

FORGIVENESS

It is essential in dealing with bitterness that we have a healthy theology of forgiveness.

1. FORGIVENESS IS NOT:

- *Forgetting about the incident.* People who try to forget find they can't. When God says that He "remembers our sin no more" (Heb. 10:17), it doesn't mean that He's forgotten. God is omniscient; there is no amnesia with God. What God is saying is that He agrees not to bring that particular sin up again. Forgetting may be the result of forgiveness, but it is never the means of forgiveness.
- *Saying it's okay.* When Joseph's brothers stood before him and asked for forgiveness, Joseph didn't say, "Hey, no big deal. Boys will be boys; good trick you played on me, throwing me in the pit." No, he said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good!"
- *Natural.* It goes against our concept of justice. What we usually really want is two eyes for an eye or two teeth for a tooth. At best we want an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. God, however, says that vengeance is His and His alone. He alone is the only one who can administer justice in a truly just way.
- *Letting them off the hook.* The problem is that we are still bound to them. We are letting them off our hook, but they are never off God's.
- *About trust.* All too often forgiveness is equated with trust. Trust is easily broken, but very difficult, sometimes impossible to fully restore. For example, if I share something confidential and that person tells everyone, I can forgive them, but I may not confide in them again.

2. FORGIVENESS IS:

- *Agreeing to live with the consequences of that person's sin.* We live with the consequences of what someone has done to us, whether we want to or not. The real question is – Are we going to live with bitterness or with the freedom that forgiveness brings?
- *For your sake, not theirs.* The issue of forgiveness isn't really between you and the offender; it's between you and God.
- *A choice.* There is nothing that we can do to make someone forgive another person. This is one of the most frustrating aspects of forgiveness. Often we deal with the issue of forgiveness with a person, only to have it end by them saying, "I can't forgive them." At that point, all we can do is pray for them.

Most importantly, when we don't forgive, essentially we're saying that we are better than Jesus Christ is. We are saying, "Jesus was able to die on the cross and forgive them, but I cannot."

Tom White, with Mantle of Praise Ministries, gives a good overview of the process of forgiveness.

- A. Make the commitment to forgive. It's something you have to do. Don't say, "Help me forgive" – God's helping you. Don't say "I want to forgive" – it's your responsibility.
- B. Ask God to reveal to you the unresolved hurt in any relationship. Focus first on the primary ones – family, former parents, close friends, and teachers. Other important people may surface. Write each incident down as it comes to mind.
- C. Remember that these incidents will trigger the emotions that accompany them. Let God bring the pain to the surface so He can deal with it.
- D. Speak forgiveness. Be specific. "Lord, I forgive (name) for (specifically identify all the offenses and painful memories). I was (so afraid, angry, ashamed, etc.), but I forgive (name). I release you from the debt you owe me; I will not try to make you pay anymore."
- E. Confess and claim forgiveness for your own sin, because of the way you reacted or felt.
- F. Ask God to fill your heart and mind with love.
- G. You may want to tell the person that you've forgiven them. If possible, seek to restore the relationship. However, please be sensitive in this area. There are times when, because of the sin committed, the relationship needs to remain separated.
- H. If the hurt remains or the memory returns, continue to offer it to God for His healing.

SUGGESTED READING

"Bitterness: The Hidden Time Bomb." Matt Neigh, *Interact*, (Dec. 1997) pp. 1-7
"Thoughts on Forgiveness." Ken Williams, Wycliffe Counseling Department
Reclaiming Surrendered Ground. Jim Logan, Moody Press, 1995. Chapter 4.
Make Anger Your Ally. Neil Clark Warren, Focus on the Family, 1990.

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