

# Can We Forgive? Part One

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## **Luke 6:37-38**

The twentieth century was the deadliest in human history. Two world wars and a multitude of regional conflicts have pitted one group of people against another with disastrous results. One of the groups in a conflict would think that they needed to getting even with the other group and violence and bloodshed would continue. Or one of the groups would say that revenge and getting even was justice because the other group should pay the price. Getting even and getting revenge to make sure people pay takes precedence over finding peace. Forgiveness offers an alternative to paying back the offense with revenge and more violence.

For the next 4 weeks we will be discussing forgiveness. There is a lot to say on forgiveness and we will take the time to discuss many of the aspects of forgiveness. We may not mention beliefs you have about forgiveness and if that happens, please reach out to me and let me know. My dissertation for my doctorate was on forgiveness. One of the main reasons I wanted to write about this topic is because of my personal experience with forgiveness.

I believe that forgiveness may be the most difficult thing we are called to do as Christians. It is easier to pray for someone than it is to forgive someone. We can pray from afar, but forgiveness is very personal. We work on forgiveness for a lifetime. Just when we think we have forgiven a person, something else happens with that person or with another person and we are back to feeling angry and wanting to get even.

I believe that there is a universal longing in every soul for forgiveness. There is a longing to forgive and to be forgiven. Now you may not think that there is longing to forgive or to be forgiven, and I ask that for the next four weeks you try to keep an open mind.

Let me share with you a story that illustrates the longing for forgiveness. In one of his stories, Ernest Hemingway tells about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. Out of great love for his son, the father takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper, 'Paco, meet me Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.' Now Paco is a rather common name in Spain, and so when the father gets to the hotel, he finds eight hundred young men waiting for their fathers. 800 men showed up who wanted to be forgiven.

Our Scripture today comes from the gospel of Luke. Jesus tells us not to judge or we will be judged. And do not condemn or you will be condemned. Jesus tells us to forgive so that we can be forgiven. In the verses just prior to the ones we read today, Jesus asks us what credit we get for loving the people who love us and cautions us that we should love our enemies. To love our enemies, we need to learn to live with a spirit of forgiveness. This notion of not judging and

of forgiving is difficult. Over the next weeks we will look at reasons to forgive, what the process looks like to forgive, and the benefits of forgiving.

As we begin this study of forgiveness, I invite you to think of someone in your life that you need to forgive or someone who needs to forgive you. As we discuss forgiveness over the next 4 weeks, I want you to come back to this person that you are naming, and reflect on what is said each week and about forgiveness. I am not asking you to forgive this person at the end of 4 weeks. I am only asking that you think about forgiveness and this person.

There is no standard definition for forgiveness. I read many books and researched the topic and there was no standard definition. I created my own definition of forgiveness; it is a definition that speaks to me. There are two parts to this definition. Forgiveness is the elimination of all desire for revenge and personal ill will toward those who have wronged us. Second, forgiveness is an inner peace of heart and the freedom of not having our lives defined by the injuries we have suffered. The first part is about our relationship with others. The second part is about ourselves.

This week I want to spend some time talking about fundamentals of forgiveness, some misplaced beliefs that some people hold, and the myths surrounding forgiveness. First, forgiveness is a process. Forgiveness is a process that we make a conscious decision to enter. It is not easy or quick. It may take years. We have the choice to enter the process or not. We can decide to begin the process to forgive or decide that this is one of those times when forgiveness isn't possible.

Second, forgiveness is not the same as forgetting that the injury happened. I have heard many people say, when we forgive, we forget what happened. That is not true. Just because we forgive doesn't change the past. Forgiving doesn't erase the event that caused our anger or hurt. Forgiveness also does not release the person from the responsibility of their actions. Forgiveness doesn't erase the consequence of the action.

In the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the father forgives his errant son. He welcomes the son home with open arms. However, the father does not divide his estate between the two sons again. If you remember he had done that once. The father remembers the prodigal son's leaving. He honors the elder son's staying and holds the younger son responsible for his actions. The father forgives, but does not forget the actions of the younger son.

Third, forgiveness is not the same as saying the behavior was acceptable. Forgiveness is not condoning the behavior. Forgiveness is about letting go of the hurt and/or anger associated with the event and still understanding that what happened was not appropriate. It requires courage to know what happened was not appropriate and still release the hurt we have felt.

Fourth, forgiveness is personal. Forgiveness is about the change that happens in us. Jesus tells us that we are to live and live life abundantly. To live abundantly means we need to be healed from past wounds and hurts. We need to be made whole. We are encouraged to forgive because that is how we are made healed. I encourage you to never rush into forgiveness until you are ready. Each of us will make the decision of whether to forgive or when to forgive.

Fifth, forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to reconcile with the person who hurt you. Only after you go through the steps of forgiveness do you need to make the decision of whether or not to reconcile. It is only after we have gone through a forgiveness process that we can make a clear decision about whether reconciling is in our best interest. When a couple divorces, it is painful. The divorce may be very difficult with lots of conflict. Even when the divorce is not as difficult and forgiveness is practiced on both sides, the decision may be to go separate ways.

Finally, there is a myth that as Christians we aren't supposed to get angry. We are supposed to love one another. Isn't that what Jesus commands us to do? However, when someone wrongs us, hurts us, or betrays us, we have emotions. Our feelings are involved. We may feel anger, betrayal, sadness, hurt, or rage.

But God created us and God created us with emotions. All emotions, both positive and negative, are part of us being human. God gave us anger as a gift. Our anger tells us that something is wrong. What God is concerned with is how we use anger. When someone has wronged us, we need to admit to ourselves the emotions we experience. We cannot forgive unless we admit the emotions we have toward that person.

One more note on forgiveness. There is a need to forgive whether or not the person apologizes for what happened. We need to remember that forgiveness is about changing our desire for revenge or getting even. Forgiveness is about freeing us from the pain and bringing peace in our lives. The desire for revenge and the freedom from pain changes through the process of forgiveness whether the other person apologizes or not. We certainly hope the other person will realize how they have hurt us and offer an apology. In an ideal world, forgiveness would always be two-way. However, in many cases, the other person doesn't apologize. They may not know that they hurt us, or they may be indifferent to whether they hurt us or not. It is up to us to forgive without the apology from the person who hurt us.

At its core forgiveness is about us and our lives. Forgiveness changes us. Forgiveness transforms us. Forgiveness helps our relationships and our health. Forgiveness is about how we look at the world and people and events in the world.

I want to share a little of my story because as I said earlier my story is the primary reason I wrote about forgiveness in my dissertation. I am not sharing this story with you so that you know what a difficult life I have had. I have worked on forgiveness for years. I still have difficulty with it. When someone wrongs me, I get angry.

I have mentioned that my dad was alcoholic. If you are familiar with alcoholism, you know what that means. If you are not familiar with alcoholism, it means that everyday life is chaotic and unpredictable. One of my biggest disappointments as a teenager was my dad not showing up for my high school graduation.

In addition to my dad being alcoholic my mother gave me harsh verbal messages. Today it would be called verbal abuse. She told me many things, but the one thing she told me that hurt me the most was that I was unlovable. It took me many years of God's healing to undue that message.

In my family as a teenager, we were not supposed to be angry. My dad would go into rages and yell and scream, but he was the only one allowed to do that. For the rest of us, we were not supposed to show our anger. Further, we were not supposed to be angry. As a teenager I tried to not upset either parent. I thought if I could only be good enough everything would be ok.

When I became an adult and some of my relationships were in trouble, I realized that I needed to make some changes in my life. I went into therapy to get some help. My therapist asked me if I was angry that my parents had not been good parents. I was stunned. I denied it. Remember I grew up without expressing anger. It took several weeks to begin to understand that I was angry. In essence my parents had stolen my teenage years. I was angry. How could my parents have treated me that way?

Once I admitted that I was angry, I had to decide whether to be consumed by my feelings of anger and hurt and continue with troubled relationships or to learn how to get beyond those feelings. So, I acknowledged the anger and the loss of those teenage years. Then, I began the process of forgiving my parents. I chose to forgive my parents. I leave this story here for now and will pick up the story in the coming weeks.

The question each week of the next 4 weeks will be "Can We Forgive?" We began the discussion today and will continue next week.

Amen.