

# The Power of Forgiveness

Colossians 3:12-17

## Intro

Canadian pastor and writer, Mark Buchanan in his book, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Multnomah, 2001) shares a powerful story of a Korean pastor Yonggi Cho. He writes,

*“I heard Paul Yonggi Cho speak a few years back. Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world. Several years ago, as his ministry was becoming international, he told God, “I will go anywhere to preach the gospel—except Japan.” He hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what Japanese troops had done to the Korean people and to members of Yonggi Cho’s own family during WWII. The Japanese were his Ninevites.*

*Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor’s conference—1,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood up to speak and what came out of his mouth was this: “I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.” And then he broke and wept. He was both brimming and desolate with hatred.*

*At first one, then two, then all 1,000 pastors stood up. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: “I love you. I love you. I love you.”*

Most of us will never look into the eyes of someone who murdered our family and friends. It’s hard to imagine being in that situation.

Sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal our heart—to reveal what’s really in our heart. How powerful is the love of Christ? Can it heal hatred between Koreans and Japanese? Can it make you reconciled to...well, you know who?

As Christians, we are awed and humbled by God graciously forgiving our sin and failure. Yet we seem reluctant and sometimes rebellious when the Lord commands us to forgive those who have wronged us. Why do we hold back? What do we fear? Who suffers most when we hoard God’s mercy for ourselves and withhold it from those whom we refuse to forgive?

Forgiveness is the essence of Christianity, the heart of the gospel. We are sinful, but God is just. God also loves and is merciful so He reconciles His justice and mercy in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to earth as a man to live a sinless life and was crucified. It is His crucifixion and resurrection, which makes forgiveness possible. All of our past and present sins are forgiven through faith in Christ when we repent and ask the Lord for forgiveness.

## Why Forgive?

It is much more natural for us humans to seek revenge once we have been hurt than to forgive. Indeed, a fundamental law of human nature might resemble one of Newton’s Laws: For every hurt humans seek an equal and opposite hurt. It feels good to get even. Revenge stirs our hearts and fires our imaginations. Why forebear it? Why not settle the score?

In fact, medical science has proven to us that carrying grudges and resentment is bad for a person's health. It raises the levels of stress hormones and leads to inflammation which in turn leads to heart disease, stroke, and cancer – the leading killers.

And on a spiritual level, the chronically angry person is usually separated from God. Short term anger is alright; it is like a sneeze. It clears the air, and serves as a protective measure. But long term anger pollutes the system of the person who carries it.

Ephesians 4:26, *“In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.”*

One of the most important issues that we all face in life is the question of forgiveness. It is important because, whatever our reputation in moral and spiritual matters, we will never be free of the need of receiving forgiveness from God and from one another, and also of giving it to one another.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus showed his recognition of this by including our request for God's forgiveness, and our offer of it to others, as part of our regular praying. Without learning something of the meaning of forgiveness, we will never be able to form deep relationships. And yet it is not easy. It has been said that "the most painful question short of our own death is the question of forgiveness." Often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the offender, but it clearly is a gift to ourselves.

### **When Forgiveness Is Difficult**

If one of the sweetest words in the Bible is *forgiveness*, why do many Christians find it so difficult at times?

God forgives us because of what Jesus has done for us; but then he commands us to forgive others because of what He is doing in us. Our Lord even forgave those who crucified Him, those who put Him to death. Jesus' prayer from the cross was, *“Father, forgive them.”* Jesus set an example and He too commanded us to do like wise.

Jesus said, *“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).

Dr. Allen C. Guelzo (of Eastern University, Pennsylvania) makes an interesting observation about forgiveness. He writes:

*“In the most universal prayer Jesus gave his disciples (Matthew 6:9–15), He makes it clear that we can pray for forgiveness only as we forgive those who trespass against us. But consider a deeper reason why we should forgive: When we refuse to do so, we in effect try to keep God from forgiving someone else. When we withhold forgiveness, we are really saying that the person who has offended us is no proper object of God's forgiveness. After all, if that person is not worthy of our forgiveness, how could he or she possibly merit God's forgiveness?”*

Guelzo continues, *“By withholding forgiveness, we deprive another person of what could lead to repentance and eternal life, and we deprive ourselves of the inner healing and wholeness that could come from being part of that renewal. And yet, despite all these seemingly obvious reasons why Christians need to be forgivers, the secret truth for many Christians is that we find it infinitely easier to be forgiven by God than to forgive others.*

The reasons for that cold reluctance are as varied as Christians themselves. There are Christians who were hurt years ago by the breakup of their parents' marriages, and hurt is buried so deep, or festers so close to the surface, that they see no way to forgive. There are Christians who have been wronged on the job or who have been gossiped about in the church.”

I like what Dr. Guelzo says. We find it hard to extend forgiveness because the wrongs done to us by others hurt deeply. At the same time, we are not completely sure what forgiveness really is or what it might involve. It is not that we *cannot* forgive someone, but that we are *afraid of* what it might cost.

### **The Bible Defines Forgiveness**

What did Jesus mean by *forgiveness*?

In the New Testament Greek there are 3 words which are usually translated as *forgive*.

- One teaches about having an attitude of mercy and love as found in Ephesians 4:32, “*being tenderhearted and forgiving one another.*”
- Another word describes the cancellation of an obligation as found in Luke 6:37, “*forgive and you will be forgiven.*”
- But the word Jesus uses in Mark 11:25 is the most common and the most vigorous New Testament word for forgiveness. Literally, it means to release, to hurl away, to free yourself from something.

Jesus said, “*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).

To forgive, as Christ intended the word, means willingly to throw away our resentment at being wronged. This entails not just *containing* or *restraining* our resentment, but letting go of it entirely so we can be truly free of its influence.

This approach, however, may strike us as phony and shallow, as if we are expected to greet every piece of rottenness dished out to us with a saintly smile and an understanding, “There, there, you didn’t mean that, did you?” Because we fear that this is exactly what forgiveness means, we find it hard to swallow. We are willing enough to suffer, if need be, for Christ, but there is something in us that does not want merely to be exploited, even for righteousness’ sake.

### **What Forgiveness is not**

Forgiveness means more than just rolling over and playing dead. There are a few things that forgiveness is *not*, and these may give it a balance. Forgiveness does not mean *pardon*.

#### **1. Pardon**

Forgiveness is personal and it refers to the impact an offense has on you and your need to release the resentment you feel. Pardon is legal rather than personal, concerned only with the legal status of the offense, not the relationship between offender and victim. And pardon, unlike forgiveness, means letting someone off the moral hook and releasing them from the punishment they deserve.

It is possible to have forgiveness without pardon. In 1986, Michael Saward, a well-known Anglican pastor, answered the door of his London home. The three men who stood in his doorway pounded Saward over the head with a cricket bat, fracturing his skull. Then they broke into his home, raped his daughter, and beat up her boyfriend. The three were quickly arrested, and in a television interview shortly afterward, a badly battered Saward touched the British nation by publicly forgiving his assailants. But when the men were sentenced to prison terms of three to five years, Saward frankly criticized the sentences as too lenient. Saward had forgiven them, but that did not mean he wanted them automatically pardoned for their crimes.

#### **2. Excuse**

A second thing forgiveness does not mean is to *excuse*. When we excuse someone, we suggest that if we could only understand how a person’s actions were shaped or motivated by environment or genetic

makeup, we would see that he or she had no alternative. And it is true that understanding someone's difficulties or shortcomings can help us forgive.

But understanding is not the same as forgiving, because all the difficulties and shortcomings in the world do not negate the fact that fully conscious offenders remain responsible for what they do. To suggest otherwise means we cannot be responsible for our obedience, either. In that case, Jesus should have said, Father, *excuse* them, because, like machines, they cannot exercise free choice.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

“There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says: “Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says: “I see that you couldn't help it, or didn't mean it, you weren't really to blame.” If one was not really to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites.

If this is true, we need not be afraid that in practicing forgiveness we are somehow tolerating wrong or condoning evil. Forgiveness does not mean ‘ceasing to blame,’ but rather, ‘letting go of resentment.’”

Lewis continues to say that, “Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.”

### **How Do We Really Forgive?**

Once we understand what forgiveness is, how do we put it into practice? Many of us have trouble forgiving others because we fail to understand what forgiveness means, or because we confuse forgiveness with something it is not. But for others, forgiveness is frightening because we misunderstand the process of forgiving, or we fear that practicing forgiveness will hurt more than receiving the original offense.

Dr. Lewis Smedes (ethicist) identifies four stages in the process of forgiveness:

1. The first stage occurs at the point of our hurt. We have been injured in some way, spiritually, emotionally, or materially, and we feel the injury.

2. In the second stage we hate. The injury we feel boils into an active resentment of the person who committed the injury. And this, too, is a natural response. So we experience resentment or actual hatred.

3. In the third stage we heal. At this point, we finally let go; it is the critical moment of forgiveness. And, unlike hurting and hating, it is anything but natural. This is the moment only a Christian can really appreciate, because to let go of hatred means we need a strength to operate on us that will work entirely in the opposite direction of our hurting and hating. It's allowing the Spirit of God to work healing in us.

4. The final stage is that we must then *forget*. This does not imply some kind of sentimental amnesia. Rather, forgetting means we no longer allow our past resentments to be the judge of the offender. The way we do that will vary with the offender themselves.

We have to be prepared for offenders who either do not think they need forgiveness or who do not really care whether you or anyone else forgives them for anything. We need to make a distinction here: In the case of someone who shows no desire for our forgiveness, forgiveness means we stop thinking up ways to hurt them.

## **Conclusion**

Reducing forgiveness to a formula runs the risk of making it sound easy. It is not. The power to forgive must ultimately come from God. But at the same time, it must be pursued, because the whole point of Jesus' command to forgive hinges on the consequence He draws from forgiveness: "*that your Father in heaven may forgive you.*"

If we want to know the power of the Cross, if we want to see whether the Cross still has the power to change lives today, if we want to know what the forgiveness of our sins really means and what it really cost, then we will know those things only as we forgive.

Forgiveness is a process, not a moment. A person cannot snap his or her fingers and forgive then and there. The deeper the hurt, the longer the process can take. But, if you commit yourself to a path to forgiveness you will be much better off than if you commit yourself to a path to revenge or resentment. Even if you never get there, you will be better off on the path to forgiveness than on the path to revenge and resentment.

Christ's teaches us to forgive, "*to set free.*" When you forgive someone else you set yourself free of the hold that anger and resentment exerts over you.

Remember the word Jesus used in Mark 11:25? It is the most common and the most vigorous New Testament word for forgiveness. It literally means to release, to hurl away, to free yourself from the grudge, the resentment and bitterness of the offense. Christ wants to set you free! Release it to Him!