



Forgiveness

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The one factor above all that will determine if a married couple is able to be helped in marriage counseling is whether they are willing to forgive one another for past offences. The issue of forgiveness is not just a marriage issue, it is one that effects every person at some point in their life. The reality is that far too many people allow a lack of forgiveness toward one person to poison and destroy all the other relationships in their lives.

Such was the case with one man I counseled years ago. He had gotten angry at a pastor and as a result had destroyed his relationship with his wife and children. When I met with him and his wife as a last chance to reconcile, he said to me, "I would rather let my wife and children burn in hell than forgive that man." How utterly horrible to consider, yet that is the unfortunate end of unforgiveness. A lack of forgiveness destroys the soul of the individual and robs them of their most precious relationships.

I want to start by considering the reason forgiveness is needed. The first time we see a conflict between men in the Bible is between Cain and Able. Genesis 4:3-16 gives the account of what took place between these men and shows us a picture of the downward spiral of anger and unforgiveness. In verses 3-5, we see the beginning of the problem between the two men, which was not a direct conflict but an issue of personal expectations.

The Bible says, *"...Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect..."* Though we could show that God had set an example of the type of offering that was needed, Cain brought an offering that he fully expected God to receive. His problem began when his expectation of God's response to his offering was broken.

The issue of expectations is so often what causes the initial offense in our lives. Psalm 62:5 says, *"My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him."* The important principle we see here is that our expectations must only be from God. To put expectations on God or on anyone else is going to turn out badly. The scriptures here do not say my expectation is in God or on God but from God.

When God says in Romans 10:13, *"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the LORD shall be saved"*, you can have a firm expectation that if you call on Him you will be saved. That is a real expectation from God. To say that I will never have a problem in my life because I expect God to keep me from troubles is not a real expectation from God. It is something you might impose as an expectation, but God is not bound to it. We not only have expectations concerning God, but we often put our expectations in people which ultimately end in broken expectations.

Jeremiah 17:5-8 gives us a contrast between those who put their expectations in men and those who get them only from God. *"Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit."*

Notice the difference between these two groups. There is a curse on those who put their trust in men. The curse is that their expectations are going to be broken. People fail. They cannot live up to our expectations because they are sinners.

When we put our expectation and trust in people, we often find ourselves just as Jeremiah describes, unfruitful and withering away like a desert bush. The reason is because putting our trust in people means that we remove our trust from God. Those who put their trust in the LORD alone are blessed. They have a promise of provision and nourishment. The person who puts their trust in the LORD will be fruitful.

Let me distinguish here between the issue of expectation and desire. I desire my children to be obedient. But I must make the distinction between my desire for their obedience and my expectation of their obedience. Likewise, God desires us to be obedient, but He doesn't expect it. God expects Christians to sin. In 1 John 1:9, it doesn't say, "if you sin", it says, "if you confess your sin". You see, sin is expected, but confession is desired.

God has a desire for you to choose to walk with Him and yet has made a provision for the fact that you are a sinner. God has never been disappointed in you when you sin, rather He is disappointed for you because He knows the consequences of sin. God hates His children to be hurt and thus desires us to do right and avoid the pain of sin. I have to make the same distinction in those I love. I desire my children to do right but if they don't, I need to understand that they are sinners just like me. I cannot have the expectation that they will never sin since that will only cause me to be under a curse myself.

Cain's expectation that God would accept his sacrifice was broken and the results were catastrophic. The first response to his broken expectation was that "*Cain was very wrath, and his countenance fell.*" Here we see that the source for most anger is our own broken expectations. Anger is not something that is done to you, or imposed on you, it is something that you choose. No one can "make you angry". Someone may do a good job of provoking you, but you choose to be angry or not.

Often the issue of anger is because we have put an expectation on someone and when they failed, we responded just like Cain. We became angry.

God sought to correct Cain for his wrong expectations and anger, but it was to no avail since Cain determined that he was wronged and now sought retribution. We read that Cain was talking to his brother Able in the field and then "*Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.*" Here the issues of resentment, bitterness and vengeance collide with an unforgiving spirit and the consequence is fatal.

In verse 9, Cain enters the stage of denial as he cannot bring himself to admit that he was wrong and thus God passes judgment on him in verses 10-12. God was merciful to Cain even in judgment. What he deserved was death for his murder, but God allowed him to live. In the face of God's mercy however, Cain was ungrateful and said, "*My punishment is greater than I can bear.*" By his constant reference to self in verse 14, we presume Cain went into depression.

Depressed people are incredibly self-focused. "*Thou hast driven me out*", "*shall I be hid*", "*I shall be a fugitive*", "*every one that findeth me shall slay me*". I, I, I, me, me, me. That is the definitive mark of a depressed person but unfortunately that is not the end of his downfall. Verse 16 tells us that "*Cain went out from the presence of the LORD*". The ultimate end of unforgiveness is that it takes a person away from the presence of God.

Notice the process in Cain's life. Broken expectations led to anger. Anger led to resentment, bitterness, and vengeance which then led to ingratitude and depression which then took him away from the presence of God. All of these sinful responses are possible in our human relationships. Unfortunately, many marriages and families are plagued with them in one form or another. The answer to every issue we see here is forgiveness.

Most people try to forgive in one of two ineffective ways. The first ineffective way is logical forgiveness. This is when you try to reason out why you should forgive someone. This doesn't work because if a person continues to do what offended you in the first place and you haven't changed, they are just going to do it again. Eventually it doesn't make sense to forgive someone who continues to offend you.

The second ineffective way is emotional forgiveness. This is where you say, "I don't feel like being angry or bitter anymore, so I am going to forgive so that I feel better." Emotions are always changing though. It is like the man who said in marriage counseling, "When my wife gets angry, she gets historical, she brings up everything I have ever done!"

Logical and emotional forgiveness are just band aids. They do not resolve the issue; they just cover it for a while. When they fail, the relationship is destroyed.

The Bible talks about a very different kind of forgiveness. For the sake of this article, let's call this spiritual forgiveness. Spiritual forgiveness is based on Ephesians 4:31-32 where it says, *"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."*

Bitterness, wrath, and anger are easily understood. Clamour means repeated loud outbursts. Evil speaking is having wrong communication with someone, talking bad about them, or talking in anger with them. Malice is to have evil intentions toward someone else.

God says that the answer for all of these things is to practice spiritual forgiveness. This spiritual forgiveness is not based upon how we think or feel but upon the choice that God made concerning forgiveness.

The verse says that God made the choice to forgive based upon Christ. God does not forgive you because He feels like it, or even because He thinks it is a good idea. He determined to forgive you because of the actions of Christ Jesus. The cross is the fixed point of forgiveness.

Feelings and thinking changes, but what Jesus did on the cross will never change. Paul says that you and I are to forgive in the same way that God forgives. We are to forgive for Christ's sake.

Paul gives us an example of this type of forgiveness in 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 when he says, *"To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices."*

Paul's forgiveness worked like this. First, he considered the offence and then asked, did Jesus die to cover this sin? The answer to that question is always yes since Christ died for all sin. He then made the decision to go with God's choice to forgive based upon the actions of Jesus Christ over his own thinking and feelings.

As a believer, you must forgive as God forgives lest as Paul says, *"Satan should get an advantage of us:"* Certainly we are not ignorant of the fact that the devil loves to trap Christians in this sin of unforgiveness.

Let me make an important distinction between forgiveness and restoration. They are not the same thing. God has chosen to extend the offer of forgiveness to all men through Christ Jesus, however, all men are not forgiven and saved.

Only those who repent and turn to God are forgiven and restored to a right relationship with Him.

Suppose a loved one is in sin and the relationship is hindered. Then someone who is ignorant of the relationship between forgiveness and restoration says, "well if you were a real Christian, you would forgive them", implying that real Christianity is to overlook unrepentant sin and act as though it didn't happen.

That is not real forgiveness. Forgiveness should be offered to the offender immediately based upon Christ but being forgiven and the restoration of the relationship is contingent on the other individual's repentance toward the offense.

True forgiveness on our part keeps us from being angry and bitter against them and thus our relationship is right regardless of their response. This is so important because of what Jesus warned us about in Matthew 6:15, *"But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

God offers us forgiveness for our offences and when we repent, restores us to a right relationship with Him. If we refuse to make the same offer to others, we are in danger of following the path of Cain to our own destruction. Following God's way of offering forgiveness frees us from the destructive power of unforgiveness.

To learn more about forgiveness and the life God intended you to have, I encourage you to take our free Bible study entitled, "Finding Hope in Jesus". Contact us at biblestudyglobal@gmail.com to learn more about our FREE Bible study program.

For more information, please contact us at:

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