

Series: "Forgiveness God's Way" Message: "What Is Forgiveness Really?" **

Main Idea: If we're going to become forgiving people we must first understand three things about forgiveness, and consequently, put them into practice in our lives.

I. Consider the call to forgive in Ephesians 4:32.

A. God forgave us.

1. He did this because of Christ.
2. He did this on the basis of the cross, not our merit.

B. We are to forgive other sinners the same way.

II. Consider what forgiveness is *not*.

A. It is not feeling something.

1. Feeling is not a prerequisite to forgiving.
2. It is a decision to say something.

B. It is not forgetting something.

1. There is a difference between "forgetting" and "not remembering."
2. Forgetting is passive. Not remembering is active.

III. Consider what forgiveness *is*.

A. Forgiveness is a declaration.

1. It is a promise to not remember something.
2. It is a promise not to bring the issue back up as a basis for how I will treat you.

B. Forgiveness is a three-fold promise...

1. I will not bring it up so as to hurt you.
2. I will not talk about it with others so as to hurt you.
3. I will not dwell on it myself.

C. Forgiveness is a choice to do with others what God did with us.

1. It's not forgive and forget.
2. It's forgive in order to forget.

I must choose to give up my "right" to remember a hurt or to get revenge for it (Rom. 12:17-21).

When I choose to give up this "right" and keep the promise, I will have fulfilled the necessary requirements for forgetting the event.

Steve Saint was only five years old when his father was brutally killed by the Waodani warriors, more commonly known by their nickname, the Aucas. Steve's father, Nate Saint, was one of five missionaries killed by the Waodani as they tried to bring the gospel to the notorious killers in Ecuador in 1956.

The rest of the story is almost too amazing to be true. After the massacre, Steve's mother and aunt and others continued to reach out to the ones who had murdered their loved ones. Within a few years the power of Christ transformed the Waodani and they turned from their wicked ways and many people to live God-pleasing lives.

Indeed, as a boy Steve came to know—and even love—the very ones who drove the spears into his father's body. He was actually baptized as a young person by the same men, now redeemed by Christ, who had killed his father, and the baptism took place in the very spot in the Amazon River where the murder had occurred.

Steve's aunt Rachel was instrumental in translating the Bible into Waodani language. In his book, *End of the Spear*, Steve writes about an experience he had as a young person right after the Waodani received the first portion of their translated Bible:

“Then the Waodani began to celebrate. They were excited. Very few of them could read God's carvings, but they knew that the markings on the think bark in these little books could lead them along the very good trail that *Waengongi's* Son, *Itota*, had marked for them. I didn't know it at the time, but more than three decades later, I would translate for Mincaye as he explained the significance of that trail and God's carvings to hundreds of thousands of *cowodi* in the United States , Canada , and Europe .

‘We acted badly, badly,’ he would tell the foreigners, ‘until they brought us God's carvings. Then seeing His carvings and following His good trail, now we live happily and in peace.’

On the far side of the little, crude platform under a thatched roof, my brother Phil was cradled on Kimo's lap. He had his arm lazily draped over Kimo's powerful shoulders and was pulling at the big hole in one of Kimo's ears, where he sometimes wore a large balsa earplug. It seemed totally natural that Phil and I should be there with the people who killed our dad while Aunt Rachel and Dayumae distributed the Good News that our dad and his friends had died trying to deliver.”^[2]

Forgiveness is a magnificent thing. Indeed, it is what sets Christianity apart from the religions of the world. As Christians, we've been forgiven. Therefore, we forgive.

You say, “Tremendous story, without a doubt. Quite inspiring. But I have to be honest. I'm glad to hear that Steve Saint could forgive the people who killed his father, but *I struggle to forgive*. I struggle to forgive people who have done far less than kill my father, but just the same I'm filled with anger and bitterness towards them and it's robbing me of my joy. What can I do about it?”

The first thing is to realize you are not alone. And the second thing is to give serious attention to what you are about to hear from God's Word.

This morning, we're going to begin a series entitled, “**Forgiveness God's Way.**” The Word of God has so much to say about the subject of forgiveness. Our approach will topical rather than strictly expository. We'll not camp in one particular text, but rather seek to harvest the fruit from many texts as we seek to answer three key questions. ^[3]

#1: “What Is Forgiveness Really?” (today)

#2: “How Do We Seek Forgiveness?” (next time)

#3: “How Do We Grant Forgiveness?” (in two weeks)

If we’re going to become forgiving people we must first understand the answers to those three questions, and then consequently, put what we’ve learned into practice in our lives.

By the way, for some of you this teaching may sound familiar, for we’ve addressed this subject in previous messages and biblical counseling training courses. For others it will be brand new. But for all of us it is absolutely critical, since the goal isn’t that God’s Word merely be familiar to us but appropriated in our lives. And forgiveness is one area to which we must give constant attention and evaluation.

I. Consider the call to forgive in Ephesians 4:32.

Ephesians 4:32 will be our theme verse for the series. It states...

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

Notice two obvious facts regarding forgiveness mentioned here.

A. God forgave us.

“God forgave you,” the end of verse 32 states. Paul is writing to first century folks living in the city of Ephesus, people who had a sordid past according to early statements in Ephesians. Take a quick look at some earlier comments in the letter:

2:1 You were dead in your sins.

2:2 You followed the ways of this world.

2:3 You were gratifying the cravings of your sinful nature.

2:3 You were by nature objects of wrath.

2:12 You were without hope and without God in the world.

That’s what they were. That’s what WE were, too. But God forgave us. That means He chose to “cancel our debt,” for that’s what the Greek term *charizomai* means. We owed God for our crime of trespassing in His universe but couldn’t pay the debt. In His grace, He chose to *cancel* our debt, to remove it entirely.

On what basis did God forgive us? The text tells us...

1. *He did this because of Christ.*

“Just as IN CHRIST God forgave you.” God’s forgiveness is not universal in scope. Those outside of Christ remain in their sins. Only those *in Christ* are forgiven. Furthermore...

2. *He did this on the basis of the cross, not our merit.*

Because God is just He cannot excuse nor overlook sin. Sin must be penalized. And it was. On the cross, “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us,” 2 Corinthians 5:21 declares.

Permit me to list some of the things God did for those of us who are in Christ. On the basis of the cross...

--He cancelled our debt (Gal. 3:13).

--He removed our sins so they no longer condemn us (Rom. 8:1).

--He turned away His wrath from us (Rom. 3:25).

--He tore down the wall of hostility between us (Eph. 2:14).

--He gave us the privilege of joining His family (Rom. 8:15).

--He made us equal partners with Christ in His inheritance (Rom. 8:17).

He did this (and so much more!) for those of us who are in Christ, and He did it, not because we deserved it, but simply because of what Christ endured at the cross. God *forgave us*.

But with privilege always comes responsibility. What responsibility do we have as those whom God has forgiven? Ephesians 4:32 makes it very clear...

B. We are to forgive other sinners the same way.

“*Forgiving each other*, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Let the words “just as” sink in. God cancelled our debt, removed our sins, turned away His wrath, tore down the wall between us, treated us as beloved children, and so much more, all because of Christ. And *just as* in Christ God did that for undeserving sinners like us, we are to do the same with other undeserving people who sin against us. We are to forgive other sinners the same way God forgave us. The *same way*. This is the call of Ephesians 4:32.

Of course, it’s not in Ephesians 4:32...

1 Peter 3:9 “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because **to this you were called** so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Colossians 3:13 “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**”

Matthew 18:21-22 “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”

The fact that we are called to forgive should indicate we will have plenty of opportunities to forgive. Indeed, forgiveness is essential for God’s people.

In his excellent book *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, Jay Adams explains: “Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of the Christian home and church running smoothly. In a world where even those who have been declared perfect in Christ sin, there is much to forgive. Christians who must work together closely find themselves denting each other’s fenders, now and then taking out a taillight or two, and at times even having head-on collisions. Under such conditions, forgiveness is what keeps things from breaking down completely.”^[4]

If any place in this world out to know about forgiveness, it should be the Church. Why? It’s because we’ve been forgiven, forgiven by God. In fact, I’ll say it again now and repeat it throughout our series, the key to learning how to forgive is understanding the way God has forgiven us.

We have been forgiven, and the One who forgave us is no less than the Creator and King of the universe, God Himself. The moment we repented of our sin and trusted in Jesus Christ, God canceled our sin-debt, and set us free. He forgave us unconditionally and unreservedly, on the merit of what His Son had done for us.

Isn’t that great? Yes, but hold on. What He has done for us He now commands us to do with each other. Remember the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, the story of the servant who was forgiven a trillion dollar debt but then refused to forgive his fellow servant of a hundred dollar debt? Remember the punchline Jesus gave in Matthew 18:35? “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you *unless you forgive your brother* from your heart.” If we’ve been forgiven by God, we must forgive each other.

You may be thinking, “Okay! But it’s hard to forgive!” Yes, it is. And one of the reasons it’s difficult is because there are so many myths about what forgiveness is. Let’s put them on the table...

II. Consider what forgiveness is *not*.

Listen to Jay Adams again, “It seems as though many Christians have forgotten all about forgiveness. Instead, they go about demanding that others treat them as they think they should, and when that doesn’t happen, they whine about how they have lost self-esteem. Indeed some seem to have learned so little about forgiveness that there is little to forget. Still others may have bought into all sorts of wrong ideas about forgiveness.”

Is Adams exaggerating to make a point? I don’t think so. Right now you may be struggling with an unforgiving spirit which you are justifying by clinging to unbiblical notions about forgiveness. Let’s identify two common myths.

A. It is not feeling something. Sam came to his pastor and said, “I’ve had it with Sally. Our marriage is over. And don’t talk to me about forgiving her. That’s impossible because I just don’t feel it.” That’s a common objection to forgiveness, isn’t it? The trouble with it is twofold...

1. *Feeling is not a prerequisite to forgiving.* Nowhere in the Bible does it say you have to feel like forgiving in order to forgive. If you wait for a feeling, you're waiting in vain.

2. *It is a decision to say something.* Something specific. Something intentional. Something you've thought through and mean. We'll see what it is momentarily. Before we do, another myth...

B. It is not forgetting something. Fill in the blank. Rob, a High School Senior says to you in tears, after recounting the painful story of his breakup with Jane, "How can I forgive her when I can't _____ what she did to me?" What would you say to Rob? How can we forgive when we can't forget? This too is a myth. In the Bible, forgetting is not a prerequisite to forgiving. In fact...

1. *There is a difference between "forgetting" and "not remembering."* What's the difference?

2. *Forgetting is passive. Not remembering is active.*

If I tell you to forget something, can you do it? The story of the Pink elephant illustrates the predicament. Back in the Dark Ages, there was a clever traveler who came up with a scheme to make money. He approached the king's court and said, "I have a box that turns ordinary rocks into gold, and I will sell it to you." The king responded skeptically, "Are you speaking the truth?" The traveler gave the king his word, "If you pay me the price I ask, I will give you this magic box which will turn any rock into gold." The king thought about it, then paid the asking price. When the traveler handed the king the box he said, "Oh, by the way, there's no prerequisite, but this should be no problem for a great king like you. For the box to work, when you put the rock into it, you must *not* think about a pink elephant. If you think about a pink elephant, the rock won't turn into gold."

And the king knew he was had.

The more you try to make yourself *not* think about something, the more you do what? The more you think about it! The more you tell yourself to forget something the more it sticks in your mind. Why? Because forgetting is passive. You can't make yourself forget.

But when it comes to biblical forgiveness, forgetting isn't a prerequisite anyway. When God forgives, He doesn't forget, does He? Can an omniscient Being not know something? No. When God forgives us, He chooses not to remember. Listen to how God forgives:

Jeremiah 31:34 "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Isaiah 43:25 "I, even I, am he who blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own name's sake, and will not remember thy sins."

Hebrews 8:12; 10:17 “And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.”

III. Consider what forgiveness is.

According to the Bible, forgiveness is the following...

A. Forgiveness is a declaration. It's not feeling something. It's choosing to *say something*. It's a making a decision that involves a promise...

1. *It is a promise to not remember something.* Again, there's a big difference between "forgetting" and "not remembering." Forgetting is passive. Not remembering is active. Therefore, biblical forgiveness is first and foremost a promise...

2. *It is a promise not to bring the issue back up as a basis for how I will treat you.* That's what I do when I "remember" something. I bring it back up in my thinking." When I "remember" the day I gave an engagement ring to Sherry, what am I doing? I am making a choice to open the archives of my memory, and bring up a feature video that's filed away in my mind.

Remembering, then, is active. It's something I choose to do with my mind. When I forgive, I am making a promise that I'm not going to bring up a painful video out of my memory archive and use it against you. It's a declaration that I make. I haven't forgotten the event, but rather I choose to not remember it.

Perhaps you're thinking, “I don't understand. How do you do that?” Let me elaborate...

B. Forgiveness is a three-fold promise... If you've sinned against me, and you come to me and say, “I was wrong for what I did. Will you forgive me?”, when I say, “I forgive you,” I am promising you three things...

1. *I will not bring it up so as to hurt you.* I will not use the event as leverage against you the next time we face a problem, "Well, you owe me one." No you don't. I forgave you.

Right here's the reason why many families don't have peace. They don't forgive. They hold grudges. They give the silent treatment. What's tragic is that God's way is so much better. When I forgive, I make a promise to no longer hold your sin against you. The slate is clean. We can move on. There's more. When I forgive, I am promising that...

2. *I will not talk about it with others so as to hurt you.* Which, sad to say, is what we often do. Instead of dealing with the problem God's way, we talk to people who are not a part of the solution. The Bible calls that *gossip*. When I say "I forgive you" I am promising I will not do that.

3. *I will not dwell on it myself.* I will not brood, sulk, have a pity party over the transgression. When I say, "I forgive you," it's settled, done, case closed.

You may wonder, "Isn't that hard to do?" Sure, but what part of living the Christian life isn't hard? In fact, our Savior says to us, "Without Me, you can do *nothing*." The fact is, no, I cannot forgive based on my strength. But I can with God's! I can make this threefold promise...*and keep it!* Indeed, I must. Why? It goes back to our first point...

C. Forgiveness is a choice to do with others what God did with us. This is what we're called to do...

1. *It's not forgive and forget.* If you say, "I need more time. Time will make it easier to forgive," you underestimate the wonder of the memory God has given you. I have seen 75-year-olds recount with fire in their eyes the injustice that happened to them when they were children. If you wait to forgive until you forget, it will never happen. That's unbiblical. Indeed, according to the Bible, it's not forgive and forget, but rather...

2. *It's forgive in order to forget.* If you choose to forgive, what you will discover is this. As time passes, you *will* think less and less of the offense. Forgiveness is like a sharp knife that cuts away the tentacles of the offense and set us free to serve God and love our brother.

So forgiveness is a declaration, a promise, and choice I make to do with others what God did with me. In order to forgive, I must choose to do something with my "rights."

I must choose to give up my "right" to remember a hurt or to get revenge for it. Listen carefully to Romans 12:17-21:

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the LORD...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

It's God's place to get even, not mine.

When I choose to give up this "right" and keep the promise, I will have fulfilled the necessary requirements for forgetting the event.

And that's what biblical forgiveness is all about. George Herbert once said, "He who cannot forgive others burns the bridge over which he himself must pass."

There's an interesting story that's told about the days following the Civil War. As you know, the Civil War left a tragic aftermath of bitterness, hatred, and resentment in America. The wounds inflicted were deep in our country. Even after the guns were silent, the anger lived on. Many could not let go of the past.

One man who refused to participate in this terrible harvest of bitterness was General Robert E. Lee, former

leader of the Confederate Army. Lee urged reconciliation between the north and the south. He knew the war was over and the future of the nation demanded a new attitude and a spirit of forgiveness. It's been said that to the day of his death, General Lee was never heard to speak an unkind word about those who had formerly been his enemies.

One day, a lady in Lexington, Virginia, showed him the scarred remains of what had once been a large, beautiful tree in her yard. All the limbs had been shot off by Federal artillery. She thought the General would share her sense of anger and outrage, and waited for his reply.

Finally, Lee spoke, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

Beloved, if you've been hurt or slighted or offended or disappointed by a past event—whether intentional or not—the Word of God is calling you to make a decision. *Cut it down.* Choose right now to respond to the past God's way. Choose to

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[2] Steve Saint, *End of the Spear*, pp. 79-80.

[3] I am indebted to Pastor Mark Dutton from Lafayette, IN, and a message I heard him preach in 1998 for some of the seed thoughts I have incorporated into this message.

[4] Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, p. 7