



Forgiveness

Receive the healing that letting go can bring.

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The Power of Forgiveness

Within it is the ability to hold us captive and the power to set us free.

by *Janine Petry*

What comes to your mind when you think of *forgiveness*?

For me, there are mixed emotions. On the one hand, it brings up memories from the past; painful things I'd rather not revisit. And it brings up questions too: *Am I forgiven? Did I forgive?* Whether I'm at fault, or someone else is, contemplating forgiveness creates a strong barrier of thoughts and emotions I can't easily cross. And at times it seems there's nothing so overwhelming as dealing with the issue.

On the other hand, *forgiveness* is like a breath of fresh air. It holds the promise of freedom from guilt and sin, and there's nothing as rejuvenating as experiencing its power at work. When I accept it and give it as the gift God intended, it heals wounds and offers a fresh start both to me and to others.

Regardless of whether I'm resisting or enjoying the freedom of forgiveness, one thing's certainly clear: it's a *very powerful* thing. Both the power to hold captive and the power to set free are within it. And the Bible speaks this message: nothing more directly affects us and makes us who we are than understanding which "side" of forgiveness we stand on when it comes to our relationships with

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God, ourselves, and others.

Though we may want to stand on the freeing side of forgiveness, that doesn't change the fact that dealing with it is probably the hardest thing we face in our lives—for good reason. Forgiveness forces us to look at sins and wrongs, accept them, and move beyond them. Thankfully, there's still a way to experience it and extend it to others—but it's only through God's Spirit living in us.

Whether you're seeking a deeper understanding of forgiveness, or you need to receive or extend it, this download can help guide you. Here, you'll find the wisdom and practical insights you need to gain a better understanding of what forgiveness is, and learn how to experience its freedom authentically in your own life. You'll also find other resources packed inside to help you and those you serve go even farther in becoming truly free from past wrongs, and ready for all the future holds.

Blessings,

Janine Petry
Contributing Editor, Gifted For Leadership
Christianity Today International

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THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past



To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

by Lewis B. Smedes

Two anxieties dominate most of our lives. We are anxious in the face of our unchangeable past; we long to recreate segments of our private histories, but we are stuck with them. We are anxious in the face of our unpredictable futures; we long to control our destinies, but we cannot bring them under our management. Thus, two basic longings, lying at the root of most others, are frustrated: we cannot alter a painful past or control a threatening future.

God offers two answers to our deepest anxieties. He is a forgiving God who recreates our pasts by forgiving them. He is a promising God who controls our future by making and keeping promises. By forgiving us, he changes our past. By promising, he secures our future.

By his grace we participate in his power to change the past and control the future. We, too, can forgive, and must forgive. We, too, can make a promise and keep it. Indeed, by sharing these two divine powers, we become most powerfully human and most wonderfully free.

I want to take a close look at how we practice these human

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shares in God's powers. Here we'll look into the human act of forgiving—not God's forgiving so much as our own, and not being forgiven so much as the act of forgiving.

What Do We Do When We Forgive?

I see three stages in every act of forgiving: suffering, spiritual surgery, and starting over. The first stage, suffering, creates the conditions that require forgiveness. At the second stage we do the essential business of forgiveness; the forgiver performs spiritual surgery in his own memory. We complete the action and bring it to its climax at the third stage, when the forgiver starts over in a new relationship with the forgiven person.

Suffering

No one really forgives unless he has been hurt. We turn the miracle into a cheap indulgence when we pretend to forgive people who have never hurt us. I do not mean that you can forgive only scoundrels who laid a hand on you. You can be hurt when you suffer at the hands of people you love. But unless you are hurt, speak of something other than forgiving.

But not every hurt needs to be forgiven. There are some hurts that we can swallow, shrug off, and chalk up to the risks of being earthen vessels in a crowded world. We should not try to forgive when all we need is simply a little spiritual generosity. Consider the following hurts:

Annoyances. People annoy us by being late for appointments, by telling boring stories at dinner, and by cutting in front of us at the checkout stand.

Defeats. Some people succeed when we fail; they get promotions when we are ignored; they get the glittering prizes we want; they always seem to be there ahead of us—and to make things worse, these people who beat us are our friends.

Slights. People we want to notice us ignore us; professors we adored forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not even invite us to his daughter's wedding.





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These are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving. Such bits and pieces of suffering require tolerance, magnanimity, indulgence, humility—but not forgiving.

The kinds of hurts that need forgiving are both deep and moral. They are deep because they slice the fiber that holds us together in a human relationship. They are moral because they are wrongful, unfair, intolerable. We cannot indulge them or ignore them; we cannot shrug them off. We cannot just chalk them up to the human condition. The sorts of hurts that need forgiving are the ones that tend, in the nature of the case, to build a wall between the wrongdoer and the person he wrongfully hurts.

There are two kinds of hurts that must be answered with the miracle of forgiving. They are acts of disloyalty and acts of betrayal. Maybe there are hurts that need forgiveness that do not fit these categories, but most do.

What is a disloyal act? A person is disloyal if he treats you as a stranger when, in fact, he belongs to you as a friend or partner. Each of us is bound to some special others by the invisible fibers of loyalty. The bonding tells us who we are: we are who we are, most deeply, because of the people we belong to. This is why disloyalty is so serious. When someone who belongs to us treats us like a stranger, he digs a ditch; and he builds a wall between the two of us. And in doing so he assaults our very identity. Words like “abandon,” or “forsake,” or “let down” come to mind:

- A husband has an affair with his wife’s friend.
- A partner who promised to come through with a loan reneges at the last moment when he can make a better profit with his money elsewhere.
- A friend who promised to recommend you for promotion lets you down when he discovers you are out of favor with the boss.
- Your father fails to show up when you are given a coveted award.
- Your neighbor spurns you when you, a Jew, need a place to

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hide from the Gestapo.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who belongs to you by some spoken or unspoken promise treats you like a stranger.

Turn the screw a little tighter, and disloyalty becomes betrayal. As disloyalty makes strangers of people who belong to each other, betrayal turns them into enemies. We are disloyal when we let people down. We betray them when we cut them in pieces.

- Peter was disloyal when he denied he ever knew the Lord.
- Judas betrayed Jesus when he turned him over to his enemies.
- You betray me when you take a secret I trusted you with and reveal it to someone who is likely to use it against me.
- You betray me when you promise to be my friend but whisper my secret shame to a gossip.
- You betray me when you are my brother but you put me down in front of significant people before whom I have no defense.
- A son betrays his father when he tells the police commissar that the father prayed for the defeat of communism.

These examples all have the same painful feature: someone who is committed to be on your side turns against you as an enemy.

Here are moral wrongs, wrongs people do out of evil intent, wrongs that cannot be tolerated. They are the wrongs that face us with the crisis of forgiveness. We should not flatten forgiveness to fit just any painful moment. The moment of forgiving comes when someone who ought to be with you forsakes you, when someone who ought to be for you turns against you.

Spiritual Surgery

The second stage of forgiving involves the hurt person's inner response to the one who wronged him. Though it happens in the mind and heart of the forgiver, it may not even be felt by the person he forgives—at least not immediately. Here the forgiver performs spiritual surgery within his or her own memory.

When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the

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person who did it. You disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him inerradicably as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory.

You think of him now not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now not as the person who alienated you, but as the person who belongs to you. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs. You recreated your past by recreating the person whose wrong made your past painful.

You do not change him, out there, in his being. What he did sticks to what he is. His wrong is glued to him. But when you recreate him in your own memory, there, within you, he has been altered by spiritual surgery.

God does it this way, too. He releases us from sin as a mother washes dirt from a child's face, or as a person takes a burden off your back, lays it on a goat, and sends the goat scampering into the wilderness. The Bible's metaphors point to a surgery within God's memory of what we are.

Sometimes this stage is as far as we can go. Sometimes we need to forgive people who are dead and gone. Sometimes we need to forgive people who do not want our forgiveness. Sometimes our forgiving has to end with what happens in the spiritual surgery of our memories.

Starting Over

The miracle of forgiveness is completed when two alienated people start over again. A man holds out his hand to an alienated daughter and says, "I want to be your father again." A woman holds out her hand and says, "I want to be your wife again." Or, "I want to be your friend again, your partner again. Let us be reconciled; let us belong together again."

Reconciliation is the personal reunion of people who were alienated but belong together. It is the beginning of a new journey together. We must begin where we are, not at an ideal place for reunion: We do not understand what happened. Loose ends are untied. Nasty questions are unanswered. The future is uncertain; we have more hurts and





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more forgiving ahead of us. But we start over where we are.

If we keep the wonder of forgiving in our minds, we will not confuse this miracle with lesser gestures that pass as forgiveness. There are a few acts that may look like forgiving but which are, in fact, very different from that miracle of forgiving.

Forgiving is not forgetting. We forget things willy-nilly. We forget some hurts because they were too trivial to remember. We forget other hurts because they were too terrible to remember: All we need to forget is a bad memory or a compulsion to suppress. We do the miracle when we remember and then forgive.

Forgiving is not excusing. We excuse people when we understand that they are not to blame for the wrong they did us. When you understand that I have a Y where an X is supposed to be in my genetic code, you will not judge me. When you know that I got to be the way I am because I was walloped into neuroses by a wacky mother, you will not blame me. You will say: What he did was foul, but he is not to blame. This is not forgiving. Forgiving happens only when we refuse to excuse: We forgive only when we blame beforehand.

Forgiving is not smoothing things over. Some people make careers out of smoothing things over. Mothers shush us and smother our conflicts: They keep the lid on our suffering so we cannot forgive. Managers earn fat salaries by smoothing things over, manipulating people into working together even when they hate each other. Mothers and managers are the great over-smoothers of the world. They prevent forgiving because they stifle hurt. Forgiving happens only when we first admit our hurt and scream our hate.

In the creative violence of love, you reach into the unchangeable past and cut away the wrong from the person who wronged you, you erase the hurt in the archives of your heart. When you pull it off, you do the one thing, the only thing, that can remedy the inevitability of painful history. The grace to do it is from God. The decision to do it is our own.

Why Forgive?

To the guilty, forgiveness comes as amazing grace. To the offended, forgiving may sound like outrageous injustice. A straight-line moral





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sense tells most people that the guilty ought to pay their dues: Forgiving is for suckers. Forgiveness is a gyp.

Take Simon Wiesenthal's story, for instance: Wiesenthal was a prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp in Poland. One day he was assigned to clean out rubbish from a barn the Germans had improvised into a hospital for wounded soldiers. Toward evening a nurse took Wiesenthal by the hand and led him to a young SS trooper, his face bandaged with puss-soaked rags, eyes tucked behind the gauze. He was perhaps 21 years old. He grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and clutched it. He said that he had to talk to a Jew; he could not die before he had confessed the sins he had committed against helpless Jews, and he had to be forgiven by a Jew before he died. So he told Wiesenthal a horrible tale of how his battalion had gunned down Jews, parents and children, who were trying to escape from a house set afire by the SS troopers.

Wiesenthal listened to the dying man's whole story, first the story of his innocent youth, and then the story of his participation in evil. At the end, Wiesenthal jerked his hand away and walked out of the barn: No word was spoken, no forgiveness was given. Wiesenthal would not, could not, forgive. But he was not sure he did right.

He ended his story, *The Sunflower*, with a question: "What would you have done?" Thirty-two eminent persons, mostly Jewish, contributed their answers to his hard question. Most said Wiesenthal was right: he should not have forgiven the SS trooper; it would not have been fair. Why should a man who gave his will to the doing of monumental evil expect a quick word of forgiveness on his death-bed? What right had Wiesenthal to forgive the man for evil he had done to other Jews? If Wiesenthal forgave the soldier, he would be saying that the Holocaust was not so evil. "Let the SS trooper go to hell," said one respondent.

Many of us feel the same way when we are unfairly hurt in far less horrible ways. Sometimes our hate is the only ace we have left in our deck. Our contempt is our only weapon. Our plan to get even is our only consolation. Why should we forgive?

Why indeed? I do not think we should urge people to forgive unless we consider the superhuman task we ask of them. To get a hint of the gospel's revolution of forgiveness we need to get inside the moral skin





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of a righteous Pharisee with a clear eye for how wrongs really ought to be settled—according to natural; straight-lined fairness. What is the answer to the unfairness of forgiving? It can only be that forgiving is, after all, a better way to fairness.

First, forgiving creates a new possibility of fairness by releasing us from the unfair past. A moment of unfair wrong has been done; it is in the inevitable past. If we choose, we can stick with that past. And we can multiply its wrongness. If we do not forgive, our only recourse is revenge. But revenge glues us to the past. And it dooms us to repeat it.

Forgiving takes us off the escalator of revenge so that both of us can stop the chain of incremented wrongs. We start over. We start over as if the wrongdoer had not hurt us at all. But we start over to begin a new and fairer relationship. We will probably fail again. And we will need to forgive again. The doorway to justice closes time and time again. And forgiveness remains the only way to open the door.

Second, forgiveness brings fairness to the forgiver. It is the hurting person who most feels the burden of unfairness; but he only condemns himself to more unfairness if he refuses to forgive.

Is it fair to be stuck to a painful past? Is it fair to be walloped again and again by the old unfair hurt? Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays. And each time it replays, you feel the clap of pain again. Is this fair?

Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiving sets you free. Forgiving is the only way to stop the cycle of unfair pain turning in your memory.

How Do We Forgive?

I must say something about how we forgive—but I cannot; I do not know how. Charles Williams said that pardon, like love, is ours only for fun; essentially we cannot do it. Maybe we cannot. But we do it anyway—sometimes! Like fumbling amateurs, to be sure, but we do it. Here are three things I have noticed about how people forgive:

They forgive slowly. There are instant forgivers, I suppose, but not many. We should not count on power to forgive bad hurts very quickly. Essentially, we cannot; but eventually we do. God takes his





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time with a lot of things. Why should we not take ours with a hard miracle like forgiving?

They forgive communally. Can anyone forgive alone? I do not think I can. I need people who hurt as I hurt, and who hate as I hate. I need persons who are struggling as hard as I need to struggle before I come through forgivingly. I know only socialized forgiving. It is fine if you can do it all by yourself; but if you are hooked into your videotape of past pain, seek a fellowship of slow forgivers. They may help.

They forgive as they are forgiven. When it comes down to it, anyone who forgives can hardly tell the difference between feeling forgiven and doing the forgiving. We are such a mixture of sinners and sinned against, we cannot forgive people who offend us without feeling that we are being set free ourselves.

I haven't found a better example of this truth than Corrie Ten Boom. She was stuck for the war years in a concentration camp, humiliated and degraded, especially in the delousing shower where the women were ogled by the leering guards. But she made it through that hell. And eventually she felt she had, by grace, forgiven even those fiends who guarded the shower stalls.

So she preached forgiveness, for individuals, for all of Europe. She preached it in Bloemendaal, in the United States, and, one Sunday, in Munich. After the sermon, greeting people, she saw a man come toward her, hand outstretched: "Ja, Fräulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins, just as you say." She remembered his face; it was the leering, lecherous, mocking face of an SS guard of the shower stall.

Her hand froze at her side. She could not forgive. She thought she had forgiven all. But she could not forgive when she met a guard, standing in the solid flesh in front of her. Ashamed, horrified at herself, she prayed: "Lord, forgive me, I cannot forgive." And as she prayed she felt forgiven, accepted, in spite of her shabby performance as a famous forgiver. Her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of hate melted. Her hand went out. She forgave as she felt forgiven. And I suspect she would not be able to sort out the difference.

Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last! Freed by the

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only remedy for the inevitability of our history. To forgive is to put down your 50-pound pack after a 10-mile climb up a mountain. To forgive is to fall into a chair after a 15-mile marathon. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. To forgive is to reach back into your hurting past and recreate it in your memory so that you can begin again. To forgive is to dance to the beat of God's forgiving heart. It is to ride the crest of love's strongest wave.

Our only escape from history's cruel unfairness, our only passage to the future's creative possibilities, is the miracle of forgiving.

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Thought Provokers

- *The author believes there are three stages to the act of forgiving: "suffering, spiritual surgery, and starting over." How have you experienced these stages in your own life? How does identifying these stages help you understand more about forgiveness, and the process of being forgiven?*
- *The author comments, "If we keep the wonder of forgiving in our minds, we will not confuse this miracle with lesser gestures that pass as forgiveness." Explain the difference between forgiveness and the "lesser gestures" he describes. Why is it important to understand the difference between these and refuse to settle for anything other than true forgiveness?*





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Keys to Forgiving

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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Keys to Forgiving



How do you know that you have truly forgiven someone?

by Lewis B. Smedes

Jesus was unequivocal on this point: As his followers, we are required to forgive those who sin against us (Matt. 6:15). But what if we don't feel like we've forgiven them? How do we know, then, if we have truly forgiven? The Holy Spirit, thank God, often enables people to forgive even though they are not sure how they did it. But forgiving, and knowing that we've truly forgiven, comes easier when we understand the realities of forgiveness:

- 1. Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded.* This is simple but important. Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure us accidentally, we excuse them. We only forgive the ones we blame.
- 2. Forgiveness requires three basic actions. First, we surrender our right to get even.* Every victim is sure that the victimizer deserves to suffer at least as much as he made us suffer. But that is not necessarily so. "The wages of sin [wronging God] is death" (Rom. 6:23), but the payment was made through the death of God's own Son. The blood of Christ covers all of our sins, but each of us must do personal business with God in order to experience his forgiveness. When we

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forgive, therefore, we place the outcome of the matter in God's hands and often choose to live with the scales unbalanced.

Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer. When we have been badly injured and clearly wronged, we make an instant caricature of the person who did it to us. We define him totally by the one wrong he did. If he betrayed us, his total being is reduced to his betrayal. When we forgive, we rediscover that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. This is what God does. Our sin hid our faces from him; now, forgiven, we shine like sparkling jewels before him.

And third, we wish our wrongdoer well. We not only surrender our right to revenge against him; we desire good things to happen to him. We bless him. Unnatural? Too much to ask of us? Perhaps. And yet, this is how God forgives us; he not only surrenders his right to see us punished, he graces us with whatever blessing is right for us.

3. Forgiving takes time. God can forgive in a single breath. But we need time. Just before he died, C.S. Lewis wrote: "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it." Maybe, had he lived longer, he would have had to do it again.

4. Forgiving does not require forgetting. True, God said through Isaiah (43:25), "I am he who blots out your transgression. . . . and I will not remember your sins." But does God have amnesia? Does God not remember that Peter denied his Lord? Or, does he treat Peter and all other forgiven people *as if* he cannot remember what they did? On a human level, it is futile to try to forget; the more we try to forget, the more we remember. But we can dethrone the memory; we can refuse to let it control our lives. We can detoxify the memory; we can purge its poison from our souls. But we do well not to worry about forgetting. Sufficient unto the day is forgiving.

5. Ideally, forgiving leads to reconciliation. But we often have to put up with less than the ideal. Sometimes the forgiven person will not want to be reunited with us; he may not care a fig for our grace. Besides, though he is forgiven, he may not be changed. If he is reunited with us, he is likely to clobber us again. Forgiving happens in our hearts. There can be no reunion without forgiving, but there *can be* forgiving

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without reunion. An offender who has violated a law will need to endure the just judicial consequences. But even as that happens, the offended person can pray and seek full reconciliation on the other side of justice.

6. *Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven.* Nothing enables us to forgive like knowing in our hearts that we have been forgiven. This is probably why Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, [but only] as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Jesus implies that it is unthinkable for a forgiven person to refuse to forgive. If we do refuse, he says later, we have no claim on God’s forgiveness. But remember, he does not expect *perfect* forgiving; he is the only expert at it. We are poor duellers trying to treat others as he treats us.

Lewis B. Smedes is professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don’t Know How (Ballantine) and Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve (Harpercollins). This article first appeared in the December 2001 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Thought Provokers

- *Describe a time when you’ve wondered whether or not you truly forgave someone. What caused you to doubt? Why is it important to be sure we’ve forgiven or have been forgiven?*
- *Which of the author’s six “realities of forgiveness” is the most meaningful to you and why?*





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What Forgiveness Isn't

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GETTING DEEPER

What Forgiveness Isn't

6 myths that may be keeping you from letting go.

by Denise George

I listened quietly as my friend Jamie told me the frank details of the sexual abuse she'd suffered as a child.

"I hate my father!" she blurted out. "He abused me for more than a decade!" Jamie cried. "But my pastor said if I want to heal from my childhood pain, I have to forgive."

"What did you tell your pastor?" I asked.

"I told him I could *never* forgive my father, that I didn't *want* to forgive him, that no one—not even God—would *expect* me to forgive him!"

Jamie told me all the reasons that kept her from forgiving her abusive father. I'd heard many of them before. In fact, I'd used some of them two years earlier, when a friend I'd trusted to keep a confidence told several women in my Sunday school class about a painful circumstance I was going through. I felt betrayed by my friend—as I should have. But *forgive* her? That was the last thing I wanted to do! I dropped out of the Sunday school class and avoided her at church.

But a year later, when I reread what the apostle Paul said about





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forgiveness, his familiar words touched my heart in a special way: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, *forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32, my emphasis).

As I meditated on that verse, I knew I’d been forgiven much. I needed to forgive my friend, even if I didn’t feel like it. I decided to do so. Later, when I met her and told her I’d forgiven her, she apologized, and we both cried. I wish I could say she and I became good friends again—but I can’t. Her betrayal deeply hurt our friendship, and I was careful never to share another confidence with her. But God’s Word and my decision to forgive set me free from bitterness.

Facing the Challenge

Jamie and I are just two of a legion of Christian women who’ve struggled with forgiveness because it’s difficult—almost impossible—to do. Yet in Luke 6:37, Jesus says, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” He elaborates in Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

The apostle Paul repeats Jesus’ command: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Surely Paul’s “whatever grievances” covers any kind of hurt, betrayal, or injury another person could inflict!

In talking with hundreds of women about forgiveness, I’ve discovered six myths that keep us from the healing and freedom God desires for you and me.

Myth 1: *Forgiving means the offender didn’t really hurt you.*

Jamie thought if she forgave her father, it lessened the severity of his abuse. Yet Jamie’s forgiveness doesn’t deny her father hurt her. In fact, it clearly recognizes the enormity of his evil—if Jamie’s dad hadn’t deliberately caused her pain, she’d have no reason to forgive him.

“Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded,” wrote author Lewis B. Smedes. “Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure





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us accidentally, we excuse them. We only forgive the ones we blame.” Choosing to forgive her father acknowledges the pain Jamie endured at his hands. It also begins her healing.

Myth 2: *Forgiving means you excuse the offender's hurtful act.*

When I chose to forgive my friend, I didn't condone her cruel behavior. Forgiveness, I've discovered, is a response that seeks to redeem the hurt, not brush it off. An accidental “slip of the tongue” needs no forgiveness because it isn't deliberately caused. Intentional hurts—like my friend's betrayal—need forgiveness. When I forgave my friend, my forgiveness didn't lessen the impact of her painful action. But forgiveness unlocked my own “prison” of bitterness.

Myth 3: *Before forgiving, you must first understand why the offender hurt you.*

On December 1, 1997, Missy Jenkins, a sophomore at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, stood with her classmates and prayed before school started. Before they said their final “amen,” 14-year-old Michael Carneal pulled out a pistol and fired 11 shots into the student prayer group. One bullet severely damaged Missy's spinal cord. Paralyzed from the waist down, Missy will spend her life in a wheelchair.

Missy doesn't know the reason her classmate deliberately hurt her. Michael may not understand his reasons. But that didn't keep Missy from choosing to forgive him.

“I believe hating him is wasted emotion,” Missy says. “Hating Michael won't make me walk again. Besides, I know it isn't what Jesus would do.”

Our human mind yearns to make all the confusing puzzle pieces fit together neatly before we forgive. However, the truth is we can forgive an offender even if we never discover the reasons for the inflicted pain. Author Philip Yancey writes in *What's So Amazing About Grace*, “Not to forgive imprisons me in the past and locks out all potential for change. I thus yield control to another, my enemy, and doom myself to suffer the consequences of the wrong.”

Myth 4: *Before forgiving the offender, you must feel forgiving.*

Forgiveness has nothing to do with how you feel. You can feel hurt, betrayed, and angry, and still completely forgive the one who





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wounded you. Biblical forgiveness is an act of the will. It's a choice you make.

Can you still feel angry after you forgive? Yes! Anger means you're in touch with reality—it's part of being human. But be careful to aim that anger at what your offender did, not at the offender herself. Then let your anger push you toward justice.

Myth 5: *Forgiving means the offender will face no consequences.*

When we choose to forgive someone, our forgiveness doesn't "let him off the hook." Forgiveness also doesn't mean justice shouldn't be served.

In December 1983, Pope John Paul II visited a prisoner, Mehmet Ali Agca, at the Rebibbia prison in Rome. In May 1981, Agca had aimed a pistol at the pope and shot him in the chest. After much pain and agony, John Paul recovered, and now he looked Agca in the eye, extended his hand, and said, "I forgive you." Even though the pope forgave him, Agca still faced the consequences of his crime. He served a lengthy prison sentence until he finally was released in January of 2006.

Myth 6: *When your offender is punished, you'll find closure.*

On June 13, 1990, Linda Purnhagen saw her two daughters, Gracie, 16, and Tiffany, 9, for the last time. Dennis Dowthitt, a dangerously sick psychopath, strangled Tiffany to death, then raped Gracie and slit her throat. When authorities discovered the girls' bodies, they arrested and convicted Dowthitt, and scheduled his execution.

A decade later, as executioners strapped him to his death gurney, Dowthitt apologized for the savage killings. But not even his confession, apology, and execution brought closure for Linda. She was disappointed after the execution, not relieved.

We think we can more easily forgive others if they confess the crime and apologize for the pain they caused. But don't look to justice, imprisonment, or execution to bring needed closure and healing. Only forgiveness will do that.

The Choice to Forgive

The decision to forgive an offender is probably the hardest choice we





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can ever make. Some crimes seem too horrible to forgive. Our instincts tell us to avenge the person who caused us pain, not to release him from the debt he owes us. But as Christians, we can't afford to have unforgiving hearts, for we have been greatly forgiven by God in Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

Only forgiveness can release us from a life of hatred and bitterness. "Forgiving is a journey, sometimes a long one," wrote Lewis B. Smedes in *Shame and Grace*. "We may need some time before we get to the station of complete healing, but the nice thing is that we are being healed en route. When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover the prisoner we set free was us."

Forgiveness ABCs

Acknowledge the hurt. When someone deliberately hurts you, don't try to diminish the pain and its effect on you. Acknowledge your suffering—and express it aloud to God. Scripture promises: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18), and "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

Blame the offender. If a person hurts you by mistake, she didn't mean to inflict pain, so she needs no forgiveness. But if a person intentionally hurts you, then the pain she caused was deliberate. Say aloud: "I personally blame you, (name of offender), because you hurt me on purpose." Correctly placing the blame readies you to begin the forgiveness process.

Cancel the debt. You've acknowledged the hurt and rightly blamed the offender. Now you're ready to make the willful decision to "cancel the debt" your offender owes you. Find a quiet place to be alone and ask the Lord's help in forgiving the person who hurt you. You might pray the "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13) and meditate on verse 12: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." After you've prayed and while you're still alone, speak aloud your decision to forgive: "(Name of offender), I've chosen to forgive you for hurting me; I've decided to cancel the debt you owe me." You've now embarked on the process of forgiving the person who hurt you.

Denise George, www.authordenisegeorge.com, is the author of 20 books,





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including Cultivating a Forgiving Heart—Forgiveness Frees You to Flourish (Zondervan). *This article first appeared in the July/August 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

Thought Provokers

- *Reread Luke 6:37, Matthew 6:14-15, and Colossians 3:13. How is forgiveness difficult, even impossible, for us to do? Why is it so important for us to forgive ourselves and others?*
- *Which myth or myths have you believed to be true and why? Why is it important to see these statements as myths, instead of acting on them as truths?*

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GETTING DEEPER

The Forgiven Woman



We can pencil in our own names as we watch the scene unfold.

by Liz Curtis Higgs

Suppose we crash a party—circa A.D. 30—when Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, knowing his guest of honor would draw a crowd.

Women weren't permitted to serve or consume the feast while men reclined at the table. The poor were allowed to hang around the periphery, collecting food scraps that fell to the floor.

Among the less fortunate was "a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town" (Luke 7:37). Since her name and specific sin aren't mentioned—prostitution, scholars say—we can pencil in our names and sins as we watch this scene unfold.

Undone and Unbound

Knowing Jesus would be there, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume. Perfume being expensive, her jar would have been small and easily hidden.

Did she mean to anoint the Lord's head, as had Mary of Bethany (Mark 14:3), who was chastised by the disciples for wasting what

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might have been sold? Or did this unnamed woman plan to donate her alabaster jar and its contents to support Jesus’ ministry financially, as Mary Magdalene had done (Luke 8:2-3)?

Whatever her intent, she drew near to him. Then, undone in his holy presence, she wet his feet with her tears. Sorrow for her sins flowed from her heart. Gratitude for his acceptance poured from her eyes.

So brave, this woman, standing in a crowded room of men—former customers, some of them—silently confessing her sins. Watching her, I, too, feel the sting of tears. Could I stand before a group of men who “knew me when” and make such a painful admission?

Having soaked Jesus’ feet, she knelt and wiped them with her hair. She was embarrassed, perhaps. Or simply wanted to serve him. Unbound tresses were a serious breach of social custom, but our sister didn’t care; Jesus was her sole concern.

Observing her extravagant display, I’m ashamed of the times I’ve restrained myself during worship—should I lift my hands? sing with abandon? kneel for prayer?—too concerned with others’ opinions and not focused enough on my Savior.

Scandalous Devotion

What this courageous woman did next was shocking. She kissed Jesus’ feet. A scandalous act. But glorious.

Again, I’m cut to the quick. In 24 years of knowing the Lord and having experienced his forgiveness, have I done one risky thing to express my love for him? Knocked on a stranger’s door to share the gospel? Served food at a rescue mission?

Forgive me, Lord. For holding back. For giving you anything less than everything.

This woman withheld nothing: Opening her jar, she anointed Jesus’ feet with her costly perfume. The scent that marked her as a prostitute—paid for by the many men who’d used her—was now poured out as a love offering for the one man who respected her.

Pointing to her humble example to teach his host a lesson, Jesus





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assured Simon, “her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much” (Luke 7:47).

Her devotion wasn’t stated, it was demonstrated. In turn, the Lord poured out grace as fragrant as any perfume. The scent still lingers whenever a woman falls at his feet, confesses her sins, expresses her love, and receives his mercy.

Even today, beloved. Even now.

Liz Curtis Higgs is the author of 26 books, including Embrace Grace: Welcome to the Forgiven Life (WaterBrook). She lives with her husband and their two teenagers in Kentucky. Visit her website: www.LizCurtisHiggs.com.

This article first appeared in the September/October 2006 issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

- *Like this woman, we can know our sins are forgiven. How do the following verses assure you of God’s grace: Romans 5:8; Ephesians 1:7-8; 1 John 2:12?*
- *The last verse of this story—Luke 7:50—serves as a benediction. What is the role of faith in our forgiveness and salvation? How does Ephesians 2:8-9 help answer that important question?*





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BRINGING IT HOME

Why Forgive?

It's more about *you* than you think.

by Neil T. Anderson



I was their last resort. Kurt and Mary (not their real names) called me in the middle of an argument.

“Dr. Anderson, you have to come and help us,” Mary said angrily. After talking with her briefly, I was afraid if I didn’t show up, their argument would result in domestic violence!

I’m making a house call police officers don’t even like to make! I thought as I got into my car.

I played referee for a couple hours until they’d worn themselves out. This Christian couple had made enemies of each other. And forgiveness was the furthest thing from what they wanted to discuss. “I’ve listened to your arguments and frustrations,” I started. “Here’s the overriding reality. Before God we’re responsible for our own character and the needs of the other person. You two have been ripping each other’s character while looking out for your own needs. You’re struggling in your marriage because you’re struggling in your spiritual life.”

They were stunned. They hadn’t connected their marital troubles with how they were doing in their individual relationships with God.





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But the Bible is clear: “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?” (1 John 4:20, NLT).

What makes a Christian marriage work is to forgive from our hearts, just as Jesus forgave us. He did so by taking our sins upon himself. For us, forgiving others means we’re willing to live with the consequences of our spouse’s sins.

But Why Forgive?

1. To help us mature in our faith. God’s intention in marriage is that we hang in there and grow up. In Colossians Paul writes: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (3:13).

It’s in the context of committed relationships where we either learn to be kind, patient, and loving, or we blow apart. Loving each other inevitably means that we forgive each other—and keep on forgiving as Jesus instructed in Matthew 18:21-22. When Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone, “Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Yes, you may be tempted to keep a written log of how many times you’ve forgiven your spouse! But Jesus was really saying we need to forgive as many times as we are offended. It may seem unfair, especially when we feel as though we’re the ones always doing the forgiving. Yet, forgiveness calls us to grow in character, which is ultimately most pleasing to God.

2. To keep bitterness away. In the close confinement of our homes, we’ll say or do things that are offensive to our mate. Even the best of us will feel hurt, put down, or rejected. But if we let a root of bitterness spring up, the writer of Hebrews says that it will “defile many” (12:15). Our unforgiveness grows to bitterness and affects everyone. It erupts in anger and brings disease, stress, pain. Bitterness is like swallowing a bottle of poison hoping the other person will die.

Excuses, Excuses

So many times we know we should forgive, we understand what God says about the importance of forgiveness, but still we fight it. Here are





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some excuses I hear from couples.

It's not fair. Of course it isn't, but we all live with the consequences of another person's sin. For instance, we're stuck with the consequence of Adam's and Eve's sin. And on the marriage front, since it's God's will that we remain married, the only real choice we have is whether we want to live out those consequences of our spouse's sin in the bondage of bitterness or the freedom of forgiveness.

But you don't know how bad he (or she) hurt me! That's not the issue. Your spouse may still hurt you. But forgiveness is how you stop the pain.

I have to heal first—then I'll be able to forgive. Research shows over and over that forgiveness brings healing, not the other way around. But I want revenge! The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay'" (10:30). We have to trust that God will even the score and make things right.

Why should I let him (or her) off the hook? If you don't forgive, you're still hooked to that offense. You'll gain freedom from the past if you let your spouse off your hook. But remember, your spouse isn't off God's hook.

Where's the justice? It's in the cross. Jesus died for your sins, and my sins, and his sins, and her sins.

Sloppy Forgiveness

Forgiveness doesn't mean we offer cheap grace, though. Here are two statements I often hear that offer faux forgiveness.

I'll just try to forget about it, because God forgot my sins. True, God remembers our sin no more. But we can't just will ourselves to forget. I like to think we remember because we can learn from it. The most important part of "forgetting" our spouse's sin is that we don't take the past and use it against our spouse—just as God doesn't use our sins against us. The one who keeps bringing up past offenses hasn't forgiven.

I'll keep forgiving even though he never changes, since that's what Jesus calls me to do. Yes, Jesus asks us to forgive over and over, but he never





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asks us to put up with wrong behavior. When Jesus forgave, he told the person, “Go and sin no more.” Part of offering grace is to set clear-cut boundaries that protect us from further abuse. Forgiving from our heart isn’t being a punching bag. Although the Lord forgives, he doesn’t tolerate sin, and neither should we.

True Forgiveness

The closer we connect to God and understand the forgiveness he’s given us, the more able we are to forgive our spouse. If we struggle with forgiveness, we can pray something such as: “Lord, I forgive my husband for (list every offense that God brings to mind), because it made me feel (rejected, unwanted, judged, small). Heal my damaged emotions and bless my husband.”

Remember, you’re the only one who can keep yourself from being the person and spouse God created you to be. We don’t just forgive the other person for his sake; we forgive for our own emotional, physical, and spiritual health. If you’ll assume responsibility to grow in Christ, and forgive those around you, the family can be the kind of environment where everybody wins.

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Thought Provokers

- *In what ways do you struggle with forgiving—or receiving forgiveness from—those closest to you, such as a spouse or a family member?*
- *How does our relationship with God affect our ability to understand, give, and receive forgiveness? Evaluate your own relationship with God: how connected are you and how is that affecting your ability to extend or receive forgiveness?*





LEADERSHIP TOOLS

No Apology



How do I forgive someone who hasn't said "I'm sorry"?

by Nancy Ortberg

This issue makes me think of my friend Carolyn. She met her husband at the Christian college they both attended. After school, much to their surprise and joy, she became pregnant. But during her pregnancy, Carolyn's husband became emotionally and physically distant. He regularly came home late at night and left early in the morning.

It was soon clear her husband was being unfaithful. And, tragically, Carolyn delivered a full-term baby girl who was terribly deformed as a direct result of Carolyn contracting a sexually transmitted disease from her husband during pregnancy. The doctors told Carolyn to expect her daughter to live no more than six months.

Carolyn's husband stayed around for a few weeks, then disappeared until after his daughter's death—four years later. Two years later, Carolyn described for me the uphill battle she'd had to forgive her husband of his infidelity and the physical suffering he caused. He never asked for forgiveness, but she knew she needed to let go of her desire to hurt him. She needed to release him into God's hands.

Your need to forgive might not stem from such a painful experience, but hurt can stem from all kinds of offenses. And it's often made worse when there's no apology. There are no easy formulas for teaching people how to forgive, but here are three things to keep in





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mind when you've been wronged:

Forgiveness is usually a process, not an event. Carolyn spent the better part of two years doing the work of forgiveness. She directed tearful tirades and whispered prayers of pain at God. She read Christian authors on the topic. She worked very hard at the part she could work on—her mind—and trusted God to do his work in her heart. With a deep awareness of God's forgiveness of her own sinfulness, she's arrived at a deeply resolved forgiveness of her husband.

Forgiveness and reconciliation aren't synonymous. Jesus talks about forgiveness in very different situations—both when there's repentance on the part of the offender (Luke 17:3) and when there isn't (Matthew 18:21). Forgiveness is about what you do, not what the person you're forgiving does (or doesn't do). For reconciliation to take place, there has to be work on both ends of the relationship. And in some cases, especially those involving the threat of continued abuse, reconciliation isn't desirable. You can forgive without forgetting.

We should work for reconciliation whenever possible. When we feel we've been wronged, especially when sin is involved, there should be a conversation with the offender (Matthew 18:15) if at all possible. Sometimes it's easier to forgive without repentance from the other person as a way to avoid a difficult conversation. Often facing the issue openly brings the clarity necessary for either repentance or for shared responsibility and mutual forgiveness.

Forgiveness is costly. We only have to look at the Cross to be reminded of that. In Luke 23:34, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." These words weren't spoken to a crowd clamoring for forgiveness. They were spoken out of love for a world that rejected and hurt him.

For Carolyn, forgiveness meant being brutally honest with God about her anger and hurt; even then it took a long time. But ultimately forgiveness gave her the freedom to let go and move ahead with her life. And as we all do when we forgive, she became more like Christ in the process.





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Nancy Ortberg is a church leadership consultant and popular speaker. Formerly a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, she now lives in California with her husband, John. The couple has three children, Laura, Mallory, and John. This article first appeared in the September/October 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

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Additional Resources

More places for more help.

A Spirit Fit to Lead, a downloadable resource from GiftedforLeadership.com, will help you explore ways to keep your spirit uplifted so you will be able to lead others. When our souls aren't being nourished, it can be easy to bring unnecessary challenges into leadership situations—whether at church, work, or even at home. Maybe we aren't as patient as we could be. Maybe we seek conflict instead of peace. Maybe we ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit when we should be focused on them.

Embrace Grace, by Liz Curtis Higgs (Random House, 2006). The forgiven life. The grace-filled life. It begins with an embrace. Wherever you are spiritually and whatever you have been through emotionally, *Embrace Grace* brings the welcome, life-giving message that you are already enfolded in the arms of One who believes in you, supports you, and treasures you. Join Higgs, the best-selling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*, as she helps women let go of past mistakes and disappointments. Learn how you can accept the gift of divine mercy—and embrace the joyful freedom that grace provides.

Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, by Lewis B. Smedes (HarperCollins Publishing, 2007). In Lewis Smedes's classic book on forgiveness, he shows us that it is possible to heal our pain and let go of the resentment that poisons us. *Forgive & Forget* will provide the energy needed to forgive our wrongdoers and release the feelings of hurt and anger that occupy our minds and souls. By using a four-stage process and real life experiences, Smedes

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offers hope and solace for anyone who longs for the peace that comes with forgiveness.

Forgiving the Unforgivable, by David Stoop (Gospel Light, 2005). Forgiveness is an essential part of being a Christian. But what do we do when confronted with the unforgivable—an act that shakes our mortal foundations to their roots, often committed by someone trusted and loved? Murder, sexual abuse, adultery—all leave lifelong wounds and all are unforgivable trespasses that through the grace of God *can* be forgiven. Dr. David Stoop compassionately guides us along the course of heartfelt forgiveness, freeing us to apply the biblical teachings that have already changed thousands of lives.

Learning to Forgive, a downloadable resource from the TodaysChristianWomanStore.com. Learning what forgiveness means—and what it doesn't is difficult. If you struggle with this issue in your life, you'll love the articles in this download. You'll find great practical advice on the how to's of forgiveness as well as stories of the transforming power of forgiving someone.

The Art of Forgiving, by Lewis B. Smedes (Random House, 1997). Within the capacity of every wounded person, even in circumstances when only hate seems possible, is the ability to forgive. If you are ready to make peace with those who have hurt or betrayed you, author Lewis Smedes will lead you through three stages of forgiveness. Using dramatic examples drawn from life, this wise author illuminates, step by step, the healing path to peace and freedom.





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