

FORGIVENESS  
***The Practice of Forgiveness***  
Matthew 18:21-22

May 2, 2021 am

HDBC

**Mark Dever**, who pastors a church among the rich and powerful in Washington D.C., shared how he and his wife walk their dogs around Congressional Cemetery on Capitol Hill. They often pass by the names of people who were quite important during their lives, but now those names are largely meaningless to those of us who go by every day, walking their pets. Reflecting on these once-powerful people he wrote, *But you know what matters most now and forever is this: Were they forgiven? Whether they were in Congress for one term or five, were they forgiven?*

Then he shares the following story from his friend Don Carson. Carson was writing movingly about the death of his father:

*When Dad died there were no crowds outside the hospital, no notice in the papers, no announcements on the television, no mention in the parliament, no notice in the nation. In his hospital room there was only the quiet hiss of oxygen vainly venting because Dad had stopped breathing and would never need it again. But on the other side all the trumpets sounded. Dad won admittance to the only throne room that matters. Not because he was a good man or a great man, because he was a forgiven man.*

**There is no greater forgiveness** than the forgiveness that comes from the Creator God to a sinful person. It impacts this life and the life to come. I sincerely hope you have experienced that forgiveness. If not, please stop everything else in your life to receive that, through repentance and faith.

**However, there** is another realm of forgiveness that is important; the forgiveness offered by one flawed person to another flawed person. This forgiveness is vital to the spiritual health of individuals and of the church. **When it is offered & received**, broken relationships are mended, anger & bitterness are eradicated and the enemy will be given no opportunity to create division & destruction.

**Spurgeon** said, *to be forgiven is sweeter than honey, but there is one thing that is sweeter, and that is to forgive.*

**Today** we focus on the ***Practice of Forgiveness***. What does it look like to forgive one another? Remember, our forgiveness of others ***is based on*** God's forgiveness of us. With God's way of forgiveness as a foundation, I want to offer three steps that will lead enable you to forgive others.

## **1. Prepare your heart to forgive**

This happens before the need to forgive another person even arises. The first thing we learned last week about God's forgiveness of us is that it is what He wants to do. God loves to forgive. **He is as ready to forgive as melted wax is ready to run down the candlestick or as ready as the water to flow downward.** In a similar way it is important that we develop a heart that is ready to forgive. Cultivate a heart to forgive.

**Talking** about being prepared before the need for forgiveness even arises. This must be done ahead of time. **Before you can bake the cake you have to assemble and mix the ingredients. You have to preheat the oven. This is all done in anticipation of baking a cake.** In a similar way there are things we do in anticipate forgiving others. When it comes to forgiveness it is not a matter of ***what if it happens***, but ***what will I do when it happens***.

### **Five things will help you prepare your heart to forgive.**

1. Acknowledge that the need will arise. **You will be hurt or offended!**
2. Focus often on how much God has forgiven you. **Don't minimize your sin.**
3. Meditate on Bible verses and stories about forgiveness. **Text me for help.**
4. Decide that it will be your default response. **Auto response is forgive.**
5. Practice forgiveness even in the most insignificant things. **Baby steps.**  
Spouse. Kids. Work. Recreation.

## **2. Make a decision to forgive**

When the offense happens, quickly make the decision that you will forgive this person. This may involve a real internal battle. You may have to fight the flesh to make this decision. You might even have to battle against the pressure other people will place on you to not forgive. **Take it to Christ and make the decision to forgive.**

**This decision** can be made even before the person apologizes or confesses. They may not even be aware that you have been hurt. This is not conditional upon what they do, but is a decision you make regardless of what they do.

### **Three realities that will help you make this decision.**

- 1) Your feelings are not in charge. When hurt, put them in their place!
- 2) Forgiveness is an act of obedience to God. It is the right thing to do.
- 3) God has forgiven more in you than you are asked to forgive in others.

You may not have done to God what has been done to you, but the cumulative effect of your sins is far more than the act of injury or offense that has been done to you. Also, your sins against God are against the holy, pure creator of the worlds.

Peter once asked Jesus, **How many times shall I forgive my brother, seven times?** He was attempting to limit the number of times to forgive. Jesus replied, **seventy times seven.** Meant to imply an infinite number. Then told story about a king & two men. Man-A owed king more than he could ever pay. The king graciously forgave the debt. Man-B owed man-A a small amount, but more than he could pay. He asked for mercy, but man-A offered none. **He failed to remember how much He had been forgiven!**

The point is that God's forgiveness of us should motivate us to forgive others, regardless of what they have done. *C.S. Lewis. To be a Christian is to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in us.*

### **Two things you are doing when you decide to forgive.**

#### **1) You are absorbing the cost of the forgiveness.**

Remember, forgiveness is free but it is not cheap. Someone has to pay the cost of the offense. If you are releasing the other person of what they owe, then you are choosing to bear that cost yourself. You may or may not be absorbing a financial or material cost to forgive. You will always pay an emotional, mental or spiritual price to forgive. You will have to swallow your pride, lay aside revenge and resentment.

#### **2) You are burying the offense in a permanent, unmarked grave.**

You are deciding that you are leaving that offense in the past and will **never** bring it up again to use against the one who is being forgiven. **Think of a kite on a string. You let it out far from you, but as long as you are holding the string you can bring it back to you.** Forgiveness involves cutting the string. **Cutting the string means you are forever giving up the kite.** When you decide to forgive you are giving up your right to exact revenge or payment from the one who offended or hurt you.

### 3. Act strategically to forgive

You've prepared your heart to forgive. When offended you have made a decision to forgive. All this has been between you and God. What next?

**You need to act on your forgiveness.** Only then will forgiveness lead to reconciliation. What does that look like? What steps do you take? To come up with a list of specific steps would be impossible because there are so many different scenarios. All forgiveness situations are not the same. There are just too many variables. Too many questions to answer. For example.

*Do I communicate my forgiveness with the other person?*

*What if they don't even know they have offended me? Do I tell them?*

*What if they have not sought my forgiveness? Do I wait?*

*What if they are arrogant and unrepentant?*

*What if I have been offended or hurt by a stranger?*

*What if the offense or hurt involved ongoing abuse?*

*What if the offense or hurt was something done to someone I love?*

*What if the offense or hurt was done by a fellow believer?*

These are all real life issues. So, let me offer some general suggestions for various situations that I hope will be helpful. These are not steps, but responses to various forgiveness situations. **Sometimes you need to . . .**

#### 1) Forgive and forget

Sometimes you need to simply forgive and never say a word. Many of the minor offenses that we experience should just be forgiven and forgotten. Every little hurt does not require a confrontation. I can only imagine how many times other people have forgiven me when I did not even realize I had offended them. And honestly, I have done the same for many others. Your hurt may be more about you being too sensitive than about anything the other person did. I've found that true of me.

*I was stopped one Sunday & the person told me he had forgiven me. I did not know what it was about. He told me & honestly, it was more about him being overly sensitive than anything I had done. In fact, he was offended by something I had not done that he thought I should have done. I've done the same, been offended because of my own sensitivity.*

## 2) **Forgive and confront**

There are times when it is best to share your hurt with the other person. Maybe it is because the hurt is so deep. Maybe it is because the person is consistently hurting you. Jesus spoke about that on more than one occasion. When you are offended by your brother, go to them.

Sometimes a conversation is needed. But you must go with a spirit of humility, love and forgiveness. Your attitude will be critical to success.

## 3) **Forgive and reassure**

What about the person who confessed and seeks your forgiveness?

They are sincerely sorry for their actions and desire forgiveness. You should be **quick to assure them of your forgiveness**. This may not always be easy, especially when the hurt goes deep. Not all hurts are the same. The hurt you feel by being rejected by a friend is not the same as the pain you feel **if your child was killed by a drunk driver or if you have been abused or sexually assaulted**. But where there is true repentance, forgiveness should be offered. It may not be immediate, but in Christ, you can get there.

## 4) **Forgive and wait**

What about the person who arrogantly refuses to confess & seek forgiveness? Remember what we learned about God's forgiveness? It is offered to all but given to some. In a sense the same is true of our forgiveness of others. I offer it to all, but those who arrogantly refuse to confess & desire my forgiveness will not experience it. This is not because I am withholding it but because they are refusing to receive it. In this case you have done your part and must wait for God to work in them. Don't worry . . . He will!

## 5) **Forgive and protect**

There are times when we forgive but must be cautious as we move forward. Forgiveness does not mean we put ourselves or others into harm's way. What if you have been the victim of abuse or sexual assault? What if the offender has a history of harming you? Forgiveness does not involve putting yourself or your loved ones back into a position to be abused or hurt again. **If you are the victim of spousal abuse, you can forgive but that does not mean you subject yourself to continuing abuse. If your child has been bullied by another kid, you can forgive, but that does not mean you have the bully over to play with your child!**

## 6) Forgive and trust God

What if the person is someone you do not know personally? What if you have no access to them? What if you don't know if they are sorry or not? **People who have been hurt by decisions made by people they never met. Holocaust victims. Victims of random crimes. Hurt by racism and oppression. Victims of genocide and war crimes. Assaulted or victimized by an unknown assailant who was never caught.**

**What do you** do when you have no access to the person? Forgive & trust God. Realize that God is the one who handles justice when there seems to be no justice. Leave them in God's hands. Give your burden, your pain, your hurt, your scars to Jesus who has borne what you have borne.

**Prepare to forgive. Decide to forgive. Act strategically to forgive.**

When you have done those things you can know that you have done the right thing, regardless of the immediate impact. Forgiveness will not always lead to reconciliation. It will not always lead to immediate peace of mind. Still, rest in the truth that you have done what God has asked you to do. You have stepped out in faith to forgive. Don't let them enemy bring discouragement because the immediate results of your forgiveness may not be obvious.

**Rest in your forgiveness** knowing that God will use it for His kingdom work. He will use it in your life. He will use it in the life of the one forgiven. He will use it in others who observe and witness forgiveness in action. Know that when you chose to forgive you were taking up arms against the prince of darkness.

Elisabeth Elliot makes this point better than I can.

*When Jesus, nailed to a Roman cross, prayed, "Father, forgive them," He wielded a weapon against which Caesar Himself had no power . . . **Who can stand up to the force of forgiveness?** Elisabeth Elliot*

**I love that.** Forgiveness breaks the bonds of hatred and strife. It disables the power of the enemy to sow division and discord. It neutralizes the weapons of anger and bitterness that Satan wants to use against us. So, let us take up this weapon and go to war in the power of Jesus.

**In 1984** a man broke into her apartment and raped Jennifer Thompson. She was determined to live and to put him behind bars. She studied his face, trying to find any clues that would help her remember him. Within a few days she identified him from a series of police photos. She picked out the same man from a police lineup. She courageously testified in court. Because of her testimony Ronald Cotton was sentenced to life in prison. He maintained his innocence.

**Two years later** he was given a new trial. She took the stand again. This time the defense brought in another suspect, Bobby Poole. She testified that she had never seen him. Ronald Cotton was convicted and sentenced to life in prison not only for the rape of Jennifer Thompson but of another victim who was assaulted that same night. Police were sure that both were assaulted by the same man and that man was Ronald Cotton. The other victim had failed to pick him out of a lineup, but on the strong testimony by Jennifer he was convicted of both crimes.

**Eleven years went by.** She got married & had triplets. She was well past the nightmare that occurred in 1984. Then, the unthinkable happened. Detectives knocked on her door and told her DNA testing had proven that Ronald Cotton was not her assailant. Bobby Poole, the man she had said she had never seen, was the man who assaulted her. He confessed. She had helped send the wrong man to prison, twice. She was devastated.

**For two years** she never stopped feeling the shame of what she had done. Then one day she stopped crying and knew what she needed to do. She drove 50 miles to see Ronald Cotton face to face. ***I'm sorry***, she said. ***If I spent every day for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to what I feel.*** Ronald Cotton was calm & quiet. Finally he spoke. ***I'm not mad at you. I've never been mad at you. I just want you to have a good life.*** For two hours they sat & talked. ***We were both victims***, he said.

**How was Ronald Cotton** able to forgive her? Amazing story. In prison, he saw Bobby Poole. The two men looked a lot alike. He knew Poole, was the man who assaulted Jennifer. He had confessed it to other inmates. He hated Bobby Poole and planned to kill him. His father pleaded with him not to do it. He told him that he would then be just like Poole. Instead of killing Bobby Poole he found forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Because he had received the gracious forgiveness of God, he was able to forgive Jennifer. They became lifelong friends and wrote a book together sharing their incredible story of forgiveness.