

MYTHS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

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Myths About Forgiveness

Forgiveness, first of all, comes from God and then flows to everybody else. But we have developed myths about forgiveness which will be examined and measured against God's standard, the Bible.

Myth 1 - God could never forgive me.

Most people tend to gravitate to one or two extremes. Some people don't think they need any forgiveness at all. They are like the Pharisee in Luke 18 who said, "Lord, I thank you that I'm not as other men are." He was praying God, aren't you glad that I'm on your side? But I've found that far more people gravitate to the other extreme. They look at themselves and see their long list of sins. They contrast that with the realization of God's ideal will for their lives and they conclude: God can never forgive me. God could never accept me. I'm not worthy of him.

The truth about God's forgiveness can be found all the way through the Bible, but there are two passages that really bring it to light.

- Romans 5:6-8 - "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Oh, that's a mouthful.
- Luke 15:11-32 - The Parable of the Prodigal Son. This shows that the father (God) desires all His children, the prodigal son, (us) to repent and return.

a) God forgives because it's his nature to forgive.

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) What prompted God to do it? One thing is his loving nature. The aged apostle John said simply, "Our God is love." 1 John 4:8

The parable that we called the prodigal son is really inappropriately named. It would be more aptly called the "Parable of the Loving Father."

The whole message of the parable is not on the prodigalness of the son, it's on the magnificent love of the father. The Bible makes clear in these three passages and in many other places that there's nothing about us that makes us worthy for God to forgive. There is nothing that we can do for him that makes him any more complete by our being on his side. The only reason God forgives is because it's his nature to forgive. He is the perfect loving Father and we praise him for that.

b) God always stands ready to forgive us.

Think about the parable of the prodigal son. You who are parents can identify with this. Let me ask you a question. The boy took his inheritance, walked away and squandered it. We don't know how long the inheritance lasted, weeks, months, maybe even years. Finally, he comes walking back, wretched and hungry. When did the prodigal son's father want that relationship to be restored and have that forgiveness ready to give to him? The minute he walked away and every minute that boy was gone. As the young man was coming home, the father saw him while he was still a long way off and he ran to him. Throughout that whole saga, his love never wavered and the forgiveness was always there for the

taking. But the boy didn't realize that because he had bought into the myth, the lie that when he walked away, his father could never forgive him. It's over. The relationship is shot forever.

If you remember the story, he got so hungry that he would have even eaten with the pigs that he was feeding. When that hunger pain hit him, he finally came up with a plan. He said, "I think I'll just go home and beg to be a slave. Do you know why he thought of becoming his father's slave? It was because he believed the lie the devil wanted him to believe. You can never go back, and if you do, you'll be a slave. That's the same lie the devil wants us to believe about the heavenly Father today. That our God is up in heaven with his back to us and with his nose in the air and arms folded saying, "You can beg and you can plead and I want you to jump through some hoops, we'll see how worthy you are." Wrong! Wrong! God's forgiven us. Would you see Romans 5:8 again? He demonstrated his love to us in that while we were yet sinners, he (thousands of years ago) let the perfect one die on the cross in our place.

c) Forgiveness is realized only when it's accepted.

When did the boy's father forgive him? He was ready and willing to forgive him the minute he walked out, but the boy was lost until he returned home and cast himself on the mercy of his father. All that time, his dad was ready and waiting to put a robe on his back, a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet and food in his belly. But all that time, the boy was penniless, starving, and lost, and you may be, too, right now.

You say, "God can never forgive me." MYTH!! The truth is he, has always wanted to but you will live and die wretched, miserable, and lost

until you turn around and head to that cross for forgiveness that is waiting for you. That is the perfect and only source of forgiveness.

God's forgiveness is waiting for every human being if one will only accept it. That's the best news a human being could hear if he has never

heard it. The great news is, our God said if you want forgiveness, you must believe that Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross as a sacrifice for your sins, be willing to confess that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and the Lord or master of your life. Don't hide it, believe it enough that you'll tell somebody. Love Jesus, then be united with him in His death, through immersion in a grave of water, baptism, calling on his name to save you, and being resurrected by God to walk in a newness of life as a new spiritual being.

Myth 2 - I can never forgive _____.

Insert the name of someone you think you could never forgive. But I dare say that for most of us, there is somebody in our life whom we find extremely difficult to forgive.

Maybe someone did something to us or said something about us. They may not have done or said what you thought they should have done or said. The reason for your resentment may be severe, it may be minor, it may have happened a long, time ago, it may be very recent, it may be a repeated series of things or a one-time thing. But the truth is, as you look into your heart, it's making you miserable. You're bitter against them and you would like to bring punishment on them, but your bitterness is keeping you in prison in a cell of anger, disillusionment, and agitation.

Forgiveness is the key to unlocking you from that cell, and it is right there in your pocket. You've got the key right here. What keeps us from reaching in and pulling out that key is the myths that we've come to buy into about forgiveness.

Myth 3 - Time heals all wounds.

Have you ever heard that? Time heals all wounds. That's a lie. That old cliché is too often misused and inaccurate. In our fear of facing the issue, we assume that if we'll just ignore or put off the hurt and the resentment that we feel from someone's offense, it will just go away. No, the passing of time heals unforgiven transgressions like the passing of time

will cure an inadequately laid foundation for a house. Or, the passing of time will cure an infection in your body. The passing of time only makes the condition worse. The myth is time heals all wounds - The truth is time aids healing only when the right choices are made.

Myth 4 - I've got to deny my hurt in order to forgive.

A lot of folks don't forgive because they were deeply hurt. They think if I forgive, I've got to act like it didn't hurt me. I've got to just put that smile on my face and go through there and say, "Oh, I forgive you. No, that didn't bother me at all." That's not true. The fact is, the denial of hurt is a sign of immaturity. A mature Christian who has been offended and who wants to forgive looks at a situation honestly and says, "You know, I was hurt by that, hurt badly. But by God's power, I want to work through that and I want to get over that." That honesty is the key to getting us on the road to recovery in this issue of forgiveness. Denying the hurt or denying it did not occur only hampers the forgiveness process. Now be careful, don't dwell on it, but nurture it. Don't let it fester; get over it. Don't deny it.

Myth 5 - Forgiveness and trust are the same thing.

Some people think that if they forgive a person, somehow they've got to open up their whole lives and be totally trusting of that person. While the transgressors says, "Oh, they said they forgave me, but they don't trust me now." But forgiveness and trust are not the same thing.

Here's the basic difference. Forgiveness is freely given. Trust is earned. Jesus taught us to forgive somebody who offends us 70 times 7 times. We must do that even over the same offense. Do you think you could do it on the same offense? 70 times 7 times? But trust in a relationship has to be built back very slowly. Every succeeding transgression or offense makes that trust just that much harder to deal with.

C. S. Lewis wrote this about forgiveness. He said, "This forgiveness doesn't mean that you necessarily believe the next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill any trace of resentment in your heart, every wish to humiliate, hurt or pay that person back." That's forgiveness.

Myth 6 - To forgive is to forget.

Someone says, "They've never really forgiven me because they've never forgotten about it." We are human beings and something great pain makes an indelible mark on our memory, and it doesn't just instantly go poof and disappear when we want it to. Jeremiah 31, God says, "I will forgive their iniquity and their sin, I will remember no more." I cannot fully relate to that. It's not because God is suddenly getting senile or has a touch of Alzheimer's, God says I promise to never bring it up again. We can make a conscious choice to put that thing behind us and not dwell on it. Don't let it keep popping up and hampering our relationships. The more mature a person is, the better he can do it.

The Truth About Forgiving

1. Remember how God has forgiven you.

That is the absolute key and that's why this lesson started with that assertion. If we fully embrace this reality, we would have precious little problem forgiving other people.

Paul said in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ, God forgave you." A person who has a hard time forgiving others, will, without exception, be a person who has an inadequate sense of the grace of God.

In Matthew 18, Jesus told a parable about a servant who served a king and somehow accumulated a debt to him of 10,000 talents. an enormous sum by any standard in any country. That servant had no way of repaying the king. He started pleading with the king for his family's sake. The merciful king forgave him, just forget it. Can you believe that?

Then something more incredible happened. That servant who had been forgiven such a huge debt went and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii, extremely small compared to the amount he had forgiven by his master. He demands immediate payment refusing his pleas for mercy and put him in prison until he can pay. That first servant did not have a clue about what had been done for him. Here's the clincher, God expects us to do for others what he has already done for us. That will only happen when we realize what he's done for us.

2. Realize that forgiveness is a choice, not an emotion.

Many people say I can't bring myself to forgive, or I can't bring myself to ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a choice, not an emotion. Emotions are all around this business of forgiveness. Sometimes we are called upon to forgive when every emotion is fighting against it. Here's the point, it's like everything else in life, when you wake up very early after a hard and difficult day your emotions don't want to get out of bed. But are you? You've got to. Once you do, your emotions begin to get in line. You have a choice about forgiveness. When somebody offends you, you can rehearse it or you can release it. You can keep rehearsing it over and over again and it will fester, or you can release it. It's a choice, not an emotion.

3. Understand the consequences of an unforgiving heart.

Remember how the first servant treated the second servant. When the king heard about it he "called the first servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all that he owed.'" When the king found out the way he treated the other man, he said, my forgiveness was there for you, you claimed it.

Somebody says is that torture that's talked about in the parable symbolic of hell? Yes, it is, but more than that, it's symbolic of hell on earth. Because when resentment infects you, it tortures you. It locks you up in prison to get at the other person and it kills you. Is there a bitter memory-robbing you of happiness? Is there a hurt that's hurting you? Let it go. It's only tormenting you. You may be holding it against the other person and they might not even know it. It may not be hurting them at all, and it's killing you. This is the only situation I can recall of our God pulling back the offer of forgiveness. He says if you blatantly refuse to forgive other people, you've cut the bridge to me. Folks, let's don't burn the bridge that you and I've got to cross to get to heaven. That's too important of a bridge; it's the bridge called forgiveness.

The Lord taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Do you really want to pray Lord, forgive me in exactly the same way that I'm forgiving other people? "Forgive us our trespasses just as we are forgiving the trespasses against us." Now that's a thought.