



By David Christensen

Forgiveness seems so easy when the preacher tells his stories from the pulpit, but somehow it gets complicated in real life. Hurt by the sin of another; we hide our resentment under the cloak of forgiveness only to have the offender hurt us again with similar behavior. The bile rises into our throats as we wrestle with our feelings knowing that God asks us to forgive the offender even as the offender seems to take advantage of our forgiveness. Sometimes the offender demands that we forgive as if forgiveness is a “get out of jail free card” in a game of Christian relationships. Christians make marvelous enablers. We enable people to keep sinning through counterfeit views of forgiveness while we build up huge loads of resentment in our souls. Easy Grace often leads to sleazy living for the “forgiven” and bondage for the “forgiver.” When God brings serious discipline into a person’s life through guilt, we often act to relieve the guilt thereby short-circuiting the disciplining grace of God before it has done its perfect work. The flip side is just as bad. Debt collecting destroys the forgiver from the inside out. As a pastor, I have dealt with people who have been so hurt by this enabling grace for serial sinners that they harden their hearts against the healing grace of true forgiveness. Jesus neither glosses over sin nor treats forgiveness flippantly. He gives us basic instructions about repentance and forgiveness for living together in the cause of Christ.

WE CANNOT FORGIVE WHAT WE DO NOT BLAME.

If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4)¹

If a person sins, rebuke him. If a person repents, forgive him. The issues surrounding sin and forgiveness are as basic as it gets for the Christian life. Lack of forgiveness is one of the most common problems infecting the Christian life and the church of Christ. We all struggle with forgiveness because it goes against our human nature. We don't want to forgive, but Jesus tells us we must forgive. Lack of forgiveness hurts us as much as it hurts the other person. Bitterness and resentment poison our souls as long as we refuse to forgive. Forgiveness frees us to live victorious lives in Christ and is a powerful testimony of God's grace at work in the church. But, we must understand forgiveness if we are to learn to forgive.

The blame comes first. Jesus tells us to rebuke the sin of a brother – a fellow believer. Jesus commands us first to rebuke the brother or sister. If the person repents, then we forgive. Part of repentance is accepting the rebuke. If the person refuses to accept the rebuke, then that person hasn't repented. A repentant heart accepts the rebukes of brothers and sisters in Christ. Forgiveness releases the penitent to start fresh in his spiritual journey. The goal of forgiveness is a changed life. Forgiveness does not gloss over the sin. Forgiveness opens the door for the sinner to become more like Christ. We forgive what we first blame because forgiveness is a step in the process of spiritual growth.

Dan Allender, a Christian counselor who specializes in counseling abuse victims, advocates the process of honest rebuke before he counsels abuse victims to forgive their abusers. He writes: "Actual confrontation must involve rebuke. ... Rebuke often opens the door to repentance. Rebuke ought to clarify the offense, its consequences, and the means for restoration. ... The rebuke must follow a logical sequence, and if a step is not passed, the rebuke cannot continue. The issues that block a step may be discussed between victim and abuser, but the resolution cannot occur until the issues are dealt with."² He outlines five steps for abuse victims to follow which I have adapted in this article for more general use.

1. The victim identifies the details of the sin, and the sinner agrees that the summary is accurate.
2. The sinner accepts full responsibility for his actions without shifting blame, excusing behavior or explaining the circumstances of the sin.
3. The sinner demonstrates genuine grief over the damage done to the victim and accepts whatever consequences are pointed out.
4. The victim identifies specific changes that the sinner must make for reconciliation to be possible and the sinner must be open to making those changes to remove the barriers to a healthy relationship.
5. The sinner agrees to pursue the path outlined by the victim and seek help through church discipline and appropriate counseling to correct the wrongs that have been done.³

Can we sin by forgiving sin too casually? I think so. God never forgives sin casually because God understands that forgiveness is not the goal but a step toward the goal. The goal is not forgiveness. God's objectives are far grander than our objectives, so God's forgiveness is far greater than our forgiveness (Rom. 8:28-30). God understands that forgiveness is not the end, but the beginning of the process and forgiveness is given to achieve the goal of holiness. Forgiveness that does not lead to righteousness is not God's model for our lives. Forgiveness that does not lead to changed lives is not God's plan for our lives. We must not settle for the lesser goal of forgiveness as if to achieve forgiveness is the conclusion of the matter. Forgiveness is the beginning of a process that God uses in our lives to achieve His goal of true holiness.⁴

Sometimes I tell people, don't be too quick to forgive.⁵ If you are too quick to forgive it probably indicates you haven't taken the sin seriously and it will come back to bite you later. Once you forgive someone for something, you can't keep bringing it up again, or you haven't forgiven the person. If the sin hasn't been dealt with properly and you forgive too quickly, then you short circuit the process of repentance. It isn't real, but you can't bring it up again because you've forgiven the person. Why can't we bring up the sin again? Because bringing up the sin again usually means throwing it in the person's face! We bring up the sin again because we still hold a grudge. We still want the person to pay for what they did which demonstrates a lack of real forgiveness. There are times when it is appropriate to bring up the sin again, but we must meet two tests of forgiveness.⁶

- 1) Am I bringing it up again as an act of love, not revenge?
- 2) Am I bringing it up again for the good of the offender not to vent my anger?

The memory of the forgiven sin is rehearsed for the good of the forgiven person. Forgiveness means that we cannot hold a grudge so we must not bring up the memory as an attempt to make the sinner pay for the sin or as an expression of our bitterness (1 Thess. 5:15). We must avoid forgiving too quickly because quick forgiveness is not spiritually healthy for the forgiven person and we will end up revisiting the painful process of repentance all over again.

FORGIVENESS IS A PROCESS NOT AN EVENT.

If a person sins seven times a day and repents, we must forgive the person over and over again. Forgiveness becomes a habit of life. Sin is often habitual too. The person will do things that slice and dice our souls repeatedly so forgiveness must become habitual to deal with it. I have found from personal experience, and from helping others with forgiveness, that forgiving someone is a constant process. I will think that I have forgiven them and something triggers the resentment all over again. I find the poison filling my heart again, and I must forgive all over again. Forgiveness is not an event that we put behind us, and we are done with it. Forgiveness is a daily process we practice throughout life. Forgiveness is a habit of life.

You say, "Dave, this seems unfair. The person gets away with it. If he keeps doing it, then he hasn't repented. If I forgive him, then he gets away with it, and that's not fair." I have two comments. First, forgiveness is not letting someone get away with it. Forgiveness is turning it over to God and letting God deal with it. Forgiveness means that I am not going to punish the person. I will let God handle the punishment. I release my right to hold it against that person – to get even. I turn it over to God and ask for His help. I can pray that prayer. I can ask God daily to help me turn it over to him, and he will help me forgive.

As long as we harbor the desire to get even, we are controlled by the wrong done to us and the person who did it. We are enslaved by the grudge we hold and continue to nurse. We need to release that grudge to God and let Him handle the penalties in His perfect way. We forgive others for our benefit when we let go of the right to get even – to make them pay for what they have done to us.

My second comment is that we must not confuse forgiveness with reconciliation. The two are not the same. I must forgive, but that does not mean that I am reconciled to that person. Forgiveness is a one-way street. I will let it go. Reconciliation is a two-way street. The other person must earn my trust

back before life goes back to normal. Forgiveness is the release of my resentment it is not an agreement to trust the person. If I loan you \$1,000 and you come to me and ask forgiveness because you cannot pay it back, I forgive you. Then you ask me for \$500, and the same process happens again. I forgive the loan. I won't make you pay me back, but I don't have to loan you more money. I'm not stupid! You need to earn back the trust that has been lost. The process of earning my trust is the process of reconciliation. Forgiveness just means that I don't make you pay back the money you owe.

Forgiveness refuses to let the anger, bitterness, and hatred poison us. Forgiveness is a process, not a single act. We have to renew the commitment to forgive every day of our lives. Be honest with your pain. Let it run its course for pain denied or repressed is merely a subtle form of debt collecting. It rises later to bury us. Only when we have owned the pain fully are we ready to forgive the hurt honestly. Then we can let go of the past and start a new future. The timetable for forgiveness is between the forgiver and God. The person who has wronged us should never be allowed to control that timetable. We should not give in to demands to forgive too quickly so as to salve the feelings of the sinner. We also should not let our souls be bound by the behavior of the unrepentant sinner. If we wait to forgive until the sinner makes the first move, then we are allowing the sinner to control the timetable of our forgiveness. Either way, we are in bondage. We forgive when God gets us ready to forgive – not before or after. We let go of what was to make way for what can be even if what can be is unknown.

IT TAKES CRAZY FAITH TO FORGIVE!

The Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to his mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:5-6)

The apostles said, "Increase our faith." We understand this request as if they are talking about faith, in general, forgetting the context of their request. The context is forgiveness. Jesus has just said some astounding things about forgiveness and the disciples' natural response is, "I can't do that. That takes crazy faith." If you are honest, you probably have a similar reaction to what I am writing about forgiveness. "That's crazy. That would take crazy faith, and I don't have that kind of faith. If you knew what has been done to me, you would understand that I just don't have the faith to forgive like that."

I understand. I don't have the crazy faith that it takes to forgive deep wounds either. But Jesus tells me to do it anyway. I have had to learn to forgive tough things in my life so I know you can too. God is the only one who can help us forgive. We can't do it on our own. No way! It won't happen in our strength. You can't do it. I can't do it. Only God can give us the grace to forgive. But, here is the vital truth. He will! I guarantee it if you are willing to trust him.

That is when we say, "I guess I just need more faith then." And Jesus says, No! It is not more faith that we need. We need faith placed in the right person. We need to believe that God is in control. We need to believe that God can handle it. We can release it all to God – all the bitterness, all the grief – and He will swallow it up in His grace and somehow make it all right in the end.

Jesus says, that if we have the faith of the mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds, we can say to a mulberry tree, be uprooted and thrown into the sea. It will obey us. He is citing a proverbial image. The Rabbis taught that the Black Mulberry had roots so deep and strong that it would stay in the ground for 600

hundred years.⁷ Here is the point of the proverb. You say, “I find it hard to forgive. I hold grudges. They take root in my soul. I can’t let them go.” Jesus says that, if you trust Him to help, you can tell those deep-rooted grudges to be ripped out of the ground and thrown into the ocean. With God’s help, they will be gone! It is not because you are so strong, but because He is so strong, and you trust His strength for your future.

A newscast in Egypt shortly after the celebration of Easter in 2017 shocked the world. Amr Adeeb, a famous talk show host, had his reporter interviewing the widow of Naseem Faheem, the guard at St. Mark’s Cathedral in her simple home. On Palm Sunday, the guard had redirected the terrorist who detonated his bomb. Naseem Faheem was the first to die saving the lives of dozens inside the church. His wife told the reporter, “I’m not angry at the one who did this. I’m telling him, May God forgive you, and we also forgive you. Believe me; we forgive you. You put my husband in a place I couldn’t have dreamed of.” The talk show host couldn’t talk for 12 long seconds. Then he stammered out, “The Copts of Egypt ... are made of ... steel. How great is this forgiveness you have!” His voice cracked as he said to his television audience, “If it were my father, I could never say this. But this is their faith and religious conviction.”⁸ Faith in God’s promises, God’s plans, and God’s future gives us the grace to forgive man’s horrible atrocities! We must have the faith to forgive.

I struggle with forgiveness like everyone else. Bitterness, guilt, revenge, and rejection can fill the sacks we carry with heaviness. Most of the weight comes from common, ordinary circumstances that everyone experiences, but the cumulative burden of little wrongs becomes more than we can bear. If we do not release those weights, the sack can become too heavy to carry. We nurse the wounds that kill the soul. Like an alcoholic, we slake our thirst with the taste of death. Revenge tastes sweet at first but turns bitter in the end. We ponder those injustices and consider in our minds our options, and slowly the poison eats away our souls. These feelings are the door that the enemy uses to penetrate our defenses. An unforgiving heart is like a Trojan horse in the soul. The enemy gets inside our minds and overwhelms our defenses from the inside out. We succumb to the bitterness and walk away from hope. Forgiveness is the key to release. The sack needs a hole to release the weight, and the hole is forgiveness. Debt collecting will eventually lead to spiritual bankruptcy. We need to release the debts before they overwhelm the soul with guilt and bitterness. Spiritual healing begins with forgiveness. The Great Physician uses His scalpel of forgiveness to surgically remove the cancer of revenge and rejection that is killing our souls.

¹ Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1977, 1995, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

² Allender, Dan, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, Nav Press, Colorado Springs Colorado, 1995, pp. 251-252.

³ Ibid, p. 252.

⁴ Frederic Godet, in Augustus H. Strong *Systematic Theology*, Three Volumes in One, Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907, p. 869.

⁵ Lewis Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and You Don’t Know How*, Ballantine Books, Fifth Printing Edition, 1997, p. 137.

⁶ Wendell Miller, *Forgiveness: The Power and the Puzzles*, Warsaw, Indiana: ClearBrook Publishers, 1994, pp. 99-100).

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, reprint edition, 1982, p. 256.

⁸ “Forgiveness: Muslims Moved as Coptic Christians Do the Unimaginable,” *Christianity Today*, April 20, 2017.

