

Discipleship

HOW TO TRULY FORGIVE

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Forgiveness is at the very heart of the Christian message. Without the doctrine of forgiveness there would be no good news, no eternal hope, no amazing grace and no Christian faith! Of course forgiveness is always good news when we are on the receiving end - when we are the one's whose sins are forgiven. But what about when we are required to extend forgiveness to others? When we are the ones who have been hurt and injured?

You see, God not only forgives our sin - he actually requires that we also forgive the sins of others! In Matthew 6 Jesus taught us to pray, *'Father, forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'*. He then went on to teach us that if we do not forgive others, then our heavenly Father will not forgive us either! Now give that a moment to sink in... if we *do not* forgive others, *God will not* forgive us! Oh dear! As anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of an injustice will know, that is sometimes a very difficult thing to do!

It is at times like these - when we have been hurt or unjustly treated - that having to forgive others can seem so unfair! When we or someone we love has been unjustly hurt or injured, often all we can think of is obtaining justice. We long to see the guilty person get a taste of their own medicine! We can even get very spiritual about this and convert our hurts into self-righteous prayers for vindication. Whilst it is not wrong to ask God for vindication if we have been unfairly treated, it is critical that we check our attitudes. Whilst we may never admit it, most of our prayers could be translated into *'Lord, please let this person who has injured me get a taste of what they have done - and with a little bit added just to teach them a lesson!'*

Yes, everyone loves justice - so long as we are the ones who are benefiting from it! The problem is, in our fallen

and sinful nature we often can't see what justice is from God's perspective. It could even be that the very difficulty that we are going through is *us* getting what we deserve!

But the purpose of all this is just to establish this truth: ***For followers of Jesus, forgiveness is not optional - we are commanded to forgive!***

Now let me share some vital keys that will help you to actually do it. There are some precious truths hidden in the Bible that will both *convince* you of the necessity of forgiveness, and *unlock your ability* to forgive.

UNFORGIVENESS: SEE IT FOR WHAT IT IS...

Unforgiveness is actually a curse. When you refuse to forgive someone, when you withhold grace from them, you actually place that person under a curse. If you are a Christian and you are praying for retribution or revenge, you are actually continually asking God to remember that person's sin and to punish them for it. You are holding them under a curse. Remember Jesus said the disciples, *'if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'* (John 20:23). I believe this a spiritual principle which was not just for the early disciples, but a principle that is at work in our lives today. Just think of the implications...

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A few years ago I was nursing some hurts as a result of some unfair treatment that I felt I'd received. Every now and again, when I was feeling low, I would pray and ask God for some justice against the people who had injured me. After a while I suddenly realised that I had been holding these people under a curse all that time. On one hand I had been praying for their salvation, and on the other I was asking God to hold all their sins against them - I was holding them under a curse. Would God forgive their sins if I kept praying for justice? It was no wonder that my prayers for them were not being answered... and it was no wonder that I was miserable! More about that later...

Jesus is explaining here how heaven's economy of grace works: If you want to receive mercy and grace in your own life then you've got to be prepared to give it! If you want to receive it abundantly you've got to give it abundantly.

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You see there's a flip-side to unforgiveness - and it is very sobering. Jesus said, *'Do not judge, or you too will be judged, for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your eye?'* (Matt 7:2-4)

Jesus is explaining here how heaven's economy of grace works: If you want to receive mercy and grace in your own life then you've got to be prepared to give it! If you want to receive it abundantly you've got to give it abundantly. It is the universal spiritual principle: it's in giving that you receive. If you want blessings in your own life, then you've got to seek to be God's channel of blessing to others as well. If you want mercy, you've got to be merciful. *'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy...'*

Conversely, the opposite is also true: when we withhold grace and forgiveness, grace and forgiveness is withheld from us. So the result of unforgiveness is that when we hold others under a curse, we are also holding ourselves under a curse!

Anyone who has ever harboured bitterness will know, it eats away at us until we end up being the main one who suffers. As painful as the injuries that we have received may be, withholding forgiveness from an adversary will only end up hurting ourselves more. We need to come to a place where we are willing to finally let go and surrender - to forego our claim to justice and then to ask God for mercy for those who have injured us.

I know this *sounds* difficult, but as hard as it may seem, there are a few keys to help us to do this, and in doing them we will be setting ourselves and others free from a terrible curse.

RECONCILIATION AND FORGIVENESS

One thing we need to understand is that we should not confuse forgiveness with reconciliation. Forgiveness is all about cancelling the debt and forgoing our claim on justice. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is about the full restoration of relationships. Whilst reconciliation should also be our goal, achieving it will depend very much on the people and the issues involved. Reconciliation may take some time and in some cases it may never happen this side of heaven. Reconciliation requires that both parties in a dispute come to the table, face the facts, humble themselves and agree to *'walk in the light'* of truth. Real fellowship is dependent upon truth - not just sweeping differences under the carpet. But the fact is, not everyone will be willing to come to the table. Not even Jesus was reconciled with his enemies. Irreconcilable differences *do* occur and are an inevitable part of life, but unforgiveness need not poison the hearts of those involved in a dispute. Like a dangerous cancer, it needs to be removed.

BUT HOW DO WE FORGIVE?

How do we forgive? And how can we *possibly* forgive

those who seem to remain so intent on injuring us at every available opportunity?

As I was struggling with unforgiveness, this was my question for God. I had tried to 'forgive' but the ongoing hurts I was experiencing just kept bringing the bitterness back. How could I possibly genuinely forgive those who seemed to have no regret for causing me pain - and showed no sign of ever wanting to repent? It is easier to forgive people who show some sign of remorse - a few tears of repentance go a long way towards softening our own hearts and evoking compassion. But God calls us to forgive - even when our adversaries are not finished hurting us and are not showing any remorse. So *how* do we do it?

A REVELATION ON FORGIVENESS

Jesus suffered the most unfair and unjust treatment that anyone could imagine: He was falsely accused, betrayed by a friend, forsaken by all his other friends, unjustly tried, wrongly convicted, beaten, whipped, spat upon, abused and reviled and then painfully crucified. While he was gasping for breath and slowly dying, his accusers stood around his cross and continued to hurl their insults at him.

Then Jesus prayed from the cross, *'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing!'* Wow.

Then I realised a significant point that I had never seen before - not about what Jesus *did*, but of what he *did not* do! Jesus *did not* look down from the cross into the face of his revilers and pronounce to them, 'I forgive you!' No - he didn't do that at all! Instead, Jesus looked *up* and prayed to the Father. He said, *'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing!'* Herein is the key to true forgiveness!

God does not expect us to pronounce forgiveness to the face of our adversaries when they are still intent upon injuring us - that is simply too hard to do! True forgiveness is not about what we say to those who are hurting us. For the most part Jesus was silent in the face of his accusers during his trial (very good advice for anyone who is suffering unjust accusations). To truly forgive someone we don't have to look them in the eye or say anything. Instead, like

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Jesus, we take it to the Father. We take our claim for justice to the judge - not to our offenders - and then ask the judge to tear up the charges! ***That is the essence of forgiveness.***

When Jesus prayed from the cross, in effect what he was praying was, *'Father, when these people stand before you on that day of judgement, please don't let their sin here today even be mentioned again - they don't know what they are doing. Please take my claim for justice and tear it up! Please don't let anything that they are doing to me ever be an issue with you again.'*

When I began to pray this way in my situation I was transformed. As I prayed I was finally released from the curse of my own resentment, hurt and unforgiveness.

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Then an even more marvellous thing began to happen - I actually began to feel a deeper heartfelt love for those who had injured me, along with a renewed desire to earnestly pray for them! My previous hurts even seemed smaller and less important. I began to imagine God's grace and favour flowing over them and as I did, I felt like I'd won an enormous battle. My adversaries no longer had any power over me... the curse was broken and I was free!

So you see, the power to forgive does not come from trying to force ourselves to change our emotional response to injustice. Rather, forgiveness is an act of obedience

that can be enacted simply by how we choose to pray! The injustices and hurts and injuries may very well continue, but this is not about our circumstances or how we feel - it is about how we *choose to respond* to the grace that God has shown us in Christ.

Because praying for God to forgive our enemies is the essence of forgiveness, here's a sample prayer you may like to use for your situation:

"Dear Jesus, thank you for your love and mercy towards me - Thank you Lord that you have forgiven me and not held my many sins against me. Father, I think now of _____ (their name) and Lord, I ask that when he/she stands before you on that day of judgement, please don't let these offences against me ever be mentioned again. Lord, I ask you to take it away and I surrender my claim to justice. Lord, please show your mercy to them instead. Amen"

SO, IS THAT THE END OF IT?

As I said earlier, whilst forgiveness may be accomplished, reconciliation may take some time, and there's no absolute guarantee that it will happen at all. But when we pray for the forgiveness of those who have injured us, God's power is released to work in their lives as well as in our own. We can expect to see changes because the curse we have been holding them under has been broken. We may need to keep praying for them - if only to keep our own attitudes right - but God will undertake to do whatever needs to be done, not just for us but for the sake of His love for them. When we finally get past demanding our own justice the Lord is free to step in and deal with them according to *His* justice.

Ultimately God's plan for His people is to prepare them for heaven. He loves His children far too much to permit them to continually be a source of hurt and injury. Whoever is at fault, you can expect that God will begin to work in their lives to bring them to a place of humility.

VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAYS THE LORD

Another good reason to forgive and forego our claim

on justice is that we, in our sinful and fallen nature, can't even fully see justice as God sees it. We simply don't have His perspective. When God says, *'Vengeance is mine, I will repay'* and, *'Leave room for the wrath of God'* He's effectively saying *'I am the only One qualified to make judgements, so step aside and let me do it. My judgements are measured, justly proportional, tempered with mercy and are always redemptive in their outcome'*.

There are times when the people who seek to injure us will not receive God's forgiveness. For whatever reason, some people will reject God's grace and will face judgement. But ultimately that's none of our business. We would do well to not dwell on how others will fare when they meet God. We just need to keep our own hearts and lives on track and to seek to be a channel of grace and mercy to all around us. Vengeance belongs to God - not to us!

REDEMPITIVE PURPOSES

The Bible also asserts that *'God is at work in all things for good'* (Romans 8:28). Are you prepared to accept that in the unjustness of your situation God may very well be working out a wonderful plan? There are numerous examples of this in the Bible: Young Joseph was a victim of his brothers jealousy. He was kidnapped and then sold to foreigners. He spent many years in an Egyptian prison before God stepped in and promoted him to the position of Prime Minister - the exact place where he needed to be to bring a blessing to his family and nation. When he finally came face to face with the perpetrators of this crime he was able to say, *'You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives'* (Gen 50:20).

We also have the example of Jesus, who at the very lowest point of his life - and in his death - was accomplishing the most powerful work of redemption the world has ever seen. So you see, the darkest times of our lives can be God positioning us for His most glorious plans. We need to patiently wait on God to vindicate us - not seek our own vindication. His deliverance will surely come when we put our hope and trust in Him - and wait.