

INTRODUCTION

In the series entitled "No, that's NOT in the Bible" we discover some of these pseudo-scriptures actually *contradict* the Bible. For instance, believing the adage "God helps those who help themselves" can hinder a person from seeking God's help. The aphorism "God won't put more on you than you can bear" can be dangerous because it can create confusion and guilt.

Have you ever heard someone say, "The Bible says, 'to err is human; to forgive, divine?'" No, that's NOT in the Bible, but the statement is basically true. We are all sinners. It's just part of our human nature. It is part of God's divine nature to forgive, so when we forgive others, we are displaying a God-like quality. But because we are human we all err. Actually, the correct pronunciation of the word "err" rhymes with "sir." So, we should say, "To urr is human; to forgive divine." But if I happen to mispronounce it in this message, will you please act divinely and forgive me?"

We all experience relationship problems in which we are hurt or offended, so we'd better learn how to forgive. Even people in the church don't always get along. Mike and I have a great relationship based on mutual love and respect, but not every preacher and music director get along as well as we do. I once heard the funny story of the minister of music who led songs disagreeing with what the pastor was saying. For instance, one Sunday the pastor preached on the importance of Christians moving out to share the gospel with others. Immediately after the message the music director led the hymn, "We Shall not be Moved." The next week the pastor preached on the importance of everyone giving more money, and the music director followed it with the hymn "Jesus Paid it All." The next week the pastor preached on the dangers of gossip and the song that followed was "I Love to Tell the Story." The pastor got so frustrated that Sunday night, he threatened to resign if the music didn't change. The music director followed that with "O, Why not Tonight?" Finally the pastor was so fed up that the next Sunday he said, "I've had it with this church. Jesus is leading me to leave and go to another church." And the minister of music stood and said, "Let's all sing 'What a Friend We have in Jesus!'"

The first part of this adage was a common Latin proverb "*errare humanum est.*" In 1711, the English Poet Alexander Pope wrote an "Essay on Criticism" in which he made the statement "Good nature and good sense must ever join / To err is human; to forgive, divine."

Since that time there have been several interesting variations on Pope's statement. Dog lovers claim: "To err is human; to forgive canine." Mae West was once quoted as saying, "To err is human, but it feels divine." For anyone who works with computers today you'll agree: "To err is human—but to really mess things up you need a computer." Someone wisely observed, "To err is human, and to cover it up is too!"

One of the most powerful passages about forgiveness is found in Colossians 3:12-13, "Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Because of our errors, we desperately need divine forgiveness. The Bible teaches God loves us and offers us forgiveness as a free gift; it's part of God's nature to display this amazing grace.

In the Model Prayer Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Accepting God's forgiveness is a lot easier than forgiving others who have hurt and offended us. In this message I want to help you understand six important principles about forgiveness.

1. FORGIVENESS IS NOT A FEELING—IT'S A DECISION

As we examine these six principles of forgiveness, can you think of anyone at this moment who hurt you so deeply you are struggling with being able to forgive them? It may be an ex-spouse, or a former boss, or a family member with whom you are currently estranged. Will you ask the Holy Spirit to put a person or situation on our hearts where you need to apply forgiveness?

Your first objection may be, "But I don't *feel* like forgiving them." That's okay, because God commands us to forgive those who sin against us, whether or not we feel like forgiving them. If you wait until you "feel" like forgiving that person, you may never get around to forgiving them. Like *agape*-love, forgiveness is not a feeling, it's a decision. A maturing Christian does not live by feelings, but by faith and obedience. Forgiveness is not a natural human trait.

William Willimon wrote: "The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural."

When John Wesley was a missionary in Colonial America, he met General James Oglethorpe, governor of Georgia. As they discussed one of the governor's enemies General Oglethorpe said, "I never forget and I never forgive." To which John Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin." The only person who can afford the luxury of unforgiveness is the person who never needs forgiveness.

2. FORGIVENESS IS NOT FORGETTING—IT'S AN INTENTIONAL RELEASE

We've all heard the phrase "forgive and forget." That's misleading because forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting. Or perhaps you've heard someone say, "Well, I'll forgive, but I won't forget!" What they really are saying is, "I'm going to say 'you're forgiven' but I'm going to actively remember what you did to me and I'll remind myself of it every time I hear your name!" That's not real forgiveness.

Forgetting is a passive process in which a matter fades from our memory with the passing of time. We all forget things like names, telephone numbers, and birthdays. It's amazing how some men can forget their wedding anniversary but can remember the score of the 1983 Super Bowl! You don't have to make yourself forget something it just happens. And the older we get the more there is to forget!

Someone said, "The human brain is an amazing organ. It starts working the moment you're born and doesn't stop working until you stand up in front of a crowd to speak!" Seriously, it's good to forget. It would be terrible to have all the memories we've ever had floating around on the surface of our brain; our thinking would be even more cluttered!

Once an old elephant was drinking at a watering hold and spied a turtle. The elephant walked over and swatted the turtle across the pond with his trunk. A passing giraffe said, "Why did you do that?" The elephant said, "I recognized that turtle as the one who took a nip out of my trunk 47 years ago." The giraffe said, "Wow, you must have a great memory." The elephant said, "Yes, I have turtle recall." (Remember, to pun is human; to forgive divine!)

Isn't it interesting we forget all kinds of things, but we usually have total recall when it comes to how other people mistreated us? Forgetting is passive, but forgiving is an active process in which you make a conscious choice *not* to remember.

That's the way God forgives us. In Isaiah 43:25 God says, "I am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sin no more." It never says God *forgets* our sin, because God can't forget anything. God is a lot older than any of us can fathom, but He doesn't suffer senility or dementia. When He forgives us, He simply chooses not to remember our sins anymore.

Clara Barton was the American heroine who founded the Red Cross. Once a friend reminded her of a vicious deed someone had done to her years before. Clara Barton acted as if she had never even heard of the painful incident. Her friend asked, "Don't you remember it?" Clara Barton replied, "No, I distinctly remember choosing to forget it."

When the first missionaries to the Eskimos were learning to translate their language, they discovered the Eskimo word for "forgive" was a multi-word phrase: "issumagijoujungnainermik." It literally means "not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore." That's what forgiveness is—it's not forgetting—it's choosing not to let the thoughts of that harmful person or their harmful deed consume your thinking.

One of the most liberating things you can do for yourself is to forgive someone, to release them. Go ahead. Apply that principle to the person or situation troubling you. Make a choice to let it go, and release them. The great Baptist preacher from London, Charles Spurgeon, once wrote: "Forgive and let it go. When you bury a mad dog, don't leave his tail above the ground." That's what forgiveness is; you bury the deed in your subconscious and refuse to go digging for it.

3. FORGIVENESS IS NOT CHEAP—BUT IT'S BETTER THAN REVENGE

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells the parable of a manager who owed his boss several million dollars. The manager begged his boss to forgive his debt, and the boss agreed. But then the forgiven manager went out and met a guy who owed him \$10. The man who had just been forgiven a multi-million dollar debt refused to forgive this man who owed him \$10! He grabbed him by the throat and threatened him, and then he had him thrown in jail. When the Big Boss heard about

the manager's behavior, he had him thrown into jail until he could pay off the millions he owed. The lesson there is obvious. Because God has forgiven us of a debt we could never pay, we should be willing to forgive others, because nobody is as indebted to us as we are to God. But we also see forgiveness costs something. That forgiveness cost the boss several million dollars. God's forgiveness is free—but it's not cheap. In order to purchase our pardon, Jesus paid with the gold of His blood, and the silver of His tears.

It always costs something to forgive. If someone borrowed \$1,000 from you and you realize you'll never see it again, it costs you at least \$1,000 to forgive them. When you forgive someone, it costs you, too. But the cost is much less than the price of revenge. You've probably seen the bumper sticker that says: I DON'T GET MAD; I GET EVEN. It is our nature to seek revenge. You could say, "To err is human; and to seek revenge is too." In the Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare has Shylock ask several human questions: "If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? If you wrong us shall we not seek revenge?" ("Merchant of Venice" III:1)

Sadly, there are people who are so full of hatred and animosity they will use every opportunity to hurt others. Even in death, some people try to extract revenge. Here are two actual bequests from the wills of two people who wanted to get even: One woman stipulated in her will that "\$1.00 from my estate be invested and the interest given to my husband as evidence of my estimate of his worth." Ouch! That's low. Another woman left this directive in her will: "to my estranged husband I leave just enough money to enable him to buy a rope to hang himself."

Jesus taught we should not be the kind of person who seeks to get even. In Matthew 5:38-39 He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." "An eye for an eye" may sound cruel, but at the time this Old Testament law was given, it was merciful. Human nature demands if someone blinds you in one eye, you want to kill them. The Old Testament law taught limited revenge. If they broke out your front tooth, you should limit your revenge to breaking out their front tooth. But someone said "An eye for an eye would leave the whole world blind" so Jesus introduced the concept of grace—not responding in anger, but giving people what they need—forgiveness. It was a revolutionary concept, and it still is. Forgiveness is expensive, but it's not nearly as expensive as seeking revenge.

4. FORGIVENESS IS NOT EASY—IT'S IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT GODS' POWER

Forgiving someone who hurt you is one of the hardest things you'll ever do. I recently read the funny story about a man who was trying to cross a street. As he stepped off the curb, a car came screaming around the corner toward him. The man sped up to hurry across, but the car swerved toward him. So he turned around and headed back toward the curb, and again, the car changed direction to head toward him. The man was so scared he just froze and stopped in the middle of the road. The car barely missed him and screeched to a stop beside him. The window came down and there was a squirrel behind the steering wheel. The squirrel said, "See, it's not as easy as it looks, is it?"

Forgiveness is not as easy as it sounds either. In fact, it's impossible without God's power. I've heard people say, "But I just CAN'T forgive him/her for what they did to me." My reply is often, "You're right, you can't, but God can forgive them through you."

In order to truly forgive someone, you must make FOUR PROMISES:

1. I choose not to think about this incident. Remember, it's impossible to forget it, but you can choose not to think about it.

2. I do not want to harm you for this incident. This is your willingness to release them from your desire to take revenge on them. People often misunderstand this point. If someone committed a crime against you, forgiveness doesn't prevent you from allowing the law to execute justice. But forgiveness requires you do not personally become the judge, jury, and executioner for what they've done.

3. I will not bring up this incident again. This promise would heal many marriage wounds. One husband told a friend, "When my wife and I argue, she gets historical." His friend said, "Do you mean hysterical?" The husband said, "No, she gets historical—she brings up all the mistakes I've ever made." When God forgives our sin, he buries them in the depths of the sea and he never goes fishing for them. When you forgive someone, don't keep resurrecting the incident.

4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us. True forgiveness wipes the slate clean and a broken relationship can be restored. That's what happens when God forgives us. Our sin has separated us from God and His forgiveness removes the wall of separation so we can have a personal relationship with Him.

Now, having examined these four promises, I know some of you are asking, "But what if the person who has hurt me doesn't want to have a relationship with me? What if that person doesn't ask for my forgiveness, should I still forgive them?" That leads to this important principle:

5. FORGIVENESS IS NOT THE SAME AS RECONCILIATION

Some Christians torture themselves because they think they haven't truly forgiven someone because they haven't been reconciled with that person. Here's the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness requires one who offers grace. And reconciliation requires two (grace given and accepted). It's true of God's grace. God unilaterally offers grace and forgiveness to everyone on this planet because He wants to be reconciled with every sinner. But does that mean everyone on the planet will accept His grace? Sadly, no. Reconciliation with God occurs when we repent of our sin and accept His graceful offer of salvation. God doesn't require that we come crawling to Him before He offers forgiveness—His invitation is for us to "come just as we are."

Grace is unmerited favor. Grace is giving someone what they *need*, not what they *deserve*. If someone has wounded you, they don't deserve to be forgiven. Grace forgives them anyway. You don't have to wait for them to come crawling to you to beg you for forgiveness, you can choose to unilaterally forgive them. Hopefully they will accept your forgiveness and your relationship

will be reconciled. But there is the possibility they will reject your offer of forgiveness. If they do, there will be no reconciliation, but you have done all God has required of you. The Bible says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath." (Romans 12:18-19) The Bible doesn't say you can live at peace with all people—that's why it says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on YOU, live at peace with everyone." Sadly, there are some people who reject your willingness to live at peace with them. So, go ahead and forgive them, and move on.

I read of a Christian attorney who after reading some scriptures on forgiveness, decided he would "forgive" some of the debts some of his clients owed him. He drafted a letter explaining his decision and the biblical basis for his decision and sent it to 17 clients who owed him money for more than six months. He sent the forgiveness letters by certified mail. Of the 17 letters he sent, 16 of them were returned to him unsigned and undelivered. His clients refused to sign for the letters because they assumed the lawyer was suing them to pay their debts. They didn't know the letters were good news informing them of the cancellation of their debt. The lawyer didn't withdraw his offer, and when some of the clients later tried to pay part of their debt they were amazed to discover their debt was canceled! Others who never paid lived in fear of being sued, and they were never reconciled with the lawyer.

That's why many people miss out on a relationship with God. He has sent them this wonderful love letter called the Bible to let them know their debt of sin can be cancelled, but they don't even read it. God offers forgiveness to everyone, but reconciliation is dependent on acceptance of His grace.

6. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ONLY GOOD FOR THE OFFENDER—IT HEALS THE ONE WHO FORGIVES

There are basically three reasons why you should forgive others: (1) Because God commands it; (2) Because God has forgiven you; and (3) Because forgiveness is good for you. People who refuse to forgive, hurt themselves. Bitter people can't sleep. Ulcers line their stomach. Their blood pressure rises. They see the negative in every situation because their life is polluted with these feelings of resentment and anger. People who are unwilling to forgive may feel they are punishing the other person but the only person paying the price is themselves. It's good to BE forgiven, but it's also good *to* forgive. If you are harboring a grudge toward someone who has wounded you, do yourself a favor: forgive them.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, "If you pursue revenge, then dig two graves." Using that analogy, maybe you need to take a trip out to the Cemetery of Forgiveness. Then make a list of all the evil, sins, faults and mistakes people have committed to you hurt you. Then dig a hole in the ground and bury those sins forever. And never dig them up again. The person who wounded you doesn't even need to attend the funeral—go ahead and bury them. In so doing, you are setting yourself free from the misery and torment over what they have done to you.

CONCLUSION

Corrie Ten Boom was imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II because her family provided a hiding place for Jews when they were being arrested. She and her sister Betsy were sent to Ravensbrück where horrible torture, rape, and death occurred on a regular basis. Betsy died in the prison camp, but Corrie miraculously survived. She became an effective Christian author and speaker. In 1947 she was invited to speak in Munich, Germany. That evening, she spoke on the topic of forgiveness—how God buries our sins in the depths of the sea. After her talk she was approached by a man who looked familiar to her. With horror she recognized him as one of the cruelest guards at the concentration camp. She remembered the shame of walking naked in front of this very man. Suddenly all the fear and hatred returned in a flash.

He said to her, "In your talk you mentioned Ravensbrück. I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from you as well, Fraulein." He held out his hand to Corrie and said, "Will you forgive me?"

Corrie wrote about that encounter:

"It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.' And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me.

And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

'I forgive you, brother!' I cried. 'With all my heart!' For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. (*Tramp for the Lord*, pp. 55-57)

Like Corrie Ten Boom, we have been offered forgiveness by God, so we should be willing to forgive others. We can't do it alone, but with God's power, we can forgive those who have hurt us. Do yourself a favor, if someone has wounded you, don't let them continue to torture you—release them with your forgiveness.

Try an experiment on the pain of bitterness and the pleasure of forgiveness. Take your right hand and make a tight fist. Squeeze as hard as you can. After only a few seconds it will become painful. Imagine what it would feel like to maintain that tight grip for days, weeks, months, or years. That's what unforgiveness does to your heart. You may not feel it physically, but when you hold onto the sins and shortcomings of others, it hurts you. Remember, the word forgiveness means "to release." Go ahead, release your fist, doesn't it feel better? That's what forgiveness can do for you. Remember, "To err IS human; to forgive feels divine!"

OUTLINE

FORGIVENESS IS NOT:

1. A feeling—it's a decision
2. Forgetting—it's an intentional release
3. Cheap—but it's better than revenge

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." *Matthew 5:38-39*

4. Easy—it's impossible without God's power
5. The same as reconciliation
6. Only good for the offender—it heals the one who forgives

In order to truly forgive someone, you must make four promises:

1. I choose not to think about this incident.
2. I do not want to harm you for this incident.
3. I will not bring up this incident again.
4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us.



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes