

Forgiveness



Letting Go to Live Freely

by Jennifer Brady

Anger. Hurt. Bitterness. Hate. What has happened in your life to generate these feelings? Was it a broken promise? A harsh word? An unjust accusation? A physical injury? Although your pain is individual, the experience of hurting is universal.

Intense emotional reactions such as these are a typical response to hurt. They are feelings we experience when we have been hurt, deceived, or misunderstood by someone that we love. The deeper the love you have for someone, the greater potential for emotional pain. Lewis Smedes, author of *Forgive and Forget*, explains that "we usually hate someone who is close to us—close enough to love". This presents a true conflict for us a Christian because we are called to live in love and unity with one another. Since this type of pain is inevitable for us, how do we respond to it?

As noted earlier, common reactions include anger, resentment, and often denial. However, a typical reaction is not necessarily the most

beneficial one. The only real beneficial way to deal with personal injury of this sort is to move through the process of forgiveness.

Before we discuss what forgiveness is, let's clarify what it is not. Forgiveness is not denial or rejection of the idea that someone hurt us. Denying the pain does not cause it to disappear, it only makes it more difficult to handle. In addition, true forgiveness is not associated with a quest for power or an illusion of righteousness. Anytime you feel "holier than" or "in control of" your debtor, you have not experienced genuine forgiveness. Instead, you have masked your pain behind the facade of forgiveness which is being used as a weapon against the injurer.

True forgiveness is a process, not a carefree gesture. Energy and effort are required, not merely a spoken word. It involves acknowledging the pain and anger that you are experiencing rather than ignoring it. We must recognize that someone else

has caused us pain and that we are holding a grudge against them. In forgiving, we choose to release the "injurer" from the debt we feel they owe us.

A Helpful Picture

Let me share an illustration (adapted from G. Moon) which may help clarify the differences between true and false forgiveness. Picture, if you will, your injurer standing on a platform. You walk up on the platform and pick up a baseball bat which is sitting next to the person. Your heart is racing, and your hands are sweating. You are feeling extreme rage toward this person standing next to you. You face your offender and look at him/her for a moment. You say nothing to this person but just scowl at the thought of being near him/her. Then, with your biggest smile and a sharp word, you lay the bat down and say "I forgive you." This is not true forgiveness. More than anything, it is an attempt to smooth over and forget about pain which really needs to be addressed.

Dr. Gary Moon calls this pre-forgiveness.

In a second scenario, you follow the same procedure except when you pick up the baseball bat, you begin to mercilessly hit the person who has hurt you. Along with your physical harm, you proceed to scream and let the person know just exactly what you think of him or her. After you have done incredible damage, you set the bat down and say "I forgive you." Obviously, this is not real forgiveness. It is revenge seeking or post-forgiveness. In this scenario, you are willing to forgive after you have paid him/her back. Getting even is not the objective of forgiveness. In all reality, this type of forgiveness usually doesn't make us feel better anyway.

Finally, in the last situation, you approach the platform with all of your disdain and hurt. You pick up the bat and hold it high over your head. At this point, you stop. The tears begin to flow as you recall all your anger, resentment, and pain. You recognize that a part of your

heart has been damaged by this person. In your mind, you are thinking that you have every right to harm this person for the pain they have caused. And yet, in the midst of this honest experience, you choose to set the bat down. This is a picture of genuine forgiveness ... releasing the person who has done harm from the debt or the need to get even.

This picture of forgiveness is most clearly illustrated for us by our Heavenly Father. We, as humans, live in opposition to God because of our disobedience and sin. We hurt the One who loved us most by choosing to live outside His plan.

Romans 6:23 tells us the "wages of our sin is death". If the story stopped here, we all would be in big trouble. We would never be able to be reconciled to our Creator. However, God instilled a greater plan ... a plan of forgiveness and restoration. The debt that we should have had to pay was cancelled by the death of Christ. In essence, God said "you have really hurt me by turning

away, but I choose to offer you forgiveness by sacrificing my own Son."

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