

What Is Forgiveness?¹

I. 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.

II. 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.

Chuck Swindoll shares the following, true story:² "During my hitch in the Marine Corps, my wife and I rented a studio apartment in South San Francisco from a gentleman named Mr. Slagle. He suffered with a back ailment that was caused by an injury received in prison camp during the Second World War. Captured at Wake Island and later confined for years in China, he was left partially paralyzed when an enemy soldier struck him with a rifle butt.

When I visited with this landlord, he'd tell one story after another of how barbarically he'd been treated. With vile language and intense emotion, he spoke of the tortures he'd endured and of his utter hatred for the Japanese. Here was a man who had been horribly wronged--without question. The constant misery and pain he lived with could not be measured. My heart went out to him.

But there was another factor which made his existence even *more* lamentable. Our landlord became a bitter man. Even though (at that time) he was thirteen years removed from the war...even though he had been safely released from the concentration

¹Some of this material has been adapted from an outline by Pastor Mark Dutton.

²Taken from *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, 1983.

camp and was now able to carry on physically...even though he and his wife owned a lovely dwelling and had a comfortable income, the crippled man was bound by a grip of *bitterness*. He was still fighting a battle that should have ended years before. In a very real sense, he was still in prison.

His bitterness manifested itself in intense prejudice, an acrid tongue, and an everyone's-out-to-get-me attitude. I am convinced that he was far more miserable by 1957 than he had been in 1944. There is no torment like the inner torment of an unforgiving spirit. It refuses to be soothed, it refuses to be healed, it refuses to forget."

My heart goes out to that man. Indeed the world is full of people who've been hurt badly, who've been mistreated, who are in the grip of the past. I'm struck by Swindoll's observation when he wrote, "In a very real sense, he was still in prison."

Mr. Slagle is not alone in that prison, is he?

This evening, we're going to begin a mini-series entitled, "A Biblical Understanding of Forgiveness." The Word of God has much to say about the subject of forgiveness. Our approach will topical rather than strictly expositional. Back in 1990 we did the former as we devoted six messages to exploring six key passages that address the issue of forgiveness. And last year, we took a similar, expositional approach in looking at three parables from Luke that deal with forgiveness.

In this series, we want to skim the cream off the top. Our aim is to do a deductive study of what the Bible teaches us about forgiveness. We'll not camp in one particular text, but rather seek to derive the fruit of many texts as we seek to answer three key questions.

#1: "What Is Forgiveness?" (tonight)

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

#3: "How Do We Grant Forgiveness?" (week 3)

What Is Forgiveness?

In his excellent book *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, Jay Adams says this in chapter one (p. 7), "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."

If any place in this world out to know about forgiveness, it should be the Church. Why? Because we've been forgiven, right? By whom? By God. In fact, I'll say it now and repeat it later, the key to unlocking the meaning of forgiveness is understanding the way God has forgiven us. Ponder Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

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 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, "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.

I. 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, the 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? Sad to say, I don't think so. You may be struggling with forgiveness right now because you are clinging to an unbiblical concept of forgiveness. Let me mention two common misunderstandings.

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 problem 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 explains. 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, yes, 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 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 Person not know something? No. When God forgives us, He chooses to not 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 blot 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."

II. 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 what? Gossip. When I say "I forgive you" I am promising I will not do that. Nor...

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, my Savior says to me, "Without Me, you can do *nothing*." There's a big difference between hard and impossible. I cannot forgive based on my strength, but I can with God's. Indeed, I must.

C. Forgiveness is a choice to do with others what God did with us. What's that?

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 (Rom. 12:17-21). Romans 12 states, "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 according to God's Word. Choose to forgive.