

FORGIVENESS: The Heart of Healing for Hurt Relationships
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Limping with a cane, she slowly walked through the door seeking counsel. Her ex-husband had broken both her knee caps with a two-by-four board. As she shared her life story of rejection and abuse my wife Linda and I cried with her. I knew from experience that she needed to let go of bitterness and forgive in order to be free. But I couldn't think of how to present it to her. She believed she had a *right* to be bitter – and in a way I agreed! But holding on to her *rightful* bitterness didn't make it *good* for her. So as I prayed about what to say, here's what came to mind.

“Suppose you came over for a Bar-B-Q and we stood talking over my fire-pit. Suddenly I picked up a handful of burning coals and announced, ‘These are mine so I have a right to hold them as long as I want.’ What would you say to me? She thought for a minute and smiled saying, ‘I’d say yes you do have a *right*, but it’s stupid.’

She understood that all those years while she'd held on to bitterness, it had been burning her up inside. Yet it did nothing to the person who had hurt her. So she lowered her head in prayer, gave her resentment up to God, forgave her ex-husband, and asked God to lead him to salvation and a transformed life. We don't know about her ex-husband, but that lady left feeling free and joyful for the first time in decades. Please understand that forgiveness does not require trust. Abusers are not to be trusted, and a counselor's responsibility is to protect others from physical abuse.

How many times have you felt hurt, angry, depressed, or betrayed because of something somebody did or failed to do? Over the past 30 plus years as marriage and family counselors, my wife and I have seen too many relationships *unnecessarily* broken because of a failure to communicate, understand, and practice biblical forgiveness. Of course this also includes our own past struggles as spouses and parents. Thankfully, by God's *grace* and in spite of us, Linda, my six children, and I are best friends.

“**Pursue peace** with all people, and **holiness, without which no one will see the Lord**: 15 looking carefully **lest** anyone **fall short of the grace** of God; **lest** any **root of bitterness** springing up **cause trouble**, and by this **many become defiled** [damaged - especially children]” Hebrews 12:14-15

Human ability to love falls far short of what's needed. Whether its husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, or grandparents and grandchildren, no relationship is immune to the *infection* of bitterness, pride, and resentment. Instead of humble communication toward heart to heart understanding, people naturally fall into escalating cycles of misunderstanding, assumed rejection, hurt feelings, and then react with hurtful responses. But we can choose to respond *above* what is natural.

“**Judge not**, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And **why** do you **look at the speck in your brother's eye**, but do not consider the **plank** in your **own eye**? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 **Hypocrite! First remove the plank** from your **own eye**, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.” Matthew 7:1-5

“**Bearing** with one another and, **if** one has a **complaint** against another, **forgiving** each other; **as the Lord has forgiven you**, so you also **must forgive**.” Colossians 3:13

Physically, the *natural* (that is selfish and sinful) reaction when a person attacks you usually takes one of two forms. One way is to attack back with your arms up and ready to hit. The extreme of this way is *murder*. The other way is raising your arms to block and *separate* yourself from the hurtful person. In its most severe form this response leads to *suicide*.

In contrast, Jesus chose a *super-natural* response. He knew that rejection, attack, and crucifixion were coming at Him. Yet He willingly embraced the cross with arms wide *open*, for you and for me. He endured it all in order to pay the price we deserve for our selfish, rebellious, *relationship-breaking* sin. His self-sacrificing act of love was no accident. It was planned, promised, and prophesied hundreds of years before it occurred.

“Surely **He has borne our** griefs and carried our sorrows;
 Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
 But He was **wounded for our transgressions**; He was **bruised for our iniquities**;
 The **chastisement for our peace** was **upon Him**, and **by His stripes we are healed**.
 All **we like sheep** have **gone astray**; we have **turned**, every one, to his **own way**;
 And the Lord has **laid on Him** the **iniquity of us all**.
 He was **oppressed** and He was afflicted, **yet He did not open His mouth**;
 He was led as a **lamb to the slaughter**... Isaiah 53:4-7

Not only physically, but also *psycho-spiritually* (relationally) we naturally react to hurts with either attack or avoidance. *Assertive* people often react with hurtful words, unloving tones, rejecting facial expressions, and blame-shifting accusations. Others who are more *passive* react by withdrawing and cutting off relationships, even with close family members we claim to *love*. Passive people also often quietly let hurtful assumptions fester, build up, and eventually leak out or explode. Both ways are destructive and end up causing more pain, including collateral damage to unintended innocents like young children and grandchildren who are watching. Saddest of all is the fact that the majority of hurtful *assumptions* are *inaccurate* misunderstandings because of a failure to communicate biblically. Biblically means, humbly, honestly, openly, and directly with the person needing reconciliation. Instead of dealing directly with the other person involved, people tend to talk to friends who will support their own beliefs (their “side”) about the conflict. So the destructive cycle of inaccurate assumptions, misunderstandings and hurt continue to deepen. Remember the old saying, “*There are always two sides to the issue*”? Actually that’s not true. There is only one side – Christ’s side – which commands humility and reconciliation.

The way of Jesus the Christ (the promised Messiah) is not natural. It’s the way of the cross. It’s not just a suggested principle, but a command.

“And [Jesus] was saying to them all, “If anyone **wishes to come** after Me, he must **deny himself**, and **take up his cross daily** and **follow Me**. 24 For whoever **wishes to save** his life [*Greek = psyche*] **will lose it**, but whoever loses his life [*psyche - lets go of his self-serving psychological desire*] for My sake [*for God’s will not our own*], he is the one who **will save it** [*save = Greek sozo = to heal or make whole instead of falling apart*].”

[Jesus said] “For if you **forgive** others their trespasses your heavenly **Father will also forgive** you, **But** if you **do not forgive** others their trespasses, **neither will your Father forgive** your trespasses.” Matthew 6:15

So, what’s the process for healing fractured relationships and broken hearts? The *good* news is that our Creator, through Christ (John 1:1-18) the “Wonderful Counselor” (Isaiah 9:6), has graciously provided profoundly simple principles for prevention and reconciliation. The *bad* news is that most people either don’t know how or are *unwilling* to apply His practical counsel.

Why would anyone be unwilling to apply Christ’s simple principles to heal broken relationships? Because even though His principles are simple, they’re not *easy*. Applying His “way” to reconcile broken relationships is hard because it hurts.

One of our children needed many heart surgeries to correct a broken cardiovascular system he was born with. Each surgery required enduring tremendous struggle. Many times he tried to refuse surgery, in order to avoid the pain. We’d explain that without that next procedure, the quality of his life would get worse. Then we, as parents who loved him, had to make him go through those *physical* heart surgeries. Now, he’s grateful and enjoys the benefits born out of the suffering he endured.

Similarly, many people whose *spiritual* hearts are stuck with a broken relationship, refuse to embrace the necessary process of healing because it’ll hurt. Consequently, they not only miss the joy of reconciliation, but end up producing the ongoing emotional suffering of dysfunction, division, and finally relationship *death*. Remember, innocent young children and grandchildren who witness this are damaged the most. Our tendency is to think that it’s pressure from other people that keeps us from being the person we could and should be. But think about it. When pressure is applied to a toothpaste tube, the squeezing merely reveals what’s already inside.

[Jesus said] “What **comes out** of a person is what **defiles** them. For it is from **within, out of a person’s heart**, that **evil thoughts come** - sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, **malice, deceit**, lewdness, **envy, slander, arrogance** and folly. All these **evils come from inside** and **defile** a person.” Mark 7:20-23

So what’s the WAY of Christ that leads to reconciliation? [Jesus said] “I am the **Way**, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father **but through me.**” (John 14:6). *Forgiveness* is the key - simple but not easy! Here’s a *summary* of three main steps involved in full forgiveness.

1. The first step is to *RECEIVE* God’s forgiveness and His pure love through Christ.
2. The second step is to *SEEK* forgiveness *from* the hurtful person since you have not been *perfect* either.
3. The third step is to *GIVE* forgiveness and do good things for that person who sinned against you.

Here are some biblical passages with practical principles for applying these steps that are *guaranteed* to work. Nope - not to change the other person, but guaranteed to transform you (if you’re willing) into the image and character of Christ, enjoying the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5). By the way, the more you reflect Christ’s character, the more your life has *potential* to touch the other person’s heart. Yet, only God can transform them.

“But **avoid** foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate **strife**. And a **servant** of the Lord must **not quarrel** but **be gentle** to all, able to **teach, patient**, in **humility** correcting those who are in opposition, **if God perhaps will grant them repentance**, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.” 2 Timothy 2:23-26

If you’ve been hurt deeply, then you’re probably thinking these steps are *too hard* and maybe even *unfair*. You’re right about the hard part. It’s actually *impossible* for us as finite, sinful humans. We don’t have the goodness to respond with *pure* love when deeply hurt. But our Creator does, if you let Him live through you to others.

Now, please think about that “not fair” part. God’s command is actually far *better* than fair, since we’re all rebellious sinners who chose our own independent moral way instead of dependence on His. Therefore we deserve *separation* from Him forever. Instead, God in love offers *reconciliation* through the person and work of Jesus the Christ.

Step One = RECEIVING God’s forgiveness and His pure Love through Christ.

“**No one** has **ascended** to heaven but **He who came down from heaven**, that is, the **Son of Man** who is in heaven. ... the Son of Man must be **lifted up [on the cross]**, so that **whoever believes [trusts]** in Him should **not perish but have eternal life**. For God so **loved** the world that He **gave** His **only** begotten **Son**, that whoever believes **in Him [trusts in who He is and what He’s done for them]** should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:13-17

“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have **fellowship with one another**, and the **blood of Jesus Christ** His Son **cleanses us from all sin**. **If we say that we have no sin**, we **deceive** ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **If we say that we have not sinned**, we make Him a **liar**, and His word is not in us.” 1 John 1:5-10

The ONE true Creator has revealed Himself as a Triune Being existing in a pure love relationship – eternally giving to one another as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Together they enjoy perfect, unselfish unity. All of creation was designed to live out and experience that same joyful harmony with Him and one another – including His animal creatures that can think and feel. Sadly, by free moral choice, angelic and human rebellion resulted in separation from God, the only source of pure love and goodness. The Good News (Gospel message) is that from eternity past, our triune Creator planned and prophetically promised to enter His space-time creation and do for us what we need but cannot do. Jesus the Messiah’s miraculous birth, pure human life, substitutionary death, power-proving resurrection, and ascension back to Heaven provide the Way to reconciliation for anyone who is willing. It’s a free gift by His grace through our childlike faith. The

only “cost” is to stop practicing self-deification (trying to be our own moral authority). We simply must admit our prideful attitude of sin and repent (turn our will), humbly submitting to Him and His Way.

Step Two = SEEKING forgiveness from the hurtful person, because you’ve not been perfect either.

We are all blind to our own sin and often self-deceptively rationalize that it’s all or mostly the other person’s fault. Please beware of making such a claim before God, your Holy Creator; the universal Judge.

“So if you are offering your gift at the **altar** and there **remember** that your brother has **something against you**, leave your gift there before the altar and go. **First be reconciled** to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms **quickly** with your accuser while you are going with him to **court**, lest your accuser hand you over to the **judge**, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison [*separated from Him and others*].” Matthew 5:23-26

What’s the best way to *genuinely* ask for forgiveness? Here’s some *easier* ways that don’t work because they’re not real:

- Will you forgive me IF I’ve done anything that hurt you?
- Will you forgive me for REACTING to what you did to me?
- Will you forgive me for having a Scots-Irish temper?

Here’s a suggested way that’s *harder*, but it works because it comes out of a truly *humble* heart:

- Please forgive me. I failed to let Christ live His love through me consistently toward you and I have no excuse. I’ve grieved and dishonored Him and caused you suffering. Will you please forgive me for all the times when I’ve hurt you by my words, my tone, my face, and my actions? I am committed to seek His power and principles to change me until I reflect His image.

Step Three = GIVING forgiveness to the person who sinned against you.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving** one another, **as God in Christ forgave you.**” Ephesians 4:32

“But **if you do not forgive** others their trespasses, **neither** will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Matthew 6:15

“Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, **how often** will my brother sin against me, and I [have to] forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but **seventy times seven.**” Matthew 18:21-22

“But I say to you who hear, **Love** your **enemies**, do **good deeds** to those **who hate you**, **bless** those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. And **as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.** ...” Luke 6:27-42

Beware of the temptation to demand that the other person first admit their fault and ask for forgiveness. *Giving* forgiveness is a gift, so any expectation you place as a prerequisite makes your forgiveness something you’re *selling* at a price. Forgiving is something you must be *willing* to give freely without expectation or it’s not real forgiveness or even real love. Anything you “give” is a gift, not something the other person earned or deserves.

Some of you are probably thinking, “But I don’t trust that person!” That’s OK because forgiveness doesn’t require trust. Christ never commanded that we trust other people. In fact, Scripture says, “Jesus did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all men” John 2:24. *Trust* must be earned and proven. That takes time and in some situations might never be reasonable. But forgiveness is instantaneous and necessary *before* two people can begin regaining trust.

What if the other person doesn’t change or seek forgiveness from you? The ability to forgive in the face of deep hurt requires a kind of love that’s pure and unselfish. No mere human can muster up that kind of love. Our Creator is the only source, so His love is only available through Christ, who is God in the flesh.

“Now **hope** does not disappoint. For **the love of God** has been **poured out into our hearts** by the **Holy Spirit who was given to us.** ... For while we were still helpless, at the right time **Christ died for the ungodly.** 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But **God demonstrates His own love toward us**, in that **while we were yet sinners** Christ died for us. For if while we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, **much more**, now that we are **reconciled**, we will be **saved by his life.**” Romans 5:5-8

It's only possible if you draw from God until in *that* moment you're filled with His pure love. Then and only then can you give the overflow to others, especially those who seem like enemies. The problem is that we try to pull from other humans, expecting them to fill our inner, *eternal* need for love. "[God] has put **eternity** in their hearts..." (Ecclesiastes 3:11). So trying to pull love from another finite human instead of God eventually pulls the relationship apart. If each one waits for the other one, then healing will never happen. Someone must take the courageous step to submit to God's love, be the first to seek forgiveness, and keep on without giving up or blowing up. Remember, with God living through you, it's not only possible, but guaranteed!

"... through him to **reconcile to himself all things**, whether on **earth** or in **heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.**"
Colossians 1:20

"All this is **from God**, who through **Christ reconciled us to himself** and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**; that is, in **Christ** God was **reconciling the world to himself**, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting **to us the message of reconciliation**. Therefore, we are **ambassadors** for Christ, God making his **appeal** through us. We **implore** you on behalf of Christ, **be reconciled to God**. For our sake [God the Father] made [Christ the son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

Above all, keep on **loving** one another earnestly, since **love covers a multitude of sins**. 1 Peter 4:8

"... **if your brother sins** against you, **go** and tell him his fault **between you and him alone**. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But **if he will not hear**, take with you **one or two more**, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And **if he refuses to hear them**, tell it to **the church** [leadership]. But **if he refuses** even to hear the church, **let him be to you like an unbeliever**" Matthew 18:15-17