

The Faces of Forgiveness (Part I)

by Harold & Bette Gillogly

A few weeks ago, we were talking with a good friend who made a comment that really got us thinking. He said he could not forgive a particular person because that person had not *asked* him for forgiveness. *Are* we held back from forgiveness in this way? What *are* the rules about forgiveness? And *who* exactly are we supposed to forgive? This made for some lively discussion in the car on the way home.

Out of that discussion grew an intense desire to find out all we could about forgiveness. That is what this *Seeds for Growth* grew out of. We figured if we struggled over the issues of forgiveness, others must as well.

We started with the basics: what does forgiveness mean?

We found that forgiveness has two faces. First, it means “to cancel a debt, to pardon or remit guilt.” That is what we had always thought it meant. But there is a second definition of *forgiveness* – to relinquish resentment against the debtor. This is harder to understand. We can cancel a debt, but how do we cancel a feeling?

Did you know the Bible does not define forgiveness? But it certainly gives us a model...God Himself. God cancels the debt and pardons those who confess and repent. 1 John 1:9 states this plainly, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* 2 Peter 3:9 says, *...He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Throughout Scripture it is clear that if we repent, God cancels our debt and pardons us; if we do not repent, He does not pardon. His righteousness demands repentance and cleansing before restoration. So God does not always forgive according to the first definition of forgiveness. He forgives only those who repent.

But what about the second definition, the part about relinquishing resentment? God always forgives in this way. He never holds resentment or bitterness against anyone, whether they repent or not. Some take Jesus’ words from the cross, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34), as a blanket kind of forgiveness for all people. But the forgiveness the Father extended to those mocking and jeering beneath the cross could not have been pardon for their sin in crucifying Jesus, for later in Acts 3 they are still held accountable. *You handed him over to be killed* (verse 13). *You disowned the Holy and Righteous One* (verse 14).

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As Jesus, suffering incredibly, looked down upon His tormentors, He refused to hold resentment against them. Can you picture the Father watching these same people crying out for His Son’s blood? Yet He held no bitterness toward them. Can you imagine that kind of forgiveness?

What do these two faces of forgiveness mean to us in our struggle to forgive?

Let’s go back to the first definition: to pardon or cancel the debt of the offender. There are two Greek words used in Scripture translated as “forgive.” The first word is *Aphiemi* – to let off; to cancel the debt; to set free from the penalty of sin. God canceled my debt of sin that long ago day when I turned to Him, confessed and repented of my sins. And ever since, each time I ask Him to forgive me when I am selfish or proud, He pardons me and restores me to fellowship with Him.

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:8-12).

Forgiving Others

God has forgiven us of so much; He has canceled our debt of sin. Now we must be ready to pardon others. If someone who has wounded us comes and asks our forgiveness, we have only one option – to cancel their debt. From Jesus’ own lips: *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* (Matthew 6:14-15). When Jesus speaks again of forgiveness later in chapter 18, He adds the phrase *...forgive your brother from your heart* (verse 35).

At a spiritually low point in her life, Susan made a reckless choice to have an affair with a co-worker in her office. When she confessed her sin and betrayal to her husband Ken, he was so deeply hurt he declared he could never forgive her. Later, he told her he might forgive her if she proved to him over a period of time that she was truly sorry. Susan was repentant and gladly received even his tentative forgiveness. Months later, Ken confessed to Susan that he had not really forgiven her, for he had not been willing to set aside his claim to justice – to see her punished for hurting him. It took much more time, but finally Ken was able to forgive Susan from his heart.

Forgiveness (con't)

When people say, "I forgive, but I just can't forget," what they usually mean is, "I can't let it go. I won't forgive." That is what Ken was saying until he learned how to forgive like God forgives... completely, unconditionally, without grudging. Scripture describes in a picturesque way how God chooses to forgive and forget. Micah 7:19 says *You...hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.* Ker-plunk! There they go! Corrie Ten Boom used to add, "And then, Beloved, He puts up a no-fishing sign." We, as human beings can not choose to forever put the hurt out of our minds, but we *can* choose to never dredge it up again. We *can* choose to not hold it over the offender's head.

Reconciliation

Because God has forgiven and keeps on forgiving us, He commands His children to be reconciled to each other. Whether we have wronged someone as in Matthew 5:23-24, or have been

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wronged as in Matthew 18:15, *we* are responsible to seek reconciliation. That's right – no matter who started it, we are responsible to try to end it. So when you and your mate quarrel, no matter who hurt who first, you each have the responsibility to make the first move to reconcile.

Forgiveness and Consequences

When we cancel the debt of the person who has wounded us, it does not necessarily mean we can cancel their consequences. Remember the young woman who earlier this year (1998) was on death row in Texas? She had brutally murdered a family, but turned to God and repented in prison. As her execution date drew near, some Christian leaders called for her life to be spared. However, the consequences for her behavior were not in their hands, they were in the hands of the state of Texas which held her accountable and executed her on the appointed day.

Whether you agree with that decision or not, it illustrates the reality that even when we repent and are forgiven, we may still have to face the consequences of our sin. Joe was an alcoholic, and when he was drunk, he was verbally and physically abusive. He always felt sorry for what he had done after he sobered up, and for years Karen accepted his apologies and canceled his debt to her over and over again. Finally, Karen realized that sometimes the most loving thing you can do for someone is to hold them accountable. Instead of continuing to accept Joe's apologies, she confronted him with the reality of their situation. She told him that because she loved him deeply, the free ride was over. He had to get serious help or leave. That was Joe's wake up call, and with professional help he started to change his behavior instead of merely feeling sorry about it. Having to accept the consequences for

his behavior was the best and most loving thing for Joe.

Sometimes, forgiving in the sense of canceling the debt is not in our hands, especially when the offender does not seek our forgiveness. Tom and Darcy fight a continual fight for the welfare of Tom's children by his first marriage. His former wife Connie on one hand bribes the children with tangible "things" and intangible promises of "no rules" if they will come and live with her, while on the other hand, telling them they are no good and unworthy of her love. To protect the children from this is impossible even though Tom and Darcy make herculean efforts to do so. Must they cancel Connie's debt of offense and pardon her? No. She has not repented and asked their forgiveness. But they must relinquish their resentment and bitterness against her or it will eat them alive. Practicing the second side of forgiveness will keep them sane and balanced and help them have peace amidst the turmoil.

We'll talk more about the second side of forgiveness in the next *Seeds for Growth*. How do we relinquish resentment against someone who has wounded us? That's what most of us struggle with, isn't it? In the meantime, we hope these few thoughts about forgiveness have given you something to think about. We welcome your thoughts and comments on the subject. We'd like to hear your stories about how God has worked forgiveness in your life.

Note: All names have been changed and details omitted for the sake of confidentiality.

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