



FORGIVENESS: A LIVING FOUNDATION

There is nothing more basic to healthy living than the concept of forgiveness. Many persons, however, knowing that forgiveness is important, never realize the power available to them for healing, growth and healthy living because they never make the concept of forgiveness a reality in their lives. The major reason for this, I believe, is the lack of a viable mode for implementing forgiveness in their lives. The following is an outline for the basic understanding, and some suggested steps to help the individual practically work out this process in his\her life.

I. WHAT IS FORGIVENESS? Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

A. Forgiveness involves giving up our harsh and destructive feelings toward the person, such as anger, resentment, bitterness, hate, malice, loathing, disgust, etc. Every harsh and destructive feeling that we have can be traced in some way to one of two things: a) A time when we were taught or shown by example to think, talk, and act in a certain way and, b) A time when we responded in a negative way to a person or circumstance that confronted us in life. We begin by holding, consciously or not, a negative feeling and in so doing, allow it to multiply.

B. Forgiveness involves giving up our desire to get even; to see the person hurt, embarrassed, ridiculed or be paid back for what they may have done to us. You will not be able to give up the desire to get even until you give up your right to these feelings, one must follow the other. We do not have the privilege to hang on to and "enjoy" those destructive feelings any longer. They must be called sin and the determination must be made to want them gone.

C. Forgiveness involves forgetting the offense as we remembered it, letting God give a new perspective. In some case, we will be able to forget it completely. "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jeremiah 31:34). God alone can heal a heart in such a way that wrong is remembered no more, and if it is brought to mind it no longer carries with it the same negative feeling.

D. Forgiveness involves loving, praying for, and doing good to the person. "But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you." (Matt. 5:44) The Word of God does not allow a neutral place; we must love and do good to all men.

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Key Statement #1 - Forgiveness is the determination that your personal, emotional and physical accounts are settled, even paid up, by the work of Christ.

Key Quote #1 "Forgiveness is 'the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you'... Forgiveness, then, involves three elements: **injury**, a **debt** resulting from the injury and a **cancellation of the debt.**"¹

Key Questions -

1. Why is forgiveness important to you at this time in your life?

2. What is forgiveness now that you have read this first part of this outline?

How has your view changed?

II. UNDERSTANDING ANGER

EPHESIANS 4:26 "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry..."

A. The very nature of what anger is, in its positive form, a powerful motivational emotion. It can save a life, correct a wrong and prevent further wrong from happening. It becomes sin when we listen to that old lie about time curing our anger. No, anger must be dealt with immediately, or as soon as it can be used in a controlled manner. If we do not, our anger becomes a part of the problem as it lends to further pain and destruction and becomes a root of bitterness bouncing about inside.

B. One of the most important tasks involved in avoiding bitterness and the serious damage it brings is learning to deal properly with your anger when it

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occurs. Anger is a motivational force. Channel it properly and it can heal instead of harm. Deal with the misbelief "I must never get angry" and become a student of good self-expression instead.²

C. Taking Responsibility for Our Actions

1. An important understanding for our Western culture is that we are responsible for our actions. A common consequence of the mishandling of our anger is that bitterness sets in when anger is not dealt with properly. Even though we were hurt by someone else, we will suffer even more unless we take the responsibility to deal with our wounds through forgiveness. The bitter person always loses!

2. One common misconception related with forgiveness is the concept of the consequence of our sin. If I steal a car, my Father in Heaven will surely forgive me. He will probably not, however, shield me from prison or probation and a fine for stealing it. Because God loves me and hates sin, He will allow the consequence of my sin to impact and change my character in the process. God does, however, promise His presence and provision in every situation. His love does not change.

III. BITTERNESS AND UNFORGIVENESS, ITS FRUIT

What is the Fruit of an Unforgiving Heart?

A. The unforgiving heart begins to think of the bad things the other has done in the past, the reasons why that person deserves punishment, and the reason they do not deserve mercy and forgiveness. (Judging and condemning)

B. The unforgiving heart's imagination begins to distort the offense and make it out to be something more or altogether different than it really is. (False imaginations)

C. The unforgiving heart resents the success of its offender. (Envy and covetousness)

D. The unforgiving heart tends to think negatively toward anything that the person may like, such as clubs, friends, hobbies, etc. (Malice)

E. The unforgiving heart stops all voluntary social contact with the individual; will not talk with them, will not lend support, etc. (Rejection and abandonment)

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- F. The unforgiving heart rejoices when the other person fails or is hurt, and at times makes a personal attempt to incur such harm. (Vengeance)
- G. The unforgiving heart begins to talk about the faults of that person with others. (Gossip)
- H. The unforgiving heart begins to think he is better than the other. (Pride)
- I. The unforgiving heart, because of pride, begins to think that God should bless him more than he does them. (Self-righteousness)
- J. The unforgiving heart, as a result of focusing on the faults of others and how they have hurt him, becomes insensitive to how he may have hurt others and therefore insensitive to God's dealings with his faults. (Stubbornness: rebellion)
- K. The unforgiving heart's walk and talk with God deteriorates. (Backsliding)
- L. The unforgiving heart becomes like the object of its hate. What he hated in the other is now the very thing that he now does. (Conformity to the world)

Key Focus -

The purpose of the "Unforgiving Heart" is to help you see any unforgiveness you retain. Write out any specific symptoms that you see here for future reference and prayer.

IV. THE BIG PICTURE

COLOSSIANS 1:13-14 "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

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COLOSSIANS 2:13 "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,"

COLOSSIANS 3:13 "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

A. All our personal forgiveness, life and relationship with God flows out of Christ and his salvation work for us.

B. All our interpersonal forgiveness flows out of our dependence upon Christ and his work of salvation through us.

C. Christ is the standard, example, and test of all our work of forgiveness.

Key Questions -

1. Get into groups of two or three. Study together the example of the Father in Luke 15:11-31. This illustrates the forgiveness and love the Father God gives to you.

2. Study Luke 15 again. On what grounds did the Father except the Son home? Have you come home yet? Do you give yourself the same freedom and acceptance the Father does? Share with each other, as candidly as you can, the answers to these questions.

V. HOW TO FORGIVE

A. The Act of Forgiveness

1. When you pray for, or give out forgiveness, make it a statement based on the truth of your ability to give or receive forgiveness through Christ's work. You must receive forgiveness before you can give it.

2. Forgiveness is an act of will. Many confuse the act of forgiveness with a change of emotion and therefore believe the lie that they cannot forgive.

3. The change of emotions and healing of the heart follows the act of forgiveness.

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Example -

a) "Heavenly Father, forgive me for my sin(s) of

_____.

Thank you that because of Jesus I am forgiven!"

b) "Heavenly Father, as an act of my will I

forgive _____ for

_____.

I choose to obey your command and ask for the change and healing of my emotions by your Holy Spirit and the virtue in your blood at Calvary."

4. Forgiveness is given out like any other gift or enablement of the spirit. If you are forgiving someone, you are giving him or her a spiritual gift at Jesus' expense. The healing of your emotion is a separate, but related issue to the action of forgiving.

- a) Justifying or whitewashing what we have perceived to be a hurtful act on the part of a person is only skirting the issue.
- b) Whether the sin against us was deliberate or not, or even if it was only perceived as a wrong against us, we need to forgive it.
- c) Unforgiveness is our problem, and it must be dealt with through forgiveness no matter who it is toward or why.
- e) Unforgiveness toward self must be seen in this light also.
(Philippians 3:13, 14; Matthew 22:35-39)

5. Forgiveness is both an act and a process. Another way of saying it: forgiveness is an act that starts a process.

6. Forgiveness is a matter between you and God. We need not go to the one we forgive to tell him unless some form of restoration is needed. (Do not confuse this with your seeking forgiveness for your wrong).

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B. The Need for Confession

1 JOHN 1:8-9 "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Why does the Bible teach us to confess our sins if, in Christ, we are already forgiven? Why does confession of our sin to others become so important, even at times when they may not know we have sinned against them?

1. Confession is the act of agreement with the truth of God. We confess the same thing that God is saying by His Word or Church.
2. Confession is for us. We are the ones who benefit by this activity.
3. Wherever we speak and live the confession of God, we spread His righteousness.
4. If Jesus death is the reason we are forgiven, confession is the means by which we experience that forgiveness.
5. Confessing your sin against another person brings the agreement and righteousness of God to bear, as well as releasing His creative strength to restore.

C. Who Do We Forgive?

1. Any person, group or institution that comes to your heart with any of the negative emotions characterized in Section III should be forgiven.
2. Yourself! Many Christians fail to see the need to love and accept themselves. Perfectionist tendencies are rank with unforgiveness of self. You deserve the same grace you would give to others.
3. God! Christians fail to recognize God because He is perfect; however, we must remember that we must forgive for what we feel, not just because it is true. Do not hesitate to tell God all you feel and forgive Him and release Him from your anger so His love can get through again.

VI. THE PRACTICAL STAGES OF FORGIVENESS³

A. Hurting! In the first stage of forgiveness, we realize we are hurt. A

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significant part of the process is the humility of admitting that we hurt. Unpopular to our culture is the vulnerability of not passing off a wound with "its O.K," or "you can't hurt me."

B. Hating! Next, we must realize and deal honestly with the pain caused by the hurt. We find that many wounds can be involved with ongoing hurt and can cause pain to fester.

C. Understanding! A crucial stage of forgiveness is when we try to understand our attacker. Often they are not even aware they hurt us. Often they feel justified. You can only forgive a person, someone you can relate with. Until you have some personal object to forgive, until you have some understanding of humanity and cause, your forgiveness will at best be legal.

D. Healing! Only after admission and recognition of pain can we finally act to bring healing. Now, when in contact with the truth of our pain is the best time to begin the process of confession and restoration with God.

VII. RESTORING A RELATIONSHIP

A. Pastor Gary Smalley has taught me one of the most important principles of communication I have ever learned in regard to my children. I have found his principle to work on any age group, with some personalization. Pastor Smalley uses the terms, "open and closed spirit".⁴ What is a closed spirit?

As we study the nature of man, we can all agree to at least two different parts of our person. The body and the soul, or spirit. Some among us would say that man has three parts: body, soul and spirit. It does little good to try to distinguish between the two in practical matters as only the Living Spirit of God can actually see this distinction in us.

The soul of a person is that part of his person, his heart feeling, sensitivities that is eternal and most precious. Proverbs 4:23 warns us, "Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." This warns us that our hearts, especially those of our children, can be damaged and polluted.

A. person's heart grows closed when we fail to hear their feelings, or meet their needs emotionally. The obvious issues of abuse or neglect need not be stated. If we are in a relationship that we have damaged, action is needed to avoid bitterness and loss.

B. Manifestations of a closed spirit are there to see in your relationships. How is your communication? Does he/she share feelings? Does he/she touch you willingly? The body and facial language is very important. Do you get eye contact naturally?

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C. Here are five steps to open a closed spirit.⁵ These should be seen as process if the closure has been a long process.

1. Become tender hearted.
2. Increase understanding.
3. Recognize the offense.
4. Attempt to touch.
5. Seek forgiveness.

Exploring these options and *personalizing* them is the secret to success.
Think on the attitude of Ephesians 4:32.

EPHESIANS 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."

D. Teaching your child forgiveness. This is a process that will only be learned if you in fact communicate it by your actions.

E. Body language is very important. You will find that with small children (all people really) your humble physical demeanor will do much to open communication and the spirit. Watch your voice, facial expression and kneel down to their level.

VIII. CULTIVATING THE FRUIT OF FORGIVENESS

A. Model your hurt by open confession of hurt and woundedness. Do not say, "It's Ok" if you hurt. Say, "I felt hurt," and "I forgive you." Children especially need to hear and see you repent and forgive, hurt and heal.

B. Words that bless are most likely the single greatest tool in cultivating forgiveness. Being critical is easy. Finding the best in a person and bringing it out is worthy of your effort.

C. Bring in God's character by prayer. When you are offended, forgive immediately. When you see someone with a need, in the light of your

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forgiven state, pray down the character blessing they need.

Key Questions -

1. What did you say the last time you were causally offended? Why?

2. With a partner take a moment now to practice responding correctly. Make an honest "I" statement about how you feel. Then make a confession of forgiveness.

APPENDIX A

Some Activities to Promote Forgiveness and Healing.

1. When alone, pray and list out the individuals who come to mind that have hurt you. If an institution hurt you, you must find a person related to it to forgive. Pray daily over the list until you sense a change of heart.

2. When alone, pray and place a chair opposite you in a room. If there are people who you are unable to speak to, for whatever reason, imagine them there and tell them what you feel. Finish the time when you can relate to them that because Jesus forgave you, you can forgive them. Make the confession of forgiveness until your feelings change. Begin to bless and pray benefit on them.

APPENDIX B

Some passages that deal with forgiveness.

I Kings 8:30-50; Jeremiah 34

Matthew 5:23-24; 6:12; 6:14-15; 18:21-35

Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:36, 37; John 20:23; Romans 12:18;

Romans 14:10-13; Galatians 5:15; Ephesians 4:1-3, 32;

Colossians 3:12-13; Philippians 2:3; I Thessalonians 5:15;

Hebrews 12:14-15; James 4:11, 12; 5:9; I Peter 2:1

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ENDNOTES

¹Charles Stanley, Forgiveness (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1987)
p.16

³Concept from Lewis Smedes, Forgive and Forget (New York,
N.Y.: Pocket Books, 1984).

⁵Smalley, p. 27.