

## When Forgiving is Hard

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It's that feeling deep in your gut that is reaching for peace, aching for clarity and longing for freedom from the pains that hold you captive. It's that still small voice beckoning for you to simply "release it and move forward." It's the one thing that you know is needed in order to make all of this happen, but your feet feel dug in and firmly planted, resisting what your heart knows is imperative for forward movement. It's what we feel can be impossible but God allows to make possible. It's forgiveness.

I know that pain can be inevitable in this life, but knowing this truth certainly doesn't seem to ease the ache when someone has hurt us or sins against us personally. We tend to feel justified in this pain, and self-righteous in our hurt, and we tend to want to hang out here in this pain for quite some time. We can often find ourselves guilty of even turning towards others to share about what has transpired and seeking out the validation of others to tell us how we should and ought to be upset or angry with them for what has happened or for what they did to us. Then we receive this validation and dig our feet even deeper into the soils of resentment and unforgiveness.

But what usually happens after staying in this place for quite some time? Often, we can quickly see these seeds of unforgiveness giving way in our lives and blooming into larger plants of bitterness, anger, impatience and frustration. We become short-tempered, frustrated at the world around us, and dissatisfied with the other relationships in our lives. We may even become isolated, depressed and unsure of why we just can't seem to find joy and pleasure in the places of our lives where we once felt we blossomed.

It's here where I usually find myself needing to then examine my own heart and ask myself what seems to be keeping me feeling stuck. When there is unforgiveness that I am harvesting in my own heart, it has then become evident that this is holding me captive more so than it may be hurting the one that I see as the real "culprit" or the true "offender." So how do we move from this begrudgingly difficult place of unforgiveness and move towards opening our hearts into learning how to forgive?

Before we can truly consider this, I believe it is almost important to first discern our readiness to explore this great task of forgiving someone that has sinned against us. It is very important that we do not fall into the common denial-based forgiveness that we often see where we are finding it easier to "forgive and forget" without truly first acknowledging the hurt and the pain that has been caused. Too often, exploring the hurt itself can become too painful a task to pursue and so sometimes we can be guilty of avoiding it altogether and simply thinking it would be easiest to move on with a surface-level type of apology and offer of forgiveness. I would encourage you to reconsider, and to see the importance of not falling privy to this type of trap that pulls us away from the powerful and transformative power that comes through authentic forgiveness.

It is also important to consider the offender and the hurt itself before determining if we are

capable of being in a position where forgiveness can take place. If re-approaching the offender or engaging with them in a conversation about forgiveness places us in a situation where our health and safety are at risk, then this type of conversation or engagement should never take place and would certainly not be recommended.

Through a lot of difficult time spent in self-reflection and with some tedious heart work, I have come to find that these steps have helped in shaping me towards opening myself to the beginning work of learning how to forgive:

### **1. Redefining in our hearts and in our minds what it means to truly forgive.**

I remember how I used to view forgiveness, and telling myself how “I can’t simply just let it go and pretend that it never happened.” Ask yourself, how do you define forgiveness? What does it mean for you? The Bible teaches us that we ought to forgive our brother, not just once, but again and again when he has offended us. (Matthew 18:21-22) Do we think that the offense then becomes insignificant if forgiveness is then offered? Absolutely not. We can forgive our brother (friend, family member, coworker, etc.) without excusing their behavior or what they did, but rather saying that we are no longer holding onto this sin and counting it against them.

### **2. Acknowledging our own sinful nature and that we are all fallen.**

Oftentimes, I find myself needing to check my expectations when I am quick to become discouraged and disappointed in how someone has behaved or treated me. I am quick to think “they should have known better” or “why would they do such a thing?” It is then that I realize my expectations are not necessarily based on truth or reality, and rather need to be adjusted to show that sometimes people are just that... people! We make mistakes, we are flawed, and we can all be selfish and inconsiderate sometimes. If God is able to look at me and see all of this in me too, and love me anyway, then isn’t this exactly how He calls me to be too? Aren’t I supposed to emulate Him in the way He loves me, by loving others (or trying to) just the way He loves us? I feel like God must have known that this would be a tough spot for us especially when we can see Scripture encouraging us to “be patient with one another and making allowances for each others faults, because of your love.” (Ephesians 4:2) We sure aren’t perfect, but thank God that we don’t have to be in order to love and be loved!

### **3. Remember the Gospel message, and make the decision to show love.**

The message of the Gospel is the power behind our salvation and our Almighty God that looks at us with His great love and intentionally chooses to love us beyond what we could ever imagine... when we couldn’t be any less deserving of this! This same love is what God tells us should flow through us and be the reflection in all that we do to point it all back to Him. All of our sins, all of our flaws, all of the mess that we are... this was all transferred over to Jesus and all that Jesus was and is has been transferred over to us. What great love is this! I think when we are able to allow the truths of the Gospel message to seep into our souls and soak into our hearts, we are able to open our hearts towards what forgiveness requires of us and what it could do for us.

When we can move towards forgiveness, we are able to experience a freedom that breaks us from the chains of hurt, pain, resentment and bitterness. Doing this can also allow us to experience a peace that surpasses understanding and helps us to be a real reflection of how God calls us to live. As one of my favorite authors Max Lucado put it, "forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realizing you were the prisoner."

May you allow God to speak into your lives to allow this kind of true peace and freedom.  
God bless!