

Living a New Life by Forgiving Others

Ephesians 4:32

In a recent *Our Daily Bread* devotional, author Philip Yancey writes, “In the heat of an argument, my wife came up with an acute theological insight. We were discussing my shortcomings in a rather spirited way when she said, ‘I think it’s amazing that I forgive you for some of the dastardly things you’ve done!’”

Philip Yancey goes on to say, “What struck me about her comment was its sharp perception into the nature of forgiveness. It is not a sweet platonic ideal to be dispersed in the world like air-freshener sprayed from a can. Forgiveness is achingly difficult, and long after you’ve forgiven, the wound lives on in memory. Forgiveness is unnatural, and my wife was protesting its blatant unfairness.”

Forgiveness is both the unnatural act and concluding note of Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 4 on the theme of *Family Matters*. Let’s read this verse aloud together: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

This morning I’d like us to explore three questions: First, what is forgiveness? Second, why should I forgive? And third, how do I forgive? In seeking answers to these questions, I’d like to especially acknowledge insights drawn from the writings of ethicist Lewis Smedes, psychologist June Hunt and pastor Max Lucado and Rick Warren. Now for that first question: What is forgiveness? Basically forgiveness means dismissing a debt.

1. What is forgiveness? Forgiveness means dismissing a debt

Imagine that you need \$1000 to help pay an overdue bill. You ask a friend for a loan and promise to pay it back at the end of the month. But when the time comes for repayment, you don’t have the money. In fact, for the next three months, you still don’t have the money. Then out of the kindness of your friend’s heart, your friend chooses to “forgive” the debt. And that’s what real forgiveness involves.

Forgiveness means dismissing a debt—you dismiss the demand that others owe you something. You dismiss the debt from your thoughts, especially when someone fails to meet your expectations, or fails to keep a promise, or fails to treat you justly. The Bible says, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another” (Romans 13:8). Jesus expressed the heart of forgiveness when He said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27).

Forgiveness means relinquishing your right to get even. Rick Warren notes that you and I must take the initiative by letting persons who hurt us off the hook. “Every time you remember how you’ve been hurt, release it. It’s got to be constant. ... How do you know when you’ve totally released the hurt? It doesn’t hurt anymore. You might have to forgive someone a thousand times to make that a reality. But every time the pain comes to your mind you say, ‘God I give it to you again. For the hundredth time, Lord, I’m letting them off the hook and relinquishing my right to get even.’ Every time we rehearse an offense, you make the pain go deeper. But every time you release an offense, the pain gets weaker in your life.”

Let’s realize what forgiveness is *not*: Forgiveness is not forgetting. We can forget certain offenses because they are trivial and others because they are too terrible to

dwell on. We can forget hurts if we have a bad memory or if we tend to suppress pain. Forgiving is not forgetting, but remembering and deciding to forgive.

Forgiveness is not excusing or smoothing over matters. We may tend to excuse evil, disloyal, hurtful or insensitive acts against us if we say that someone had a rough or sad upbringing. We may smooth over our pain or stifle our hurt but that's not the same as forgiving. In the words of Lewis Smedes, "Forgiving happens only when we first admit our hurt and scream our hate." In other words, forgiveness is not excusing or explaining away the hurt. Instead it is working through the hurt—which we'll get to in a few moments. Forgiveness is not denying the anger. It's admitting anger, and it's taking steps toward resolving hurt and anger by releasing the offense and offender to God.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. No, forgiveness is much more a sobering decision, an act of the will. Forgiveness is not a natural response it is a supernatural response, empowered by God. As Lewis Smedes puts it, when someone forgives, they reach into an unchangeable past and cut away the wrong from the person who wronged him or her. They erase the hurt in the archives of their heart. The grace to do it is from God. The decision to do it is one's own.

Forgiveness is not circumventing God's justice. Forgiveness is allowing God to execute His justice in His time and in His way. Forgiveness is not letting the guilty "off the hook." Forgiveness is moving the guilty from your hook to God's hook. Forgiveness is letting go and letting God have His way.

Forgiveness is not explaining away the hurt. Instead it is working through the hurt—which we'll get to in a few moments. Forgiveness is not denying your anger. It's admitting your hurt and anger, and it's taking steps toward resolving hurt and anger by releasing the offense and offender to God. Forgiveness is not a feeling it is much more a decision, an act of the will. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. It takes two to reconcile, but it takes only one in order to forgive.

Forgiveness is not excusing unjust behavior. It may be a way of saying that unjust behavior is without excuse. But even wrongs of unspeakable pain can be forgiven. The debt is real, but the debt can be dismissed and the debtor can be released. That's why we pray each Sunday: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Lewis Smedes has said, "Revenge never evens the score, for alienated people never keep score of wrongs by the same mathematics. Enemies never agree on the score because each feels the wounds he receives differently from the wounds he gives."

Forgiveness may be described as a decision to make four promises: First, "I will no longer dwell on this incident." Second, "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you." Third, "I will not talk to others about this incident." Fourth, "I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our relationship." But the one who forgives actively, consciously and deliberately chooses not to think or talk about the unjust behavior. Forgiveness is not a natural response it is a supernatural response, empowered by God.

To this point we've said that forgiveness is dismissing a debt. This leads us to a second question and truth to note: Why should I forgive? As Paul notes, we are to be "forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32b). We have a mandate to forgive and a model of forgiveness in our Lord.

2. Why should I forgive? Jesus has forgiven me and tells me to forgive

Let's read aloud together another passage penned by Paul: "Bear with each

other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Why should we forgive? In part, in order to grow as obedient disciples.

To forgive others as Christ has forgiven us, of course, requires that we reflect about the life and work of Jesus, including the personal sacrifice he made in order to dismiss our debt and grant us the forgiveness of our sin. The fact is that Jesus paid a price he didn’t owe to give each of us a gift we could never earn nor deserve. We will never have to forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven us. God forgives completely, unconditionally, and constantly.

Lewis Smedes notes, “To the guilty, forgiveness comes as amazing grace. To the offended, forgiveness may sound like outrageous injustice.” If you find yourself offended as someone who has been hurt, feelings of contempt may seem like your only weapon. A plan to somehow ‘get even’ may seem like your only consolation.

Why forgive? First of all, according to Lewis Smedes, forgiving creates new possibilities of fairness by releasing us from an unfair past. “If we choose, we can stick with that past. And we can multiply its wrongness. If we do not forgive, our only recourse is revenge. But revenge glues us to the past. And it dooms us to repeat it.”

Rick Warren notes that “Resentment is always self-destructive. It always hurts you more than the person you’re resenting. When you rehearse the pain someone has caused you in the past, you allow them to continue to hurt you over and over again. ... The truth is, if you don’t release the person who has hurt you, then you will resemble him. Whatever you focus on, you’ll become like. If you focus on pain, that’s what you’ll move toward. If you focus on purpose, that’s what you’ll move toward.”

Second, forgiveness brings fairness to the forgiver. “It is the hurting person who most feels the burden of unfairness; but he only condemns himself to more unfairness if he refuses to forgive. Is it fair to be stuck to a painful past? Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiving sets you free.”

You may ask, “How can I forgive someone who has not apologized or shown any kind of regret or repentance?” Well, truth be told, forgiveness has nothing to do with someone else’s apology, regret or repentance. Forgiveness is not based on what the offender does or deserves or doesn’t do and doesn’t deserve. Forgiveness is a choice to dismiss a debt, to relinquish your right to get even. It’s giving the gift of grace and mercy. It’s giving a gift that is not deserved, like the forgiveness which Jesus gives to each of us.

Why forgive? In order to obey Christ as his faithful disciple! In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15).

What happens when we don’t forgive? We can actually do injury to ourselves. First, we can harm ourselves physically. Medical experts are discovering that it’s not what you eat that matters as much as what’s eating you! Research has shown that bitterness and resentment are toxic emotions that must be released, or they’ll do damage. Second, we can harm ourselves spiritually. We can become spiritually dry, trying to feel connected to the Lord, but hindering our own prayers because we fail to forgive.

When Jesus forgave us on Calvary’s cross his enemies, who were sinners just like us, had neither apologized nor repented. Yet, Jesus opened his heart of forgiveness by praying, “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” (Luke 23:34a).

This leads to a third and final question and truth to note: How can I forgive? I must focus on Jesus, rather than on offenses or offenders.

3. How can I forgive? I must focus on Jesus, not on offenses or offenders

Let's read a few verses from the 13th chapter of John's Gospel: "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:1-5).

What an incredible gift Jesus gave His followers! He knows what these men are about to do. He knows they are about to perform the vilest act of their lives. Within a few hours all of them will betray and abandon him to enemies to will crucify him. Yet, he knelt before them and washed their feet. He forgave their sin before they committed it. He offered mercy before they sought it.

Max Lucado, in his book *Just Like Jesus* says that we become more like our Master when we fix our eyes on him. Max Lucado asks, "What would it be like to shift your glance away from the one who has hurt you, and setting your eyes on the One who has saved you?" Because He has forgiven us, we can forgive others. Because He has a forgiving heart, we can have a forgiving heart. Jesus offers unconditional grace. And so we are to offer unconditional grace. The mercy of Christ preceded our mistakes. And our mercy must precede the mistakes of others. Those in the circle of Christ had no doubt of His love; those in our circles should have no doubt about our love.

What does it mean to have a heart like Jesus? It means to kneel as Jesus knelt, with care, love and compassion, washing away unkindness with kindness. It means, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4 to, "Be kind and loving to each other and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ."

Corrie TenBoom's story is one of forgiveness in the face of outrageous offenses by evil offenders. She witnessed the death of her father and sister, while enduring months of imprisonment at Ravensbruck, one of Hitler's horrific Nazi concentration camps. Yet, Corrie clung to her faith. One evening a few years after the war, she was speaking at a church in Munich bringing a message that God forgives.

As the people filed out after her talk, a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat walked up to her. Suddenly a scene flashed back in her mind: She saw this man before. He wore a blue uniform and cap with skull and crossbones. She saw a the huge room with its harsh, overhead lights; the humiliation of walking naked past this man... this man who was now standing before her.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. I was a guard there," he said. "But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well." He extended his hand toward Corrie and asked, "Will you forgive me?"

By her account, Corrie stared at the outstretched hand. The moment seems like hours as she wrestled with the most difficult decision she had ever had to make. Corrie knew Scripture well, but applying the passage she had just spoken on seemed almost too

much: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6:14).

Corrie recalled, “I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer: ‘Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.’”

Then she said, “As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.” As Corrie put it, “I found that it is not from our forgiveness any more than from our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but it is the Lord's. When he tells us to love our enemies, along with the command, he gives us the love as well.”

Corrie ten Boom was living proof of Jesus' love and forgiveness until her death 30 years ago in 1983. Her heart of forgiveness powerfully expresses Paul's directive to us today as we close our study in Ephesians 4: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

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“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4).

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).