

## FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER

Because we are not always very good at loving one another, we need to become good at forgiving one another. Live long enough as an imperfect person in an imperfect church in an imperfect world, and you will be called upon to both forgive and be forgiven. And since forgiveness is so unnatural, so demanding, it will be a powerful witness to a watching world if Christians forgive one another. *EPHESIANS 4:32* says we are to forgive each other as Christ has forgiven us. It is part of being Christlike.

We first acknowledge that many relationship difficulties are forbearance issues not forgiveness issues. Forbearance means we accept people as they are and have an attitude of humility and patience towards others who may grate on us. I forbear someone who talks too much. I forgive someone who talks maliciously about me. Forgiveness means we freely choose to not allow a wrong done to us shape our relationship with the wrongdoer. It means we refuse to get even, refuse to hit back, even though we recognise a wrong has been done to us.

So it isn't true that every time we are upset with someone that we must forgive them. We may have to forbear them. When do we forgive? The hurts must be deep, personal, and unfair. Let's say I am flying to London and am in the queue for the flight and someone jostles me and gets in front of me. I don't have to forgive such a minor offence, even though I am hurt in a sense. Then when I get checked in I find the flight is delayed by bad weather and I will be greatly inconvenienced. But I can't forgive the weather. When I board the aircraft, I make a joke to the flight attendant about being a terrorist and I am greatly hurt and offended when security offloads me. But I can't forgive them because I wasn't treated unfairly. So when do I need to forgive?

If you find yourself chewing over certain episodes involving someone else, there is a chance you need to forgive them. If you find yourself repeatedly telling yourself or others that you have forgiven them, there is a good chance you still need to forgive

them. If you find yourself experiencing uncomfortable physical or emotional symptoms when you encounter certain people, you may need to forgive them. If you find yourself plotting revenge (even polite revenge), of wishing someone ill, chances are you need to forgive them.

The people you most likely need to forgive most often are those closest to you. Your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends and associates. Not because they are any worse than anyone else. In fact they will be people whom you especially love. But spending much time with others, developing intimacy and closeness, means we have greater opportunity to hurt each other. We invest so much time and effort in close relationships that when they don't live up to our expectations as is inevitable, we are specially hurt. Some of our deepest pain comes from being betrayed by those whom we trusted.

We sometimes speak of how hard it is to forgive ourselves. This is more a case of finding it hard to accept God has forgiven us. We figure our words or acts somehow are excluded from God's mercy. Thus refusal to forgive ourselves is a perverse sort of pride. We are beyond help, we are exceptions to God's rule of grace. If we find it hard to forgive ourselves, we need to get lost in the wonder of God's amazing grace. Which means he doesn't hold our sins against us; he doesn't keep a ledger; his mercy has no fine print attached. If he has cleansed us we are truly clean.

So how do we go about forgiving the deep, personal, unfair hurts that come our way, possibly from those with whom we are in loving and close relationship? Having determined that the issue is a forgiveness issue and not a forbearance issue, we need to begin the process of forgiving. And we need to be aware that forgiveness is a process and not just an event. When we choose to forgive we choose to begin a journey towards healing and wholeness. And like all journeys, it takes time and is not always straightforward.

When we begin to forgive, we need to first face up to the fact of our pain. We need to forgive specifically. Don't resort to making grand

sweeping gestures, forgiving all who ever hurt me. We can only forgive concrete sins which affect us, not generalised abstractions. We need to recognise the hurt. Forgiveness is not leniency, is not excusing. To forgive does not mean telling ourselves or the other person that it doesn't matter. Forgiveness is realistic in that it admits hurt. It doesn't brush it aside and forget about it. Note too that forgiveness is to do with personal relationships, not the law of the land. If someone who sins against me commits a crime in doing so, then the law takes its course. Forgiving doesn't let them off the hook, it just lets them off my hook.

Forgiveness is not forgetting: it is remembering and still resolving not to hit back. I may always remember pain caused to me but if I forgive, I can remember without bitterness.

Much forgiveness happens internally. If you can let go of the bitterness and resentment and get on with life without confronting the offender well and good. Confronting the person is necessary only if it is the only way this letting go can happen. Such situations may include very serious hurts; ongoing or recurrent wrong behaviour; conduct which is public knowledge and thus affecting others directly; and also where the other person is affecting others by their inappropriate conduct. And there are times when we can't personally confront the person: they may be dead.

If personal contact is necessary, then it must be done carefully. Forgiveness is not to be used to score a moral point or two by showing the other party how deeply spiritual you are. In fact, just saying "I forgive you" can sound very superior. If such a thing is to be said, ensure it is at the end of your talk not the beginning. Forgiveness is not a weapon we use to clobber people into feeling bad about themselves. It is best to start by telling the other person what is bothering you. It may be they had no idea the pain it caused and there may be a simple process of repentance on their part and forgiveness on your part. All this opens us up to the possibility that we too have wronged the other person. We too might need to be forgiven.

This brings us to the matter of outcomes: what might we expect when we forgive or fail to forgive? There are three main outcomes. One is ongoing resentment if we fail to forgive. Resentment literally means to feel over again. If we fail to forgive, we replay the hurt over and over again, chewing over it and even getting perverse pleasure from reflecting on how badly done by we are. We begin seeing the other person in caricature, defining them in terms of the pain they caused us. We dehumanise them. Feelings of revenge often intrude. Revenge can be outward and dramatic, but usually we just play our fantasy games of getting even. Taking this course of action means we are on an escalator of pain: they hurt us, we hurt them....either inwardly or outwardly, they hurt us again, we hit back again. No one wins this endless and miserable battle because whenever we wound someone else we wound ourselves as well.

A second outcome is when we choose to forgive and the other party does not repent of the hurt. This can happen because the other person is dead or beyond our reach. Or it can happen because after talking it over, they refuse to admit responsibility in the matter. Your role here is to be forgiving, explaining the hurt you feel, acknowledging their refusal to accept responsibility. In this case, the relationship is only partially healed, but you have done all you can. Your task is to offer forgiveness: you cannot single handedly bring about reconciliation. Not even God can do that with us: he offers forgiveness but unless we repent and respond to his offer the relationship is impaired. Forgiveness is actually an offer.

In 1830 in America, a man named George Wilson was caught red handed killing a government employee while robbing the mail. He was sentenced to be hanged. President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon to him. But George Wilson refused to accept it. What was to be done? The issue was passed to the Supreme Court. Chief Justice Marshall wrote the court's opinion. "A pardon is a slip of paper whose effectiveness depends on the acceptance of it by the person to be pardoned. George Wilson refuses to accept it so it is no pardon. He must hang."

Forgiveness is no magic wand making everyone live happily ever after. There is no guarantee that it will effect reconciliation. But without it, any reconciliation is absolutely impossible. The third and best case outcome is that after you have admitted your hurt and the other party has admitted their responsibility and repented, there is reconciliation. You can be at ease with each other and look one another in the eye again.

But note that reconciliation might not even then mean total restoration to how things were. A man might consistently abuse his wife and yet through some painful dialogue and gracious forgiveness there is some reconciliation. But that need not mean the marriage is restored. A church leader might be caught out being physically violent with children in the church. Again, there can be repentance and forgiveness, but we might not reappoint that person to a children's ministry position.

When we choose to forgive we resemble God who faces up to human sin without flinching and who offers mercy and grace to those who hurt him. When we choose to forgive we turn off the tape of pain in our lives and begin to hear again the gracious voice of God speaking hope and new life into our wounded spirits. When we choose to forgive, we set a prisoner free, and we discover that the prisoner was us.