

# **MOTIVATED**

## **Why Forgive At All?**

**Forgiven Series (Part 2)**

**Text: Ephesians 4:17-32**

### **Why Forgive?**

I read recently of a couple named Jane and Ralph who raised their kids and safely launched them. About the time that Jane is finally able to pursue the interests she'd sidelined when raising a family, the news comes that Ralph's brother and wife have been killed in a car accident. Ralph begs Jane to let them take in the three children. Jane says YES. She spends the next several years now raising and launching these children, while Ralph climbs the upper rungs of his career ladder.

As Jane now sees the finish line for the second time, Ralph announces that he has found true love in the arms of his young secretary. Divorce ensues, Ralph goes off with Sue, and joins a church that baptizes their newfound happiness. In a period of religious resurgence for Ralph, he returns to try to tie up loose ends with Jane. "Will you forgive me?" he asks earnestly. Jane responds with five succinct words: "You can go to h-e-double hockey-sticks," she says.

Do you blame her? Do you understand why Jane might not want to give up the only power she felt she had left – the authority of her justified hate? Why should she throw away this final source of dignity and self-esteem? Why should she risk in any way appearing to condone or bless such an outrageous betrayal? Why relieve his guilt? You can understand this, can't you? When a person has done something that has seriously wounded you and wronged you it is very HARD to forgive.

So, why would YOU do it? Why might you even DESIRE to move from that place of resentment or bitterness or righteous indignation in which you may be stuck right now? Before we start exploring next week the HOW of forgiveness, think with me today about the WHY of it? What would actually make you MOTIVATED to even pursue the HOW? In view of the awful things that people do, why not just hold onto all the delicious scorn and contempt we can? Why not just seek and rejoice in the punishment of wrongdoers? In short: "Why forgive at all?" It's a good question. Let me suggest a few possible answers as they are supplied by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4.

### **Because the Lord Forgave You**

In the FIRST place, you might be motivated to start releasing some of those venomous feelings you may have for those who have hurt you and you might

even begin desiring to move toward forgiving them of their sins for this reason: because the Lord forgave you. Paul puts it this way: **"Get rid of" – let go of, push away from you – "all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**

Let's think about that for a moment. If you are at all like me, then you have this tendency to reduce the painful crises and conflicts in your life to clear roles. The person who hurt us is the criminal who needs to say "I am so sorry" and beg for forgiveness. We are the victim who needs to find it in ourselves to show someone else grace. There is truth to this storyline, of course. Someone else HAS usually failed and we HAVE been injured. But is it really as simple as that?

We never feel quite so blameless as when we have just been battered by someone but, as Lewis Smedes writes, "being the injured party doesn't mean that we are also the innocent party." Sometimes we bring our own injury upon us. We get taken advantage of because we left the door open too wide, eager to prove how accommodating we were. We get into a terrible business deal because we didn't do full diligence before venturing in. We contribute to our spouse's harshness or infidelity because we failed to address them in the way for which they hungered or hurt them in ways we can't yet see.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn suffered for years as a prisoner in the work camps of the Soviet Union's famous Gulag penal system. If ever there was someone who could have demonized his oppressors and credited himself with righteousness, Solzhenitsyn was that man. Yet his years of pain only deepened his self-awareness. Solzhenitsyn wrote:

"If only there were vile people... committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being... During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood."

Theologian, Miroslav Volf, writes: "Imagine what would happen if each of us were punished for every transgression we committed – for every sarcastic remark, for every unkind thought, for every intentionally misleading comment." This is, in part, why Jesus reserved his heaviest critique for sinners who would not forgive other sinners. Christ saw the tragicomedy of flawed people condemning those whose crimes and misdemeanors were not utterly different

from their own. God cannot bear the incongruity and injustice of this. Jesus actually dares us to wonder what might happen if God measured out grace to us with the same size spoon that we use with others.

The bottom line is that if it never even occurs to you to forgive the person who wrongs you... If you don't even try to let go of a bitter memory or pray for the power beyond yourself to heal a broken relationship, then you must be as insensible as the man in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant we studied last week. Perhaps you simply do not yet understand the vast size of the debt that **"in Christ God forgave you."**

### **Because You Are to Become Like Jesus**

There is, however, a SECOND motivation to forgive, even when others hurt us badly, and especially if we regard ourselves as Christians. It is because our calling is to become like Jesus. St. Paul puts it this way: **"Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."**

John Ortberg is famous for saying: "Nobody ever became like Jesus because they thought they ought to. You have want it." Do you want to be more or less like Jesus by the time you finish this life? Do you want that **"old self"** that keeps score and is being **"corrupted by its deceitful desires"** for retribution to be what is remembered by others or stands before God one day? Or do you want to **"be made new in the attitude of your mind"**? Wouldn't you rather **"put on the new self, created to be like God"**? Each time you and I move toward giving grace to somebody who doesn't deserve it we become more like Jesus.

**"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,"** wrote Paul, **"clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you"** (Col 3:12-13).

### **Because It Helps Your Heart**

Do you know what the THIRD reason is to pursue forgiveness. It is because it helps your heart. Listen to what Paul says about this: **"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the**

**ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."**

Living with the spirit of unforgiveness is like smoking cigarettes in the hope of killing the person you hate. I suppose the second hand smoke of your hurt and rage might damage them a bit. But it is largely "futile thinking," as Paul says. It is an act of "ignorance." It only leads to the further "darkening" of your understanding, the further "hardening" of your heart, the further "desensitizing" of yourself to all the parts of life, people, and God that are still sweet and good. When you suck on sin and the pain it causes, you kill yourself.

Again, Lew Smedes writes: Go ahead, "recall the pain of being wronged, the hurt of being stung, cheated, demeaned. Doesn't the memory of it fuel the fire of fury again, make it hurt again?... You have become a prisoner of your past pain; you are locked into a torture chamber of your own making... Do you want your private world to stand still at that wretched incident in your irreversible history? Or are you ready to find a better way?... The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving stops the reruns of pain... When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free [and] find out that the prisoner was you."

### **Because It Improves Our World**

In Ephesians 4:25-30, Paul gives us one further motivation to pursue forgiveness, in spite of all the reasons not to bother. He paints a picture of a world in which people are relating falsely to each other until someone comes along who speaks "**truthfully to his neighbor.**" He pictures a world in which anger is allowed to pile up and harden like snow turning into ice, until someone decides "I'm not going to let the devil keep skating. I'm addressing this problem before the sun goes down." Paul pictures a planet where there is not this endless cycle of stealing from and verbally attacking others, because someone decides to do "**only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.**" In short, he foreshadows the great "**day of redemption**" when God will finally and fully intervene to make all things new.

Here is the message: Somebody has to start the new pattern. Somebody has to break the cycle of hurt. Somebody has to at least try to overcome evil with good, or the future is not bright. Why forgive? Because in some small but very important way, it improves our world until Christ redeems it completely. As Brian Zahnd writes: "If the only way of responding to the evil of injustice is retaliation and revenge, we conspire with the powers of darkness to keep the world an ugly place... [But] Grace is God's idea of how the world can be made

new.”

Can the Jane’s among us ever forgive the Ralph’s among us, and what about that secretary Sue? Can YOU ever forgive that person who may have wounded and wronged or even now may be injuring you? And, more to the point, WHY would you choose that hard but gracious path? I hope you see it a little more clearly today. It is because by so doing you will improve our world. You will help your heart. You will become a bit more like Jesus. And you will be showing your gratitude for the way that the Lord has forgiven you.

© Daniel D. Meyer / Christ Church of Oak Brook

PAGE \\* MERGEFORMAT 1

Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, pp. 128-29.

*Ibid*, p.147

Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 135.

Op cit, Smedes, p. 130, 132-33.

Brian Zahnd, *Unconditional?*, p.19.