

But How Can I Forgive?

Earl Creps, Ph.D.

Director, Doctor of Ministry in Pentecostal Leadership

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
Springfield, Missouri

ecreps@agseminary.edu

www.agts.edu

Abstract: Letting go of past hurts can be a big problem for all of us. This article tells the truth about forgiveness--it's about making decisions, not about having feelings. The beginning point is understanding why forgiving is so tough is. Without pulling punches or suggesting easy, cliché answers this piece describes the biblical decisions that can create the foundation for forgiving.

The human mind is an amazing thing. Dr. Earl Radmacher reports that, "your brain is capable of recording 800 memories per second for 75 years without ever getting tired." Oddly, the same brain that easily recalls commercial jingles heard decades ago can forget a spouse's birthday.

However, there is one function at which the mind is almost infallible: remembering hurts. Vicious words and deeds scar our hearts and flood our lives with the acid of anger. Even the passing of years may not be enough to take the edge off the pain. In an instant, our minds replay the offense as if it happened only moments before.

In His mercy, God has given us a way to heal: *forgiveness*. At the mere mention of the word, however, many wounded people recoil. Their question is a reasonable one: "But how can I forgive?" The hurts are so deep, the damage so extensive that the call to forgive is shouted down by the voice of rage.

Colossians 3:13 urges us to be, "forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (NIV) God is not asking us to do the impossible. Rather, He is placing a healing balm in our hands. The challenge is to learn how to use it to release others and restore ourselves. Here are three ways we can put forgiveness into effect:

- *I Can Forgive By Giving Up My Righteousness*

Sin is a spiritual crime. 1 John 3:4 defines it as "lawlessness." Thus, one person can victimize another only by breaking the law of God (and sometimes the laws of mankind).

When sin is committed against us, our minds become *courtrooms*. We review the evidence, file an indictment and put the offender on trial for his or her misdeeds -- sometimes for the rest of our lives. Peter may have had this in mind when he asked Jesus how many times another had to be forgiven. [Matthew 18:21] In the courtroom of my mind even seven times can seem like far too many!

It is very appealing to serve as prosecutor and judge. Looking down upon the defendant from the bar of justice I can feel secure in my own righteousness and almost God-like in my ability to pass sentence. To the wronged, judging feels so right.

The tragedy of running my own courtroom, however, is that I am only convicting myself. "Judge not, that you be not judged," Jesus warned. [Matthew 7:1] God knows that judicial robes do not fit us well and He will hold us accountable for any attempt to wear them.

Sensing my attitude, other people will also hold me to a strict standard. "With the measure you use," Jesus said, "it will be measured back to you." This is why angry people are often lonely people. Others can tell when our thinking is dominated by a judgmental spirit and they want nothing to do with it.

I can know the freedom of forgiveness only by giving up my righteousness. James 4:12 puts it bluntly: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?" I surrender my righteousness by confessing that I am not qualified to evaluate anyone.

In fact, had circumstances been different, I could easily have been the perpetrator instead of the victim! Every parent, for example, knows the feeling of disciplining a child with words they learned from their own parents, words they swore never to inflict on anyone. Once I realize that life could have reversed the roles, that "We all, like sheep, have gone astray," [Isaiah 53:6] my lack of standing becomes painfully obvious. God alone is qualified to make judgments. [Psalm 19:9] My need is to repent of self-righteousness and tell God I am sorry for usurping His role.

Because God is a righteous judge, the offended person can safely transfer the case to heaven's court. The forgiving person, then, is filing for a *change of venue*, moving the case to its proper jurisdiction. As the sovereign of the universe, the Lord promises to establish justice. "Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism." [Colossians 3:25]

Many times in pastoral counseling I have watched mistreated wives relinquish their anger against their spouses, only to find shortly thereafter the wayward husband broken by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. Seeing these men sob in my office, desperate for God's grace, was a testimony to the Lord's faithfulness and the enormous power of forgiveness.

How is all this possible? Because on the cross Jesus has paid the price for my forgiveness. I am to forgive "even as Christ" forgave me. My need for grace is no less than that of the person who has harmed me. "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You. That You may be feared." [Psalm 130:3-4]

Once I see myself as a helpless recipient of the grace of God, I can no longer pretend to be righteous and am forced to resign from the bench. Because He has forgiven me, I can extend forgiveness to others. His character is never more evident in me than when I do.

- *I Can Forgive By Giving Up On Restitution*

Sin creates an emotional IOU. Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive us our debts." [Matthew 6:12] The Greek word used here is an economic term with financial connotations. When I am victimized, then, I feel the offender has taken something from me (money, dignity, reputation, safety) that must be repaid.

In 1778 a Philadelphia businessman named Jacob deHaven lent the Continental Congress \$450,000 to finance George Washington's campaign at Valley Forge. He was never repaid and died a pauper in 1812. A few years ago de Haven's family sued the Federal government to recover their loss. With interest, the current balance on the loan would be \$107 billion. Over time, a small hurt unattended can become a monster.

As the outstanding balance grows and grows, my mind becomes a *collection agency* pressing for repayment. The appeal of the collection business is that it makes me feel powerful in a powerless situation. Demanding what I am due seems so reasonable when the alternative is simply caving in to whatever life has stolen from me. In the end, though, I am only collecting from myself. Keeping the books open on delinquent accounts makes me delinquent before God. "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." [Matthew 6:15]

Missing the fullness of God's grace, it is no surprise that angry people are often guilty people. Feeling insecure in their relationship with God, they have trouble feeling secure with anyone else.

Moreover, our IOUs accrue interest in the form of bitterness. [Hebrews 12:15]

In a recent radio interview, the head of a ministry whose work is to free wrongly convicted prisoners confessed that many of those released were already back in jail. Adjustment to life on the street was part of the problem. But most of the former inmates lost their one chance for freedom because they could not get over their anger.

Fixating on what I am owed only makes me feel more cheated. The result can be emotional bankruptcy, squandering the freedom Jesus gave His life to purchase for us. As Luis Palau has written, "I believe more lives are spoiled by bitterness and a lack of forgiveness than anything else."

Forgiveness is possible, however, if I will give up on restitution. I must decide not to require repayment in any form before I release my debtors. Many times the restitution we wait for is an apology. But this puts my life at the mercy of someone who has already injured me. Lifetimes are wasted waiting to hear the words, "I'm sorry." They may never come.

Jesus has provided a way to settle the issue: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." [Mark 11:25] There are no conditions set in Jesus' teaching. I am to forgive whenever I turn to God in prayer.

By closing my collection agency I can transfer the account to heaven, "forgetting what is behind." [Philippians 3:13] This is the spiritual equivalent of burning a mortgage that has been paid off. When such a debt is discharged the sense of relief is enormous and immediate. Giving up on restitution is the first step.

But who has paid the debt? Jesus. 1 John 2:2 states that He died, "not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." The Son of God laid down His life on the cross for me and for those who would sin against me. He has voluntarily paid their debt so that I can close the books. There is no obligation between us because Christ has marked it *Paid In Full*. [Colossians 2:13-14]

Even while wrestling through the emotional aspect of forgiveness, I can decide to do certain things about it. Jesus said to, "bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." [Matthews 5:44]

It can take time for our feelings to catch up with our commitments. In the interim, a decision to bless and pray for our former debtors makes forgiveness a part of our lifestyle. This practical step burns the mortgage! It will hasten the day when anger loses its hold and the past loses its sting. By extending God's grace to one who has hurt me, I will receive many times more than I could ever give.

- *I Can Forgive By Giving Up On Revenge*

Sin demands a penalty. "The wages of sin is death," Paul tells us in Romans 6:23. When I am injured, I feel like imposing a penalty on the guilty party: revenge. The mind of the vengeful person becomes a "prison." All those who have been hurtful in any way occupy its cells. The lure of this penal system is that it allows the "warden" to punish the inmates in his or her mind. After all, it seems patently unfair for those who sin against me to escape unscathed.

The tragedy of revenge, however, is that I am only punishing myself. Jesus described the fate of those devoted to getting even. His parable of the unforgiving servant [Matthew 18:21-35] describes a man, released from a huge debt, who threatens another man owing him a relative pittance. As a result, he is turned over to "the torturers" until he pays off the original amount. David Seamands notes that these tormentors are a "fearsome foursome: "guilt, resentment, striving and anxiety. The unforgiving life is the tormented life.

Thinking I am the warden, I wake up one day to find that I am really the prisoner. All this time I have been on the other side of the bars. Unless my anger is dealt with, a dreadful irony sets in. The person I am flogging in the prison of my mind comes to control my life. He can even make me over in his own image: the abused child becomes the child abuser, the abandoned teen becomes the aloof father, and the daughter of a teenage mother becomes a teenage mom.

The only hope of forgiveness is to give up on revenge. By surrendering my right to retaliate, I free myself from the bondage of anger. Moreover, I give the Lord the opportunity to become my advocate. As Romans 12:19 instructs, "do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

I can forsake revenge only if I adopt God's method of forgiveness: full and unconditional release. The Greek term translated "forgive" in Colossians 3:13 comes from a root meaning of "grace." It denotes showing kindness unconditionally--the same way in which God has shown His mercy to us. God knows nothing of parole or probation--only pardon.

I can extend this sort of forgiveness to others because of what Christ has done for me at Calvary. "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him." [Romans 5:9] I have much less incentive for revenge if I understand that God has spared me from the wrath I deserve. Seeing myself as a recipient of such overwhelming grace makes it easier to give up my right to strike back.

Even before the anger fades, this repudiation of revenge can be acted out in my behavior. "Therefore, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." [Romans 12: 20] Coals of fire were a symbol of repentance in the ancient world. Thus, acts of love

have the power to break even the hardest heart, perhaps even turning enemies into friends. Kindness is indeed the best revenge.

During a church split years ago, my wife and I absorbed some serious punishment. The pain grew as the gossip, irate phone calls and ugly confrontations mounted. When the dust settled I could open my desk drawer and see the pile of keys turned in by leaders who had left the congregation. Our hearts were broken.

But God is faithful. Some who departed eventually telephoned to apologize; others never did. Regardless, we committed ourselves to forgiving those who had hurt us, and to praying regularly for them. I also approached those with whom I had made mistakes and asked them to forgive me. As the months passed the burden gradually lightened until, talking with a faithful couple from the church one day, I was able to laugh about the situation. Through forgiveness, God turned our mourning into joy. It works.

Real forgiveness is neither easy nor quick. Giving up on righteousness, restitution and revenge are only the beginning. These choices must be made anew whenever anger flares up. However, if we persist in the right choices and confirm them with the right behavior, the fire will eventually go out.