

If You Forgive . . .

A little boy was asked, “What is forgiveness?” He answered; “It is the odor that flowers breathe when they are trampled on.” That is a nice answer but not a biblical one. How would you answer the question, “What is forgiveness?” Forgiveness appears for the first time in Matthew in what we call the Lord’s Prayer. It should be called “Our Prayer” because it is really about our desire for holiness, the holy Father, forgiving others and not leading us into temptation. Jesus concludes with a warning about forgiving others.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors . . . For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.
(NASB) Matthew 6:12, 14-15

HEART PAIN. We all struggle with forgiving others. We have all been hurt, deceived, used and abused in one way or another. Some of us have suffered more than others with less pain in the heart, while others have experienced the opposite.

My worst pain seems to occur when people deceive me, use me and then lie about me so that they look good. What pain in the heart! What hurt. What anger! If forgiveness does not occur, bitterness grows in the heart. This leads to a spirit that moves us to slander and spread discord,

Hatred stirs up strife . . . And a slanderer separates intimate friends. (NASB) Prov. 10:12; 16:28

But this behavior does not bring peace in the heart; it only makes the inside pain worse. We look good on the outside, but on the inside we are hurting,

The heart knows its own bitterness . . . Even in laughter the heart may be in pain . . . (NKJV) Prov. 14:10, 13

Yet deep inside we often want those who have hurt us to pay. Some of us will go as far as to attempt to pay them back for the hurt.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone . . . If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge . . . (NASB) Rom. 12:17-21

And all the time we are longing for the hurt to go away. We long for someone to accept us - for peace in our heart,

A tranquil heart is life to the body, But passion is rotteness to the bones. (NKJV) Prov. 14:30

FORGIVENESS. Many would say we need to love more and they quote 1 Peter,

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. (NASB) 1 Pet. 4:8

While this verse describes the motivation of the heart, it does not give us the solution, which is forgiveness. The root Greek word that Jesus uses for forgiveness is *aphiemi*. This is a wonderful word. It has the meaning of “to send out,” “to liberate,” “to let go,” “to release,” “to surrender.” It is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to “divorcing” a wife or husband (1 Cor. 7:11-13). It was used in the secular world to refer to the “release” of slaves and being “exempt”

from military duty.

Maybe the best New Testament illustrations are found in the gospels of Mark and John,

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. (NIV) Mark 1:17-18

The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away . . . (NIV) John 10:12

“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. (NIV) Mark 14:6

That is forgiveness - abandoning your fish net full of hurtful memories and running away from them. Forgiveness is a choice - a decision. It is deciding to leave the memory of the person who “caused” the hurt alone . . . Have you made the decision to forget and not dwell on your hurts and replace them with love for your offender?

The martyr Stephen is a great example of forgiveness as he was being stoned to death,

And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (NASB) Acts 7:60

He did not become angry and protest. He forgave them. Do you see that forgiveness is not warm “fuzzies?” It is no longer holding them responsible and choosing to abandon the memory. Is there someone you keep remembering who hurt you in the past? Do you recount how they hurt you over and over again? If so, you have not forgiven them.

CONSIDERATIONS. Some have a distorted concept of forgiveness and accept the world’s idea of forgiveness. 1 Corin-

thians 5:1-13 tells about a son who was having sex with his mother. They sinned. This was not just a personal offense, but sin in the church. Paul, the apostle, rebukes the church members because they did nothing about it. They “let it alone.” It is possible someone was saying, “We need to forgive them” or “I need to love them.”

This is not Jesus’ concept of love and forgiveness. Forgiveness is required when YOU have been personally offended. The church members had the wrong concept. So Paul tells them,

And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. (NASB) 1 Corinthians 5:2

Does Paul take a non-judgmental approach? No, he tells the church they have sinned and to remove the offenders if they do not stop (1 Cor. 5:13)! Matthew 18:15-20 provides Jesus’ guidelines for helping those who sin to stop. Galatians

6:1 tells us that we need to be gentle. Later in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul tells the church to forgive and comfort them after they repent -

An Ability Not To Remember

When the Moravian missionaries first went to the Eskimos, they could not find a word in their language for forgiveness, so they had to create one. This turned out to be: **Issumagijoungnainermik**. It is a formidable looking word but an expression that is beautiful. It means: “Not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore.”

when they stop sinning.

CONCLUSION. When Jesus told the crowd on the hillside, “if you forgive men . . . your heavenly Father will forgive you,” He is not talking about earning our forgiveness. He is talking about the fact that those who have been forgiven are the ones who are forgiving others (Luke 11:4).

. . . in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (NASB) Colossians 1:14

Jesus says that Christians forgive much because He has already forgiven ALL of our sins,

. . . but he who is forgiven much, loves much. (NASB) Luke
7:47 paraphrased

Has Jesus forgiven you? If so, He has forgiven your past, present and future sins and promises to not remember them (Isa. 43:25). He could remember your sins if He wanted to since He is all knowing, but He has chosen to not remember your sins. It is His promise.

So who has offended you? Who are you remembering? Are you like Stephen? No insults, no threats, no protests, but only forgetfulness! Jesus wants you to empty your fishing net of hurtful memories into the sea of no-memories and to express your love . . .

Praise God for forgiveness!