you don’t have to hate them back. You can’t always make people love you, but you can always love them back.

Jesus gave us the principle that we call the Golden Rule. It goes like this: “Do to others what you would have them do to

you” (Matthew 7:12). Treat people as you would like to be treated. Speak to them as you would like to be spoken to. Grant them the honor that you wish they would grant to you. Give them the respect you desire for yourself. Offer them the kindness you wish they would offer you.

In Romans 12:17-21, Paul expands upon the Golden Rule and applies it to the hardest of all hard cases. How do you respond to those who badly mistreat you? Or to say it another way, what do you do when you’ve been done wrong?

The answer comes in two parts: When we’ve been done wrong, 1) we are to live in peace with our enemy if at all possible, and 2) we are not to seek revenge. In fact, we are to reach out to those who have hurt us by doing practical deeds of kindness to them. In so doing, we are overcoming evil with good (see Romans 12:21).

The Call to Peace

Romans 12:17-18 contains one negative and two positive statements. The negative is, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” That speaks of retaliation and seeking revenge. And the first positive statement involves personal responsibility: “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” That is, don’t give people a reason to treat you unkindly.

This has many practical applications. It affects how we dress and act, the way we treat others in public, common courtesy, honesty at work, having a cheerful heart, being a team player, and not being a troublemaker, grump, whiner, constant complainer, or hypochondriac. Live in such a way that no one can make an honest accusation against you. Live so that if they are going to accuse you, they have to tell a lie to do it.

Then there is the second positive statement: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” I like this statement because it strikes me as utterly realistic. In a fallen world, it isn’t always possible to live at peace with everyone. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we’ll rub people the wrong way. Sometimes you are thrown into a situation at school or at

work with people who are grade A, board-certified, 100 percent jerks—and you can't do anything about it. Such people don't want peace; they want to make trouble.

A friend of mine once mentioned a colleague at work who yells at everyone all the time for no particular reason. She just yells and yells and yells. He called her a “rageaholic.” That's a great word to describe a very sick person. Unfortunately, she's not the only one out there. You can find at least one person like that in every school, business, and neighborhood. Paul's advice regarding such a person is simple: Live at peace with him or her. If that doesn't work, make sure you aren't part of the problem. Note that little phrase, “as far as it depends on you.” The only person you can take care of is you. Do you remember the saying, “It takes two to tango”? We could rephrase the words to “It takes two to tangle.” If you refuse to tangle, at least you can't be blamed for causing the problem. So be a peacemaker to the point that, if someone makes trouble for you, no one can legitimately blame you.

The Warning Against Revenge

Paul clearly rules out all attempts at revenge: “Do not take revenge, my friends” (verse 19). There are no exceptions—no maybes, ifs, or buts. Revenge and retaliation are forever ruled out for the believer in Christ. The next few verses give us three reasons for this.

1. *Revenge is God's work*

“Leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’” (verse 19). President John F. Kennedy liked to say, “Don't get mad, get even.” That represents the wisdom of the world. And that's the way most people, even many Christians, operate. With one slight revision in some cases: We get mad, then we get even. By contrast, Paul says, “Let God handle the revenge. That's His special ministry.” Have you ever thought of vengeance as a “ministry” of God? Well, it is. Vengeance is one aspect of God's justice. It's His way of balancing the scales of life.

What happens when we try to take vengeance into our own hands? We almost always mess it up. We're either too harsh or too soft, we strike too fast or too late, or we attack the wrong person or say the wrong words, or we end up making matters worse and not better. Too many times we're like Bruce Willis in one of those *Die Hard* movies. We load up our guns, run into the room, and start firing. Our motto is "Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out later." And if we accidentally hurt some innocent people, we rationalize our actions by saying, "Well, it's a tough world, and sometimes people get hurt."

The most important reason not to take revenge is that by our clumsiness we may block God's work in another person's life. We typically just want to get even, but God wants to bring that person to a place of repentance and reconciliation. God has a better view than we do, and He has a higher goal. Vengeance is His specialty.


When we talk about God, remember that He's the one who kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden, and who caused the Red Sea to dry up for the Israelites and close up to drown the Egyptians. He's the one who opened up the ground and swallowed the sons of Korah and who struck Miriam with leprosy. He's the one who delivered Goliath into David's hands and who caused David's infant son to die because of his affair with Bathsheba. He allowed Peter to walk on water, and then Jesus rebuked him to his face and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" He worked miracles in the early church but killed Ananias and Sapphira when they lied about their giving.

He's God. He sees what we don't see; He watches the motives of the heart. He knows our thoughts before we think them, our words before we speak them. He knows what we're going to do before we do it, and He knows the reason behind it. Revenge is His special ministry to mankind. You can never do it as well as He can. Instead, you'll just mess things up. So leave vengeance to the Lord. He's far better at it than you will ever be.

2. *There is a better way to get even*

“On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head’” (verse 20). This is one of the most unusual verses in the New Testament. What does Paul mean when he talks about heaping hot coals on your enemy’s head? Paul is quoting from Proverbs 25:21-22, and the statement has three parts: the command, the result, and the reward.

The command is, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (Proverbs 25:1). Needless to say, this flies in the face of common sense. You shoot enemies; you don’t feed them. After all, if you feed your enemies, they will get stronger and stronger and then attack you. But God says to feed them. You are to act contrary to your natural tendencies when you respond to your enemies.



*Those who are close to you are
sometimes used by God to expose
the weak areas of your life.*

Who is the “enemy” in Romans 12:20? He or she is almost always a friend, colleague, or family member who has hurt you in some way. My enemy, by definition, will usually be someone close to me. I don’t have any enemies in Iran because I don’t know anybody over there. But it’s not hard for me to have enemies in Oak Park because I live there and know many people there. Let me give you this definition: *An enemy is any person God uses to reveal your weaknesses.* An enemy is like a chisel God uses to chip away at the rough spots in your life. That’s why if you are married, your husband or your wife will be your enemy some of the time. No one knows your weaknesses like your spouse. He or she knows the

hidden blemishes, secret sins, and bad habits the rest of the world never sees. But they know your faults because they live with you every day.

Can a husband be your enemy? Yes, and you can still love him even when you can't stand him. Can a wife be your enemy? Yes, because she knows your weaknesses and sees the real you that the rest of us never see. You may put on a front at church, but your wife knows the real story. And, if she loves you, she'll have to be your enemy from time to time. Otherwise, how are you ever going to get better? That's why you have to feed your enemy. You can't let your wife or husband starve to death. That's why you have to give your boss or your teacher or that obnoxious person in the next office something to drink. Those who are close to you are sometimes used by God to expose the weak areas of your life.

Now, there's a happy result from treating your enemies kindly—you heap burning coals on their head. Many Bible commentators think Paul was referring to an Egyptian custom in which a person would actually put burning coals on his head as a sign of repentance for his sin. If that is the case, then Paul is suggesting that we can win our enemies to our side by deeds of love and kindness. “The coals of fire this may heap on him are intended to heal, not to hurt, to win, not to alienate, in fact, to shame him into repentance.”¹⁷ You may have heard the statement, “Killing 'em with kindness.” That's what Paul is talking about here. Through deeds of love shown to those who have hurt us deeply, we may actually change their hearts and lead an enemy to become a friend. Someone has said that the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend. The apostle Paul would certainly agree.

What would qualify as “hot coals”? A kind word, a phone call, a brief note, a flower, a meal, a small gift, a letter of recommendation, running an errand, offering a ride, helping complete a project, rewriting a report, stepping in to save a failing project, putting in a good word to the superiors, helping clean the classroom, going bowling, and so on. The list is endless, because “hot

coals” refers to any act of kindness you do for an enemy. Your only limit is your creativity.

Then Proverbs 25:22 tells us the good result: “And the LORD will reward you.” God rewards those who show kindness to their enemies. How? It’s hard to say. One obvious answer might be to cause your “hot coals” to turn your enemy into a friend. Or, God might promote you or pour out new blessings or grant you answers to your prayers or new spiritual growth.

A woman wrote me to say she realized she needed to forgive her husband, who left her for a younger woman after 26 years of marriage. She found out later that he had been having an affair over the previous year. To make matters worse, she discovered that some of her friends not only knew about the affair, they were aiding her husband and helping him cover up his infidelity. When she wrote her note to me, she said she realized she had never truly forgiven those friends for what they had done. Here is her story:

Today I wrote to four people the Lord brought to my mind and let them know I was praying for God to bless them. I felt the need to write to them and tell them I had asked for them to receive a blessing from God. At first it was the hardest thing I had done in soooooo long, but then I started writing the quick message and telling them that after hearing a sermon (didn’t say on what) I was writing to tell them I’d asked God to give them a special blessing. Three of the four people have claimed to be a Christian, but they all contributed to my ex’s infidelity and adultery. Yet, after writing the e-mails, I felt better and more at peace.

This is an especially good example because she did not mention the way these people had hurt her. She simply wrote to say she was praying for them to receive a blessing from the Lord. How did they respond to those notes? I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. She did what she needed to do, and it set her free. By pouring hot

coals on those who betrayed her, she was set free, and now God can deal with those people any way He chooses.

With that truth firmly in mind, we now come to the third reason revenge is ruled out for the children of God.

3. Revenge destroys you, but good overcomes evil

Our text ends with a pithy little motto that sums up Paul's teachings in this passage: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (verse 21). When Paul says, "Do not be overcome with evil," what he means is, "Don't let revenge destroy your life." Too often, we look at life as a kind of competition. "He hit me, so I had to hit him back." "Sure, I said some awful things to him, but he said them to me first." This happens in marriages all the time. We play games of tit-for-tat. You hurt me, so now I'm going to hurt you. You cheated on me, so now it's okay if I cheat on you. You slapped me, so I can slap you back. You raised your voice, so now I'm going to raise mine just one decibel louder. And on it goes. We may even enlist the Bible in an attempt to support that kind of behavior. You know, the passage about an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (see Deuteronomy 19:21). It's called evening the score.

Why Revenge Doesn't Work

Getting even doesn't work. All it does is unleash a whole cycle of retribution and violence. And the cycle never ends because someone else always wants to have the last word. Paul tells us not to do that because it's destructive. You may win the battle, or say the last word, or strike the last blow, but in the end, you've destroyed your spiritual life. In the process of hurting another person, you've hurt yourself, too. Anger has done its dirty work on the inside. You seethe with malice, rage, hurtful feelings, and horrible thoughts that keep you up late at night. That's one reason many people are sick today. They aren't sick, because of some bug or strange virus. No, their soul is sick, and as a result their body is sick. The list is long, but it includes high blood pressure, heart

problems, back problems, tension headaches, nightmares, ulcers, stomach problems, weight problems, blurred vision, a stiff neck, and insomnia.

Paul then said, “Overcome evil with good.” This is the bottom line. Although we live in a world where evil seems to win out, more often than not, that’s only a temporary situation. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” While evil may do well in the short run, in the end, good always wins. If life were a 100-yard dash, you would bet on evil. But life is a marathon, and because it is, good will win out in the end. It might not win out in the course of one lifetime or in one generation, but eventually, God does move to bring justice into the world. And if justice doesn’t come in this life, it will definitely come in heaven. Justice *will* be done. Evildoers *will* be punished. And those who follow the way of Jesus *will* be rewarded. That’s the promise of God.

The Brother of the Faith

A while back I read a sobering book titled *Against All Hope*, by Armando Valladares.¹⁸ The book tells the story of the author’s 22 years in a Cuban prison. I do not have the words to tell you what his experience was like. The brutality was beyond belief. Suffice it to say that the Nazis had nothing on the Cubans. They only did it on a larger scale. Truly, the Cubans treated pigs better than they treated prisoners. During the author’s early years of imprisonment, over 6,000 people were kept in a massive prison on the Isla de Pinos. Most of them were political prisoners whose only crime was opposing Castro. In the book, Valladares describes how men were left naked to wallow for months in their own excrement, beatings, food unfit for barnyard animals, and systematic attacks by the prison guards.

The men in this prison were organized into forced-labor teams and sent to work in rock quarries. When the men returned from the quarry, they were tired, hungry, and exhausted. They were dirty, some of them barefoot, with their clothes hanging in tatters.

As they entered the compound, the guards screamed for them to move faster. When the men didn't respond, the guards began beating them with machetes. As the beatings increased, something strange happened. As he was being beaten, one prisoner raised his arms and face to the sky and shouted, "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do!"

The other prisoners called this man the "Brother of the Faith." He was a Protestant minister who had dedicated his life to spreading the Word of God. He spent his days and nights going through the cells, finding sick men, and washing their dirty clothes for them. He started a prayer meeting and even preached sermons standing behind a pulpit improvised from an old salt-codfish box. The soldiers tried to break up the meetings by beating the prisoners, but they never succeeded. If a prisoner became sick or fell behind in his forced labor, the Brother of the Faith would show up to help and encourage him to keep going and not to give up. He would help the other man do his work so he wouldn't be brutally beaten. Sometimes the guards would come up from behind and hit him for no reason. Instead of cursing or retaliating, he would stand up, face the guard, look him in the eye, and say, "May God pardon you." He constantly reminded the other prisoners not to hate.

Eventually the men were transferred to an even worse prison—Boniato. Torture went from unspeakable to unimaginable. One day a riot broke out and the guards moved in with machine guns. Total slaughter ensued.

But suddenly, as though to protect them, there appeared a skeletal figure with white hair and flaming blazing eyes, who opened his arms into a cross, raised his head to the invisible sky, and said, "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." The Brother of the Faith hardly had time to finish his sentence, because as soon as he appeared, Lieutenant Raul Perez de la Rosa ordered the guards to step back, and as the Brother of the Faith was speaking he fired his AK submachine gun. The burst of

fire climbed the Brother of the Faith's chest, up to his neck. His head was almost severed, as though from the blow of an ax. He died instantly.¹⁹

Jesus said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). We wonder, *Is it possible to live that way?* The answer is yes, even in the most desperate circumstances, even in the midst of the most unspeakable brutality. Yes, you can... if you are willing to lay down your life.

Learning What God Is Like

In 1849, Frederick W. Faber wrote a hymn called "Workman of God." The hymn speaks of what it means to overcome evil with good in a world where evil often seems to win the day:

Workman of God! O lose not heart,
 But learn what God is like;
 And in the darkest battlefield
 Thou shalt know where to strike.

Thrice blest is he to whom is giv'n
 The instinct that can tell
 That God is on the field when he
 Is most invisible.

Blest too is he who can divine
 Where real right doth lie,
 And dares to take the side that seems
 Wrong to man's blindfold eye.

Then learn to scorn the praise of men,
 And learn to lose with God.
 For Jesus won the world through shame,
 And beckons thee his road.

For right is right, since God is God;
 And right the day must win;
 To doubt would be disloyalty,
 To falter would be sin!

When we read the story of Armando Valladares, we are entitled to wonder if we could ever have that sort of courage. We'll never know until we're put in a similar situation. But the secret of his faith is not hard to find. We see it in the first verse of Frederick Faber's hymn: "Workman of God! O lose not heart, *but learn what God is like.*" It's all about God all the time. It's not about us, and it's not about the people who have hurt us. You will never pour hot coals of kindness on your adversaries until you "learn what God is like."

And how do you do that? Study His ways. Memorize His Word. Ponder His character. Remember His goodness to you. Think about His compassion for sinners. Examine His justice. Fix your mind on His holiness. Consider His wisdom. Meditate on His mercy. Delight in His decrees. Obey His commands. Believe His promises. Give thanks for His salvation. Rejoice in His faithfulness.

The Reformers often used the Latin phrase *Coram Deo*, which means "before the face of God." It's a reminder that God is always watching everything we do. His eye is always on us, nothing escapes His notice, and all of life must be lived for His approval. World-renown organist and composer J. S. Bach carved the words *Soli Deo Gloria* on his organ at Leipzig to remind him that all his music be composed and performed for the glory of God. That's why the initials SDG appear at the end of his compositions.

The only way to be delivered from a spirit of revenge is to be so filled with God that a desire for revenge finds no place in your heart. When God Himself fills your heart, you will find a new strength to love your enemies, no matter what it takes. Learn what God is like, and you will overcome evil with good.

Ten

Questions and Answers



*The Bible tells us to love our neighbors,
and also to love our enemies; probably because
they are generally the same people.*

G. K. CHESTERTON

*A*rchbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.” He was speaking not just of personal pain, but also in the larger context of South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid. What is true of individuals is true of families, and what is true of families is true of cities and states. And what is true for states is true for nations as well. Without forgiveness, there is no future. We could add to the archbishop’s statement in several ways without changing its basic meaning:

Without forgiveness, there is no freedom.

Without forgiveness, there is no recovery.

Without forgiveness, there is no healing.

But in a world with so much pain, hatred, and animosity between races, tribes, clans, and nations, is forgiveness realistic? Or is it just a distant dream, a theory that can never become reality?

The question is fair and honest and deserves an answer. In an attempt to provide one, we might end up saying, “Yes, forgiveness is the best way, but it is so far beyond us that we must settle for something much less.” We could say that, and indeed we may think that, but we would be wrong. Forgiveness may be beyond us, but that doesn’t mean it is impossible. It just means we have fallen short of God’s goal for us.

Let’s begin with the observation that the forgiveness of sins is a major biblical doctrine. The Bible has a great deal to say about God’s forgiveness of our sins because that is where salvation really begins.

- “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).
- “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness” (Psalm 130:3-4).
- “You have put all my sins behind your back” (Isaiah 38:17).
- “I—yes, I alone—am the one who blots out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again” (Isaiah 43:25 NLT).
- “You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean!” (Micah 7:19 NLT).
- “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).
- “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

Salvation begins with our forgiveness by God. If God did not forgive us, we would have to shoulder our sins forever, and be weighed down under a load of guilt that could never be removed.

But the Bible also has a lot to say about *our* forgiveness of the sins of *others* against *us*. Here are two examples:

- “When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:26).
- “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

There are several points we should observe from these two verses on forgiveness:

First, Christianity is supremely a religion of forgiveness. It begins with God and comes down to us.

Second, God has only one solution to the problem of human sin—the act of forgiveness. If we do not accept His solution, no other will be offered.

Third, God Himself has shown us how to forgive others. We are to do for others what He has done for us.

Fourth, there is a direct connection between our own spiritual health and our willingness to forgive those who have sinned against us. When we have a “root of bitterness” springing up within us, we cannot be truly healthy.

I’m sure we would all agree that forgiveness is of the Lord in the sense that forgiveness starts with God, comes down to us, and then goes out to other people. This is what Ephesians 4:32 plainly says. We are to forgive as God has forgiven us. In his massive commentary on Ephesians, Harold Hoehner points out that the word translated “forgive” in the NIV Bible is part of a Greek word meaning “be gracious.” It includes forgiveness, but is a much broader concept. We are to extend grace to others as God has extended grace to us. We, the undeserving who have been showered with God’s grace in Christ, are to give to other undeserving sinners (who have sinned against us) the same outpouring of grace. From God to us to others. Grace to us, grace to others. This is God’s plan.²⁰

But is it realistic to live this way? Is the standard too high? Can anyone really practice this in a fallen world? What would a “grace full” lifestyle look like? When Paul uses the words, “forgiving

each other,” what does he mean? Several practical questions arise at this point.

Practical Questions About Forgiveness

1. *What is forgiveness?*

The various authors of the Bible used a number of different Hebrew and Greek words to communicate the concept of forgiveness. One word means “to blot out” in the sense that God erases the record of the sins we commit. A common Hebrew word means “to lift and carry away,” speaking of the complete removal of our sins from us, as if a heavy load were lifted from our shoulders. Still another word means “to release from debt,” indicating the punishment for sin has been canceled. And one Greek word means “to show grace to one who has sinned greatly,” speaking of the undeserved nature of forgiveness. Indeed, forgiveness is truly a gift from God. In their book *Forgive and Love Again*, John Nieder and Thomas Thompson point out that the Bible uses at least 75 different word pictures of forgiveness. Here are a few of them:

- “To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door, and let the prisoner walk free.”
- “To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, ‘Nothing owed.’”
- “To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare, ‘Not guilty!’”
- “To forgive is to shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be found again.”
- “To forgive is to bundle up all the garbage and trash and dispose of it, leaving the house clean and fresh.”
- “To forgive is to loose the moorings of a ship and release it into the open sea.”
- “To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal.”


- “To forgive is to relax a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.”
- “To forgive is to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking like new.”
- “To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be pieced together again.”
- “Or think of yourself as a banker. In your hand is a note detailing a huge debt owed to you. What debts of others does your note list? Slander? Fraud? Rape? You carefully take the note and look at it once more. But instead of putting it back in the file, you tear it into a thousand pieces. That’s forgiveness.”
- “When we forgive, we consciously, before God, cancel the debt. We discard the note. We pardon the prisoner. We release the offender.”²¹

We can also find it helpful to know what forgiveness does *not* mean:

- Denying the evil that was done.
- Excusing sinful behavior.
- Pretending it never happened.
- Glossing over the pain you suffered.
- Removing all consequences for wrong behavior.
- Overlooking criminal behavior.
- Approving of evil.
- Condoning abuse.
- Acting as if the sin never happened.
- Letting others continually abuse you.
- Pretending you weren’t hurt.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation or restoration. It’s not a magic trick we can use to force others to become our friend again. It’s not a tool designed to manipulate others into confessing what they did that hurt us so greatly.

What, then, is forgiveness? It is a choice, not a feeling. God never says, “Forgive them if you feel like it.” Forgiveness is not about your feelings. If you have been deeply hurt, you will probably never “feel” like forgiving someone. Forgiveness is a choice, a decision you make in your heart. It is a choice to release others from their sins against you. That’s why 1 Corinthians 13:5 tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs. Forgiveness means letting go of the anger and the desire for revenge. Seen in its true light, forgiveness is an act of mercy toward the offender.



*Forgiveness is not about fairness.
Rather, it’s about grace.*

Sometimes we hear people say, “He doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.” Of course he doesn’t. No one “deserves” forgiveness. Forgiveness isn’t earned, and if a person could “earn” forgiveness, he wouldn’t need it in the first place. It is a gift of mercy that you give to someone who has hurt you. But note this qualifier: The gift is extended to the other person, but the action remains between you and God. The other person might never know about it. When you forgive, God knows and you know—and that’s all that matters. And the end result is a change in the way you feel and act toward that other person.

A friend wrote and said, “I’m looking for fairness, but can’t seem to find it.” And you won’t find it, because forgiveness is not about fairness. Rather, it’s about grace.

2. How do I know when I have truly forgiven?

The answer will vary depending on the person involved and what he or she did to you. Here are a few helpful guidelines (taken

partly from Kendall and also from a list by the Puritan author Thomas Watson).

- Face what they did and forgive them anyway.
- Don't keep bringing it up to them.
- Don't talk about it to others.
- Show mercy instead of judgment.
- Refuse to speak evil of others.
- Choose not to dwell on it.
- Pray for them.
- Ask God to bless them.
- Do not rejoice at their calamities.
- Help them when you can.

In giving this list, I do not mean to imply we must carry out all ten guidelines before we can say we have truly forgiven another person. The presence or absence of repentance plays a role as well. We would do well to take this list and dwell on it, pray over it, and ask ourselves some hard questions.

3. Is forgiveness an event or a process?

The answer is it's both. Forgiveness is an event in the sense that you must, at some point, decide to forgive. And it is a process that must be repeated often over time. I spoke with a woman whose husband abandoned her for a younger woman, leaving her with a very young child to raise alone. As she told me the story, she said, "I guess I've forgiven him a million times. I forgive him over and over again every day." "You'll probably have to forgive him a million more times before it's over," I replied. That may not seem like a word of hope, but, in fact, it is. Remember, forgiveness isn't a tool for manipulating people into having a good relationship with you. No one can force another person to become reconciled with you. That must come from a heart prompted by God's Holy Spirit. As we've noted earlier, there are two very good reasons to extend forgiveness that have nothing to do with the other person:

- You should forgive because God has commanded it.
- You should forgive because forgiveness is good for your soul.

Any other benefits are like ice cream added to a slice of apple pie—nice, but not necessary. We should practice forgiveness for God’s sake and our own. That ought to be enough to motivate any of us.

Sometimes we will struggle with forgiving a certain person for years. As a child, C. S. Lewis suffered greatly from a teacher who was a bully. This teacher made life a living hell for his students. Lewis never forgot the pain and humiliation he suffered at his hands, and he never felt able to forgive him. Near the end of his life, however, he wrote to a friend in America:

Do you know, only a few weeks ago I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I’d been trying to do it for years; and like you, each time I thought I had done it, I found, after a week or so it all to be attempted over again. But this time I’m sure it’s the real thing.²²

That strikes me as an entirely honest statement. Forgiveness is a journey toward freedom that sometimes requires multiple steps before we reach our goal. Do not despair if your first few steps must be repeated again down the road. Keep walking, and eventually you will get there.

4. Does forgiveness always lead to reconciliation?

The answer is no. Forgiveness is one thing, reconciliation is another. Reconciliation requires forgiveness, but forgiveness does not demand reconciliation. Forgiveness depends on you. Reconciliation depends on you plus the other person. It implies confession, repentance, forgiveness, restoration of trust, the passage of time, and a mutual desire to reconcile. Often it is not possible; sometimes it is not wise:

The former friend we forgive may not be good for us. A former husband may be still addicted to abusing women. A former partner may be a crook—a forgiven crook, but still a crook. Being forgiven does not qualify a person to be a friend, a husband, or a partner. And if he does not qualify, we are better off to walk away and heal ourselves alone.²³

5. What about the person who says, “I can forgive but I can’t forget”?

This is a common problem and a common statement. I must confess I have changed my answer to this question over the years. If you go back and listen to my sermon tapes on forgiveness from a few years ago, you will hear me say something like, “If you haven’t forgotten, you haven’t forgiven.” I’m smiling as I write these words because that statement is so obviously wrong I wonder what made me ever think that way. We all understand that God “forgets” our sins when He blots them out, puts them behind His back, and casts them into the depths of the sea. He can “forget” our sins because He’s God and has the power to do that. But we’re not God, and our painful memories often return to haunt us.


In pondering this problem, my mind ran to a scripture in the book of Hebrews that speaks of God’s forgiveness of our sins. Surely if we have trouble forgetting, what about God, who never forgets anything? Hebrew 10:17 quotes God as saying, “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” According to the phrase, “I will remember no more,” God chooses not to remember our sins.

That’s helpful, isn’t it? *Forgiveness is a choice we make.* It is not a feeling or a mood or a passing notion. Forgiveness does not mean we somehow wipe out of our mind the record of what happened. Forgiveness means we choose not to remember it. There is a big difference between remembering a painful event and dwelling on it. We can all remember (if we try hard enough) events in the past that hurt us deeply. Forgiveness means we

choose not to dwell on those events. It also means we choose not to hold a grudge against someone who has wronged us. Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, was talking with a friend one day when the name of a person they both knew came up. Years before, that person had acted meanly toward Clara. The friend asked Clara, “Don’t you remember when she did that to you?” “No,” Clara replied, “I distinctly remember forgetting that.”

6. Does forgiveness mean I have to let people walk all over me?

When I was preaching on forgiveness at a conference center in Colorado, a young man in the audience asked, “I know we are supposed to forgive, but does that mean you just lie there and take it?” Does forgiveness mean letting someone keep hurting you over and over again? How does forgiveness apply to an abusive marriage relationship? How does it apply to unethical situations in your workplace?



*Forgiveness does not
cancel all the consequences
of sinful behavior.*

When it comes to injustice, there is a big difference between *how* you respond and *why* you respond. There are many times when the only proper response to injustice is confrontation. Such confrontations are rarely easy or pleasant, and sometimes they lead to the breaking of a friendship. But that’s not really the issue. The issue is *why* we confront injustice. That’s where forgiveness comes in. If we confront injustice out of anger and bitterness or out of a deep desire to get even with someone who has hurt us, then we ourselves are guilty of sin and God will not bless our

efforts. Why? Because, as James 1:20 says, “Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” Thus, forgiveness is *always* appropriate, even in cases where we are deliberately and repeatedly wronged. In those cases, it is imperative that before we take a step of confrontation, we rid ourselves of the venom of bitterness and the acid of resentment. Otherwise we will be guilty of carrying out a righteous action in an unrighteous way, and God will not bless us.

Forgiveness and justice are different, and we do well to keep them separate. The same is true for forgiveness and reconciliation. No wife needs to stay in an abusive relationship. And when you see the law being broken, you have a moral obligation to call the police. Forgiveness does not cancel all the consequences of sinful behavior. Even when we forgive someone who harms us, that person may still end up going to prison.

7. Do I need to tell the person, “I forgive you”?

Not necessarily. Obviously, if a person asks for forgiveness, and if you intend to forgive him or her, then of course you should say, “I forgive you.” But most of the time, the people who hurt us are not seeking forgiveness or reconciliation. Sometimes it isn’t helpful to say, “I forgive you,” for then you end up picking a fight because the person responds, “I didn’t do anything that needs to be forgiven.” Remember, your forgiveness doesn’t depend on them. You don’t need their permission to forgive them. You don’t need their agreement that they were wrong. Just forgive them. Choose forgiveness in your heart, and then move on with your life.

8. How do you forgive if they do not confess?

How do you forgive those who do not, will not, or cannot own up to what they did? If they don’t ask for forgiveness, how can you forgive them? This is a painful problem for many people because we live in a cruel world filled with mean people. There are individuals who will stomp on your face and walk away laughing. And they’ll do it again and laugh again. You might

work with someone like that, or be married to someone like that. You may have a relative who sexually abused you and has never admitted it. And how do you forgive someone who has died? What about people who have moved out of your life and you have no way of confronting them? What does it mean to forgive in such situations?

Writing over 450 years ago, John Calvin addressed this very question by saying there are two kinds of forgiveness. One is when the person who did the wrong admits it, comes to you asking for forgiveness, and you grant it—and the relationship is restored. That’s the best kind; that’s the ideal. There is confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. Unfortunately, however, sometimes people who have wronged us will not admit their guilt no matter what we do. In fact, sometimes they will lie to cover up the truth. Sometimes they will cut off the relationship rather than face the hard work of reconciliation. Sometimes they will keep right on hurting us on purpose.²⁴

How can you forgive in a situation like that? Calvin said you can forgive even in that situation in the sense that you let go of your anger and bitterness and refuse to let the hurt dominate your life. True, the relationship remains broken. It may never be healed. But you can choose not to remember the sins of the other person. You can choose to wipe the slate clean so your life is free from bitterness. That’s not easy, but it’s far better than living in the past and nursing a wounded spirit. It’s also biblical, for in this we have the example of Jesus Himself, who, when He hung on the cross, prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

9. What about the feelings of anger that keep coming back?

This common problem confirms that forgiveness is often a process and a journey, not just a one-time event. It’s a choice we must continue to make over and over again. In one of her writings, Corrie ten Boom tells of some Christian friends who

wronged her in a public and malicious way. For many days she was bitter and angry, until she forgave them. But during the night she would wake up thinking about what they had done, and she would get angry all over again. It seemed the memory would not go away.

Help came from her pastor, to whom she confessed her frustration after two sleepless weeks. He told her, “Corrie, up in the church tower is a bell that is rung by pulling on a rope. When the sexton pulls the rope, the bell peals out ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong. But if he doesn’t keep pulling on the rope, the sound slowly fades away. Forgiveness is like that. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we’ve been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn’t be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They are just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.”

So it’s not surprising if, after forgiveness, the memories keep coming back for a while. If you refuse to dwell on them, they will slowly fade away. Why? When you forgive, you let go of the rope, and the force is gone out of your anger.

Supernatural Help From God

God makes forgiveness possible

That brings me back to the original question: Is forgiveness realistic? On a purely human level, the answer is no. In our own strength, we will never be able to forgive others as God forgives us—completely, absolutely, freely, immediately, graciously, with no strings attached. As long as we live on the human level, complete forgiveness will be beyond our grasp. But once we bring God into the picture the answer changes, because with God, all things are possible.

On the supernatural level, forgiveness is not only realistic, it’s the “supernatural” way of life. Forgiveness is nothing less than a miracle of God. It is a miracle we receive the moment we put our trust in Jesus Christ. And it is a miracle we give to others when, in

Jesus' name, and by His power and for His sake, we forgive those who sin against us.

“Without forgiveness, there is no future.” So said Archbishop Desmond Tutu. His words ring true because they are based on the truth of God. Without forgiveness, there is no future, no freedom, no hope, and no healing. But where there is forgiveness, there is grace and mercy and a future as bright as the promises of God.

God moved the fence for us

During World War II, as the Allied soldiers fought their way across France, a soldier died during a bloody firefight. After the battle was over, his buddies wanted to find a way to give him a decent burial. The only cemetery in the closest village was a Catholic cemetery, so they approached the priest and asked for permission to bury their fallen comrade there. “Is he Catholic?” the priest asked. “No, he’s Protestant,” came the reply. With great regret, the priest said, “He cannot be buried here. This cemetery is reserved for baptized members of the Catholic Church.” The soldiers found a suitable place outside the fence bordering the cemetery and with great sorrow, buried their friend. The next day the soldiers returned to the tiny village, hoping to add some flowers to the grave. To their surprise and consternation, when they came to the burial spot, they could not find the grave. Not knowing what else to do, they asked the priest if he knew what had happened. He told them that after they had buried their friend, he could not sleep during the night. So he got up early in the morning and moved the fence to include the body of the much-loved soldier who had died.²⁵

That’s what God did for us. He could not rest while we were on the wrong side of the fence. He wanted so much to bring us into His family that He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who through His death on the cross, “moved the fence” so we would have a place in God’s family.

If God “moved the fence” for us, can we not do the same for others? If God found a way to include us in His love, can we not

reach out to include those who have sinned against us? This is the very heart of the gospel. What God has freely done for us, we are called to do for others. The heart of God is filled with love, and at its center stands a cross. Through that cross, we have been forgiven. May God give us the grace to “move the fence” for others in the same way that He “moved the fence” for us.

Eleven

The Final Step



*Forgiveness is setting a prisoner free,
and then realizing the prisoner was you.*

LEWIS SMEDES

*I*t was 3:00 AM and as the fleet moved through the darkness of the Pacific Ocean, men on every ship began to stir. This was the hour, this was the moment of truth. The waiting was over. The battle was about to begin. From headquarters came the signal: “Climb Mount Nataka.” That meant the attack was on.

For one man, it was the greatest moment he had ever known. The long years of training were about to pay off, the countless hours of drills repeated over and over again. He was the man chosen to be the leader. When Mitsuo Fuchida woke up, he dressed, ate breakfast, and then pulled on his heavy, fur-lined flight jacket. Then he went to the operations room for a last-minute intelligence briefing. Tying a white headband with a red circle around his flying cap, he jumped into his plane. At 5:30 AM he took off, the first plane in a squadron of 200. From the carrier decks of the *Hiryu*, the *Soryu*, and the *Atsugi*, plane after plane

followed him in two waves until the total reached 350, the largest airborne naval assault in history. As the planes sped across the 230 miles that separated them from the island of Oahu, not a word was exchanged among the pilots. The die was cast, the decision had been made. And as Mitsuo Fuchida came across the final mountain that separated him from Pearl Harbor, he cried out the prearranged code word that meant total surprise had been achieved. In his excitement he repeated the word three times: “Tora! Tora! Tora!”

The first bombs fell at 7:55 AM Pearl Harbor time. As battles go, it was over quickly. Within an hour and a half, the second wave of planes had returned to the carriers. The damage was done. Behind them, the Japanese pilots left a sea of flaming wreckage. Before it was all over, the death count would reach 2,403. To this day it remains the single greatest naval defeat in American history.

The End of Innocence

That day—December 7, 1941, a day that lives in infamy—one world died and another world was born. It was the end of the Age of Innocence. In one tragic moment, America was jerked into the modern era. Up until that hour, America had basically been a sleeping giant, taken for granted by the other nations of the world. After Pearl Harbor, we would never be taken for granted again. But from that day, and from what followed after that day, America became and still remains a superpower. Seen in that light, the attack on Pearl Harbor was the single most important event in America in the twentieth century.

Because Pearl Harbor dominated the press at the time, and has gotten so much attention since, many people don’t realize there were two other epochal events that took place that same week. One took place on the outskirts of Moscow, when, after a desperate battle, the Russians decisively turned back the German army. The Russians stopped the Nazis at the very edge of the city. Little noticed at the time, that German defeat changed the course

of World War II. Up until that moment, Hitler's grand design had been to quickly defeat Russia, sue for peace with England, and thus keep the United States out of the war. Once Hitler knew he could not conquer Russia, he knew his only choice was to go west, even though that meant America would eventually enter the war. Thus the course of history was changed two days before Pearl Harbor.

But that's not all. The other great event, totally unnoticed and unreported at the time, took place in Washington, D.C., the day before Pearl Harbor. On December 6, 1941, a new U.S. government committee, code named S-1, met in Washington, D.C. Its subject: the feasibility of constructing a weapon called the atom bomb.

These two events—bunched into a short three-day window of time—not only galvanized a nation, but also changed the balance of power and ultimately redirected the course of human history.²⁶

From Pearl Harbor to Baghdad

What happened at Pearl Harbor led directly to the U.S. involvement in World War II, the bloodiest war in world history. By the time it was over, some 25 million people had died. If you take the long view of history, you can see that what happened at Pearl Harbor led eventually to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that in turn set the stage for the Cold War, which itself led us into the Korean War, and ultimately to the war in Vietnam and to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. To put it another way, there is a dotted line that stretches from Pearl Harbor to Baghdad. What started over 60 years ago has ramifications that are still with us.

According to an article in the *Canadian Army Journal*, a former president of the Norwegian Academy of Science, aided by historians from England, Egypt, Germany, and India, came up with some amazing figures: Since 3600 B.C. the world has known only 292 years of peace. During all the other years there have been 14,531 wars, large and small, in which 3,640,000,000 people have been killed. The value of the destruction would pay for a golden

belt around the world 97 miles wide and 33 feet thick. In addition, since 650 B.C. there have been 1,656 arms races, only 16 of which have not ended in war. The remainder ended in the economic collapse of the countries concerned (as happened in the disintegration of the Soviet Union). To put it another way, in world history we have seen 13 years of war for every year of peace. Since the beginning of time, more than 8,000 peace treaties have been agreed upon. Although meant to last forever, the average time those treaties remained in force was two years.²⁷

God intends to bring peace on earth by moving from heart to heart to heart. His plan is not to reach people by the masses, but one by one. In that sense, there is no such thing as institutional peace or national peace. There are only men and women who love peace, and men and women who love war. Unfortunately, there still seem to be a lot more people who love war than people who love peace.

This works itself out on a very personal level. We all have to live with the choices we make. If we choose to be angry or bitter or critical or mean-spirited, then we have to face the consequences of our behavior. That's why the message of peace doesn't come through peace conferences, as good as those might be. The message of peace is spread one heart at a time, one person at a time. Someone may object, "That's an awfully slow way to bring peace on earth. Isn't there a better plan?" The answer is simple. It *is* a slow plan, but God's way is the only way that works.

From Heart to Heart to Heart

Jake DeShazer

We're back now at Pearl Harbor. It's a few months after the attack, and America is trying to come back from the great defeat. The military is re-arming and getting ready for all-out war in the Pacific. General Jimmy Doolittle is chosen to lead a daring day-time bombing raid over Tokyo. Militarily the bombing raid has little affect on the war, but it has a profound impact on both the

Japanese and American mindsets. It boosts American morale, and sends a signal to the Japanese that they are not safe on their island fortress. Unfortunately, the bombers run out of fuel and are unable to make it to friendly Chinese airstrips. Most of the pilots are forced to bail out over hostile Japanese-held territory.

One of the men who bailed out was Jake DeShazer. Held in a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp for nearly four years, he was beaten, mistreated, and nearly starved to death. He spent 40 months in Japanese prisons—including 34 months in solitary confinement. Three of his buddies were executed, and another died of slow starvation.²⁸ By his own admission, Jake hated the Japanese with a fierce and passionate hatred. He hated their appearance. He couldn't stand their language. When the Americans in the POW camp asked for some reading material, they were given an English-language Bible—14 months later. The Bible was given to the officers first, but eventually was passed on to Jake DeShazer. For the first time in his life, he read the Bible. As he read the story of Jesus, the message of forgiveness overwhelmed him. On June 8, 1944, in a Japanese POW camp in China, Jake DeShazer gave his heart to Jesus Christ.

How my heart rejoiced in my newness of spiritual life, even though my body was suffering so terribly from the physical beatings and lack of food! But suddenly I discovered that God had given me new spiritual eyes and that when I looked at the enemy officers and guards who had starved and beaten my companions and me so cruelly, I found my bitter hatred for them changed to loving pity. I realized that these people did not know anything about my Savior and that if Christ is not in a heart, it is natural to be cruel. I read in my Bible that while those who crucified Jesus had beaten Him and spit upon Him before He was nailed to the cross, on the cross He tenderly prayed in His moment of excruciating suffering, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”²⁹

In that one transforming moment, all the anger, hatred, and animosity was gone. Jake even started loving his Japanese guards. And after the war was over, Jake DeShazer came back to America, enrolled in Seattle Pacific University, and later returned to Japan as a missionary, where he preached and wrote gospel tracts.

Mitsuo Fuchida

The year is 1945. The Japanese people are trying to put their lives back together. Mitsuo Fuchida was discharged from the army and returned home to work on the family farm. His fighter pilot days were over—forever. For a while he thought he would be tried as a war criminal, but instead he was called as a witness and was never accused of any war crimes. Shortly after the war he spoke with a friend who spent time in American POW camps. The friend told him about an 18-year-old volunteer named Peggy Covell, who had been especially kind to the prisoners.

When the prisoners asked her why she had been so helpful, she replied, “Because Japanese soldiers killed my parents.” She explained that her parents were missionary teachers in Japan at the beginning of the war. They fled, only to be captured later in the Philippines. They were judged to be spies and, while kneeling in prayer, they were beheaded. When Peggy heard about this three years later in the States (she had been evacuated), she was filled with hate. But she concluded that her parents must have forgiven their killers. Now God asked her to forgive—and show it.³⁰

Hearing that story caused Mitsuo Fuchida to conclude that the real hope for peace could come only from a supernatural source. In 1950, Mitsuo Fuchida rode the train to Tokyo. As he was walking across the station platform, someone handed him a little piece of paper. He glanced at the title—“I Was a Prisoner of Japan”—and stuffed it into his pocket. He thought it was another story of Japanese atrocities. It wasn’t. It was Jake DeShazer’s story

of how he had come to Christ. As Mitsuo Fuchida read the story, he was captivated. It told of a man who once hated the Japanese but now gave his life to reach them for Jesus Christ. The tract caused Mitsuo Fuchida to find a Bible and to begin reading it. As a Buddhist, it was all new to him. He was enthralled by the story of Jesus Christ, especially by the story of the crucifixion, and most especially by the words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

These are the words of Mitsuo Fuchida:

I was impressed that I was certainly one of those for whom He had prayed. The many men I had killed had been slaughtered in the name of patriotism, for I did not understand the love which Christ wants to implant within every heart.

Right at that moment, I seemed to meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of His death as a substitute for my wickedness, and so in prayer, I requested Him to forgive my sins and change me from a bitter, disillusioned ex-pilot into a well-balanced Christian with purpose in living.

That date, April 12, 1950, became the second "day to remember" of my life.³¹

As the news of Mitsuo Fuchida's conversion spread, his friends and family members were shocked. There were huge newspaper headlines that read, "Pearl Harbor Hero Converts to Christianity." Mitsuo's old war buddies visited him, attempting to convince him to give up this crazy idea. But they couldn't. And so the man who led the attack on Pearl Harbor became a Christian and a fervent evangelist for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Joe Morgan

The story is not yet over. We're back in 1941 again. This time we are on the ground with a 19-year-old young man from Brockton, Texas, named Joe Morgan. He was raised as a Baptist

and, at one point, felt God was calling him to be a preacher. But those plans were set aside when he joined the navy in order to see the world. When the attack descended upon Pearl Harbor, he was paralyzed with shock at first, but then grabbed a gun and started firing wildly at the attacking planes. He stayed at his position all day and all night, waiting for the planes to come back—but they never did. After the war Joe Morgan went to seminary and he, too, became a preacher. Where do you suppose his first church was? In Hawaii. He struggled for years with hatred for the Japanese. He simply couldn't forgive them for what they had done at Pearl Harbor. He hated them for all the atrocities in the Pacific. "When we dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, I cheered. I was happy that we had finally killed so many of them," he said. Years passed, and he was still a pastor on Oahu, eaten up with anger and bitterness. Then in 1956, a friend told him about an unusual guest speaker who was coming to a local Methodist church. It was a man from Japan named Mitsuo Fuchida, the man who led the attack on Pearl Harbor. With great skepticism, Joe Morgan went to hear him. Afterward he confronted Fuchida and told him he had been on the ground at Pearl Harbor. Fuchida bowed slightly, then very gently said, "Gomenasai," which means, "I'm sorry." Then the man who led the attack reached out his hand to one of the men he had tried to kill on that day. Joe Morgan's response?

As he reached out to shake my hand, I experienced the miracle of my lifetime. The anger and hatred were gone. God had let me forgive.³²

From Enemies to Friends

What a story of the grace of God! It started on the deck of a Japanese aircraft carrier. It led to a Japanese POW camp in China. It continued on the platform of a Japanese rail station. It climaxed at a Methodist church in Hawaii 11 years later.

- Jake DeShazer, who hated the Japanese, found Christ in a POW camp.
- Mitsuo Fuchida, who led the attack at Pearl Harbor, found Christ after reading Jake DeShazer's tract.
- Joe Morgan, who was on the ground at Pearl Harbor, found freedom from hatred when he met Mitsuo Fuchida.

That these former enemies became friends is a testimony to the power of Jesus Christ to bring reconciliation between even the worst of adversaries. And whatever happened to Joe Morgan? In his later years he became a chaplain for the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. On December 7, 1991, on the fiftieth anniversary of the attack, when President George H. W. Bush spoke at the National Cemetery of the Pacific, Joe Morgan gave the invocation.

Is there such a thing as peace on earth? The answer is yes. But the peace Jesus came to bring is not won around a conference table or at the point of a bayonet. His peace goes from heart to heart to heart. It *is* possible for former enemies to be reconciled, and for people who once hated each other to love each other and to forgive.

It is against that backdrop that we consider the words of Jesus in Luke 6:27-36 (ESV).

I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to

those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

“Love your enemies.”

That may be the most difficult command Jesus ever gave. Even when we read it in the Bible, it is extremely difficult to believe that Jesus really meant what He said. But in case we have any doubts about this, consider the way this command is explained:

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

As if that were not enough, Jesus gave us some additional commands so we can't weasel our way out:

If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek.

If someone takes your shirt, give him your jacket, too.


If a beggar comes to you, give him something.

If someone in need takes something from you, do not demand it back.

And in the middle of all this we have Luke's version of the Golden Rule: “As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.” Jesus also said it's not enough to love those who love you. As Frank Burns said on the TV show *M*A*S*H*, “It's nice to be nice to nice people.” Sure it is, but that doesn't win any points with the Lord. Even sinners are nice to nice people.

Then like any good preacher, Jesus repeated His main point just in case we didn't get it the first time around: “Love your enemies” (verse 35). And do good even to people whom you know

will treat you rudely in return. Be willing for others to take advantage of you. Don't go around thinking you deserve something in return. That's not why you forgive others, and that's not why you love your enemies. After all, you may forgive someone who was a jerk, and that person may still be a jerk after you forgive him. And you may love your enemies, and they may still be your enemies tomorrow morning.



*Love and hate cannot coexist in
the same place at the same time.*

Why Live Like This?

Let's stop for a moment and observe these truly radical sayings by Jesus. A friend once commented to me that everything the world teaches us about human relationships is wrong. Compared to what most of us have heard, the words of Jesus are (literally) out of this world. That is, they come from another place altogether. If we take these words seriously (as we should), we will often find ourselves at odds with the conventional wisdom most people hold to regarding relationships. Why, then, should we live this way? What's in it for us? Jesus gives us two answers:

1. *You will receive a great reward.* I believe Jesus is referring primarily to a great reward in heaven. But there are also rewards even in this life when we love our enemies. Perhaps the greatest reward is that we are set free from bitterness and anger. Love and hate cannot coexist in the same place at the same time. If we love our enemies, we will not hate them. It's really as simple as that.

2. *You will demonstrate you are a true child of God.* God specializes in being kind to the unkind and showing mercy to mean people. He specializes in showering grace upon sinners, and He loves to turn enemies into friends. When we love our enemies, we're showing forth the character of God to the world and proving that we are part of God's family. There ought to be a family resemblance that even the unsaved can spot.

That's why the text ends with these words: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (verse 36 ESV). Did you get that? "Your Father." If we say God is our Father, then we have obligation to show forth His character to the world. And what better way to do it than by the way we treat our enemies?

Who Are My Enemies?

That leads to a very practical question: Who are my enemies? *In the broadest sense, an enemy is anyone who turns against me.* The dictionary defines an enemy as "one who feels hatred toward, intends injury to, or opposes the interests of another." It's important as we think about what Jesus said that we not restrict the term *enemy* to people such as Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Jesus was talking not about enemies in general, but personal enemies. Our personal enemies tend to be much closer to home. In fact, home is the first place to look for our enemies. Jesus said, "A man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:36). In that surrounding passage, Jesus specified three very close relationships that can go sour:

- A father and his son,
- A mother and her daughter,
- A mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law.

We can easily extrapolate from that list to other close relationships, including the husband-wife relationship and relations

with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other more distant relatives. These are the people we go home to every day or interact with on more or less a regular basis. Every week we work with or go to school with people who may dislike us. We may even come to church and see people we would rather not see. Many of our enemies are found in our immediate sphere of influence. If this teaching of Jesus about loving our enemies is going to work, it must work first in the relationships closest to us. You have to learn to deal with the people closest to you before you can impact the world around you.

God's Call to Forgiveness

I received a very honest e-mail from someone who read one of my sermons on forgiveness. I have never met this person and, as far as I know, the person has never attended the church I pastor. Here is part of the e-mail:

I am in the depths of unrelenting and what appeared to be immovable unforgiveness due to serious wrongs and abuse committed against me by a very close believer. I have read anew the “forgiveness” scriptures. I have been receiving counsel. I have bought ALL of the forgiveness books. But nothing has touched my heart, spirit, and understanding like this message. Even as I write, I am crying, as I know God is calling me to forgive this person for HIS sake, even as He has forgiven me. And as I do, as I stop dwelling on the pain and hurt of it all, the years of anger, bitterness, and resentment will subside in me.

Those words have the ring of truth about them. Christians can hurt each other deeply and repeatedly. Sometimes we do it deliberately. Our feet are made of clay because we are sinners, too. In a fallen world, the people we thought we could trust will often let us down. Sometimes the people we love the most will turn against us. And sometimes it will happen over and over again, and we will discover that our loved ones have become our enemies.

Let me be more specific:

- Your children could be your enemies.
- Your husband could be your enemy.
- Your wife could be your enemy.
- Your ex-spouse could be your enemy.
- Your parents could be your enemies.

That's why the words of Jesus are so difficult to obey. We are instructed to love those who have hurt us deeply—even those who despitely use us and abuse us and victimize us again and again. And that's very hard to do when the attacks come from someone close, someone whom we should be able to trust.


Yet the command remains: "Love your enemies." We cannot escape it. *This is the final step in forgiveness.* We have not totally forgiven until we can bless those who have hurt us.

Seven Ways to Love Your Enemies

So the question then becomes both personal and practical: How do we love our enemies? Here are some suggestions:

1. *Greet your enemies.* This is a simple step we often overlook. One part of loving our enemies is to greet them graciously when we see them. Sometimes (often, perhaps) instead of turning the other cheek, we turn our whole body away so we won't have to say hello to someone who has hurt us. Some of us have been quite adept at looking the other way, ducking into a room, crossing the street, or even using Caller ID to keep from greeting those who have hurt us. But if we greet only our friends, what benefit is that? Do not even sinners greet each other? One part of loving your enemies is to greet them instead of avoiding them.
2. *Disarm your enemies.* That's what you do when you turn the other cheek or go the second mile. You disarm them by doing what they least expect, which includes speaking well

of them. General Robert E. Lee was once asked his opinion of a fellow officer who was widely known as one of Lee's greatest detractors. The general said he thought the man was a very fine officer. "General," his questioner replied, quite perplexed, "I guess you don't know what he's been saying about you." "Oh, yes I do," replied Lee. "But I was asked my opinion of *him*, not his opinion of *me*."³³



As long as we talk over and over again about how others have hurt us, we will never find the strength to forgive.

3. *Do good to your enemies.* It's fascinating that in Luke 6, when Jesus said, "Love your enemies" (verses 27,35), both times He immediately added, "Do good to them" so that we wouldn't miss the point. Doing good to your enemies means seeing beyond your pain and their meanness to their humanity. It means seeing them as people made in the image of God and understanding that there is something twisted inside that causes them to do what they do. Doing good means doing what will promote their healing despite the way they have treated you. The idea is for you to make the first move. You send the e-mail. You pick up the phone. You make the contact. You bridge the gap. You set up the appointment. I once met a businessman who is greatly gifted in sharing Christ with others. He has a knack for saying the right thing at the right time so that people are eager to know Jesus. What's his secret? He said there are four keys to being used by God to help others: Show up, hang loose, trust God, stay alert. Those four keys will work for you if you want to help those who have hurt you.

4. *Refuse to speak evil of your enemies.* That's what Jesus meant when He said, "Bless those who curse you." It means you refuse to think evil thoughts or speak evil words against those who have wronged you. The book of Proverbs has a great deal to say about the power of words. For example, "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21). Every time we open our mouth, life or death comes out. I am increasingly impressed with this thought: Forgiveness in many cases is not possible because we will not stop talking. As long as we talk over and over again about how others have hurt us, we will never find the strength to forgive. At some point, we have to stop talking and start forgiving.
5. *Thank God for your enemies.* If you believe in the sovereignty of God, you must believe your enemy is sent to you by God's design and with God's approval. Your enemy could not torment you apart from God's permission. Behind your enemy stands the hand of God. And God would never permit this if he did not intend to bring good out of the situation.
6. *Pray for your enemies.* When Martin Niemoller, a German pastor, was arrested by the Nazis in World War II, he prayed daily in his prison cell for his captors. His fellow prisoners asked why he prayed for his enemies. "Do you know anyone who needs your prayers more than your enemies?" he replied. But what if you hate the person you are praying for? Tell that to the Lord. He won't be surprised. Then say, "Lord, I hate this person, but You already know that. I ask You to love this person through me because I can't do it in my own power. I ask You for a love I don't have and can't begin to produce." God will not turn you away when you come with an honest heart, admitting you need His love to flow through you.

As I was working on this chapter, I thought that I should take my own advice and begin to pray for some

people who have been difficult for me to interact with. So I bowed my head and began to pray. When the first name came to mind, immediately (in less than three seconds!) I sensed strongly that I should contact that person. I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't shake the impression. At one point, I looked up and started laughing because I knew this was from the Lord. I couldn't just keep on praying. I had to make the contact. We'll see what happens next. This particular person is unhappy with me (and with others) for a variety of reasons. Perhaps I can make a difference. Perhaps not. But I know I have to make the effort. The rest is in the Lord's hands.

7. *Ask God to bless your enemies.* Here's a simple way to do that. When faced with someone who has mistreated you, ask God to do for him or her what you want God to do for you. Seek the same blessing for that person that you want God to give to you. Think of it this way: The greater the hurt, the greater the potential blessing that will come when we totally forgive, and by God's grace, bless those who curse us.

Your Enemy, a Gift from God

Let me offer one final word: *Your enemy is a gift from God to you.* Though you probably can't see how that is possible, remember, that enemy is present in your life only with God's permission. To say that is not to excuse evil or to condone mistreatment. It is to say exactly what Joseph meant when he said to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20 ESV). Our enemies humble us, they keep us on our knees, they reveal our weaknesses, and they expose our total need for God. Just as David needed King Saul to pursue him, persecute him, and repeatedly attempt to kill him, we need the enemies God sends to us. If we didn't need them, He wouldn't send them. Therefore, we should thank God, who knows best, and we should love our enemies the best way we can. Often God raises up an

enemy to see if we really want to be like Jesus. He will keep our enemies alive and well as long as we need them.³⁴

Unfinished Business

We often wonder what it means to love our enemies. That seems such a hard thing to do. If it means that we have to feel affection for them, most of us can never do that. But love is more than just an emotional feeling. In this case, loving our enemies means seeing a good opportunity and putting ourselves at personal risk to help someone who doesn't like us. Most of us would be perfectly happy if we didn't have to mess with our enemies at all. We prefer to leave them alone, and hope that they will leave us alone. How neat, how tidy, how convenient. But loving our enemies means more than putting them in some airtight, hermetically sealed compartment where they won't bother us anymore. It means more than saying, "Good riddance." If we are going to love our enemies, then we are going to have to take some risks and lay ourselves on the line for the sake of those who are trying to hurt us.


That might mean making phone calls we don't want to make; it might mean writing letters we don't want to write. It might mean some face-to-face confrontations we would rather avoid. It will certainly mean some difficult moments. But that is what God is calling us to do. And to be perfectly frank, I cannot guarantee you success because I cannot guarantee how your enemies will respond. I do guarantee that God will bless you when you dare to obey His word. Jesus never said, "Love your enemies as long as they love you back." No, He simply said, "Love your enemies." No strings attached.

It may be that you've cut someone out of your life because he hurt you and God is saying, "You need to take care of some unfinished business." Maybe you've gloated while your enemies have suffered, and now God is saying, "You need to reach out to them." Perhaps you need to begin praying for a good opportunity to show love to someone who has turned against you. When I shared this with my congregation, I mentioned in passing that most of us

will have more than one enemy. A woman came up afterward and said with a smile, “You were talking to me when you said that. I needed extra room on the paper to make my list.”

The decision about what to do will be different for each of us. Some of us know exactly who we need to see and what we need to say. Is there someone in your life you need to talk to? Someone who would be easier to simply leave alone? If the answer is yes, then the question God is asking is, What are you going to do about it?

Jesus said, “Love your enemies.” It won’t be easy, but we have no other choice. And if we love them, who knows? Someday they may become our friends once again.



*If you forgive,
you will be set free.*

The Power of Forgiveness

When Nick, our youngest son, graduated from high school, we hosted a party for him at our home. During the party, someone came up to me and said, “I took a walk this evening with two friends.” She meant that during the party she and two friends had taken a walk half a block from where we live in Oak Park. “We walked to the place where your van was wrecked, and we stood there looking at the tree the van hit.” That was over ten years ago. I hadn’t thought about the wreck in a long time. So much had happened since then. That night, four people got in our van and took a joy ride. Less than a block from our house, it spun out of control and hit a tree at approximately 55 miles per hour. All four people were injured, and the van was totally destroyed. Looking back now, I see clearly that hitting the tree was a mercy from God.

If the van had not hit the tree, it would have hit a house 50 feet farther, and someone would likely have been killed. The person who spoke with me at the party was in the van that night, as were the other two people. She said they stood and talked about the wreck for a while. Then she said, “I asked them to forgive me for my part in it. And they said, ‘We forgave you for that a long time ago.’” Then they spontaneously hugged her. “This is going to help me in so many ways,” she told me. She is right. Forgiveness always helps us because it sets us free from fear, guilt, anger, and bitterness so that we can get on with life. It is a transforming gift from God.

The next day I walked up the street myself and looked at the tree. You can still see the scars where the van hit. But when you look up, you can see green leaves everywhere. The tree, though once badly injured, is healthy once more. Though it still bears the scars of the past, you can’t see the scars unless you look for them.

The tree is a parable of the power of forgiveness. Though we have been badly injured, by the grace of God we can be healed and made healthy once again. The scars might remain with us till we die, but they will not be the first thing people see. Through the grace of forgiveness, the green leaves will flourish once again and become more prominent in our life.

You don’t have to stay chained to the past forever. Is God calling you to forgive? Do it. Do it now. Do whatever it takes for as long as it takes. Do it for your sake. Do it for the Lord’s sake. Don’t focus on the other person. It’s not about him or her anyway. It’s all about you and the Lord. If you forgive, you will be set free. That’s the whole message of this book. Now it’s time to do something about it.

Notes

1. R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2002), pp. xix-xxii.
2. Many of the ideas in this section come from Scott Hoezee, "Out of the Depths," www.calvincrc.org, September 14, 2003.
3. J. R. Grider, "Forgiveness," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 421.
4. Lewis Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), pp. 5-12.
5. Bruce Larson, *There's a Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick* (Garden Grove, CA: Cathedral Press, 1991), p. 15.
6. Chuck Colson, "The Enduring Revolution," www.iclnet.org, January 1, 2004.
7. Ibid.
8. James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Heart of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 17.
9. *Atlanta Constitution* online, December 9, 2002.
10. Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines of the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 286-91.
11. Edward E. Plowman, "Bullets Won't Stop Us," www.worldmag.com, December 7, 2002.
12. John McArthur offers an excellent discussion of this issue in chapter 3 of his book *Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), pp. 53-74.
13. John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 149.
14. Jordana Lewis and Jerry Adler, "Forgive and Let Live," www.msnbc.com, September 27, 2004.
15. Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), pp. 52-53.

16. Dave Burchett, *Bring 'Em Back Alive* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2004), p. 189.
17. John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 336-37.
18. Armando Valladares, *Against All Hope*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 325-26.
20. Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), pp. 639-40.
21. John Nieder and Thomas Thompson, *Forgive and Love Again* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1991), pp. 62-63.
22. Cited by Lewis Smedes in *Forgive and Forget* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), p. 95.
23. Lewis Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 28.
24. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, tr. William Pringle, vol. XVI (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint ed.), pp. 364-65.
25. Warren Jones, "Grace Is Flexible Fences," www.bethelumc.us, December 31, 2004.
26. George Will, "Surprise Attack Backfired on Japan," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 6, 1991, p. 41.
27. Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7000 Illustrations* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1979), p. 1571.
28. Chuck Colson, "Forgiving Our Enemies," www.townhall.com, December 7, 2004.
29. Jacob DeShazer, "I Was a Prisoner in Japan," www.bli.org, January 3, 2005.
30. David Seamands, "The Kamikaze of God," www.christianitytoday.com, January 2, 2005.
31. Dean Merrill, "30 Years from Pearl Harbor," *Moody Monthly*, December 1971, p. 29.
32. Richard Price, "The Terror of Pearl Harbor," *USA Today*, December 6, 1991, p. 2A.
33. Daniel D. Meyer, "Crime and Punishment," www.cc-ob.org, August 4, 2002.
34. R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness*, pp. 157-58.

Special Note



If you would like to contact the author, you can reach him in the following ways:

By letter:

Ray Pritchard
Calvary Memorial Church
931 Lake Street
Oak Park, IL 60301

By e-mail:

PastorRay@calvarymemorial.com

