

Forgiveness

By Pastor Alan Utting

'Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realising you were the prisoner.'

Max Lucado

In our fallen world, we all get hurt in ministry. How we cope with hurts will determine the state of our hearts. Unforgiving behaviours are likely to produce fruits of bitterness, cynicism and judgemental attitudes even though we may not realise it at the time. This is where we need good self-awareness. Hebrews 12:15, 'See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.' A good illustration of this is where a farmer will go out and fell a tree in a paddock and grind out the stump. In a couple of years later upon his return, another small tree may have grown up from the root system again, which also needs removing. In a similar way unforgiveness is an unwelcome visitor which strikes relentlessly.

I can have an excellent practical theology of 'forgiveness', but sometimes after receiving hurt from a person, emotionally extending forgiveness is naturally the last thing I want to do. Even forgiving oneself is an effort at times! The repercussions of not forgiving is to limit God's presence and work in my life.

Over the centuries colonial powers have oppressed vast numbers of indigenous tribes along with various countries, causing enormous grief and resentment. Unfortunately, I have noticed understandably that some of these leaders still carry bitterness in their spirit. On the other hand, I have been profoundly blessed when I see leaders express forgiveness to their oppressors in multiple ways.

When it seems too hard to forgive and that's what you need to do, remember Jesus exemplary example when on the cross He called out, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). You can, with His strength, do the same!

Bible Perspective

The concept of forgiveness was not common in Roman and Greek thinking, and yet it was pivotal to Jesus's teaching. He said:

'Blessed are those who are persecuted' (Matthew 5:10).

'Forgive us our sins as we forgive them that sin against us' (Matthew 6:12).

'Father forgive them for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34).

'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart' (Matthew 18:35).

'Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed' (James 5:16).

Definitions

'Forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace' (M. Volt).

'Forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is about letting go of another person's throat' (W. P. Young).

Observations

1. One symptom of unforgiveness unfortunately, is when we have been badly hurt we can secretly enjoy it when our offender goes through a period of weakness and hard times. Perhaps we think they deserve it. It can then even give us a sense of pride and control. That is bad and so wrong!
2. Unforgiveness and anger are destructive. Get immediate help if that is your challenge.
3. To forgive a person doesn't mean that you have to necessarily trust them unless they prove themselves otherwise. This is where wisdom is needed. I also note, to my surprise, that when some people mess up badly in one situation they may transfer to another place for a fresh start and they may excel. Don't hold grudges.
4. I find that when I need to keep on repeating a hurtful story to myself, it could mean I haven't completely forgiven that person.
5. People suffering from a traumatic past and people with a strong sense of justice are more likely to suffer from forgiveness issues than others. Sensitive people can also find it harder to forgive.
6. The sin against the Holy Spirit verse disturbs some people into thinking they are unforgiven. 'Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come' (Matthew 12:31,32).
The fact they feel convicted along with confession, means God's grace is available to them. If there is a hardening of their heart, it means they are open to impending judgement.
7. Forgiveness can happen at a 'point' in time, but very often is a 'process' working itself out over a period of time. When immoral sins are committed, I observe it usually takes time to complete the repentance process, especially if they are confronted with the sin before they acknowledge it.
8. At times we need to confess our sins to others, although at other times, it is unhelpful. For example, as a young man, I criticised a Bible College lecturer to others. After feeling convicted about my unhelpful remarks, I asked in person for his forgiveness. However, I sensed that although it cleared my conscience, it left him feeling inadequate and insecure. Sometimes just sincerely repenting before God is enough. Keep in mind, however, that repentance is a 'change in behaviour'. I needed to be careful with my comments in future.
9. We must learn to forgive ourselves when we fail. Satan is good at bringing us under condemnation like the High Priest in Zechariah 3:1-4.

'Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire? Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.'

‘Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’
(Romans 8:1).

10. Our biggest hurts and need for forgiveness can come from those closest to us, especially in ministry. For instance, many a leader finds betrayal as one of the most difficult things to cope with.
11. On one occasion in ministry, two of my staff not only didn't accept my leadership but badly undermined my leadership ability when speaking to others. (Note: we have to recognise that there may be some truth in criticism worth examining, as in this particular case). It was a ‘dark night of the soul’ for me when I could not justify myself to others for various reasons, and so some lost confidence in my leadership ability and even tried to remove me from that position. The only way I came through this and could forgive them was by journaling my daily Bible readings and in claiming God's promises in the Bible. I also actively sought to bless them in prayer, talked to a counsellor, and came ultimately free from the effect of accusations after several months. My leadership in time was again publicly endorsed and blessed.
12. Once again it is remarkable that Jesus should suffer great pain and offer forgiveness on the cross to us undeserving sinners. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray he said, ‘And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...’ (Matthew 6:12 KJV). Debt is normally associated with economics, but it can be used in a spiritual sense as well. That is, we must forgive the sins of others even if they don’t ask for it. It then likewise means we absorb the pain, their debt. We can do that by wanting the best for the debtor and not look for opportunities for putting them down, especially by gossiping to others. Jesus did that for us.
13. An act of the will to bless others may not come naturally, but I find singing from the heart is good medicine mixed with authoritative prayer.
14. Regularly confiding in a respected counsellor in articulating the problem is excellent therapy.
15. Sam Moffat, a missionary in Communist China, states, ‘If I have no forgiveness for the Communist, then I have no message at all’ (Yancy). The same applies to us in our situation.

Experiencing personal forgiveness from sin and shame is the right of every Believer.
Enjoy it!

‘So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:36).

Resources

Caroline Leaf, *Switch on your Brain*

Dr Phil Halstead, *Forgiveness Workshop*