

Forgiving One Another

by Jim Davis

The theme of forgiveness parades its way through the literature of almost every culture and every period of time in human history. We recognize forgiveness as a beneficial virtue. Books are written and movies produced extolling it. Forgiveness demonstrates the higher aspects of the nature of man who was created in the image of God. Its beauty strums the cord of the human heart producing harmonious relationships between God, family and neighbors. It stirs us to the hope that loneliness may be banished and we may actually experience the joy and satisfaction of proper relationships in life. The heart deeply longs for the benefits forgiveness can bring.

Forgiveness means to show yourself gracious, kind, or benevolent to someone without condition. It has to do with dismissing a wrong that has been committed against you. You may release someone from a debt they owe to you or grant remission for sinful or evil conduct that caused personal harm. When you forgive one another you give up your right to retaliate for the offense. It does not mean that you overlook a person's faults. Forgiveness is only necessary because you hold a person accountable for their behavior. The ultimate goal is change of behavior toward one another. Although you may never experience this in your relationship you are encouraged to look past the offense to the potential.

God's plan of forgiveness involves the complete removal of the cause of offense between God and men. Faith in Jesus' work on the cross procures our pardon from all sin. But God's work does not stop there. Pardon brings reconciliation to God. Hope for transformation is only possible when our relationship to God is restored. Colossians 3:10 says, that our new self is being renewed to a true knowledge, according to the One who created us. He works to transform us renewing our minds until we are conformed to the image of His Son Jesus. When God forgives he looks past the offense; he looks past the sinful nature which caused the sin to the potential restoration and renewal of the person.

If a person slaps you it becomes necessary for you to forgive them. Once forgiveness takes place there is the possibility of reconciliation and change of behavior. Forgiveness is the personal sacrifice that you make in order to remove the offense that hinders the restoration of your relationship. As God looked past your sin he requires that you do the same to others.

Forgiveness is commanded in the Bible. It is not an option for anyone who wants to experience peace in life. It is God's prescribed method for healing relationships. The exercise of this characteristic is to be habitual and unlimited. When I was little we were instructed by our parents to try to avoid a fight if anyone started to pick on us. We were told to try to avoid the fight three times and then we were instructed to declare war or go to fist city. When Peter asked Jesus how often we should forgive one another he followed the question with a suggestion of seven times. That was gracious in our neighborhood. The rabbis in Peter's day also taught that you should forgive a person up to three times. But Jesus raised it to seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22).

I have a friend who was raised in a close family. His father and uncle were partners in a profitable business. These blood brothers did everything together including raising their families. My friend said that they were all so close that there was no distinction between

sibling and cousin. There was no distinction until one night in drunken conflict tempers flared and shots were fired and his father's life was taken. Once so closely associated that the only life the two families knew was life together, now, in one moment of time, they became totally estranged to one another.

A number of years later my friend came to experience the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. His lifestyle underwent some radical changes and he departed the bar room for the local church. One evening he was leading music in a small church in an obscure place far from home when a familiar looking person entered the church and sat down on the back row. It was his estranged cousin.

The forgiveness of Christ transcends the barriers and pushes down the walls that divide. To release someone from the wrong that he has done to you is the only option. The alternative to forgiveness places one in an endless cycle of bitterness and resentment that brings about self-destruction. Bitterness is no option at all. It enslaves a person to a world of isolation and loneliness.

Here are a few tips to consider. Remember that forgiveness is an act of the will. You do not have to like a person to forgive them and you should not expect your emotions to respond immediately. But do not allow your emotions to control you. Do not allow just anger to become sin. Do not allow yourself to fall into the snare of bitterness.

When you forgive do not bring it up again. Send it away. The Psalmist declared, "He has not dealt with us after our sin, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:10-12). What a picture of forgiveness! There is a story of a man on his deathbed growing concerned over the hatred he harbored for a former friend. He eventually called for the man that he had a disagreement with years before and they shook hands. But as the old friend departed the sick man raised up off the bed and declared, "If I get well the quarrel still stands."

God does not forget what we have done to Him and neither will you forget what someone has done to you. But you can send it away as far as the east is from the west. When the memory rises up you put it down. Do not harbor it in your heart and do not remind yourself of the injustice of it. This would include resisting the desire to tell others. Jesus taught that if a brother sins against you, you are to go and reprove him in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother (Matthew 18:15). Take care of the dirty things in private and do not publish your faults.

The benefits of forgiveness are well worth the cost. Real change takes place through the reconciliation that comes when we forgive one another. When the alternative is bitterness choosing to forgive becomes the only reasonable course of action. May Almighty God grant you the grace to forgive.