

Forgiveness

The Formula to Freedom

By Daniel L. Robinson

The First Leg of the Journey, Introduction

Clarence, the wingless guardian angel of the classic story, *"It's A Wonderful Life"* gave George Bailey the opportunity to experience what life would've been like had he never existed. It didn't take George too long to get to the point of begging Clarence to give him his life again, including his wife, and his children. Clarence then told him, "You've been given a great gift, George. The chance to see what the world would be like without you."

As this sad, shocking, warm and sometimes humorous scene unfolds we observe a different man developing in George Bailey. The man that had never realized his own significance to the world around him, whose circumstances had driven him to despair, finally caught sight of the value of life. As George came back to reality, the joy of life exploded with feeling as he celebrated the existence of not only the good and happy things but also every little irritant that had formerly weighed in to sink his ship.

If I may, I'd like to borrow Clarence for a bit, or at least his trick. I believe it would do most of us a lot of sobering good to have the great gift of seeing what it would really be like if every person who had ever hurt us actually experienced the pain we've wished upon them. In the courtroom of our making there is usually one victim (us), one witness (us), one prosecuting attorney (us), one judge (us) and one hero (again, us). Most of these people have not been tried just once by us, but many times, always with the same result. We are justified; they are condemned. We receive the long awaited and much deserved comfort, solace, and acclaim, even tickertape and glory. They, the long awaited, much deserved social reprimand, ostracizing and sometimes no less than capital punishment. Try as we might, we will rarely, if ever submit a fair, just and unbiased sentence on the criminals in our life. We rarely consider their history, their pain, or what the end result would be if our prayer for the "fire of God" actually came down upon them.

However, our unbridled imaginations usually don't make room for much honest self-evaluation, much less ensuing self-incrimination. We stay so busy dressing our wounds with justified anger, retribution and even upper-hand revenge that we may rarely consider that we too are guilty at some level of very similar offences against others, and we should justifiably be in the same system of incarceration or excluded from the world's population. In fact, if this were played out no one would be on the outside looking in; everyone would be incarcerated or destroyed, and not by chemical warfare or nuclear blasts. Rather, what we wished upon others has probably been wished upon us as well, demonstrating that we are all guilty losers. As Lamentations 3:39 says, *"Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?"*

Jesus' words of Matthew 5:21-26 suddenly take on greater significance. *"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 'But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother*

shall be guilty before the court ; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court ; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

A close observation of the word, “love” in the Bible shows that it is rarely used in reference to a feeling. It is most often used as an act of the will – a choice to do something for the benefit of another.

So also a close observation of the word, “hate” when used in the Bible shows that it too is an action word, not just a feeling, nor even a simple abhorrence. It speaks of an action that targets the demise rather than the benefit of another. Proverbs 13:24 says, *“He who spares the rod hates his son!”* Here, the word “hate” is not talking about a feeling but that the sparing of the rod actually works to the undoing and ruin of the child.

Thus John’s words in 1 John 3:15 and 4:20 take on more applicable significance. 3:15 *“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”* 4:20 *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”*

If these imaginary scenes of our own making played out in reality what a scene of horror it would be. I imagine the hateful demand for retribution would result in absolute chaos and death, maybe down to the last person.

But God’s way of peace comes through another avenue, through forbearance and forgiveness, and according to Matt. 5:15, one of Jesus’ earliest teaching on forgiveness, it is as important as life and death.

Let’s abandon Clarence’s trick and thank God for a better way.

It should be noted that during human conflict the typical, natural reaction is to flee or fight. But God commands His people to respond, with forbearance and forgiveness (1Cor. 3:12-14).

Forgiveness is all about choices. Forgiveness is not complicated though it can be very difficult and at times, very costly. Since there is no way to remove the injury, once incurred, the choice of forgiveness means that we allow the other person to go free while we bear the injury. The choice of non-forgiveness means that we obligate the person to somehow pay us back or suffer till we are satisfied. But so often the other person suffers very little while our refusal to forgive becomes a heavy weight of bitterness within us that only grows with intensity, infecting our whole being, even spreading its poison to others.

Study Questions

Please spend some quality time here - do not rush through this, it is not intended to be busywork.
Rather, let it provide for quality time between you and the Holy Spirit.

1. Personalizing Lamentations 3:39, ask yourself,

A. To what degree has God shown mercy and extended forgiveness to me?

B. Do you remember the details of the offences?

C. What is the degree of forgiveness God extends to me according to 1John 1:7 and 9?

D. What would be my condition if God had not ever forgiven me?

E. In all actuality, what punishment do I deserve for my sinful actions?

2. If the injurious offenders in your life experienced the sentences you've passed against them in your imagination,

A. How would it benefit them?

B. To what extent would it hurt them?

C. How would it benefit you?

D. Would it actually demonstrate God's character of mercy or would it smack of self-righteous personal retribution?

E. Would their sentencing be compatible with your own self-evaluation concerning the harm you've done to others?

3. How does the heart of God differ from the actions and motivations of the world as described in Matt. 5:43-48?

4. **For those who would like to actually embark on this journey**, make a list of the names of the people who have hurt you in ways that still plague your thinking and emotions every time the person or incident(s) come back to your memory or attention. It is not my intent to dredge up

pain for psychological reasons, but to be transparent, honest with yourself, and potentially experience the true freedom of forgiveness.

Guard this list from public scrutiny. It is not intended for others to see, it's written from your injured heart, and God willing, eventually *for the benefit* of your heart's healing. The list will be revisited later as we walk through the various aspects of forgiveness.

It may be necessary to ask God for the grace to be willing to place names on this list knowing the costliness of forgiveness. But ask Him for help, accepting by faith that it is God's way and that potentially you will be freed from the bondage and persecution of unforgiveness. The intent of this study is to extract every root of bitterness and displace it with peace and the sanctification without which no one will see God. This is the will of God as is penned in Hebrews 12:14-17.

The Second Leg of the Journey, Definitions

In order to help us understand the full Biblical concept of forgiveness, we should know that there are two different Greek words translated into our English word “forgive.” These are not synonyms, but rather two unrelated words that together give the full meaning of forgiveness:

1.) *Aphiamei* is a word used in some very interesting ways besides the idea of forgiveness:

- It’s used when material things are abandoned or removed from one another (words translated from *aphiamei* are in **bold**)-

*Matt. 4:20 “Immediately they **left** their nets and followed Him”*

*Lk. 21:6 “As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be **left** one stone upon another which will not be torn down.”*

*John 4:28 “So the woman **left** her water pot, and went into the city and said to the men,”*

*John 11:44 “The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and **let** him go.’”*

- It’s used when leaving geographical locations-

*John 4:3 “He **left** Judea and went away again into Galilee.”*

- It’s also used of offences-

*Matt. 6:12 “And **forgive** us our debts, as we also have **forgiven** our debtors.”*

*Matt. 6:14 “For if you **forgive** others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also **forgive** you.”*

*Luke 23:34 “But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, **forgive** them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves”*

*Col. 1:13-14 “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the **forgiveness** of sins.”*

The key concept wrapped up in the word, *aphiamei* is: **“To let go and leave behind.”** So, when it is used relating to hurts, and offences, and is translated into the word, “forgive or forgiveness” it carries the same concept and means to release from an incurred debt; to let go of the offence and leave it behind. One picture is that of releasing one’s enemy, taking one’s foot off their throat and walking away.

I think that we would all logically admit that one cannot both leave the fishing nets behind and at the same time, keep them. The woman did not both leave her water pot and also keep it with her. The word means to leave it behind, absolutely; in these illustrations let go, abandoning the net or water pot, turn and leave. So also, when the word relates to forgiveness it means to let go, turn and leave without carrying the offence along with you. With this understanding go back and read the four passages mentioned above where the word *aphiamei* is translated, *forgive*. We can rightfully insert the word, *release* in the place of *forgive* in these passages.

2.) **Charidzomai** is our second word and it is derived from the Greek word, *Charis* from which we get the word, *grace*, and means *to show favor, give freely*.

A few verses follow in which the word *Charidzomai* is used and is translated, **forgave, forgive, forgiven**.

Luke 7:42-43 "When they were unable to repay, he graciously **forgave them both. So which of them will love him more ?' Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he **forgave** more.' And He said to him, 'You have judged correctly. '"*

Interestingly, a few verses later, in the same context and the same experience with Jesus the word *aphiami* is used four times and is also translated into the word, **forgive**: *Luke 7:47-49 "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been **forgiven**, for she loved much; but he who is **forgiven** little, loves little.' Then He said to her, 'Your sins have been **forgiven**.' Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, 'Who is this man who even **forgives** sins ? '"*

Col. 2:13 "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having **forgiven us all our transgressions,"*

Col. 3:13 "bearing with one another, and **forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone ; just as the Lord **forgave** you, so also should you."*

The key concept wrapped up in the word, *charidzomai* seems to be to extend grace to an individual who otherwise has severed their relationship with us due to offensive, hurtful behavior, even as our sin nature had us severed from a relationship with God, in which He extended grace, and essentially, life to us. With this understanding go back and read the three passages mentioned above where *charidzomai* is used.

Remember, these two Greek words are first of all, not interchangeable; they are not synonyms. Secondly, they are used purposely for their differences. Thirdly, when the intent of each is combined, we are given a more complete understanding of what forgiveness is all about.

The two parts of forgiveness-

Aphiami is basically just to *let go of the offence*; do not try to squeeze the payment out of them (this goes way beyond dollars!).

Charidzomai includes *giving them* what they don't deserve- a new lease on life with no strings attached; a new chance to act right! It is *extending grace*; *it is offering opportunity for them to come back into your life and work toward trust* (caution will be addressed later).

A simple illustration may provide a window to help us understand what this looks like:

Imagine that you just slipped into your jogging sweats, and reaching for your \$100 pair of running shoes you discover that the left one is not where you last placed it. So, pushing the screen door open and looking into the yard, you notice your eight month old Golden Retriever, who having just heard the door open, dropped a familiar looking, but now mangled left running shoe from his mouth and is looking up at you with eyes fixed, head lowered and ears drooped.

Does he *deserve* to be beaten with the shoe? Yes (this may seem a little radical but we probably would all agree that at least some form of punishment is warranted.)

But will it restore the shoe? No, it will mainly release some of your pent up aggressions and possibly (maybe... hopefully... with an outside chance...) teach him a lesson. (Remember, this is about forgiveness, not canine obedience training.)

So, apply ***aphiami***; let go of it.

Next, man's best friend gets up, leaving \$50 worth of a pair of running shoes on the ground, sheepishly (and guardedly) walks over to you, wagging his tail just enough to show *his* continued love, and looking up with very insecure eyes, smiles, asking for a scratch on the head.

Does he *deserve* to be scratched? No way!

But will it restore the relationship? Immediately! This action would be the application of ***charidzomai***.

Herein are the two aspects of forgiveness, and it is intended more for our relationships with people, but it does not hurt to practice on our pet!

One side of forgiveness seems to focus on the offence, **the debt**, and is in the concept in the word, *aphiami*, and the application is, *let go of it*.

The other side focuses on the person who incurred the debt; **the debtor**, and is in the concept of the word, *charidzomai*, and the application is, *extend grace to them*.

We can look at these individually for clarity purposes, but they are really inseparable when it comes to the act of forgiving people for the harm they have done to us.

Study Questions

Please spend some quality time here - do not rush through this, it is not intended to be busywork. Rather, let it provide for quality time between you and the Holy Spirit.

1. In your words, write a brief summary of the differences of the two Greek words for forgiveness.
2. Using a concordance with a numbering system delineating word uses and definitions, look at the word, *forgive* and its' derivatives. Keeping the separate definitions in mind and read each of those entries to get a deeper feel for the word uses.
3. In your own words write a brief summary of how the two Greek words complement one another.
4. **For those who are actually embarking on this journey**, refer to your list of people who have hurt you. In each case can you determine whether the hurt was more in regards to the debt incurred or the debtor? In other words, is it more practical, i.e. if restitution occurred things would be back in order, or is it relational, i.e. the persons themselves are really the root of your hurt.

Begin asking the Lord for the grace to go through this process with each person. With some you'll be letting go, with some, extending grace, and with some, both. Beyond heart evaluation and prayer, please read through the next section about misconceptions and warnings before acting. It is crucial to keep them in mind.

Remember, the intent of this study is to extract every root of bitterness and displace it with peace and the sanctification without which no one will see God. This is the will of God as is penned in Hebrews 12:14-17.

The Third Leg of the Journey, Some common misconceptions about forgiveness

Forgiveness is not an unknown concept in our culture, but due to bad information and erroneous reasoning, forgiveness often malfunctions. Eight misconceptions that have come to my attention are addressed here, and more may be running around out there that I am not yet aware of. Error always seems to come up with some new facet, and must be compared with the known truth from God so that the error will be exposed for what it is. God's people, like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, must be a more noble-minded people, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so.

These eight misconceptions are not intended to be in any descending order of importance, so give each one equal evaluation time. Some of these misconceptions have additional lies stemming from them that I will simply label, "their lying children."

1. Forgiveness means you must trust the person. That is, once you can trust them again, then you can forgive them, -or- forgiveness requires you to trust them.

But forgiveness is not built on trust. Let's go back to Peter's question, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother... up to seven times?" (cf. Matt. 18:21). Peter was aware that forgiveness was a personal choice, motivated by God's righteousness and outside the realm of trust. He implied that the violator may do it again, and extending forgiveness a second time goes beyond the normal call of duty, and especially beyond trust. As he brought the number seven to the Lord's attention, I believe he was going well beyond the norm - he saw it as the godly extent of self-sacrifice. Though humanly unreasonable it may be necessary to go that far if one wants to be pleasing to God, so he stuck his neck out there. Of course, Jesus' answer of "70 x 7" could not even be imagined by them; it was shocking!

But in between the lines, looking at how this fleshes out, if someone violates us once it is reasonable that a righteous person would extend forgiveness, even though the violator may not be repentant so may repeat it again. Forgiveness is not based on them changing but on our heart response before God. If the violator has not changed then they may in fact violate us again, and again. They may not be worthy of trust.

For a simple, believable example, if someone borrows your car and totals it due to reckless or foolish driving, you can forgive them, but you may be unwise to let them have the keys to your new car, not to punish them, but applying wisdom. They are forgiven, but until they regain your trust you are not required to play into their irresponsibility and selfishness. If you do loan them the next car (or whatever) you will actually be enabling them to continue on in their irresponsibility and they may not learn about consequences for decisions made.

Oh yes, don't forget about the Golden Retriever! Though you forgive him, will you leave it up to him to make a good moral choice about your next pair of shoes?

2. Forgiveness means you will automatically forget. "Forgive and forget!" And this produces the lying child, "I haven't forgotten therefore I haven't really forgiven."

Really? Says whom? Forgiveness just means that you are giving up the practice of replaying the memory to the point of exciting your emotions again. It is a process, and sometimes that process needs to be revisited. In other words, don't push the "replay" button, and

if/when it comes back to mind, short its circuit by recalling the choice of forgiveness. You may want to pray, “Lord, give me Your grace to walk in forgiveness.”

3. Forgiveness means the relationship will be restored. But forgiveness cannot guarantee a restored relationship, though it may be the first move towards one. Remember Jesus’ words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This was not a restoration of relationships but it did make restoration a possibility depending on the response from the guilty ones.

There are two angles to consider with this one. First, the other person may not be willing to have a restored relationship, which leaves you helpless. Second, a restored relationship may be unwise. If some danger remains then don’t go there. You need to forgive for your good, and you may also need to stay away for your good.

Forgiveness involves freeing your own heart from the weight and burden of the violation. Some would have us believe that if we haven’t sacrificially and jumped back into the relationship, we haven’t truly forgiven. While in some cases this may be true, I feel compelled to say that in other cases this is not a measurement of forgiveness but of foolishness. It is one of the lying children of this misconception.

Above we used the example of the person who wrecked your car through irresponsibility. Things like that happen. But many of us have been hurt, even abused mentally, emotionally, physically and sexually by ones who may still do the same kind of damage if given the opportunity. These violations are usually purposeful and premeditated and are based on absolute violent selfishness. They abuse others for their pleasure, entertainment or expressions of anger. The book of Proverbs gives us many examples of the types of people to avoid, 1:8-19; 2:10-22; etc. as do passages like Deut. 13:1-11; 1 Cor.5:9-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15, etc.

If this involves family members, especially dads, moms, husbands or wives, and in some cases it is the child (and only gets worse as they age), decision-making gets tough and confusing. It needs to be bathed in prayer and third party help is often needed. If some of the violations that we’ve experienced were in the Old Testament times, they would’ve been grounds for capital punishment, usually by stoning to death. This shows the depth of the violation and for us today, the very least that should be done is to keep them away from society, though that’s not always an option for us. Surprising to some, the actions of Jesus sometimes included avoiding violence up until it was time for salvation’s plan to be fulfilled, then He willingly laid down His life (Luke 4:16-30; Mark 3:20-35; John 10:10-18). And Paul warned Timothy to watch out for (avoid) Alexander the coppersmith, who did him much harm (2 Tim. 4:14-15). In other words, there are times to avoid people, for safety’s sake. So seek God’s wisdom for your particular situation.

An important disclaimer here is that this section is not intended to give an excuse to run away from a problem relationship just because it is uncomfortable. We are living in a society where children are suing their parents for abuse because their electronic privileges (touted as “rights”) had been withheld from them. Though this seems incredulous, it is where we are. Husbands and wives are often going after “greener pastures” and justifying it by pointing out some area of discomfort and calling it abuse. God is not going to condone it, nor am I implying it. Actions like these cause unbelievers to blaspheme the name of our God, similarly to Romans 2:24. Also look at the admonition of Romans 13:14.

4. Forgiveness means the hurt will automatically go away. A lying child of this one is, “I still hurt, therefore I haven’t forgiven.”

I don't believe that anyone has experienced immediate pain release at the moment of forgiveness, though time and the grace of God can progressively relieve the intensity of pain.

I wonder if in a loose way we can apply Mt. 5:43-48, "pray for your enemies." Knowing from experience that this kind of pain comes in waves and is related to our thoughts and memories of the experience, when the acute pain is felt or even as it begins, couldn't we use that as a cue to pray for that person as well as to pray for God's grace to be present, helping us to walk in forgiveness? Personally, at times in the beginning of my forgiveness process, I actually spoke out loud against the temptation of replaying the experience: "No, I have forgiven them! Lord, take these thoughts and temptations and replace them with truth. Lord, I want to walk in obedience to Phil. 4:8. Help me walk in the grace you promised in 1 Cor. 10:12-13."

My own experience and that of many others is, that given time and the grace of God, the tsunami waves of pain decrease into manageable waves, into ripples and eventually into calm waters. There is no formula that insures a quick release of pain, no one-size-fits-all. So the raw, individual feelings must be met with our own unique prayer and meditation on the Word of God. The timing must be left in God's hands.

5. Forgiveness is an admission that they deserve to be forgiven. Often the lying child accompanying this one is that, "I am the guilty one and they are the victim. It is my fault, maybe because I haven't forgiven them" as if they automatically deserve it!

So the question that comes into my mind is, "God has forgiven me but did He wait until I deserved it?" Forgiveness is not based on one deserving it. And the truth is that if we waited for that magical moment when the violator deserves forgiveness, most of us would never extend it. We'd set the price so high that they could not possibly achieve it and so deserve to be forgiven. In many cases the violator would run loose, not even caring that we hurt, while we are left holding on to that excruciating burden. Remember, forgiveness is freeing your own heart from the weight and burden of the violation. Forgiveness is not dependent on the violator's righteousness.

6. Forgiveness is to be based on the offender asking for forgiveness, or at least showing signs of genuine sorrow and repentance.

Some would insist that this is not a misconception and might even point to Luke 17:3-4 to establish their case. Just before getting into this misconception let me say that though I believe that asking for forgiveness, and showing genuine sorrow and repentance are not a prerequisite to forgiveness, let me also say that it sure helps!

The terminology, used twice in Luke 17:3-4 is, "...and if he repents, forgive him." But we must consider several other points before using this as a one-size-fits-all passage.

First of all, in no other passage that admonishes us to forgive do we see a condition put on it. None of them mention the heart condition or action of the violator. Therefore, the weight of Scripture admonition is heavy on the side of unconditional forgiveness.

Second, the Greek word for forgiveness found in Luke 17:3-4 is *aphiami*, which means to release him from the violation. The emphasis in the context seems to include rebuking him for the offence – the action he did to cause someone to stumble – and if he responds positively, let it go, even up to seven times. To let it go means to no longer hold him in violation. We can assume that he has come to his senses and is no longer continuing the deviant behavior, therefore the disciplinary measures are no longer necessary. Let go of it.

Third, if we are going to force the exact wording here as the exact steps that need to be followed then I guess one is not required to forgive after the eighth offence.

Fourth, the occasion might not be possible or ever present itself for the offender to come to us in order to verbally repent.

Does that mean that they haven't repented? Can we really insist that they do not regret the offensive words or actions? The answer is a resounding, "No!" I, personally have many regrets of offences that I have committed against others whom it is not possible for me to either track them down, nor visit heaven or hell in order to have that conversation. I can only hope (and have prayed) that they can find release from the hurt by forgiving me.

Does that mean that I must carry the weight and burden to the grave?

Does it give me the exception to the commandments in Matt. 5:12-15 and Col. 3:13-14 to forgive as I have been forgiven? To develop this, Col. 2:13-14; 3:13; 1 John 1:7 and 2:2 each declare that all of our sins and transgressions have been forgiven (past tense). 1 John 1:9 seems to be the "Christians bar of soap," admonishing us to confess our daily sins. But upon further investigation that verse must remain in the fuller context (1 John 1:5- 2:2 ff.) that speaks of our admission of our sinful condition (or not) which can only be met in Christ. And that God is communicating that truth to all humanity, so to deny that truth is to call God a liar. So, for those who have confessed their sin, the sacrifice of Christ is complete to pay for all of our sin! I am forgiven in full, and, hallelujah, it includes the sins that either I never was aware of or that I had forgotten about and never confessed. If these were held against me then I have no other means of payment and I am hopelessly lost. With this truth in place, the admonition, "forgive as the Lord has forgiven you" takes on a much fuller meaning. It must include forgiving every person for every violation, whether confessed to me or not.

The obvious lying child here is that the offender has not verbalized their wrong therefore they are not sorry.

7. Forgiveness negates the need for confrontation. Obviously, there are many times where confrontation has already occurred and has only dredged up more muck and mire. But, there are times, not to be ignored, where an offending party may benefit greatly by facing into their issues. They may be blind to their own need for growth and change, and true forgiveness may even offer a platform for us to honestly and lovingly confront with the purpose of restoration and reconciliation in mind. This is the intent of the Matt. 18:15 ff., Luke 17:3-4 as well as Gal. 6:1. Godly, biblical confrontation is to have redemption, reconciliation and restoration in mind. It is not just for us to be heard and proven right, which could simply be a form of retaliation. It is to restore them to a right relationship with God first of all, and to others if possible.

However, if there is a need for confrontation one caution to keep in mind is that they may not be able to hear our voice, or that we may not be able to confront without developing a new problem; we may not be ready. So, prayer for sensitivity is always wise, remembering that God is much more interested in their restoration and far more able than we are to accomplish it. He may actually have someone else in mind for the confrontation whose voice can be heard, and who will have no true or perceived ulterior motive. Other cautions include timing, wording and the attitude of the confronter, all of which bring us to the need of sincere prayer asking God to lead us.

8. Forgiveness is only activated as I verbally tell the person, “I forgive you.”

While in many cases it is healthy and good to speak your intentions to the person, sometimes it is not, for these reasons.

- a. They may no longer be alive.
- b. It may prove to be unsafe.
- c. Though I might feel obligated (socially or before God) to say the words, “I forgive you,” it might not be from a genuine heart. The words themselves don’t necessarily mean that I am either letting go, or that I am extending grace. This may sound confusing but it brings us back to a heart issue before God that needs to be fully met in Him.

Study Questions

Please spend some quality time here - do not rush through this, it is not intended to be busywork.
Rather, let it provide for quality time between you and the Holy Spirit.

1. Which of the above misconceptions have hindered you from forgiving others?
2. If you picked more than one, can you prioritize them as to which has affected you the most?
3. Which of the above misconceptions seem to impact our culture the most? Explain.
4. Misconceptions #5 and #6 often have been used to stop people from extending forgiveness, and they are related to one another in the mind of some people.
 - A. If an offender were to come and ask for forgiveness does it automatically mean that they deserve to be forgiven?
 - B. What might motivate an offender to ask for forgiveness, beyond genuineness?
 - C. Is it even possible for an offender to reach a point of deserving forgiveness?
5. If you were to pick one misconception that you wish were true, which would it be?
6. Why did you pick that one and how would it help if it were true?
7. **For those who are actually embarking on this journey**, refer to your list of people who have hurt you. Try to pray through that list, one at a time, asking the Lord to walk with you through the forest of misconceptions and to give your heart and mind a willingness to forgive each one.

The Fourth Leg of the Journey, A Testimonial

Many lives have been much more tragic than mine, but my story, in generalities is this.

My family was broken when I was a young boy of 5, and my mom remarried numerous times, often in an attempt to provide a father for me and my two younger brothers. Our first step-father was killed accidentally just on the other side of a door where we were seated for dinner, a mere 10 feet away. That fateful night was a horror story with the accompaniment of hard wind and rain, no electricity and people understandably freaking out in a panic.

1 year later, after another close relative died, my mom developed cancer had several major surgeries, including the removal of her thyroid, and beat the odds, but not without our deep fears.

We moved often, and by the time I was an early teenager we had lived in 35 houses or so. I had been a student in five different elementary schools, and later, three high schools. All this meant that I often had to leave my friends, and grew used to the idea that they were temporary.

I remember at ages 6-9 looking at myself as the butt of all jokes. I remember thinking, “The world was a big joke and everyone but me knew the joke.” I had bad experiences in school with girls that I liked, being made fun of by them and by other boys and family members, which in my awkwardness hurt deeply.

I had family members that continually entertained themselves by making fun of others, and I was often the ridiculed target. I learned sex education from school-mates and discovered pornography in the stash of a relative at a young age. I saw physical abuse of my mom by different step dads, and at their hand my brothers and I received punishment that didn’t “fit the crime.”

My mom did the best she could but we were generally poor and often didn’t have enough to eat beyond beans and macaroni because of excessive expenditures on our dad’s (plural) alcohol and tobacco or foolish purchases made by the same step dads. Numerous times my brothers and I experienced being left alone in our family car till the bar closed at 2:00 a.m.

At twelve years old I was introduced to marijuana by a close relative, along with Eastern religions, and at 13 we moved in with a man who was a Metaphysical Lecturer, which also turned out to be a very unhealthy, immoral setting.

These and many other experiences took place that caused me significant insecurities and when I was 14 years old I was angry and left home. I was on my own, though supported to some degree by a relative. I continued high school and rented an empty house with another relative who then left me all alone. My morning meals were often uncooked oatmeal with a bit of milk and brown sugar if I had it. I don’t remember the evening meals. I was lonely. A girl at my high school once told me that I was mysterious, and I took that as a complement and ran with it. I didn’t want to socialize yet found myself internally jealous of those who did and were able to laugh and have some fun.

Though I still cannot figure out how, I did finish high school and the last year and a half of that schooling included socializing with friends who introduced me to beer and I introduced them to marijuana. Our parties were almost nightly and there were but a few nights when I was not completely inebriated. Many times I drove home but did not remember the trip whatsoever. At 17-18, my stomach area developed a continual pain, and my previously healthy, active body

was not able to do normal activities. I realized that I was in trouble and moved from my stomping grounds of Virginia City Nevada to Northern California in order to work on the ranch of an uncle who graciously opened the door to me. He knew I needed a dad, and to some degree was able to fill that need. My uncle's welcome had another motivation and that was to share the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ with me. For obvious reasons I didn't trust men in general, but this one I did trust, so I listened, asking God to show me if it was true. At 19 years old (by one month) I was convinced it was true and received the forgiveness of my sins through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ten months later I started Bible School and the Christian church life, which was very different than I had ever known. Several years into it I was told by one of the deans that he was amazed that I had lasted. He said that they "shook their heads when they first saw me coming!"

Often I would think back about my past with its painful experiences and mull it all over again. I knew I was supposed to forgive, but the best I could come up with was, "I forgive *them* for everything." But anytime I thought about an experience or person, I would hurt all over again. My hurts were often accompanied by desires for retaliation or public justification and many times, I would tell my story with the scantily disguised motive of gaining sympathy by disclosing the hurt that others had inflicted on me. Even in Bible School I continued the practice that had become so familiar, that was to laugh when the joke was on me, to add to the joke, and hide the pain till I was alone. I was in the lifetime habit of compartmentalizing, and so grew quite good at facing each new day, without any signs of remorse or hurt.

It's no wonder that I often felt like I was not worthy like others, nor able to accomplish the things that others were, nor to feel "normal" like others appeared to feel about themselves.

It was later on in my life, I was 33 when the Lord God was gracious enough to reveal some very deep and old problems that I had dragged along for all these years. Through a series of events in my life as I was considering proposing marriage to a young lady, the Lord showed me that I had three Monsters that were driving much of my internal life. "Monsters" I call them, heavy issues that I had dragged along for most of my years that had affected the way I looked at people, the way I treated people, as well as how I saw myself. They were identified as Jealousy, Rejection and Lack of Trust and I could not rid myself of them. I realized that if I entered marriage with this kind of baggage, I would probably ruin an otherwise innocent girl. I began begging God to heal me of these things. The Lord then took my mind back to the earliest of hurtful memories and led me through a process of forgiveness. It was different than before because I knew that the "blanket forgiveness prayer" never worked. I still had unresolved issues with the people and deep hurt and, as I stated before, often a longing to somehow get even, though the Christian life in me knew that was not at all godly.

The Lord led me to speak out loud, before Him, but as if to each person individually, a declared determination, "I forgive *you* for (*and here, I would mention the hurtful incident*); in Jesus' name, I forgive you." At times I had to pray, "Lord, help me to forgive them" or "Lord, help me to want to forgive them," which was intended to replace either the desire to get even or to get sympathy. I went through each incident that I remembered with each person that I remembered from earliest memories to present with the intention of letting go. There was no cause to try to dredge up forgotten stuff, nor embellish that which I did remember. I was desperate to be honest, and desperate to become free of these internal pains I had unwittingly chosen to carry all of my life, coping by simply learning to stack yet another one on top of the pile. The process was long yet no more agonizing than each painful time I had ever remembered each person or incident. The Lord actually gave me peace that I had never known. I did not have

to go back and rehearse the prayed declaration again, except for the few times where I chose to mull the incident over again. At those times, as soon as I would catch myself, I would say, “No! I have chose to forgive them, and in Jesus’ Name, I say it again, ‘I forgive you for that!’”

During that time, as a secondary process, the Lord revealed to me that I had often exhibited sinful behavior toward the person who hurt me. So, wanting to be humble and honest, and see this through, I had to stop and say, “Lord, I am so sorry. Please forgive me for *that*.”

I will admit that some of the people of my past were dead, so I felt a little embarrassed that I was still angry and hurt and still held resentment. But the fact is unforgiveness is something that resides in us, and the offending person may not even be aware of it, or, as in this case, they are even dead. Some of the people were still in touch with me and I was able to talk with them, both seeking forgiveness and offering it. Others I have not seen for years and may never see again. I have come to understand that with some of the people, though I suppose I could find them, it would even be more hurtful and confusing to reopen the past relationship, for them as well as for me. I had to simply forgive them and walk away. And with others, God has been faithful to bring them across my path and I was able to honestly extend grace to them, and most often it was reciprocated. The debt is gone! Hallelujah.

Progressively, God healed my heart! I soon had situations come into my life where there was an opportunity to feel rejected, or jealous, or distrustful where distrust was not warranted, and it was as though I checked my pulse and it remained normal. I wasn’t having a reaction of jealousy, or rejection. It simply wasn’t there and I was a little surprised!

I have been married to that young woman I mentioned for over 24 years now, engaged for two years prior to that, and to this day, those old monsters are gone! God healed my heart. I can also honestly say that I have no more pain about past offences. I have regrets about my own choices but I also had to learn about forgiving myself which we’ll deal with in the final chapter.

I also had another revelation (to me) from the Lord when He first revealed and identified those monsters to me. I was walking down the road the very next day and a man from the church I was pastoring (yes, I was a pastor at the time!) saw me and stopped for a conversation. He proceeded to cry on my shoulder about his wife who was doing “suspicious” things. I asked him if he trusted her? “No.” Was he jealous? “Yes!” Did he feel rejected? “Yes!” Hmmm. As I followed through, I realized that this man lived with the same monsters, and though his wife was a little “sketchy,” he carried some old and heavy baggage!

Soon after, I was involved in other marriage counseling opportunities, and there they were again, with varying degrees of anger, wrath and bitterness. To this day, in all the pre-marriage as well as marriage counseling that I have done, I purpose to bring these monsters out in the open by telling my story, so that if it is true in their life, they too might find freedom. More often than not, one or both people respond with a nod and a comment like, “Sounds familiar.”

If I am dealing with a person with uncontrolled anger, I pursue it as simply a symptom of far deeper issues, and often, it points back to these three monsters. I now know that anger is a choice and not to be blamed on being a “Fiery Redhead,” for instance. We react to our circumstances with anger, and the more often we do so, the more of an involuntary lifestyle it becomes. I have seen anger diminish as men and women have gone back to root issues and moved forward. The same is true with most alcoholism and drug use. It is very often the act of self-medicating in an attempt to numb the hurtful past and cope with today.

Summary

In much of the counseling I have done over my years in ministry, I am convinced that many of the personal issues and altercations between people can be resolved, done away with and put in the past if the person(s) would exercise what God told them to do, that is to forgive.

In fact, one of the sins that the Bible addresses rather intensely is non-forgiveness. Take a look at Matt. 6:9-15; Matt. 18:21-35. We don't often think of unforgiveness as sin, but rather something we have the right to exercise or not. Thankfully forgiveness is not only addressed in this "cut and dry," "either, or" fashion. It is also addressed in a very relational fashion and intended to be thought-through and volitionally applied by the children of God. It is to be part of the warp and woof of our discipleship journey.

These passages include Colossians 3:13 and Ephesians 4:32 that command us to extend forgiveness *as we have been forgiven*. We have received it though we don't deserve it. And because we have experienced it through the mercy of God, we should therefore reciprocate it to others, having no legitimate basis to hold it against them. If we do not extend it to others then we are not treating them as we have been treated, and truly not loving them as we have been loved. When we know it is right to forgive and choose to not do it, that is sin (cf. James 4:17).

Most of my story deals with psychological problems but there are other repercussions of unforgiveness. One of those is bitterness, as Hebrews 12:14-15 speaks of. Bitterness tends to grow, getting more and more putrid with time and can impact other people around us in very negative ways. Other repercussions include anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech (Colossians 3:8). Both Col. 3:13 and James 5:9 command us to give up complaining against one another, which is another result of unforgiveness. A critical spirit in general is another end result. Retaliation is another, taking revenge into our own hands, which Romans 12:19-21 strongly speaks against.

Another repercussion that I believe to be very prevalent is the physical and emotional wreck it can make of us. It affects every part of us. This may sound rather subjective, but some of the people I have known who have the worst (non-injury) back problems are also some of the most bitter people I have ever met. While there certainly are extenuating physiological issues, many medical reports also attribute ulcers, intestinal problems, heart problems, migraine headaches, mental and emotional problems to the stress brought on by worry and bitterness, often stemming from non-forgiveness.

Forgiveness offers freedom and joy, and might I add, potentially better health. I hope that I can persuade many to embark on that journey.

Study Questions

Please spend some quality time here - do not rush through this, it is not intended to be busywork. Rather, let it provide for quality time between you and the Holy Spirit.

In each of the previous chapters, in the Study Questions at the end, I have referred to **“those who are actually embarking on this journey.”** It is especially for you who have embarked on this journey that I have related my own story. The application is obvious and I encourage you to ask God for the strength and courage to walk through this suggested process. I don't believe it is unique for me, but it is the route that the Lord took me through after carrying the weight of unforgiveness for three decades.

For you, I have a little more advise:

1. Please do not try any short cuts.
2. Pray, asking the Lord for the strength to do this step of discipleship, for the healing of your heart or inner person. If you have physical problems possibly stemming from pain and bitterness, ask the Lord for healing as you move forward in this process.
3. Follow through in all honesty before the Lord and He will give you the grace to finish. He knows you better than you do, loves you and want the best for you. Raw, painful feelings may become a thing of the past.
4. Don't try to hurry. The time frame will be different for each person. Let it be God's timing. He may stop you and keep you at a specific person or incident where He needs to meet with you and minister to you. Listen to what He is saying and know that He loves you.
5. If you need a third person, pray about it first. You need to be sure that the person you choose will be a Godly person with your best interest truly in mind. Either explain the truths in this material to them, or better yet, have them read it for themselves. This will put them on the same track as you and give them a heart for the task.

The Fifth Leg Of The Journey, Walking in forgiveness

I may be guilty of oversimplifying in what I am about to write, but my observations are not fictional. In the world of psychology it is recognized that people have issues, and they may properly identify many problems. The professionals may come up with helpful solutions, granted, but at other times their solutions are disturbing and warped (my opinion). They don't stop at blaming the offender for his crime, but also blame him for the ongoing reaction of the victim to their everyday activity, thus relieving the victim from their responsibility of acting properly today. That blame may seem like a viable source but it leaves the victim helpless to ever get past their past. Those influenced by this thinking often do not take responsibility for who they are and what they do today and often fully leave the grace of God out of the equation as a possibility for healing. All of their problems stem back to the injury.

Solutions offered by these professionals include taking a hammer and beating on a block of wood until they tire, imagining that it is the one that hurt them. The person is told that they have pent up aggression that needs to be released, and hitting the block will get it out of their system! They may force a trembling smile when the doc says, "There, now doesn't that feel better?" But, unwittingly it actually causes anger, hatred and bitterness, to root itself even deeper.

On the other hand the professionals may put them in self-help support groups, that associate them with other victims so that they can gain self-confidence in who they are, rise above their problem and conquer their offender. But again, this often simply reinforces the posture of victimhood.

Sometimes the problems are so complicated that medication is prescribed as the only viable solution, along with regular visits to the psychiatrist. Thinking they are dealing with their problem, people take a pendulum swing to further (very expensive) bondage, where they are totally reliant on someone else to carry them, and yet often remain very stuck in their problem. They are truly victimized. Granted, there are times that a person's body chemistry is out of balance and needs some assistance, and many have been helped by taking certain medications or supplements. But there is also a lot of abuse and victimizing in this same arena.

Returning to the context of one's visit to the professional, to use the words "sin," or "forgive," in his or her presence is seen as hurtful or foolish. Their conclusion is often, "It's just not fair to simply forgive. That person deserves punishment." While this may be true, God's solution is still forgiveness. This will give true freedom, and will enable us to act in a proper fashion today. We should also remember that God says that He will deal with the violators (Rom. 12:19-21)

Colossians 3:12 instructs us to put on compassion (tenderhearted mercy), kindness, humility, gentleness (meekness), and patience (longsuffering, forbearance with others).

As we put on these character qualities (attitudes or heart-motives), they lay the foundation for one of two actions to occur, spoken of in the next verse, "*bearing with one another, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.*" Wording verse 13 in another way, "*If you have an irresolvable complaint against someone, you either need to forbear or forgive.*"

Explanations of the two actions are:

1. *Bearing with one another*; this is where people do things differently than you, or are at a different spiritual level, or have character “flaws” known as idiosyncrasies, and quite frankly, it irritates you! But, God says, “*Put up with it.*” It is not necessarily sin or wrong, it is just different, so patiently endure it. The word can also mean, *cover*, thus, let go.

2. *Forgiveness*; this is where people do things accidentally or purposely that offend or hurt you and the godly response is to forgive them. “*And, do this as the Lord has forgiven (Charidzomai) you.*”

A similar exhortation is found in Ephesians 4:30-32, “*Be kind, tenderhearted (compassionate), forgiving (Charidzomai), each other just as in Christ, God forgave you.*”

But, as someone may well ask, what if I do think of it again and it still hurts, or makes me angry again? Does this mean I haven’t truly forgiven them? Remember, the subject of forgiveness has some non-biblical misconceptions that accompany it. I want to repeat, regardless of what we are told, forgiveness:

- Does not mean that you must trust the person again.
- Does not mean we forget (forgive and forget? Maybe, if you are God).
- Does not guarantee a restored relationship.
- Does not mean the hurt automatically goes away (there is hope for this in time).
- Does not maintain they deserve forgiveness.
- Does not wait for them to be sorry and/or ask for forgiveness.
- Does not necessarily negate the need for confrontation.
- Is not necessarily activated when I simply say the words, “I forgive you.”

According to a number of verses on the topic the action of forgiveness is an ongoing exercise. As long as there are people around us, there will be opportunities to extend forgiveness. But sometimes forgiveness needs to also be an ongoing process in order for it to be a complete work in which God heals us. We are to posture ourselves according to the decision we made to forgive, reminding ourselves of that decision as often as necessary, asking God for strength to move forward.

Our task is to walk in forgiveness. It is a process. Once we have forgiven someone before the Lord, whether we have been able to express it to the offender or not, if it comes back into our mind, **we must arrest the thoughts before they get carried away, reminding ourselves that we have forgiven them. We may also need to ask the Lord to help us walk in forgiveness at that moment.** We have released them, therefore we have no right to hang on, punishing them in our mind or throwing a “pity party” for ourselves. We can’t both let go of offences and hold on to them. It’s one or the other.

As a forgiven offender comes into our mind, and just the thought of them hurts, take it to the Lord, remembering,

Hebrews 2:18 “*For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.*”

Hebrews 4:14-16 “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

So, let's be honest and ask ourselves several questions:

1. When I feel the sting of pain from an offence, am I hurting from a legitimate injustice or because my pride was hurt and I am still feeling sorry for myself?

2. "What is my focus?"

a. If my focus is on the offence, I will experience a slow, agonizing death within. Lack of forgiveness will lead to further anger and bitterness. There are enough daily cares and circumstances to deal with; we should not want to drag along the weight of past offences that will inevitably rob us of present joy and peace.

b. If my focus is on Jesus, I can/will experience His healing and life. By God's grace, we can be finished with past baggage.

Look at the contrast in the choices we make, either for forgiveness or not:

- Forgiveness brings joy, happiness, peace and sometimes, precious sanity.
- Harboring a grudge breeds discontentment, anger, resentment, bitterness, hatred, and possibly, insanity.
- Forgiveness opens our world up in a positive way – it frees us and releases others.
- Harboring a grudge closes us down and pens us in – it is a form of self-imprisonment.

Down to the nitty-gritty. I *am* talking about that husband (or former), wife (or former), father, mother, step-father, step-mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, sergeant, boss, teacher, pastor, parishioner, yourself! The offence took place and there is no erasing it, no rewind switch to hit in order to relive it; nothing to do except forgive them so we can get on with our life and make the best of it. We do not have to remain in the dungeon of hurt, regrets, anger and bitterness.

Non-forgiveness will destroy us from within. As previously discussed, many of us act in certain ways today based on a reaction to hurts and offences from the past. That life-long reaction becomes an encumbrance that leaves us crippled in various ways and keeps us from growing properly in His grace. And tragically, it can also cause us to project sins of people in our past on people today.

Put that water pot down and walk away from it. By God's grace, take that You-Haul (spelling is intentional) trailer off of your hitch and drive away! With God's help, walk in forgiveness and experience the abundant life that Jesus spoke of, remembering that you too are forgiven!

Romans 12:18-21 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord. 'BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK ; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Remind yourself to let the problem be God's problem.

A Final Step, Forgiving Yourself

Before we can leave the project of forgiveness, we must face into something that many of us struggle with, possibly just as much as forgiving those who have hurt us. That is forgiving ourselves for some of the things that we are so ashamed of today.

To get to our final destination we must remain on the road of God's truth.

Romans 8:1 tells the believer in Jesus Christ, *"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*

Romans 8:30 says, *"and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."*

We hear teachings today about living the "Victorious Christian Life." But honestly, many of us quietly think to ourselves, "Really?" Maybe others do, but I can't attain that; I'm not worthy, nor able. It doesn't seem possible for me."

What prevents us from walking this truth out in our lives?

Walking the victorious Christian life requires doing battle with several enemies:

1. Our adversary, the devil (accuser of the Brethren).

Zech. 3:1 *"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."*

Rev. 12:9-10 *"And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.'"*

Luke 22:31-32 *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."*

1 Peter 5:8-9: *"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world."*

1 John 2:1-2 *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."*

Rom. 16:20 *"The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."*

How can this adversary be conquered in our lives? 1 Peter 5:8-9 above really gives us the answer to our part of the battle, while the other passages demonstrate God's part. Beyond this, trust God who is very able to do His part. I am to know and remind myself who I am in Christ, whose battle it really is, and where I really stand with God. When the fiery darts from the enemy strike us, meet them by faith with God's truth and promises (cf. Eph. 6:10-18).

2. People around us.

Again, Peter gives us the right approach to this one in 1 Pet. 2:11-12, *“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.”*

3. Self-condemnation.

At times this may be the most difficult and aggressive enemy we have, because of our own shame, followed by self-inflicted punishment. We can't lie our way out; we can't blame others; we are truly guilty. Some of us also understand that we absolutely do not deserve forgiveness so we continue to beat ourselves up, and that, for years.

What is the solution? Again, we must look at ourselves as God sees us, reckon the truth to our account and walk in it. Work through the following verses and answer the questions.

Jeremiah 17:9 *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”*

What truth is here for me?

Rom. 8:1 *“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

What truth is here for me?

Do I believe it?

1 John 3:18-22 *“Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.”*

What truth is here for me about my heart?

Do I believe it?

How are Jeremiah 17:9 and Rom. 8:1 intertwined in these verses from 1John 3?

My deceitful heart can short-circuit the truth of Romans 8:1, not in reality, but in my mind. But whether I feel it or not, it is still true; I am not condemned by God. Rather, I stand forgiven! And if God has forgiven me then I can and must walk in that truth. Not forgiving myself when God has forgiven is to live in self-imposed defeat. There can be no “victorious Christian life” when I am in that state of mind and heart.

Am I ashamed of many of the things I have done in the past? Absolutely! And Scripture addresses this:

Ephesians 5:7-16; *“Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says, ‘Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you.’”*

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil."

Romans 6:20-23; *"For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

I am ashamed, but can I go back and change anything? No. Where does this leave me? It leaves me entirely dependent on the grace and mercy of God for my personal well-being.

Learning From Examples

There are two men in the New Testament who can serve as wonderful examples of walking in God's forgiveness, Peter and Paul. Both men could have lived out the remainder of their lives in utter despondency and depression, full of undying grief for their actions toward their Savior or His people. Let's begin with Peter.

We could trace more blunders from Peter's life in the gospels but look at this last utterly despicable act that Peter did, beginning in Mt. 26:31-35. We can give Peter the full benefit of the doubt here that he uncompromisingly intended to do what he said. But Peter did not understand what Peter was fully capable of doing if Peter attempted this on his own. And so, the raw truth comes out in v. 75. Like Judas Iscariot in Mt 27:5, we could have expected Peter to have ended right here, if not by his own suicide, at least to disappear into the fog and distance of history never to be heard from again. I believe that Peter's failure shook him to the core. But the Lord, compassionate and full of mercy went after him. In Mark 16:7 there was a messenger from the Lord who met several women at the freshly opened tomb and told them specifically to go tell His disciples *and Peter* about what they'd discovered. Why else would Peter have been singled out as separate from the other 10 disciples unless he was in fact separate from them, at least in his own estimation. He was apparently with them when the announcement came, according to John 20:1-7, but we really don't have clarity on that. It's entirely possible that the women went and found him first, and it's even possible that he was alone with his friend John who was consoling him. But whatever the scene, in his own heart he knew his own sinfulness. And I have often wondered what Peter really meant in John 21:3 when he declared, "I'm going fishing." I guess it's left up to speculation but was he simply saying, "Hey guys, we've got a little free time, I'm bored and need a distraction?" or was he at the end of hope about God ever using him, and he was going to go back to the one thing he knew how to do? We don't know what was in his heart but we absolutely know what was on God's heart. That which is recorded for us in vv.7-17 is the heart of the Lord, full of grace and redemption. An appointment for full reconciliation had been set and Peter knew nothing about it. But that's okay; that was God's business.

Peter had come to the end of himself and didn't see much usefulness or hope. But, that he had come to the end of himself was also the sovereign preparation of a wonderful, loving God in showing the world what He can do with an assumed "hopeless case." I believe that this is the reason that Peter could not use the word, "agape" in response to Jesus' three questions about Peter's love in John 21:15 ff., he could only bring himself to use the word "phileo," a lesser degree of love. Peter was empty and knew there was no way he could fully devote himself to that

depth of devoted, all-out love, but he could simply give his human ability, thus “plileo.” But with each new asking came the grace of God more purely to Peter’s disposal. The Lord met him just where He had already foretold, in Luke 22:31-34. The Lord was not offended, nor was He surprised. It was clear to Him ahead of time, though Peter remained clueless.

The beauty of the remainder of Peter’s life and ministry is clearly seen in the first half of the book of Acts, as well as in his own two letters of 1 and 2 Peter. One hundred percent selfless devotion to the work of the Lord without one hint of a backwards look to his past; not once is it recorded that Peter went back and grieved about his sin. I’m certain that he was sorry, but he truly understood God’s forgiveness and walked in it. He did exactly what the Lord told him to do in Luke 22:32, “strengthen the brethren,” and in John 21:15-17, “Tend My Lambs, shepherd My sheep, and tend My sheep.”

Paul, first known as Saul of Tarsus is our next case study. Acts 7:58 is the first mention of Saul of Tarsus, and Acts 8:1-3 records the story of his horror-filled commitment to destroy the followers of Jesus. But the Lord had different ideas and got Saul’s full attention in Acts 9. This type of murderous persecution is described in Foxe’s Book Of Martyrs, and Martyrs Mirror, and has been experienced by believers throughout Church history. We probably do not need to think that what Saul did was any lighter in weight just because some of those gory details are left out of the account in Acts 7-9.

What is very noteworthy is that in two of Paul’s letters, 1 Cor. 15:9,10 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17, he shared his testimony as the former Saul of Tarsus. In both places he simply recorded general details of his blasphemous and murderous sin, and draws the reader’s attention to the wonderful grace and mercy of God. As far as how God was using him, he simply said, it’s by the grace of God that I am what I am. He also pointed out that he was the chief of sinners and as such, God was using him to be the highlight example of His ability to touch, change and use an otherwise disqualified life.

I believe that Paul certainly regretted his former actions. He assuredly met people whose families and lives he had ravaged and maybe destroyed. But Paul truly knew God’s forgiveness and thus was able to teach widely on it, and by all evidence did not walk in self-condemnation. Neither was he arrogant about his former sin as if he got away with something. He humbly continued on in the calling God had for him.

Returning to my own story from the last chapter, I did not mention the deep regrets I had for my own action and attitudes, hurting relatives, school-mates, people around me, but especially grieving the Lord. I beat myself up for nearly three decades with regret and remorse, seeking forgiveness over and over again, as if God couldn’t hear me, or didn’t want to.

Then the Lord had another chat with me – my choice of words for the sake of levity. I was challenged to accept the truth of God’s promises to His children, that they (we) are completely forgiven of their sin (c.f. Romans 8:1; 1 John 1:7,9). I wondered, is *all* my sin really forgiven? Even those that I am so ashamed of? Then the fact resounded in my mind that if it was not true then the Bible was in error and I had no hope.

But I knew God’s Word to be true because God cannot lie. Therefore, it is true that I am fully forgiven. It’s wonderful that in Colossians 1:14 and 3:13, concerning God’s forgiveness toward us, both Greek words for forgiveness are used. Thus, God has released me from my debt and has extended grace toward me, for my soul’s salvation.

The impact came home to me - God, the only one who can condemn me, has given me full pardon. He doesn't bring it back up again. It is finished! I have been reconciled to God, therefore I am a righteous child of God, having taken on the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So, if I feel condemned, and my feelings of condemnation are not coming from God, what is the source? Either the whispers of the Accuser of the brethren or the shouts from my own heart as 1 John 3:19-20 addresses.

If it is the Accuser of the Brethren, then it needs to be dealt with as Jesus dealt with that enemy. He met the temptations and accusations with Scriptural truth from God's Word. The foundational truth on this topic is that I stand forgiven before God! He has declared that I am justified (declared righteous) and am called a saint and a child of God with no condemnation (Rom. 8:1 and many other passages). All this is true in spite of all that I have ever done.

As for self-condemnation, it stands condemned as invalid based on the same reasons. It is not true so don't accept it! Thank God for forgiveness and humbly walk with your head up, knowing that you stand in the mercy and grace of God. Face the truth, accept the truth, and worship God, praising Him for so great a salvation!

Then let His compassion toward you overwhelm you as it extends itself from you to others, who like you, do not deserve it (c.f. Colossians 3:12). This is the victorious Christian walk!

By the grace of God stop beating yourself up; leave self-condemnation behind and enter into the confidence that is based wholly on the forgiveness of God, according to His mercy and grace.

Study Questions

Please spend some quality time here - do not rush through this, it is not intended to be busywork. Rather, let it provide for quality time between you and the Holy Spirit.

By now, I hope that all who have worked through this material have found areas in their own lives that need God's adjustment. Forgiveness is something that all of us need to face into and some find it easier than others. And for those who have thought they have worked through forgiveness yet have deeper levels to go, I hope the designation **"those who are actually embarking on this journey"** has been personalized.

1. Read Ephesians 4:25-32; Acts 8:23; Hebrews 12:15 and answer these questions.

How does God feel about anger and bitterness?

How might unforgiveness lead to anger and bitterness?

How do anger and bitterness affect people around us?

Anger is a choice and bitterness is often the result. By God's grace, kick those tyrants out of your life, and chase them away the next time they come knocking.

2. Read Romans 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:8-10 and answer these questions.

What do these verses teach us about repentance?

What do these verses say about remorse?

Sadly, remorse is sometimes driven by other motivations. Can you identify any that probably won't lead a person to repentance?

3. To what extent has self-condemnation affected your life?

A. Very extensively

B. Moderately

C. Little or no impact

4. Are you willing to let go of your self-condemnation and move on?

5. If so, will you start spending time with the Lord about it, even today?

If not, why not?

Forgiveness is just one side of the relationship - we have spoken nothing about the offender's responsibilities of repentance or restitution. That is a whole other topic in itself, and God does address the offender. We have only talked about our responsibilities as the offended.

But admittedly, at times we are the offending party and need to know what God says about those offensive sins.

6. What does Matt. 5:23-26 teach us about our responsibility in a relationship?