

Chapter 6

FIVE STEPS OF FORGIVENESS

Carol was so jealous and suspicious of her husband that she was miserable. When he came home from work a few minutes late, she would start questioning, "Where have you been? What have you been doing?" They had only been married 6 months, and at first Tim didn't notice what was happening, but when her nagging continued it started getting to him. He told her gently at first to stop it, but she did not seem to be able to control herself. Jealousy preyed on her mind whenever he was away from her, and again and again she would blurt out her suspicions and accusations. Finally Tim told her that she was suffocating him and ruining their relationship and that she had to do something. With much confusion she made an appointment to see a counselor.

In 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 St. Paul says that unforgiveness is a scheme and a trap of the devil. The devil places traps in the paths of people to capture and destroy them. In this fallen world people trespass and sin against us. They have done so in the past. They have hurt, offended, and betrayed us (and possibly we have done the same thing to others). When we respond to these trespasses by falling into unforgiveness, bitterness, and hatred, we have stepped into Satan's trap that he devised with the intent of destroying us. All of us know that as Christians we must forgive others, but, in my experience, more Christians are trapped by the bondage of unforgiveness than any other bondage. In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus spoke in a parable saying that unforgiveness brings people into a condition of being in jail and of being tortured. Those are strong words that describe the inner torment of someone trapped by unforgiveness and bitterness. I assume most of us would agree that we must forgive others in order to lead a victorious Christian life. But, what exactly does it mean to forgive? Let me list five important steps of forgiveness: ¹

- Be honest about who hurt you and what they did
- Express your feelings of hurt and anger
- Cancel the debt
- Protect yourself or establish boundaries
- Consider reconciliation

Step 1: Be Honest About Who Hurt You And What They Did.

The first step to complete forgiveness starts with total honesty. In order to fully "lay the axe to the roots," we must be willing to look at the painful details of our individual trauma. If someone has abused us, abandoned us or betrayed us in the past, even someone that we love (a parent, husband, wife, or someone else very close to us) then it is imperative to admit that reality to ourselves! To fully forgive means that we do not pretend that nothing happened nor that we were not deeply wounded. I have heard it said by many people that it is not proper for Christians to dig into the past. There is a common misconception among Christians that we should let "sleeping dogs lie," just "let time take care of the

situation," just "forget it," and so forth. That is neither true nor scriptural.

As painful as it seems initially, digging into the past is crucial in order to cleanse our wounds. Unless the terrible things of our past are uncovered, they become more poisonous as time goes on and start to act like a tumor inside of our spirits until they are dealt with. We wouldn't treat a tumor by ignoring it, so why would we do anything different in our spiritual lives? I have ministered to people who have been trapped by some situation that happened in their life 20, 40, or 60 years ago. They could not get past it; they could not fully mature and develop as Christians. They could not live in peace if they were tormented every day by something that happened to them in childhood, as a teenager or at some other point in their life. Everything will not be all right if you simply try to forget or deny that you have been wounded or sinned against. That is not really possible. Forgiveness has nothing to do with forgetting. The reality that we cannot erase a bad memory from our mind is entirely different from the destructive habit of continually dredging up hurtful memories, reliving them, and talking about them with expressions of outrage and self pity.

The anecdote about Carol that started this chapter, the newly married young woman who was unreasonably jealous of her husband, illustrates the power of a repressed memory. Remember, the scriptural principle is "bad fruit - bad root." It was evident there was something inside Carol from the past that was causing her to act in jealousy. Over the course of a few interviews, the counselor learned that when she was a young girl her father abandoned her mother, causing a multitude of problems and much suffering for her and her family. She said to the counselor, "I have always tried to forget what my father did. I have always pushed it down and tried to act as if it never happened." He replied, "You can't forget an experience like that. It was one of the most traumatic, painful, and influential experiences of your life. And the reality is that it happened."

Then the counselor led her to say, "My father abandoned my mother, and he abandoned me. What he did was wrong, it was terrible, and it caused much suffering for me and my mother, but for Christ's sake I choose to forgive him." Remember, forgiveness has nothing to do with our feelings; it is an act of obedience to Christ. He prayed for her wounded heart and for the trauma of that experience. He prayed for Christ to come and heal her of jealousy and insecurity. He told her how to resist the habit of jealousy through the power of Christ. This cut the root of her obsession so she could start working on her relationship with her husband.

Denial is a psychological word which really is just an aspect of lying and deception. What Carol was doing in trying to suppress a memory is one example of denial. Another example of denial is when victims pretend that what their oppressor did to them was not intentional or all that serious: "Yes, my brother raped me, but it was during our childhood. He was only a boy himself at the time." "Yes, my father hit me and broke my nose, but he was drunk and didn't realize what he was doing."

Step 2: Express Your Feelings of Hurt and Anger

Is anger a sin? Jesus was angry on occasion, wasn't He? When He saw the man with the withered hand and the reaction of the Pharisees who were judging Him for healing this man on the Sabbath, "*He looked around in anger.*"² But Jesus did not sin. Ephesians 4:26 says, "*Be angry but sin not,*" and "*Don't let the sun go down on your anger.*" It is normal to react in anger when someone has hurt or offended us very deeply, but we are not to "*let the sun go down*" or to let that anger go into the darkness, because Satan works in darkness. Very quickly we are to deal with that anger and forgive the person who has hurt us. Great damage is done in families and relationships because of anger that is allowed to stay inside us and fester.

Express

hurt feelings and anger verbally to God and to another appropriate person. Avoid expressing your feelings to just anyone; if you talk, talk, and talk about how bad your father or someone else treated you, you will never be healed. You should express hurt feelings and anger only to a pastor, a counselor, or a mature Christian friend. Avoid repression and denial. You need to get the truth out into the light so God can heal your heart.

A young woman named Myra went to see her pastor and his wife. She said, "I just can't do it."

He asked. "You can't do what?" "I can't forget what my father did to me. I tried to forget because I had so much anger and hatred toward him that it was preying on my mind, and I was having nightmares. They told me to forget it, but I never could do it."

He responded, "You don't have to forget it. Who told you that you have to forget it?"

"Well, the people in church told me that I have to forgive and forget, and the Bible says I have to forget things that happened to me."

The pastor's reply was insightful: "Myra, the Bible does not tell you you must forgive and forget, and if the people in the church have been telling you that they have not been saying something that is scriptural or helpful. You must forgive what your father did to you in the past, but it is impossible for you to forget it. How can you erase that terrible experience from your mind? I want you to forgive your father so that you will not be tormented by the memory of that experience any longer. Forgiving him will remove the pain from your memory and from your heart, but it is impossible for you to forget it. Myra, the fact that you were so angry at your father is understandable. However, when you allowed that anger to stay in your mind, it began to interfere with your rest and probably with your relation with God. I am going to lead you through the steps of forgiving your father; repenting of judging him, and then telling God that you honor him. Next, I am going to pray for the trauma that came into your life, and, in the event that a spirit of anger entered you, I will cast out that spirit. Finally, my wife will pray for your heart, and then we will give you some instructions on how to maintain your freedom and your peace of mind."

Step 3: Cancel The Debt.

When someone trespasses against us, we may feel that the scales of justice have been unbalanced and

say to ourselves, "They owe me an apology. They owe me something because of what they did, and I'm going to get even with them." Even Scripture refers to trespasses as debts in the NKJV translation, but it does not instruct us to collect the debts. Instead, it says, "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*"³ From the cross, Jesus made a statement that has many layers of meanings and implications: "*It is finished.*" The Greek word *totelestai* means "it is finished" or "the debt is paid." Historians who study the middle ages have discovered this word stamped on bills from ancient times in Greek culture. When a bill was paid, it was stamped, "totelestai." When Christ died on the cross, He died for our sins. We owed God a debt we are unable to pay, and Christ stamped "totelestai, the debt is paid" on our "bill" as He died.

For us to cancel a debt is to:

- Speak words of release: "*Totelestai*. I cancel that indebtedness to me just as Christ canceled my debt toward Him; they owe me nothing"
- Excuse the debtor's fault or offense
- Renounce anger or resentment against the trespasser
- Repent of all judgments and determine not to speak evil against the person⁴
- Surrender the wish to punish or get even personally AND the desire for God to punish the trespasser. Remember that from the cross Jesus asked His Father to "forgive them, for they know not what they do"⁵
- Release, set at liberty, and unchain the person - because unforgiveness chains or ties us to a person until we forgive the one who has offended or sinned against us. An important principle is conveyed in Christ's words in Mathew 18:18, when He told His disciples, "*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*"

Obviously, we cannot ultimately pardon someone or cancel their debts for sins against us or against anyone else. Only God can do that. He will do so only if the person confesses, repents of his sin, and asks God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. If any person does not finally repent of his sins, God says, "*Vengeance is Mine.*" But we can release them into the hands of God for terrible sins that have been committed against us or our family by saying, "Lord, I put this person in Your hands, and I forgive him. In the name of Jesus, I cancel all debts against him."

Step 4: Protect Yourself or Establish Boundaries

The Bible teaches that while we must always forgive others, at times it is appropriate and necessary to establish boundaries in order to protect ourselves and others from abuse and mistreatment. This has been an overlooked truth by many of us in the church, and we owe much thanks to Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend for their treatment of this subject in the book, Boundaries. On occasion Jesus Himself established boundaries, and He taught His followers the right way, the loving way, to protect themselves from mistreatment by a brother. For example, in the 18th chapter of Matthew, the same chapter where Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that they should forgive others 70 times 7 times, He also gives detailed instructions on what should be done if your brother sins against you.⁶ He did not say in this instance that you should turn the other cheek and let the matter pass, but He gives specific steps that you should take to try to resolve the matter in love. These steps are designed to protect you from further abuse, to stop the hurtful conduct, to effect reconciliation, if possible, and to exert pressure on the offender that he might

repent and amend his life.

I minister to people regularly who have dominating, controlling, abusive fathers or mothers and do not know what to do. Sometimes they believe the commandment to honor their father and mother requires them to submit to such control and abuse after they are grown and have their own family. Here is one example:

A young couple came to see me after a church service in Mexico. They said the wife's father was extremely dominating and controlling. "He controls our life. He tells us where we must go to church, and how to raise our children. He corrects them in front of us, and he tells us how to spend our money. He tries to control everything about our lives. It is messing up our marriage." I said, "You are going to have to lovingly confront him. Sit down with him and tell him what he has been doing and that you are not going to allow it anymore." They responded in a fearful manner, "Oh, he is very strong. He will explode!" I said, "Well, let him explode. But really this is more your problem than his, and it is up to you to put an end to it. You have not had enough understanding or perhaps not enough courage to stop this kind of treatment. You still have to forgive him and to honor him, but that does not mean that you allow this domination and control to continue."

Malcolm Smith relates the story of a woman who was sick and bedridden. She had a good friend, a lady, who knew why she was sick. A terrible thing had happened to her about a year before. Her father had committed incest on his granddaughter, the woman's daughter. When her daughter had told her about it, she had confronted her father and cursed him and screamed at him. She had said to him, "I should turn you over to the police, but I don't want to hurt my daughter any further. I will never forgive you. I will never speak to you again!" She then went home and continued to rave and to berate and curse her father for days which turned into months, and then she had gotten sick. Her friend brought her a cassette tape on the subject of forgiveness. When the women started listening to the tape, the sick lady took it out and threw it across the room and said, "I will never forgive my father! He doesn't deserve forgiveness." When her friend left she decided after awhile, "Well, it wouldn't hurt just to listen to it." So she listened to it and listened again and again until she started coming under a state of conviction and brokenness. She got out of bed and went to see her father. She said to him, "Father, what you did was wrong. It was a terrible sin, and I will probably never be able to trust you around my daughter again, but I want you to know that I have no right to hate you. Jesus has been bringing me to a point that I have come to forgive you." And she said, "I love you," then she kissed him.

Her father was stunned. He couldn't believe his daughter would forgive him. He felt dirty and

unforgivable. In a short time he came to Christ, and his life was totally transformed. Can you guess what happened to his daughter? - - She was totally healed. She never had to go back to that sick bed. Even the granddaughter started getting over the awful thing that had happened to her. While she had been terribly wounded and traumatized by her grandfather's sin against her, the situation was being exacerbated by the bitterness of her mother, whose constant tirades kept stirring up her mind and preventing any possibility of healing. (Hebrews 12:15 indicates that a root of bitterness can "defile the many" unless it is dealt with.)

The woman did the right thing. She forgave her father, but she also said, "I will probably never be able to trust you around my daughter again." While we must forgive a person no matter what they have done, trust must be earned, especially in severe cases of abuse such as this one. Forgiving someone does not eliminate the necessity to, in some cases, establish boundaries to protect ourselves and to protect vulnerable children. (See chapter titled ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES which deals with this subject in more depth than is possible in this chapter.)

Step 5: Consider Reconciliation

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same. Forgiveness is unilateral, but it takes two to tango. Let me give an illustration:

A young woman named Jill was the "black sheep" in her family. Her parents and two older sisters always talked down to her, blamed her for everything, and treated her as if she were evil. Her reaction to the rejection of her parents and her sisters was that she started using drugs when she was a teenager. This further convinced her parents that she was a bad person, so they kicked her out of the home. Seven years passed and she became a Christian. She got a job, married, and had two children. She wanted to be reconciled to her parents. She forgave them and her sisters for the way they had treated her and repented for her sins of rebellion and drug use. Letters she sent to her parents were returned unopened. She telephoned them, and they would hang up on her as soon as they recognized her voice.

What could she do? Really, her options were very limited. She needed to forgive her family, to pray for them, to love them, to continue to reach out to them (but not all the time), and she needed to let them go.

She needed to put them in the hands of God and wait on Him to change their hearts.

Perhaps you were the victim of an abusive relationship in the past. For instance, if there was trouble with your father or an ex-spouse in the past, you should definitely not get back into a situation where you allow them to resume abusing you or your children. Maybe there has been alienation between you and someone you care about. After prayer and careful evaluation, you may believe you should make the first step toward reconciliation. Even though you may feel that the other person is largely to blame or at least equally to blame for the problem that led to the alienation, be careful not to blame them. You need to go back very humbly, ask forgiveness for your sins without putting blame on them, and offer reconciliation. You cannot demand their apology nor should you get your hopes up that they will respond favorably. Bill Gothard suggests that you use the prodigal son as an example. He had alienated himself from his father and wanted reconciliation, so he made up a little speech of what he was going to say, "Father I have sinned before heaven and before you, and I don't deserve to be treated as a son." And that is exactly what he said.

You need also to prepare yourself for the possibility that the person with whom you are attempting reconciliation could reject you. I have heard of sad stories where that is exactly what happened. The person went back very humbly and lovingly and the parent simply would not consider reconciliation. That is very painful, but we cannot predict or control the reaction of the other person. We can choose to do what is right, and then with Christ's help we can leave the consequences in the hands of our Heavenly Father.

A Time of Reflection

Is there anyone with whom you have unresolved issues of unforgiveness? Reflect on these five steps:

1. Be honest about who hurt you and what they did
2. Express your feelings of hurt and anger honestly-to God and to the right counselor
3. Cancel the debt-*totelestai!* Your debt and mine have been cancelled and paid in full!
4. Protect yourself or establish boundaries, if this is necessary
5. Consider reconciliation

Go back over these five steps and pray for the wisdom and courage needed for what you need to do. Sometimes we know what action we should take, such as confronting someone, but we are afraid of the consequences and ask God to bail us out. We say, "God, please take care of it so I don't have to deal with it!" He says, "No, I will be with you, but you get up off your knees and go and do what needs to be done. My spirit of love will be inside of you, and with courage and faith you must do what is required. I will be with you to take you through it." The book of Joshua describes just this kind of interaction between Joshua and God.⁷

Endnotes

- (1) Adapted from the Minirth-Meier book, Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves, by Dr. David Stoop.
- (2) Mark 3:1
- (3) Matthew 6:12 NKJV
- (4) James 4:11
- (5) Luke 23:24

- (6) Matthew 18:15-17
- (7) Joshua 7:1-15