THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

The journey of forgiveness requires that we deal with periods in our past. In our past are points of pain that cause fatigue and frustration with people, often causing dreadful disagreements, awful arguments, and sometimes the severing of longtime relationships. This set of circumstances places us in the need to deal with the issue of forgiveness. The journey of forgiveness is first forgiving the past in order to secure our faith in the future. In this lesson, we will deal with several key aspects of understanding forgiveness, receiving forgiveness and learning to do the same, extending forgiveness. These key aspects include God’s forgiveness, Christ’s willingness to forgive; and the example we are to follow from them to successfully implement forgiveness in our Christian character.

I. FORGIVENESS (a journey beginning with the past; a study in its ideals and concepts)¹

Forgiveness is excruciatingly difficult. There are a hundred reasons why one cannot forgive and a thousand easier, more appealing alternatives. Many of these alternatives will accomplish something worthwhile. Some will enable us to forget the pain, others will help us to understand our feelings, and still others will enable us to transfer our hurt or anger onto something or someone else. But none of them will totally heal or restore the broken relationship. Whether or not such healing or restoration is even necessary has been questioned by some. Why should a Jew forgive a Nazi or a woman her rapist? Do their enemies not deserve to die unforgiven? Would it make any difference to them if forgiveness were offered? Can the value or success of forgiveness be measured? Are there not some cases where traveling the road of forgiveness simply raises more problems and opens more wounds than if the journey had never begun? Before examining the dynamics of forgiveness, it is important to establish what forgiveness is not.

A. Some Misconceptions

Understanding. To understand all is not to forgive all. Forgiveness is not dependent on our understanding everything about the person or the situation, nor is greater understanding a guarantee of forgiveness. We are being unrealistic if we expect to understand everything before we forgive. Situations and people are so complex and their depths are so unfathomable that we cannot afford the luxury of waiting until we understand before we forgive. On the other hand, people may understand all about a situation but still remain unforgiving. Greater understanding may facilitate forgiveness and may flow from forgiveness, but forgiveness is not dependent on it.

Forgetting. Similarly, forgiving is not forgetting—for three reasons. First, if hurts can be easily forgotten, no forgiveness is necessary. The hurts in question are no more than mere annoyances, here today, gone tomorrow. Second, forgetting may be no more than avoidance or suppression, a defense mechanism to avoid the demands of real forgiveness. Third, where true forgiveness is needed, and even after it has been achieved and experienced, forgetting does not happen automatically. We cannot forget on demand. Forgiving can still be sincere even if we remember. Forgetting must happen naturally as part of the longer forgiving process.

¹ Montgomery, David J. from his article in The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity (here through p4.)
Avoidance. Forgiveness is not a way of avoidance. It is an alternative to revenge and retaliation, but it is not a way of opting out. On the contrary, because it (forgiveness) gets to the root of the problem and refuses to exacerbate the hostility by multiplying the hurts, it is the only way of truly dealing with all aspects of the conflict situation.

Toleration. To forgive is not simply to accept or tolerate. Acceptance can be selective: it can be a way of looking at the good that is in each one of us, no matter how evil many of our actions may be, but it does not deal with the bad. It concentrates on the sober generosity of the drunkard, the family commitment of the terrorist or the conscientiousness of the adulterer. But it is the bad—the drunkenness, the murder, the adultery—which is unacceptable. That is what forgiveness tackles.

Getting Away with It. Finally, to forgive is not the same as saying that “it doesn’t matter.” Those who have wronged will still have to pay and bear the consequences of their actions—legally, socially or personally. A wrongdoer can be truly and completely forgiven, yet prosecuted. Forgiveness complements justice; it does not replace it.

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B. Forgiveness in Scripture

The Old Testament deals, in the main, with divine forgiveness. From the very beginning of salvation history God has been active in forgiveness. The promise of Genesis 3:15, Noah’s ark (Genesis 6:13-9:17), the subsequent covenant (Genesis 8:21-22) and the story of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-25:10) are all early examples of God’s determination to save and restore people into fellowship. There is no single word for forgiveness in Hebrew, but rather a series of images. There is the image of paying a ransom price (kipper: Exodus 30:15-16; Numbers 5:8; Isaiah 6:7); taking away (na’: Exodus 32:32; Job 7:21; Micah 7:18); pardoning (selach; 1 Kings 8:30-39; Jeremiah 31:34); and even passing over, overlooking (’abar; Micah 7:18; Proverbs 19:11). These are powerful and significant images. Initially, through the old covenant provisions of the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-22) and the general sacrificial system, God illustrated his willingness to overlook the sins of his people because they had been paid for, borne away, by someone or something else. God therefore has no call to remember their sins, for they are irrelevant (Psalm 25:7; Psalm 103:9-12; Micah 7:19). Isaiah uses identical language as he looks forward to the ultimate scapegoat sacrifice who will bear the sins of the people (Isaiah 53:8-12).

The New Testament makes it clear that this was Christ and that his sacrifice was sufficient for all time (Acts 8:32-33; Hebrews 10:10). It is in the light of Christ’s sacrifice and our hope of eternal reconciliation with God that the New Testament writers employed the image of letting go (aphiēmi) to describe divine and therefore Christian forgiveness. As God has taken leave of our sins in Christ, so too we should let go of the sins committed against us (Matthew 6:12; Ephes. 4:29-32). This is brought out most powerfully by the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35), where an unforgiving spirit is portrayed starkly as nothing less than blasphemous. One of the reasons we find forgiveness so difficult is that we are offended by God’s love, which can forgive those who have so spitefully abused us. We are like the elder brother (Luke 15:28-32), resenting the grace of God and living unfree lives, bound by our own self-righteousness and prejudice. The key in the journey of forgiveness is to understand how much we ourselves have been forgiven by God. Like the woman in Luke 7:36-50, those who
truly understand the depth of God’s forgiveness are driven to love, not judgment (see also Matthew 7:1-5).

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C. Seeing Ourselves on the Journey: Forgiving Oneself

Forgiveness is usually regarded as an interpersonal affair, but there is an intrapersonal aspect which is often overlooked. If we need to forgive ourselves and are unwilling to do so, this will hinder our forgiving others. Often the greater the sin, the less we are able to forgive ourselves: “Sin and self-forgiveness assume inverse proportions in our minds” (Stanley, p. 141). This is fundamentally a theological problem. We have not really understood or experienced the forgiveness of God, which is free, unmerited and unconditional. By refusing to forgive ourselves we betray a self-centered obsession that undermines the completeness of Christ’s atoning work. We claim we don’t forgive ourselves because we are unworthy, yet that is the whole point of the cross. Christ died because we were unworthy. We claim we have disappointed God, yet in reality it is only ourselves we have disappointed. How can God be disappointed when he knows us exactly as we are and yet forgives us?

Sometimes, as an alternative to self-forgiveness, we will engage in self-deprivation or penance in the mistaken belief that we know something bad about our sin that God does not already know. Alternatively, we will become compulsive activists, burying ourselves in good works in order to impress God and thereby “atone” for our wrongdoing.

The two main pillars of the early church had to learn what it was to forgive themselves. Peter, because of his denial of Christ, had possibly counted himself no longer a disciple (Mark 16:7; John 21:15-17), and Paul had to come to terms with atrocities he had personally inflicted on Christians before his conversion (1 Cor. 15:9-10). Once we have grasped the extent and manner of God’s forgiveness, we are without excuse in withholding forgiveness from anyone, and that includes ourselves.

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D. The Practice of Forgiveness (what to do along the Journey)

David Augsburger (1981) has highlighted the five stages of forgiveness: realizing the wrongdoing, reaffirming love, releasing the past, renewing repentance and rediscovering community. Smedes (1984) approaches the subject from the “inside,” highlighting the four possible experiences of the forgiver: hurt, hatred, healing and reconciliation. Hurts must be differentiated from forgettable oversights, insensitivities or mere disappointments. Hurts penetrate deeply and involve betrayal, disloyalty or personal injury. “Hatred is a compliment” (Smedes, p. 24), for we are not treating the perpetrator as robotic or irredeemable but as a free, rational person who has behaved unacceptably. They should have known better. It is on the unacceptability of their actions that our hatred is focused. These, however, are stages we must pass through. We cannot hate forever, or it will consume us and forgiveness will never take place. Alongside these two approaches to the practice of forgiveness, I offer a third that deals with past, present and future.
1. **A new attitude.** This concerns how we deal with the past. We make a choice to deal with festering hurts and to embark on the journey of forgiveness. We decide neither to perpetuate the hostility nor to suppress the hurts and allow them to eat away inside us. A refusal to forgive binds us eternally to the past. Our personality becomes frozen, we cannot move on from the moment of the offense, and we are incapable of living fully in the present. As injured people, we too require soul surgery. In some cases we need to admit our contribution to the breakdown in relationship. In other cases where we have been passive victims, we need to confess that we have allowed the event to hinder our spiritual growth and that righteous anger has become self-righteous bitterness. By choosing the way of forgiveness we are prepared to change our attitude toward those who have hurt us. We are prepared to forget and to acknowledge that someday we may be able to love them. Loving Christians, if they are to model God, must keep no record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5; Psalm 103:3-4).

2. **A new perspective.** This concerns how we cope with the present. We begin by viewing people differently. We attempt to get outside the hurts and rages of our present brokenness and see our enemy as God sees them (2 Cor. 5:16). The temptation will be to view those who have injured us in a reductionist manner, seeing them totally in terms of their sin, when in reality they are normal people, a mixture of the image of God and sinful humanity. We are blinded to their true identity because of the sin they have committed against us. Real forgiveness cannot take place unless we are prepared to see them as they truly are, and not as the demons we have perceived them to be in the midst of our hurt and anguish. A test of whether our anger is righteous and directed against the sin, or unrighteous and directed against the sinner, would be to ask ourselves whether we would find greater pleasure in the conversion or restoration of the sinner than in their destruction (ECONI, p. 10). Or can we imagine a situation where we would actively wish the person well (Smedes, 1984, p. 29)? This takes time, but a new perspective will enable us to work to that end.

3. **A new determination.** This deals with the possibilities of the future. Forgiveness opens the door to new possibilities in relationship which would have been unthought of at the start of the journey. That is why forgiveness must be unconditional. If we lay down conditions, it means we are choosing the future and seeking to manipulate the other person into satisfying our unrealistic demands. If our demands are truly just, then the God of justice will see to it that they are met in the context of dialogue, growing trust and reconciliation. Reconciliation is not a return to old ways, a turning of the clock back to the exact moment of the offense. This is a new world. Circumstances have changed: the injured body may be irreparably damaged, or the marriage may be irretrievably lost because of new relationships. “We make our new beginnings, not where we used to be or where we wish we could be, but only where we are and with what we have at hand” (Smedes, p. 37). We can only forgive today with today’s circumstances. “Forgiveness is letting what was, be gone; what will be, come; what is now, be” (Augsburger, 1981, p. 52).

 Forgiveness naturally involves risks. We open the door not only to a bright new future but to the possibility of repeated injury. But where there is no risk, there is no need of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not deal with contracts and guarantees but with covenant and trust. That is God’s way with us, and it must be our way with each other (Deut. 4:30-31).

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E. The Power of Forgiveness

No one can force us to forgive, and all the pressures of personality and culture are against it. Yet in spite of our culture’s preoccupation with strength, machismo and getting even, to choose to forgive is to exhibit the greatest strength of all. Self-deception, avoidance and grudge-bearing are all easier options than loving confrontation, realism and forgiveness. When we forgive we are acting as free persons and treating others as such. The strength of the love that inspires forgiveness derives from respect and commitment. We see the other person as worth the respect and are prepared for the energy, time and disappointment that may come. “Hate gives a temporary power for surviving today’s brutality and it has a short-term power to move us into tough action for tomorrow. But hate lacks the staying-power to create a fairer future beyond revenge. For long distance, forgiving is stronger than hate” (Smedes, 1984, p. 146). No greater example is needed than that of Christ himself, the embodiment of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of hope, forgiveness and reconciliation. It was he who, as he bore the physical agony of crucifixion, the emotional torture of the taunts and insults of passersby, and the spiritual weight of the sins of the world, found the strength to say: “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

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II. FORGIVENESS (the Biblical and Practical ideals)

GOD'S FORGIVENESS

How can we experience God's forgiveness?

BIBLE READING: Psalm 51:1-19
KEY BIBLE VERSE: For I recognize my shameful deeds—they haunt me day and night. (Psalm 51:3)

Experiencing God's forgiveness comes through confession and repentance. This psalm was David's written confession to God after a particularly sinful episode in his life. David was truly sorry for his adultery with Bathsheba and for murdering her husband to cover it up. He knew that his actions had hurt many people. But because David repented of those sins, God mercifully forgave him. No sin is too great to be forgiven! Do you feel that you could never come close to God because you have done something terrible? God can and will forgive you of any sin. While God forgives us, however, he does not always erase the natural consequences of our sin—David's life and family were never the same as a result of what he had done (see 2 Samuel 12:1-23).

BIBLE READING: John 20:19-31
KEY BIBLE VERSE: If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are unforgiven. (John 20:23)

We can be confident that our sins have been forgiven in Christ. Jesus was giving the disciples their Spirit-powered and Spirit-guided mission—to preach the Good News about Jesus so people's sins might be forgiven. The disciples did not have the power to forgive sins (only God

2 The Handbook of Bible Applications (here through p. 8).
can forgive sins), but Jesus gave them the privilege of telling new believers that their sins have been forgiven because they have accepted Jesus' message. All believers have this same privilege. We can announce the forgiveness of sin with certainty when we find repentance and faith.

BIBLE READING: John 13:31-38
KEY BIBLE VERSE: Now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. (John 13:34)

God consistently forgives us each time we ask in repentance. John describes these few moments in clear detail. We can see that Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. He knew about Judas and about Peter, but he did not change the course of events, nor did he stop loving them. In the same way, Jesus knows exactly what you will do to hurt him. Yet he still loves you unconditionally and will forgive you whenever you ask for it. Judas couldn't understand this, and his life ended tragically. Peter understood, and despite his shortcomings, his life ended triumphantly because he never let go of his faith in the one who loved him.

BIBLE READING: 1 John 1:1-10
KEY BIBLE VERSE: If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. (1 John 1:9)

Forgiveness is complete even when confession isn't. Confession is supposed to free us to enjoy fellowship with Christ. It should ease our consciences and lighten our cares. But some Christians do not understand how it works. They feel so guilty that they confess the same sins over and over; then they wonder if they might have forgotten something. Other Christians believe that God forgives them when they confess, but if they died with unconfessed sins, they would be forever lost. These Christians do not understand that God wants to forgive us. He allowed his beloved Son to die just so he could pardon us. When we come to Christ, he forgives all the sins we have committed or will ever commit. We don't need to confess the sins of the past all over again, and we don't need to fear that God will reject us if we don't keep our slate perfectly clean. Of course, we should continue to confess our sins, but not because failure to do so will make us lose our salvation. Our relationship with Christ is secure. Instead, we should confess our sins so that we can enjoy maximum fellowship and joy with him.

Honest confession includes turning away from sin. True confession also involves a commitment not to continue in sin. We wouldn't be genuinely confessing our sins to God if we planned to commit them again and just wanted temporary forgiveness. We should also pray for strength to defeat temptation the next time we face it.

Confession reestablishes relationship with God. If God has forgiven us for our sins because of Christ's death, why must we confess our sins? In admitting our sins and receiving Christ's cleansing, we are: (1) agreeing with God that our sin truly was sin and that we are willing to turn from it, (2) ensuring that we don't conceal our sins from him and consequently, from ourself, and (3) recognizing our tendency to sin and relying on his power to overcome it.

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6
HUMAN FORGIVENESS—A Personal Journey towards Renewal, Mercy and Restoration

Why should we forgive one another and how can we do it?

BIBLE READING: **Genesis 45:1-28**

KEY BIBLE VERSE: *Don’t be angry with yourselves that you did this to me, for God did it. He sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives.* *(Genesis 45:5)*

**Joseph is a model of genuine forgiveness.** Joseph was rejected, kidnapped, enslaved, and imprisoned. Although his brothers had been unfaithful to him, he graciously forgave them and shared his prosperity. Joseph demonstrated how God forgives us and showers us with goodness even though we have sinned against him. The same forgiveness and blessings are ours if we ask for them.

BIBLE READING: **Romans 12:1-21**

KEY BIBLE VERSE: *Don’t let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.* *(Romans 12:21)*

**Forgiveness is a mark of the Christian life.** Verses 17-21 summarize the real core of Christian living. If we love someone the way Christ loves us, we will be willing to forgive. If we have experienced God's grace, we will want to pass it on to others. And remember, grace is *undeserved* favor. By giving an enemy a drink, we're not excusing his misdeeds. We're recognizing him, forgiving him, and loving him in spite of his sins—just as Christ did for us.

**Forgiveness is contrary to the pattern of the world.** In this day of constant lawsuits and incessant demands for legal rights, Paul's command sounds almost impossible. When someone hurts you deeply, instead of giving him what he deserves, Paul says to befriend him. Why does Paul tell us to forgive our enemies? (1) Forgiveness may break a cycle of retaliation and lead to mutual reconciliation. (2) It may make the enemy feel ashamed and change his or her ways. (3) By contrast, returning evil for evil hurts you just as much as it hurts your enemy. Even if your enemy never repents, forgiving him or her will free you of a heavy load of bitterness.

**Forgiveness is an act of the will.** Forgiveness involves both attitudes and actions. If you find it difficult to *feel* forgiving of those who have hurt you, try responding with kind actions. If appropriate, tell such people that you would like to heal your relationships. Give them a helping hand. Send them a gift. Smile at them. Many times you will discover that right actions lead to right feelings.

BIBLE READING: **Matthew 6:5-15**

KEY BIBLE VERSE: *If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.* *(Matthew 6:14-15)*

**If we expect to be forgiven, we need to practice forgiveness.** Jesus gives a startling warning about forgiveness: if we refuse to forgive others, God will also refuse to forgive us. Why? Because when we don't forgive others, we are denying our common ground as sinners in need of God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness of sin is not the direct result of our forgiving others, but it is
based on our realizing what forgiveness means (see Ephes. 4:32). It is easy to ask God for forgiveness, but difficult to grant it to others. Whenever we ask God to forgive us for sin, we should ask ourselves, Have I forgiven the people who have wronged me?

BIBLE READING: Matthew 18:21-35

KEY BIBLE VERSE: Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" (Matthew 18:21)

**Real forgiveness does not keep track of offenses.** The rabbis taught that people should forgive those who offend them—but only three times. Peter, trying to be especially generous, asked Jesus if seven (the "perfect" number) was enough times to forgive someone. But Jesus answered, "Seventy times seven," meaning that we shouldn't even keep track of how many times we forgive someone. We should always forgive those who are truly repentant, no matter how many times they ask.

**Real forgiveness follows God's pattern.** Because God has forgiven all our sins, we should not withhold forgiveness from others. Realizing how completely Christ has forgiven us should produce a free and generous attitude of forgiveness toward others. When we don't forgive others, we are setting ourselves outside and above Christ's law of love.

—Handbook of Bible Application

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**III. FORGIVENESS (practical points to consider)**

- demonstrates strength not weakness. 1 Kings 1:52-53
- conditions for forgiveness 2 Chronicles 7:14
- no sin too great for God to forgive.2 Chronicles 33:12-13; Psalm 51:1-7; Acts 2:14;
- means forgetting the wrong committed against you.Psalm 103:12
- first step in restoring relationship. Matthew 5:22-25
- must lead to change of heart.John 8:11
- don't resent God's forgiveness of others.Luke 15:32
- Christ exchanges his forgiveness for our sin.Romans 4:25
- why we should forgive our enemies.Romans 12:19-21
- involves God forgetting that we ever sinned.Hebrews 10:17
- God wants to forgive us. 1 John 1:9

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*Phillips’ Treasury of Humorous Quotations*

Always forgive your enemies—nothing annoys them so much. —Oscar Wilde

Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names. —John F. Kennedy

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3 Life Application Bible Index