

life group study guide

Self-Control: Choose to Forgive

July 28, 2013



Introduction:

Webster's dictionary defines forgiveness as - *to give up resentment of or claim to revenge for*

Q: What makes forgiveness difficult?

Q: Do we get to pick who we forgive (situational)? Why or why not?

A Story of Forgiveness - *From Anger to Forgiveness: Man Befriends Brother's Killer*, by Rose Arce, CNN

The day Anthony Colon heard his older brother had been gunned down in East Harlem, he began struggling with a rage that would last for years. The anger wore him down. He missed him desperately. He hated the three men who had fired 13 bullets into his brother who was unarmed.

"Oh, God, it just - it just put so much hate in my life. I hated everybody. I hated everything. It made me to be a person, like a monster," said Colon, who considered his brother Wilfredo his only stable family.

"I loved him because he always stood up for me from a little kid. He would not even allow me to fight. He would stand up for me, whatever happened, because he always saw that goodness in me."

But as the years passed the fog of anger began to lift. He married. Had two children. He welcomed religion into his life. And, he was overwhelmed by a desire to find reconciliation with his brother's killer. Then one summer day, a chance encounter while visiting a friend at the Eastern Correctional Facility in Ulster County, New York, changed his life.

He looked across the room and saw Michael Rowe, one of the men who had murdered his brother. Rowe saw him too and tried to duck down.

"I was expecting that we would be you know, it would be a fight, some type of physical violent altercation," said Rowe.

Rowe recalls feeling remorse and shame, unable to forgive himself for murdering another young man – and afraid of retaliation. Colon walked straight up to him and said: "Brother, I've been praying for you. I forgave you. I've been praying I would see you again." The meeting would transform both men's lives.

Rowe had married the same girl he was dating when he went to prison. They were able to have three children together during his imprisonment, and he wanted desperately to parent them even as he served a sentence of 20 years to life.

"I figured I would die in prison. Or at least leave there a very old man with grey hair," he said.

In prison he was befriended by Julio Medina of Exodus Transitional Community, which prepares inmates for their release. Rowe studied and soon he got an associate's degree, then a bachelor's. As he was studying for his master's degree in Professional Studies, Colon began visiting him regularly.

"To have that kind of support from the man whose brother he killed, that is remarkable," said Medina. "Not only does it lift that cloud of shame that he walks with, but more importantly it allows him to have a second chance with the blessings of the victim's brother."

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The day of his graduation, Colon surprised Rowe by coming to put on his robe. He also came to his parole hearing, where Rowe said this to the board deciding his fate:

"Anthony is my hero. I have two sons, and if my sons grow up to be half the man that Anthony Colon is, I will be an incredibly proud father. And I don't know if I can sum it up or explain any better than that how I feel about Anthony Colon. He has changed my life."

Colon believes religion has propelled him to forgive Rowe. "For some reason I felt that he was dealing with all that he was dealing with. Like condemnation. Self-pity. Just like this hovering darkness that was around. I felt that, when people think that's strange, but it's just the part of the nature of a person that's closely connected to God. There's a connection with God that can allow you to see past what's in front of you," he said.

Rowe was released from prison this week after 20 years, a man who has not seen the world since he was barely grown up. He showed up at one of his children's elementary schools with cupcakes and gave her the surprise of her life. He saw the home where he will be living with his wife and three children for the first time. And he went to see Anthony Colon, who he will join at Exodus reaching out to young men at risk.

"God has a purpose for me. God has a purpose for us," said Rowe, sitting alongside Colon at the offices of Exodus. "Yes, us," adds Colon smiling.

Amazing story!

Q: Who benefitted most from Colon's act of forgiveness? Explain.

Q: How does this story parallel Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers?

Q: Was Joseph's act of forgiveness mutually beneficial? How?

Q: What do you believe is God's purpose in this?

A Look at Scripture:

– Genesis 42-45

The biblical account of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers is gut-wrenching. Joseph makes his brothers return to their father first without Simeon and then it seems without the beloved Benjamin. As his brothers are pleading for Benjamin, Joseph reveals his identity. The brothers are beyond frightened as their sin has caught up with them. But Joseph offers forgiveness to them and shares that their actions have been used for a greater purpose.

Q: How else could of this story played out?

Q: Joseph's act of forgiveness allowed God's purpose to come to fruition. What was that purpose?

- Hebrews 10:10-18a

10 And what God wants is for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time. 11 Under the old covenant, the priest stands before the altar day after day, offering sacrifices that can never take away sins. 12 But our High Priest offered himself to God as one sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down at the place of highest honor at God's right hand. 13 There he waits until his enemies are humbled as a footstool under his feet. 14 For by that one offering he perfected forever all those whom he is making holy. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies that this is so. First he says, 16 "This is the new covenant I

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will make with my people on that day, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts so they will understand them, and I will write them on their minds so they will obey them." 17 Then he adds, "I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds." 18 Now when sins have been forgiven...

- 2 Corinthians 5:19

19 For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation.

Q: How was God's forgiveness extended to us?

Q: What was the purpose?

Q: In each of three stories a sacrifice was made to extend forgiveness. What were those sacrifices?

Application:

Forgiveness is a choice. In all three of our stories forgiveness was granted, but it could have just as easily been withheld.

Q: Have you ever given forgiveness and it not received? Have you been asked to forgive and not granted it? Why?

But when forgiveness was extended, a greater purpose came to light.

In Matthew 6:5-18, Jesus is teaching about prayer. One of the key elements of his teaching is that we should forgive as God has forgiven us.

Q: Is there somebody in your life to whom you need to forgive, so that God's greater purposes may come to fruition?

Q: What might those purposes be? Healing and restoration of friendships, a marriage, the bond between a parent and child.

Q: How can your Life Group pray for you?

Q: How can they hold you accountable to step out and faith, sacrifice, and extend forgiveness?