

Chapter 2

THE TRAP OF UNFORGIVENESS

In past years, hunters used to catch bears in the mountains of Colorado with big steel traps. When a bear would step on the hidden trap, the steel teeth would snap shut breaking the bear's leg and holding him down in agony until the hunter came and killed him. A bear steps into a trap because the trap is hidden and the bear is oblivious to the danger.

In a similar fashion, Christians sometime allow unforgiveness to take root in their hearts because they are oblivious that it is a trap of the devil. Paul says that unforgiveness is a scheme or a trap of the devil. (2 Corinthians 2:10-11) How often have we seen people who are sincere in their Christian faith struggle to grow into spiritual maturity, defeated or discouraged by their sins and weaknesses? They strain to bear fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, self control) in their homes, jobs, and in all of life, and lack confidence in God's love for them, fulfillment in their work, and hope in their future. They seem to be hobbled and in agony like a trapped bear.

If you have been involved in a church for a number of years, you probably know someone who is a member, but whose life does not seem to have changed. He or she has verbally accepted Christ, attends church, reads the Bible, serves in some capacity, but he has never repented, and their life has not really changed. This person lives in denial about hurtful, sinful words, actions, and attitudes. He or she lives in the same self-centered way, has not deeply changed since they were born again, but now are religious and convinced they are OK.

You probably know another Christian whose situation is different. He loves the Lord, has repented of his sins, and is earnestly trying to follow Christ. But as he walks in the new direction, he stumbles and falls back into his old sinful ways. I believe that all of us have gone through this pattern, and the question is why? When we are born physically we come to the age when we start learning to walk, and that is a process. Mom and dad are not angry when baby falls down. He is a baby. They are loving and patient. When we are born again spiritually, we are spiritual babies. We must drink milk until we can eat meat. We have to learn how to walk. Our Heavenly Father is not angry when we fall down. He knows that we are spiritual babies.

The problem is that many Christians never seem to progress beyond the falling down and getting up stage. A 1-1/2 year old child falls and gets up all day long. But if a 12-year-old or a 20-year-old continued to fall down there would be something seriously wrong. The fact is that many Christians, who are sincere in their faith, never grow past the falling down stage. Emotional bondages from their former life such as anger, fear, anxiety, self pity, depression, and feelings of worthlessness continue to defeat them. These bondages can manifest themselves by recurring sins such as addiction to alcohol and drugs, pornography, other sexual sins, and physical or sexual abuse of their spouse or children. Christians commit these sins!

I have ministered to scores of them, some of whom were leaders: elders, deacons, teachers, pastors, and missionaries. Many of these folks fall into a sin and confess cycle: "Oh, God, I'm so sorry! I'll never do it again!" But they do it again and again. They may go to their pastor or overseer and confess. He may be shocked and say, "Brother, are you really saved? You need to repent, pray more, use self-control." They try these things but continue to fail and eventually begin to feel like a failure and a hypocrite. They are living like the Apostle Paul described in Romans 7, doing the very thing they hate.

What is wrong with this picture? Well, there are three roots that hold back a sincere person from growing as a Christian.¹

- A wound in the heart.
- Sins connected to that wound.
- Lies connected to that wound.

It is typical for all three of these roots to be linked together. For instance, if a boy was rejected by his father (or mother), if his father favored a brother or sister, or if his father cursed him, abused him, or abandoned his family, a deep and terrible wound lies in his heart. Even if he becomes a committed Christian, his spiritual growth can be stifled until that wound is healed. The good news is that Jesus came to heal the brokenhearted!²

Sins will probably be connected to that wound in his heart. Although the boy was an innocent victim, he may have reacted to the rejection and mistreatment in a sinful way by becoming angry, bitter, and by judging and hating his father. His growth as a Christian will be impeded until he repents of those sins.

Lies may also be connected to that wound. His father may have said to him by his words or by his actions, "You are worthless, unworthy of my love and attention, and I despise you!" And the child may have come to believe those things about himself. Even if the boy grows up and accepts Christ in a sincere way, those lies may be embedded deep within his heart. His growth as a Christian will be hindered until the lie of his father's words is renounced and the subconscious power of those words is broken.

In other words, if there is bad fruit in a Christian's life (anger, fear, addictions, sexual sins, etc.) it comes from a bad root. (This subject is developed in Chapter 3, "Bad Fruit and Bad Roots.") The first bad root I look for is unforgiveness. Many Christians find there is little peace and joy in their lives because they are living with unforgiveness and bitterness toward their father or mother, toward their husband or wife (or ex-spouse), or toward the person who molested and betrayed them. Satan lays his traps before every person. In this life people will disappoint, offend, and hurt others. Sometimes it can be the people closest to them. It is normal to be wounded, and it is human nature to react with anger. But if people allow that anger to stay inside it will turn into unforgiveness and bitterness, and they will be caught in a trap of the devil. Unforgiveness is like acid being carried in a bucket. For awhile, you can't see it from the outside, but inside it is corroding and destroying the bucket. The healing process starts when they are able to forgive the ones that caused them pain.

All Christians know they are commanded to forgive others. So, why is it so difficult for Christians to forgive? Here is a list I have assembled of some of the reasons why Christians don't forgive:

- Some think that forgiveness is a sign of weakness.
- They may have been trained by their family or by their culture never to forgive and that the manly way to handle an insult or an injury is to exact revenge. There are whole societies that live by this credo. Their minds need to be renewed by the Word of God, and they need to see Jesus as their model
- Others believe that forgiveness is only required if an apology has been given. This is not true. Jesus forgave us from the cross while we were still rebelling against God and before we ever asked for forgiveness.³ Also, Peter, who was once ready to attack an enemy of Christ with the sword, had such a change of heart that he said we should bless those who hate and revile us.⁴
- Unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment, and self-pity feed the flesh. It feels good to our lower nature to feel like a victim and to nourish thoughts of bitterness and revenge.
- Forgiving someone makes us vulnerable to being hurt again. But it is also true that as long as we hold onto anger we will continue to be hurt and victimized by the person who wounded us. We don't seem to move forward. The unforgiveness locks in the pain and locks out God.
- Some people have said to me, "I just can't do it! I was hurt too badly and I've tried to forgive, but I can't!" My answer is "Of course you can." God doesn't command us to do the impossible. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"⁵ You may not be able to do it in your own strength, and you may not be able to do it instantly, but if you will ask for God's grace and help, and if you will meet His conditions, you can certainly do it. Forgiveness starts with an act of obedience, an act of our will. We can say something like this, "Lord, as an act of obedience to You, I forgive _____ for (whatever they did that wounded me)."
- Some people don't know they haven't forgiven because their memories are repressed and hidden from their conscious mind. Those repressed memories still continue to adversely affect their lives, however, because "Out of the heart are the issues of life."⁶ Here is an example:

During ministry a young man told me that he had never known his father who had impregnated his mother and abandoned her before he was born. I asked him to forgive his father. He said, "I don't need to forgive him. I never knew him, have never thought much about him, and don't have any bitterness toward him." I said to the young man: "Although you never knew your father, it is likely that when he abandoned you and your mother and you were born without a father, it wounded your spirit. By faith, will you simply say, 'Lord, I forgive my father for abandoning my mother and me, and I repent of all judgments against him that are hidden in my heart and I honor him....'" When he did that tears came to his eyes and he said, "When I said those words I felt something happen inside. I think maybe I did have some feelings about my father."
- The principal reasons that most Christians don't forgive, in my opinion, are pride, rebellion, and stubbornness. Many Christians go through life as if there is a clenched fist inside. I illustrate this when I am teaching by holding my clenched fist up in front of my heart. This

represents their anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, and vengeance. When people go through life like this, it creates a lot of problems. It creates problems in their relationship with their family and in their relationship with God. It creates emotional problems. They may have problems sleeping and resting, and develop problems with their health. They come to a place of desperation many times and cry out, "God, help me! I am being overwhelmed. I'm a Christian, but everything is going wrong in my life. Please help me and heal me!" God hears our prayers. He says to us, "My son, my daughter, I hear you, I love you and I want to answer your prayer. Obey Me. Humble yourself. Unclench that fist inside." Unfortunately, their closed fist is like a wall between their heart and God's love, God's peace, and God's answers to their prayers. When they come to a place of humility and obey Christ by forgiving, the fist unclenches, and the wall comes down so God's peace, love, and healing reaches their hearts. I have seen countless people healed spiritually, emotionally, and physically when they forgave.

Consider what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: *"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions*

."(NIV)⁷ Did you notice what Jesus said? He said that if we do not forgive others that God will not forgive us! Stop and consider that statement which is profoundly serious. Jesus is not saying that God has set the bar so high that we can't jump over it, and then God is going to get us! No, no! He is saying just the opposite. He is encouraging us. By His example, and empowered by His grace, we can forgive those who have offended and wounded us. Then we will cast aside those chains that have been frustrating us, and holding us back from moving into a deeper realm of peace, joy, and intimacy with the Father. But He is also warning us of terrible consequences if we refuse to forgive.

Let's look at two other spiritual principles. First, Jesus said, *"Do not judge and criticize and condemn others, so that you may not be judged and criticized and condemned yourselves. For just as you judge and criticize and condemn others you will be judged and criticized and condemned, and in accordance with the measure you deal out to others it will be dealt out again to you."*(AMP)⁸ And, second, the 5th Commandment is quoted in the New Testament: *"Honor your father and mother"-- which is the first commandment with a promise -- that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."*(NIV)⁹

God connects a promise to this commandment. He says if you honor your father and mother that He will give you long life and things will go well with you. If you do not honor your parents it can shorten your life and things will not go well with you. Remember the example of Ham who dishonored his father Noah and brought a curse upon himself,¹⁰ and of the Pharisees who dishonored their parents and were rebuked by the Lord.¹¹ The commandment does not say to honor them if they are good, kind, loving parents. All parents are not that way. Sometimes they are harsh, rejecting, cold, and abusive, and that grieves the heart of God. It is not His will. But He says that if we obey Him, by honoring them, He will bless our lives, and give us grace to obey this commandment.

What is the specific meaning of honoring one's parents? I believe it means:

- To forgive them for their sins and mistakes of commission and omission against us¹²
- To repent of judging and condemning them¹³
- To repent of criticizing and speaking against them¹⁴
- To repent of cursing them¹⁵
- To repent of despising them or looking on them with contempt¹⁶
- For a child or young person, to obey them in the Lord¹⁷ (When the child becomes an adult and gets married, he is to "leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife"¹⁸, and he is then free from obeying his parents, although he should continue to honor and respect them.)
- As they have needs, to support them financially¹⁹

Several years ago in Mexico a woman came weeping to the altar. She said, "I can't love my children! I always said that I would never treat my children the way my mother treated me. She was harsh and cruel. She cursed me and beat me, and I never felt loved by her. And I said, 'I'll never treat my children that way!' But that is just the way I'm treating my children! I can see the pain in their eyes -- and I'm a Christian. I've repented and I've asked God to help me many times. What's wrong with me?"

What was wrong with her? She was human and was deeply wounded. She had never forgiven her mother, and she was trapped by the devil. She lacked peace in her relationship with God. She had judged and condemned her mother and the judgment was coming back to her in the form of her broken relationship with her children. Romans 2:1 says, "Who are you to judge another when you do the same things?" Time and again, I have observed that when someone judges their father or mother, they end up acting in a similar fashion as the one they judged. When someone tells me they are abusing their spouse or their children, I ask how their parents treated one another and how they treated the children. If there are judgments hidden in their heart, there will a strong tendency to act the same way even though they despise the way they are acting. When someone has a problem with addictions I ask, "Was your father or mother an alcoholic?" The first step to freedom is to forgive them and repent of those judgments.

I explained this principle to the young mother and led her to forgive her mother and to repent of her judgments and condemnation. The next step was to state that she honored and respected her mother for the Lord's sake. She was quiet for a few moments and then started laughing out loud. She finally said, "For the first time in my life I feel love in my heart for my children!" I encouraged her to go home and ask her children to forgive her. I also told her to resist the devil and draw near to God when she was tempted to fall back into her old ways. Old habits become deeply engrained, so these scriptural principles must be prayed about and practiced again and again, with repentance when we fall short, until God's way becomes natural to us and our old way feels unnatural and we grow to hate it. This takes time and patience with our self.

Sometimes a person's feelings will not change immediately as they did with this young mother. So what should they do if they say the words, "I forgive my mother," but their heart continues to feel wounded and angry when they think of that person? They should do what Jesus said to do: "Pray for those who spitefully use you..."²⁰ Pray for that person, pray, pray, pray, until God changes your heart towards them. Sometimes there are many different hurts and wounds that must be individually called to mind and forgiven before you can come to a place of peace in your heart. Pray until all the anger and pain is gone and you

truly love them and desire God's blessings for them. The hardest situation is if you are living with a person who continually batters you verbally, emotionally and physically. I advise people (usually wives or children) to protect themselves by physically separating from the abuser, particularly from one who abuses physically or sexually, until he gets counseling and healing and demonstrates that he has truly repented. (Please see chapter titled Establishing Boundaries.) In some situations, however, the abused wife or child cannot establish safe boundaries. What should they do? It takes supernatural grace to live in such a situation and not grow bitter. They must continue to forgive, every day and every night, or Satan will devour their souls. And they must daily cast themselves on the grace of God.

Now I will give you an example of a man I will call "Jack."²¹ Jack was a very angry man. He was in my church years ago. He had been divorced three times. He was very harsh and very hard on his wife and children. He abused them physically and emotionally. He used to say to his children time and again, "You're no good. You will never amount to anything!" But then there came the time after Jack's third wife left him that he came to our church and accepted Christ. His life was transformed and he became very loving and kind. He became a strong man of prayer. He convinced his wife to come back to him and everything went along fine for awhile. After a period of a few months, however, anger started coming back into his life. He again started being very harsh and abusive to his children, and again his wife left him.

Now, I have a question: Why did Jack act the way he did? Why was he such an angry person? You may have guessed correctly that Jack had a father who had treated him in the same way he was now treating his children. His father had been an alcoholic who became brutal and sadistic when he was drunk. In fact, Jack told me that his father had on many occasions knocked him to the floor and had then kicked him while saying to him, "Jack, you're no good. You will never amount to anything," the very words that Jack now used against his sons. But the question is, Wasn't Jack saved? Doesn't the Bible say that when we become Christians we are forgiven for all our sins, and we become "new creatures"? If that is so, why did Jack revert to acting the way he did?

This is a very important point! The Bible says that when we become Christians we are forgiven for all our sins, if we (1) repent of our sins (2) believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. (Refer again to the Preface: WHY DON'T CHRISTIANS GROW?) In the case of Jack, and the previous example of the woman who came to the altar weeping, both of them had accepted Christ as their Savior, but Jack had never forgiven his father, and the woman had never forgiven her mother. If a drunkard "accepts Christ," but willfully continues to be a drunkard, is he forgiven by God? Of course not. If an adulterer, pedophile, or pornography addict "accepts Christ," but willfully continues in his immorality, is he forgiven by God? Not unless he repents. (I am saying if a person "willfully" continues in his sin, he is not forgiven. I am not referring to the person who repents, falls back into his old sins, repents and falls, time after time. For many, repentance and freedom is a process, and is only gained by a tremendous battle. God looks on our hearts, and knows whether we are sincere.) Christ warned about the sin of unforgiveness far more than He did about drunkenness or immorality! Forgiveness is so important to Him that He included it in the "Lord's Prayer," and specifically warns us following that prayer that if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us.²² If God does not forgive us, what does that portend on the day of judgment?

Consider the spiritual principles mentioned above. One says, "*Honor your father and your mother that things may go well with you*". Jack never honored his father. He told me that he despised his father. Because Jack hardened his heart and refused to honor his father, things were not going well for him. A

second spiritual law is "*if you forgive others you will be forgiven*". Jack never would forgive his father. He said, "My father ruined my life." Let me say that nobody can ruin your life but you. Yes, other people can hurt you and do you great damage, but, according to Jesus, what destroys your soul is the bitterness, the resentment, and the sin that comes into your heart. Jack would not forgive his father and he never felt forgiven by God.

A third spiritual principle is, "*Don't judge others, or you will be judged, in whatsoever way you judge it will come back to you*". Jack was judging and condemning his father and the judgment was coming back into his own life. He found himself trapped by the devil into the same kind of conduct he despised. He could not prevent himself from treating his children in the way he had been treated. James 2:13 says, "*Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment*". If we refuse to be merciful to those who have mistreated us by forgiving them, by repenting of judging them, then God has said that no mercy will be shown to us.

How should we minister to Jack? Very simply, he needs first and foremost to choose to obey God, to choose to honor and respect his father. By God's grace he can do this. God is not going to command us to do anything that is impossible for us. Jack needs to forgive his father. He needs to say, "I forgive my dad for the way he treated my mother and for the way he abused and mistreated me. It hurt me very badly, it devastated my life, but for Christ's sake I forgive him." He needs to repent of judging and condemning his father. He needs to say, "I repent of judging and condemning my father. I repent for hating him and cursing him and speaking against him. Lord, You have given me mercy and I choose to give my father mercy." And then we, of course, need to pray for Jack's wounded heart. Jesus said that He "*came to heal the brokenhearted.....to set at liberty them that are bruised*."(KJV).²³

Was Jack a real Christian? God only knows. When we become Christians (through repentance and faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross) God forgives our sins, but if we continue to hold onto sin, the consequences of those sins will continue to impact our lives. Many Christians are confused and believe that since they have gone to the altar and accepted Christ they are free to continue to sin. That is not true!²⁴ We are then free not to sin. We can't help sinning before we come to Christ, but He has set us free from the power, or reign, of sin that has been controlling our hearts.²⁴ But the good news is that the Lord Jesus has come to save us from our sins – from the power, the deception, and the control of sin over our lives; from the love of sin that we may still have; and from the consequences of sin – which is death and separation from God.²⁵ Glory be to God!

A TIME OF REFLECTION

I want to lead you in a short time of reflecting on those you need to forgive. Please be quiet before God.....Do you need to forgive your father? Perhaps he rejected you, abused you, was an alcoholic, had other women, and abandoned your mother and you. Perhaps he was a good man but he was away working all the time. Perhaps he simply did not know how to give love. Say, "Lord, my father hurt me very much, and it has deeply affected my life, but I forgive him. I repent for judging and condemning him. By your grace, I honor and respect him" (or if he is dead, "I honor his memory").

Do you need to forgive your mother? Maybe she loved a brother or sister but never loved you. Or maybe she was dominating and controlling, or unfaithful, or addicted. Or perhaps she was always depressed and withdrawn, or physically sick. "I forgive my mother -- and repent of judging her -- and I honor her."

Perhaps you need to forgive your grandparents or a step parent or someone who raised you, a brother or sister, a teacher or classmates, a judge or a lawyer, a boss, a priest or a pastor or someone in the church, your spouse or ex-spouse. Maybe someone molested you when you were a child or a teenager. That awful experience affected your life. Say, "Lord, that was a terrible sin against me, but for your sake I forgive that person and ask you to have mercy on him/her. I break the soul-ties between us spiritually, emotionally, and physically. I renounce any spirit of perversion, uncleanness, or homosexuality that came in at that time and command them to leave in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Breathe deeply and as you exhale command all unclean spirits to go!)

Now, put your hand on your heart and pray: "Lord, come and heal my heart, my emotions, and my memories. Fill up all the loneliness and emptiness with your Holy Spirit, love, and peace. Heal me, fill me, in Jesus' precious name, amen."

ENDNOTES

1. Ed Smith, Theophostic Ministry, Basic Training Seminar
2. Luke 4:18
3. Luke 23:34
4. I Peter 3:9
5. Philippians 4:13
6. Proverbs 4:23
7. Matthew 6:14-15
8. Matthew 7:1-2
9. Ephesians 6:2-3
10. Genesis 9:20-27
11. Mark 7:6-13
12. Matthew 6:14-15
13. Matthew 7:1-2
14. Matthew 7:1-2, James 4:11
15. Mark 7:10
16. Ezekiel 22:7
17. Ephesians 6:1-4
18. Matthew 19:4-6
19. 1 Timothy 5:8, Matthew 15:1-6
20. Luke 6:28
21. All names of counselees in this book have been changed to protect their privacy
22. Matthew 6:9-15
23. Luke 4:18
24. Romans 6
25. Many of the principles in this teaching are amplified in John and Paula Sandford's book, [Transformation of the Inner Man](#).

