

The Blessings of Forgiveness – Dan Hitz

This article is part-one of a two part article on forgiveness. Both are included in the “Basics of Recovery” series. Dan Hitz is the Executive Director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan, a member ministry of the Restored Hope Network dedicated to bringing freedom to men, women, and adolescents struggling with sexual and relationship issues. For more information contact Reconciliation Ministries at 586.739.5114, or visit us on the web at www.recmin.org.



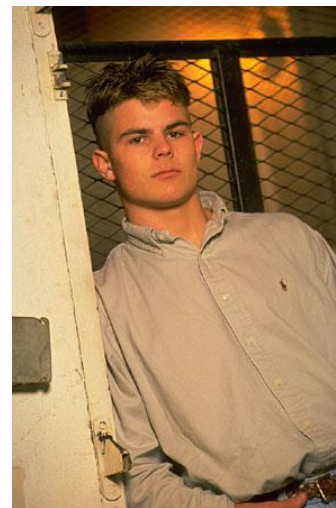
As we ponder our lives, we may notice many times that we've been wounded or wronged. Usually the deepest wounds are caused by those closest to us. We might even notice an anger stirring in our hearts. Sometimes it runs just below the surface. Other times it comes pouring out like lava spewing from a volcano. Anger can be scary for Christians. We don't think we're allowed to be angry. Some of us have grown up in homes where the punishment was swift if our faces showed the slightest disapproval of anything our parents did or said. We can be especially afraid to admit that we might even be angry at God. Some of us have learned to block our feelings of anger and pretend that everything is okay. Pretending might work for a short while, but sooner or later the consequences of hiding our anger begin to take their toll.

The Bible gives us instructions about anger. Ephesians 4:26 reads, “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” Here we see that it is okay to be angry, as long as we handle that anger properly. Notice that we are instructed not to let the sun go down on our wrath. That means at some point we must forgive. In Matthew 18, Jesus instructs us about forgiveness and tells us that we must forgive our offenders from our hearts. He says that if we don't forgive others, we won't be forgiven ourselves. As Christians we want to obey the Lord. It's easy to give forgiveness lip service. We may actually intend to obey Scripture and try to forgive our offender, but if we still feel our blood pressure rising and the veins in our foreheads popping out every time we think of him, then we haven't really forgiven him from our hearts.

For some of us, it is a big step forward just to realize that we really are angry. Anger may have helped us cope with devastation in our lives for a season, but sooner or later the Holy Spirit calls us to let that anger go. He wants us to allow Him to heal the wounds in our hearts. He wants us to allow Him to deal with our offender as He sees fit. That requires us to trust the Lord to do what's right. Forgiveness is a process and we need the Lord's help. Sometimes we need to sort through our emotions before we're ready to truly forgive from our heart.

Forgiveness is especially challenging when our offender refuses to apologize. What if those who hurt us are actually delighted that we are in pain? Are we called to forgive even then? Consider Jesus' response to His unrepentant offenders as He is hanging on the cross. Luke 23:34 reads, “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.” Jesus, our example, forgave His offenders even as they continued to crucify Him and divide his clothing in front of Him.

In times of incredible pain, we may want to use our anger as a shield or offensive weapon. We may try to use anger as a barrier between the pain in our hearts, and those who may hurt us again. Unfortunately, the same barrier that pretends to block the enemy also blocks the Lord from bringing us peace. Unforgiveness traps the pain



in our hearts. In Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant, the master commanded that the unmerciful servant be thrown in jail and turned over to the tormentors until his debt is repaid. I was astounded one time when a friend of mine who had suffered much pain as a result of long term abuse said that he had suffered more pain due to his own "tormentors" of unforgiveness than he had ever suffered at the hands of his abuser. As my friend learned to forgive from his heart, he began to receive more and more peace and strength from the Lord.

True forgiveness that brings peace is not pretending that everything is alright. True forgiveness is actually taking an account of the specific sins against us, and then putting our offenders in Jesus' hands. Forgiveness requires that we don't make excuses for our offenders or brush the offenses off as minimal events. We recognize offenses for what they are. We then release our resentment and desire for retaliation to the Lord, and we release our demands of how He should deal with those who wronged us.

As we truly forgive our offenders from our hearts, we notice that we begin to heal from our wounds. We may even notice a compassion growing in our hearts for our offenders. There are a few important things to notice at this stage. First, although we may have chosen to forgive our offenders, they may still not be safe for us to associate with. Forgiveness is essential; however, restoring the relationship with those who have hurt us may not always be wise or possible. Second, there is a big difference between forgiveness and healing. If I drop a 100 pound weight on my friend's foot, he may forgive me but his foot is still broken and requires medical attention. In the same way, we may forgive our offender but the wound that was afflicted may require professional attention.

Unforgiveness places a barrier between our hearts and God. Forgiveness removes that barrier and helps us to connect with the heart of Jesus. The one who chose to take all of our offenses upon Himself, receive the punishment that we truly deserved, and give us His righteousness. Forgiveness frees us to enter into a deeper relationship with the Lord and learn beautiful aspects of His nature that we can't learn any other way. It brings a new freedom and richness to our hearts and allows the grace of God to flow through us more freely.

The first step of forgiveness is to open your heart to the Lord and quiet yourself in His presence. Second, identify the specific sins against you that need to be forgiven. Resist the temptation to make excuses for your offender or minimize what happened. Third, ask the Lord to help you understand the specific effects of those sins on your heart and in your life. His death on the cross not only paid for the sins you committed, it also provided for the healing of your heart from the sins that others committed against you. Forth, state the sin against you and place it in Jesus' hands. It may help to picture yourself handing each sin to Jesus as He hang on the cross and pressing each sin into His wounds. Next, release your right to get even and allow the Lord to work on your offender's heart however He sees fit. Ask God to heal your heart rather than expecting your offender to make things better. Lastly, allow yourself to learn to walk in your new found forgiveness and give yourself time to receive healing for your wounds. In time you will recognize a growing inner strength and a deeper level of intimacy with the Lord. As you learn to walk in forgiveness, your life will change forever.

