

# Chapter 14

## Rest, Forgiving As Forgiven

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

(Ephesians 4:32)

He that demands mercy and shows none, ruins the bridge over which he himself is to pass.<sup>131</sup>

(Puritan saying)

Hello.”

“Good morning. Is this Ramona?”

“This is Ramona.” Her voice was so bright and cheerful, but that would change in a few moments.

“I’m Jim Anderson with Anderson Trucking Service.”

“Oh yes, my son, Stanley, drives for your company. He really likes driving for ATS.”

“I am glad to hear that.” I took a long pause. “Well, I’m afraid I have some very bad news.” I heard Ramona take a deep breath. “I am so sorry. There is no good way for me to tell you. Your son was killed this morning in a trucking accident.” There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Like air being let out of a balloon, the cheer had been drained from her voice. I repeated, “I’m sorry. I wish I didn’t have to tell you this.”

Ramona was weeping. I broke the silence again, “Stanley was one of our best drivers. This is a big loss for us and a great loss for you.”

Stanley was a million-mile driver, which meant he had driven a million miles without an accident. It takes about eight years of constant driving to drive a million miles. Stanley was actually well on his way to being a two million-mile driver.

In a trembling voice Ramona slowly whispered a few questions inquiring about the accident. The news had dealt her an emotional death blow, as if she had been hit by the truck. My words had drained the strength out of her. I gave Ramona a general description of what happened. She called her cousin to join her as she pondered her loss.

This was one of the hardest phone calls I have ever made. As Relationship Consultant (Chaplain) with the trucking company, I was the most likely person to make the call. I wished I could have delivered the news in person; however, I was several hundred miles away from Ramona’s home at the time. Law enforcement officers and the coroner in the vicinity of the accident were a thousand miles away. They wanted the family to be contacted as soon as possible. My cell phone was the most expedient means of sharing the sad news with Ramona.

Ramona lived alone on a small pension. Stanley, Ramona’s only child, was now dead at age forty-seven. He left behind no children. He had never been married. Now Ramona was more alone than ever.

Another truck had pulled out directly in front of Stanley’s truck. His death was immediate. The other truck driver walked away unharmed. His company quickly offered Ramona a settlement. It was more money than she had seen at any time in her life. However, it was small compared to what she might have received had she chosen to pursue a greater amount in court.

Ramona was content with the offer, expressing no desire to fight over her loss. No amount of money could bring her son back. Ramona wrote the following note to the other truck driver:

I hold no animosity toward you. It was an accident. We cannot fully understand God's plan, nor can we change it. Although I am completely heartbroken, I wish you God's peace. Pray for us both.

(Stan's Mom)

Ramona lives about a three-hour drive from me. Once in a while I make a point of stopping by to have coffee with Ramona. Her hardships have been great, as has been her freedom. She smiles and laughs freely without regret or thoughts of retaliation. Ramona is a picture of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is rest. Apart from forgiveness there is no real rest. There is hardly a relationship on earth that doesn't at some point require forgiveness. Even if a person works for himself, the day will come when he will have to forgive himself for some ridiculous or wrongful act.

After years of providing pastoral counseling in church and community situations, I have boiled counseling down to two questions: *Has the person in front of me sinned? Has the person in front of me been sinned against?*

Obviously there is much more to counseling than two questions. But those two questions provide beginning points. If the person has sinned, I must lead him or her to a response of repentance, no matter how convincing his or her rationalization or pathetic the circumstances. In the event that he or she has been the victim of someone else's sin, I must gently lead this person down the path to forgiveness, no matter how disgusting the abuse.

Several years ago a woman Lois and I knew became anxious as she grew aware of abuse in her life. As a child she had been sexually abused by her brother and one of his friends, and it was all coming back to her. The

woman had an eating disorder and was experiencing a wide range of emotions from sorrow to rage. Lois and I empathized with her childhood losses and adult misery as she worked through the memories and tarnished relationships. She had reason for anger but choosing a vindictive mode was unhealthy. She had watched a talk show which encouraged anger and getting even. When I suggested she move toward forgiveness she responded, “Forgive? No, get angry!” Being confident that she had neither the means nor the intentions to carry out vengeance, I said, “Let us know when you are ready to talk about forgiveness.” After three weeks of bitter anguish she approached us willing and ready to learn about forgiveness. She wanted to be free, not only from the sin others had brought on her, but the anger toward those who had abused her. Unforgiveness tormented her.

### **FORGIVENESS IS ESSENTIAL FOR HEALTH**

Recent research reinforces what has been the truth of Scripture for thousands of years: forgiveness is essential for health! Dr. Frederic Luskin, Ph.D. in Counseling and Health Psychology from Stanford University, is the Co-Director of the Stanford-Northern Ireland HOPE Project, an ongoing series of workshops and research projects that investigate the effectiveness of his forgiveness methods on the victims of political violence.<sup>132</sup> He states: “The practice of forgiveness has been shown to reduce anger, hurt, depression and stress and leads to greater feelings of hope, peace, compassion and self confidence. Practicing forgiveness leads to healthy relationships as well as physical health. It also influences our attitude which opens the heart to kindness, beauty, and love.”<sup>133</sup>

Just as the official Christian response to personal sin is repentance, the official Christian response to abuse is forgiveness. We cannot rest until we learn to forgive as God in Christ forgave us. We may engage in restful vacations, relaxing hobbies, fine fellowship, annual retreats, and periodic

sabbaticals. We may even establish a weekly Sabbath-rest. However, if you and I are not convinced of God's forgiveness toward us and have not learned to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us, we remain restless.

If you have not forgiven someone, you cannot stand to be in the same room with the person. If you happen to see someone who reminds you of that person, your blood pressure rises as you subconsciously tense up. If this person is at work, conversations are guarded and communication is limited. By the end of the day fatigue has you weary. If the person is at church, tuning in God is like attempting to listen to AM radio while going through a car wash. Without admitting it, you are in bondage to your unforgiveness.

Walter A. Henrichsen has written a daily devotional book which in my evaluation is worthy to stand on the shelf next to Oswald Chamber's *My Utmost for His Highest*. In *Thoughts from the Diary of a Desperate Man*, Henrichsen makes a case that is applicable to any life situation: "Your readiness to forgive is essential for a life of love and ministry. If you cannot forgive because of hurt inflicted by others, you will be unwilling to be vulnerable for fear of being hurt again. Because people are sinners, you cannot love and you cannot minister without getting hurt."<sup>134</sup>

As we mix with church members, fellow employees, neighbors, and strangers, there will be ample opportunity to forgive. We all have our personal horror stories of being used, abused, or betrayed. The question is not how often or severely we have been wronged, but how often we have forgiven as God in Christ has forgiven us.

If I have any hope of forgiving, I must have an accurate definition of forgiveness. After studying forgiveness as demonstrated throughout the Scriptures for years, I have settled on the following definition of forgiveness: Forgiveness is a premeditated condition of the heart based on the fact that God in Christ has already forgiven me. This definition proceeds

from two similar verses of Scripture: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

As I ponder forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven me, I cannot help but ask *how does God forgive?* And more specifically, *how has God forgiven me?* If I cannot answer these questions, there is little chance that I will be able to forgive others as God has forgiven me.

### **GOD TAKES THE INITIATIVE FOR OUR FORGIVENESS**

First of all, when God forgives he takes the initiative. Figuratively speaking he doesn’t stand there with his arms folded and nose in the air waiting for offenders to come crawling and begging his forgiveness. Notice who makes the first move after Adam and Eve commit the first sin: “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’” (Genesis 3:9-11).

God took the initiative, calling to Adam and Eve while they hid in shame. God, the Righteous, made the first move toward man, the fallen. Forgiving as God forgives means you and I make the first move toward offenders when offended. Unlike God, my tendency is to leave fellow sinners to cower in their own garden of shame. Worse than avoiding, I tend to turn away from those who offend me. Instead of enhancing forgiveness, walking away makes forgiveness more awkward. God, the Righteous, builds bridges to the offenders. We, the sinners, tend to burn bridges of forgiveness toward fellow sinners.

God took the initiative by providing a solution to man's sin problem. The multitude of consequences sinful man brought upon himself belonged to man. Sin was man's problem. God could have folded his arms in disgust and responded, "You got yourself into this mess. You can get yourself out." He could have let humans squirm in their consequences for a few hundred years before giving the slightest hope that he would help them. Not God! He gave them hope by immediately taking the initiative. In the midst of the curses resulting from the fall, God gives the battle plan for defeating sin. God cursed the serpent for instigating the fall of man; with the curse came the announcement of Satan's ultimate defeat at the foot of the Messiah.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:14, 15)

I cannot imagine that Adam and Eve understood all that there was to know about the coming Messiah by this pronouncement. But they had to get the message that God would send someone extraordinary to defeat the serpent, Satan, reverse the deadly consequences of sin, and lead them to the tree of life. This was their hope and the hope of their descendants for ages to come.

God's initiative to forgive pre-existed the fall of man. Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul provides insight into God's kind intentions: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Ephesians 1:3, 4).

Did God scramble to conjure up some response to man's twisted behavior? *Oh my! What am I to do now that man has fallen into sin?* No. His disposition was to forgive. When man sinned, God's plan to send his Son was engaged, first as a promise, then as a sacrifice.

That initial nugget of hope given by God to the first man and woman would come to fruition in the coming of Jesus Christ the Messiah. The author of Hebrews discloses many promises which in times past were mysteries: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

From the beginning God took the initiative, bringing forth a plan to forgive man—a plan that was impossible for sinful man to perform and probably beyond the imagination of his darkened mind.

God's initiatives surge forth from his love, love that precedes the fall of man. That love pre-dates all creation. It is a love that always was, is, and forever will be. God is love (I John 4:16). The love of God will not be denied. No human condition can stop it, not even the grotesque sinful condition of man. It continues to demonstrate itself in the most profound way: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

God's taking the initiative to forgive was consistent in his teachings. One of the many examples in the Gospels where Jesus took the initiative to forgive is featured in Mark chapter two:

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. <sup>2</sup> So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. <sup>3</sup> Some



men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup> Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” <sup>6</sup> Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, <sup>7</sup> “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” <sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? <sup>10</sup> But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” <sup>12</sup> He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”  
(Mark 2:1-12)

The paralytic was brought in because he needed to be healed. Jesus did better than heal the man. He took the initiative to forgive him despite the unbridled criticism of the teachers of the law. This narrative communicates not only Jesus’ willingness to forgive but his authority to do so.

God’s initiative to forgive was evident in the life as well as the death of Christ. Among the most hideous sins committed against the one who came to forgive were the scoffing rude taunts from those who so desperately needed his forgiveness. Bleeding and bruised, Christ took the initiative to express forgiveness: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots” (Luke 23:34).

I cannot help but question, *did anyone in the New Testament actually take forgiveness as far as Jesus did? Is there any example of anyone taking the initiative to forgive as Jesus demonstrated?* The answer is found in Acts chapter seven. As Stephen was being stoned for speaking while full of the Holy Spirit, others added sins to their accounts by stoning him. Full of divine initiative to forgive in the pattern of Jesus, Stephen cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Stephen’s example leaves me with no excuse for failing to take the initiative when I’m sinned against. I cannot say *that’s impossible. Only God has the strength to take the initiative and forgive such sin.* God gives the strength to forgive with such an initiative if we are willing to forgive as forgiven. John Ensor is president and executive director of *A Woman’s Concern* (pregnancy resource centers), a ministry that cares for unwed mothers and teaches them to forgive. The following excerpt comes from his book, *Experiencing God’s Forgiveness*:

There are many people who have blocked the flow of mercy in their own lives with huge grudges. Stephen knew somehow that his own ability to receive mercy was dependent on letting go of his grudges—no matter how justified they felt. A wise Puritan once said, “He that demands mercy and shows none, ruins the bridge over which he himself is to pass.” So Stephen forgave his worst enemy and in so doing received mercy from God.<sup>135</sup>

Every Sunday the Lord’s Prayer is recited from memory by millions of parishioners in a myriad of languages. The Lord’s Prayer assumes a willingness

on our part to take the initiative in forgiving other sinners as God has taken the initiative in forgiving our sins: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven me requires that I, the offended, make the first move toward my offenders. Running, hiding, and avoiding my offenders are no longer options. I must take the initiative, not with passive-aggressive intentions smearing them with shame but by building a bridge to God which we can walk together.

## **GOD PAYS THE PRICE FOR OUR FORGIVENESS**

Second, when God forgives he pays the price for forgiveness. Forgiveness, which is free to the sinner, costs the sinless his Son. Nothing is truly free. Regardless of the product or service, every free offer is a line item in a budget. Someone is paying for any free gift. What may be free to me costs someone something. We cherish our freedom as Americans, boasting about how free we are to one another and the rest of the world. However, one trip to the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C., or any military graveyard is a sobering reminder that our freedom is not free.

The Hebrew word for forgiveness conveys the idea of carrying or bearing a heavy burden. This word to forgive is used repeatedly in Psalm thirty-two and provides a vivid picture of forgiveness in Isaiah chapter fifty-three:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.  
(Isaiah 53:4-6)

The forgiveness that is free to me, a sinner, is not free to God or his Son. The price is very heavy. However, the weight is not measured in pounds or dollars. The price is measured in blood, the substance of life.

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

(Hebrews 9:14)

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

(I Peter 1:18-19)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

(Ephesians 1:7)

The forgiveness that is free to me and you was purchased with Christ's blood. His blood was one-of-a-kind, sin-forgiving, and life-giving plasma. It was the maximum price paid by God. No other human specimen would do, for he alone was sinless, satisfying the price of sin on man's behalf. As the Son of God, Jesus Christ satisfied forever the righteous demands of God. As man, Christ died on behalf of man. Grace is defined by God's paying the price for the forgiveness of our sins. It is a free gift that can never be earned or deserved: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

There is one cost to the recipient of free forgiveness. It will cost you and me our pride. Pride tends to think it is worthy of forgiveness. Pride wants to claim *I figured it out on my own. I worked hard enough to deserve forgiveness*. Pride sees no need for grace and no problem with sin. Pride is the price of forgiveness. It must be left at the door of forgiveness.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

(I Corinthians 1:26-31)

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

(Galatians 6:14)

Corrie ten Boom provides this description of the prideful, self-possessed heart that at one time or another describes all of us: “Self is a tight lock. I saw many decent sinners who were in a kind of spiritual prison because self was on the throne of their hearts and Jesus was on the cross. What a liberation came when Jesus cleansed the heart with His blood. Then He came to the throne, and self went on the cross.”<sup>136</sup>

If I am going to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven me, I must be prepared to pay some price as I offer forgiveness. This price is not to be confused with or compared to Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross for the sins of the world. I am, however, likely to suffer some consequence for my offender’s wrongdoing. Take, for instance, the example of Stephen who was stoned to death by jealous men. Stephen’s life was shortened because of the sin of his murderers. The difference between Stephen’s death and Christ’s death is that Stephen died *because of* their sins, Jesus died *for* their sins. Stephen’s death was a consequence of their sins. Jesus’ death was a

payment for their sins. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (I Peter 2:24).

## **FORGIVENESS AND CONSEQUENCES**

Forgiveness means that I am willing to accept the consequences of someone else’s sin. Forgiveness does not automatically remove or reverse the consequences imposed by a careless or evil act. If that were the case, forgiving would be easy. Forgiving without consequences would be light duty. Living with one leg because a drunk driver swerved into your lane is hard to forgive. Enduring third-degree burns and scores of skin grafting procedures because some arsonist set your apartment on fire require a big, forgiving heart. Unfortunately, children are often the brunt of adult abuse.

My grandfather on my mother’s side lived to be ninety-five years of age. At age eighty-seven he set out to write down his life story. He was not well educated and struggled to put it all on paper. The final copy was only sixteen double-spaced typed pages. I have wondered, *how can a person manage to cover eighty-seven years in sixteen pages?* Whatever finds its way into print must have had great impact on the autobiographer.

Peering back to when he was seven, Grandpa Joe, as he was known, remembered enduring several painful procedures to save his leg from osteomyelitis, an inflammation of the bone and bone marrow. A team of doctors would come to the house. One would hold the chloroform pad over his nose to keep him from moving while the other cut his leg open from knee to ankle. Then they proceeded to chip away the decayed bone from his leg with a hammer and chisel. It was reported that his mother had to leave the house because she couldn’t bear the intensity of his screams.

He was on crutches for six months and out of school for one and one-half years. He was now well behind the children in his class, bigger than those in his stage of learning and practically illiterate. Since his immigrant parents only spoke Swedish, he didn't know much English. In his own words, "I didn't understand the teacher and she didn't understand me."

It became necessary for him to attend summer school. The teacher told the children, if they did not miss one day during the term, she would give each a football. He reported: "Ed Shafer and I made it. The last day the teacher came to me holding two toothpicks in her hand. One toothpick was higher than the other. I pulled on the lower one and she pinched her fingers tight, then I had to pull the other one and that was the short one. She then said that I should go to Ed and see who had the longest and she handed the football to Ed. Then the kids laughed. We should have both had a football."<sup>137</sup>

To his death Grandpa Joe always had two legs. He lived with a very thin layer of skin on his shin. If he bruised that leg his shin bone became exposed. He also lived with a very thin layer of self-respect. I don't know how my Grandpa Joe processed that belittling moment arranged by the one-room school teacher. Obviously, the event influenced him enough so that he recalled it eighty years later. He forgave and learned to live with being slighted more than once. However, as a child it may have weakened his self-respect as much as osteomyelitis weakened his leg.

I was thirty when Grandpa Joe died. He had been retired my whole life and was available to spend time with his grandchildren; we loved him. Grandpa Joe left me with a wealth of memories and always encouraged good self-respect. Unfortunately, he had to fight for what little he possessed.

Consequences don't disappear because we forgive, bitterness does. In a discussion of forgiveness versus bitterness Neil Anderson explains how to

live with consequences without becoming bitter: “Forgiveness is agreeing to live with the consequences of another person’s sin. Forgiveness is costly. You pay the price of the evil you forgive. You’re going to live with those consequences whether you want to or not; your only choice is whether you will do so in the bitterness of unforgiveness or the freedom of forgiveness.”<sup>138</sup>

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNFORGIVENESS**

Painful as bearing the consequences of someone else’s sin may be, failure to forgive can be far worse. In the same chapter where Paul tells us to forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us, he warns: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27).

Anger is not necessarily sin. However, the longer anger remains unresolved the greater the likelihood that anger will turn into sin. Stuffing anger may appear to be a safe option compared to going to jail for acting it out on someone or something. On the other hand, seething, unexpressed anger can result in another kind of imprisonment.

It is no accident that these two verses appear together. Unresolved anger gives the Devil a foothold, and literally ground in our lives. He uses anger as a beachhead from which he can further disturb a person’s peace. The person becomes preoccupied with the disabling unrest and distracted from his or her awareness of God. I don’t believe Satan or demons actually possess believers, since they don’t really possess anything. Possession is not an accurate description of demonization. The literal meaning of demonization is “demon caused passivity.”<sup>139</sup> Satan and his cohorts are squatters, not owners; however, as squatters they can certainly create a disturbance. No case of unresolved anger is worth coddling, given the likes of Satan’s schemes (II Corinthians 2:11, Ephesians 6:11).



There is another reason to dread the consequences of unforgiveness—it easily turns into bitterness, causing us to miss out on the fullness of God’s grace. Hebrews 12:15 warns: “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” Failure to give or receive forgiveness yields ground to bitter roots. Like roots of Bermuda grass these bitter roots occupy one location from which shoots of grass spread out in many directions.

I was first introduced to Bermuda grass after moving to Overland Park, Kansas. Bermuda grass soccer fields or lawns are ideal in southern climates, a nuisance in the central states. Every summer this strange grass kept springing up in my lawn. I was surprised to find that the roots did not grow directly beneath the grass. As I pulled the vine-like grass hand over hand I eventually came to roots anchored in the ground. When I tugged on the root I seldom got it all. The unwanted Bermuda grass returned to my lawn season after season. One day a lawn care specialist told me that I would need to kill the lawn in those areas if I want to get that creepy grass off my lawn. So I ended up with big brown spots of dead grass that required reseeding.

Unfortunately many communities, work environments, and churches are like that lawn. Bitter roots of unforgiveness have been sown by unforgiving people. Roots of bitterness spread poisoning attitudes decades later. It is hard to identify the true sources of bitterness; some have died, others have moved away but the bitterness remains. I am afraid that many churches are missing God’s gracious blessing because of people with bitter roots. It is so severe in some churches that closing them down probably remains the best option.

## **VENGEANCE**

I have wrestled with the question, *how can anyone rest when he or she has suffered such wounds and feels such vengeance toward those who have tortured them?* Romans chapter twelve reminds us that we can rest in the fact that God is just and vengeance belongs to him: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:17, Deuteronomy 32:35).

Vengeance is God’s responsibility, not yours or mine; and he carries a bigger stick than we can fathom. Imagine that you have been picked on by bullies after walking home from school. You could retaliate, which would result in getting beat up far worse than being picked on. Or you could tell your big brother what’s been happening. God is your big brother who cannot be beaten. God keeps perfect records of what goes on down here. You don’t have to tell him a thing; he already knows about your suffering and has a plan for executing justice. There will be no need for witnesses. He has seen it all. There will be no jury. His wisdom is perfect and without prejudice. You can rest in the fact that he will set all things right.

Jesus Christ provided the most powerful example of enduring suffering without retaliating. The Apostle Peter wrote the following to believers who were suffering for their faith: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ <sup>23</sup> When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (I Peter 2:21-23).

I can tell you personally that entrusting my body, soul, mind, and circumstances to God who judges justly has brought great rest into my life.

I have not trusted consistently; but when I have, trust has allowed me to sleep like a baby in his mother's arms.

Paul assured the suffering believers in Thessalonica that God would punish those who had wronged them:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you <sup>7</sup> and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power <sup>10</sup> on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

(II Thessalonians 1:6-10)

As my awareness of God's righteous power expands, I become convinced that it is an awful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God (Luke 12:5). My attitude toward offenders has changed from fear of them to fear for them. I pray for offenders and will urge them to plead for mercy and forgiveness from Almighty God before it is too late.

## **GOD FORGIVES COMPLETELY**

Third, it must be noted that forgiving as God forgives covers all of our sins. Paul makes a specific point of mentioning that God *forgave us all of our sins*. "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Colossians 2:13, 14).

Unlike a child who separates his vegetables at the dinner table eating carrots and corn and leaving peas and beans, God does not sort out sins, forgiving some and not others. The word *canceled* means to blot out or wipe away. When a scribe needed to remove what was written, he blotted it out with a liquid substance similar to ink. In more recent history typists used whiteout to cover mistakes. In the age of computers we highlight and press the delete key. God highlights our past sins and presses the delete key. That's forgiveness! On the topic of justification, Warren Wiersbe has provided a vivid illustration that has stayed with me for years:

My friend Dr. Roy Gustafson has the finest illustration of justification I have ever heard. It seems that there was a man in England who put his Rolls-Royce on a boat and went across to the Continent to go on a holiday. While he was driving around Europe, something happened to the motor of his car. He cabled the Rolls-Royce people back in England and asked, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?" Well, the Rolls-Royce people flew a mechanic over! The mechanic repaired the car and flew back to England and left the man to continue his holiday. As you can imagine, the fellow wondered, "How much is this going to cost me?" So when he got back to England, he wrote the people a letter and asked how much he owed them. He received a letter from the office that read, "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls-Royce." Now that's justification.<sup>140</sup>

That's not all. So complete is God's forgiveness that he cancels the written code that was against us. Not only our sins went on the cross, but everything that identified and exposed our sins. That which made us feel guilty was nailed to the cross with the sin. When God purchased our forgiveness he did not fit us into something just good enough, He gave us a Rolls-Royce model of forgiveness. Forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven

means that I turn around and forgive others with the finest forgiveness, forgiveness from heaven.

If I am going to forgive as God forgives me, I must not only release the sin of the offender from my mind, I must relinquish scorekeeping. I must ignore how many times they have hurt me versus how many times I may have hurt them. I must surrender record keeping all together. I am to throw away the evidence of the sin, refusing to reapply the written code that exposed the sin in the first place. Such comprehensive forgiveness is also mine to claim for myself. Some personalities have a harder time forgiving themselves than forgiving those who have offended them. Believe me, I have been there. If I have asked for God's forgiveness in Christ, I am to treat my sin as completely forgiven. Being forgiven by God puts an end to replaying in my mind sins I have committed.

Fourth, forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven you will probably mean you will have to do it again. Peter asked the question others have hesitated to ask for fear that they may have to do the hard work of forgiving all over again: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Translators debate whether the Greek phrase should be rendered *seventy-seven times* (NIV) or *seventy times seven* (NASB). "You are to forgive an unending number of times" was probably the intent of Jesus' comment. That is an astonishing answer to Peter who no doubt thought he was being quite generous by suggesting he forgive an offender seven times. It is an outrageous answer to any of us who think we are being quite big after forgiving once.

**"I WOULD FORGIVE YOU, EVEN IF YOU DID IT AGAIN"**

When I was young enough to be an asset to a church softball team our entire family got in the church bus with other ballplayers and their families. We were on our way to an away game. After the game we shook hands with the other team, the winners, and began loading the bus gathering chairs, blankets, balls, bats, and youngsters. Suddenly we all heard a blood-curdling scream. Nate, our seven-year-old son, had picked up and swung an aluminum bat, striking four-year-old Landon above the eye. The cut bled as freely as he cried. Realizing what he had done, our son joined the parade of tears. Landon would require a few stitches but was going to be all right. Before leaving the field I instructed Nate that he needed to say “I’m sorry” and ask Landon to forgive him.

Still whimpering, Nate walked up to Landon, “I’m sorry, Landon. Will you forgive me?”

Without prompting Landon immediately replied, “I’d forgive you even if you did it again.”

Following Peter’s question pertaining to the frequency of forgiveness, Jesus provided a parable stressing the importance of forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven. The punch of the parable warns all that unforgiveness has a tragic result. Anyone who does not forgive as God in Christ has forgiven him should not expect to be forgiven.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. <sup>26</sup> “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’” <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt

and let him go. <sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. <sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ <sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. <sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. <sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”  
(Matthew 18: 21-35)

## FORGIVING WITHOUT PROMOTING SIN

By now you may be wondering whether or not forgiveness has any exceptions or limitations. *Can a person forgive to a fault?* I have wrestled with such questions. *If I continue to forgive am I inviting offenders to offend me and others again? How can businesses continue that simply forgive employees who shoplift, fail to show up on time, cheat on their timecards, or fail to do their work? Aren’t churches that perpetually forgive actually promoting sin?*

The context of Matthew eighteen speaks otherwise. While Jesus’ conversation with Peter teaches believers to forgive offenders repeatedly, in context Jesus has just instructed his disciples to repeatedly confront sinners who will not acknowledge their offenses and repent of their sins:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. <sup>16</sup> But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”  
(Matthew 18:15-20)

This passage challenges me to confront those who wrong me in significant ways. Just as it is my responsibility to confront, it is my local church’s responsibility to see that I follow through with the process. The context teaches me to forgive in my heart as I confront my offender, always ready to express forgiveness as the person admits his or her wrong. In that same attitude of forgiveness, the church—beginning with its leaders—carries out consequences in the event that the offender refuses to admit any wrongdoing. My readiness to forgive indicates that I do not desire vengeance after I have suffered loss or injury. The individual or church that forgives without confronting may be as wrong as the individual or church that confronts without forgiving. Matthew eighteen teaches that forgiveness and confrontation go hand in hand.

Jesus and Stephen both confronted and forgave their offenders with their final words before death. They clearly voiced forgiveness while recognizing they were being put to death by those who sinned against them: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34) and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Hopefully precious few of us will face martyrdom. If we have any hope of generating the same



selfless responses at the point of death, that same blend of confrontation and forgiveness will need to be adopted in everyday life.

Failure to confront persists as one of the unhealthiest trends in twenty-first century churches. Seldom do individuals confront as prescribed in Matthew eighteen. It is even harder to find church leaders who will back them if they do confront. The ranks of churches that follow through with consequences when offenders fail to respond are even scarcer. Without confrontation true forgiveness is seldom expressed and long-term grudges produce conditions frigid as icebergs ready to fragment. Thanks to the emphasis of organizations like Peacemaker Ministries, many churches are waking up to the fallacies of “*peace-faking*,” a phrase coined by founder Ken Sande: “People who use escape responses are usually intent on ‘peacefaking,’ or making things look good even when they are not. (This is especially common in the church, where people are often more concerned about the appearance of peace than the reality of peace).”<sup>141</sup>

## GRACE CONFRONTS

One of the Greek words for *forgive* shares the same root as the word grace, *Charis*. Grace has a firm side to it which confronts that which is ungodly and harmful. Grace teaches us the proper use of the word we first learned at age two: “No!”

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. <sup>12</sup> It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, <sup>13</sup> while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

(Titus 2:11-14)

Grace that forgives confronts! Forgiving grace is not a license to sin perpetually. Grace was granted to save us from the consequences of sin but also from perpetual sin. Paul addressed the faulty logic which says, *I can increase grace by sinning more.*

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? <sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. <sup>5</sup> If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. <sup>6</sup> For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.

(Romans 6:1-6)

Grace breaks the chains of sin so we are no longer slaves to sin. Forgiveness sets me free from the perpetual cycles of sin. True followers of Christ have died to their sin just as Christ died for their sin. Perpetual sin and a life in Christ are incompatible. It is not unforgiving to confront sin that persists. The forgiving and loving response is to confront cyclical sin patterns. When confrontation does not change someone's behavior, consequences are sure to follow.

Forgiveness is not foolishness. Forgiveness is not foolish trust by which a person continues to trust the untrustworthy. Foolish trust actually sets a person up to fail again so they have to be forgiven again. Forgiveness does not pop the cork on a bottle of alcoholic beverage and set it on the table in front of an alcoholic. Forgiveness does not leave car keys available where a fourteen-year-old with a habit of driving illegally can find them. Forgiveness does not put a pedophile in a position where children are

jeopardized and forgiveness marginalized. Forgiveness does not place employees in situations where they are sure to fail, so they are at the mercy of the employer's forgiveness.

Jesus did not trust contrary to what he knew. He saw through those who showed up for a handout with no intention of following him: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. <sup>25</sup> He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:23-25).

### **FORGIVENESS DOES NOT DISMISS ALL CONSEQUENCES FOR OFFENDERS**

While God's forgiveness in Christ sets believing sinners free from the eternal penalty of sin, temporal consequences often follow. Ken Sande of Peace Maker Ministries provides examples of how consequences followed the sins of Bible characters:

Forgiveness does not automatically release a wrongdoer from all their consequences of sin. Although God forgave the Israelites who rebelled against him in the wilderness, he decreed that they would die without entering the Promised Land (Numbers 14:20-23). Even Moses was not shielded from this consequence (Deuteronomy 32:48-52)....

There are many times when you forgive someone but cannot afford to absorb the consequences of such wrongdoing. Or, even if you could bear the cost, doing so may not be the wisest and most loving thing for an offender, especially one caught in a pattern of irresponsibility or misconduct. As Proverbs 19:19 warns, "A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty; if you rescue him, you will have to do it again." Thus, a treasurer who secretly stole from your church may benefit from having

to repay what he or she took. Likewise, a careless teenager may drive more safely in the future if he or she is made to pay for damages. An employee who repeatedly neglects his responsibilities may need to lose his job to learn needed lessons.<sup>142</sup>

I remember Dad being called out of bed late one night during my high school days. He went down to his office building only to be greeted by a fellow deacon from his church, an office employee, and a policeman. The policeman had driven by and thought it peculiar that certain lights were on at that hour. He entered to find the employee stealing cash from the office. Most startling was the fact that the employee was also an officer at the same church Dad and Mom attended. I probably remember this event so well because this employee had a son my age who was a high school friend and youth group buddy. It was devastating for that family and embarrassing for the church.

Dad forgave the man. I never heard him say an unkind word about the employee. Dad also fired the man. Theft was a standard reason for firing employees. He certainly could not treat this employee differently because he attended the same church. Innocent mistakes could be tolerated; dishonesty triggered immediate consequences more than once. When consequences followed, Dad expressed more pity than anger toward those who cheated him and fellow employees. He expressed an amazing grace to forgive.

Dad had witnessed both the bitter results of unforgiveness and the beautiful results of forgiveness in his own family. One example of forgiveness must have influenced him more than any residue of unforgiveness.

I wrote about my great grandparents in chapter eight. Once Victor married Mathilda, a peasant girl without a cottage, he was disinherited and banished from his parents, Anders Nilsson and his wife. Within a year of their

marriage Victor and Mathilda immigrated to Minnesota from Sweden. The young couple would never see their parents on earth again. However, there is ample reason to believe that they have been reunited in heaven.

As the legend goes Victor's brothers, Isak and Anders, traveled with the newlyweds to the new country. The brothers returned to Sweden, but not until one important change had taken place in their lives. They discovered the faith in Christ they apparently had not obtained through the stoic state church of Sweden. Either they became true believers through a source in America or, like Victor, they were persuaded to trust in Christ through Mathilda's strong faith.

That is not all—Victor's parents eventually became believers. Their faith is evident by this 1926 letter from Mathilda to her cousin Ester translated from Swedish to English.

Hello Ester,

Victor is fine. He has written his mother twice, and never got a letter back from her, because he married me a peasant. They were angry that he married a peasant without a cottage. But I am happy that they have found God and love Jesus. Even though they don't write back, that is good.<sup>143</sup>

It is believed that Victor's brothers, Isak and Anders, returned to Sweden and shared with their parents the living faith in Christ they had discovered. Whether or not that is how it happened is not the point. Mathilda was happy that they had found God and loved Jesus. She could have been angry with her in-laws, considering the way they treated their son and her husband as an outcast. Given Victor's early life of comparative ease, survival in the new land must have been a rude awakening. She could have been bitter toward them for holding on to the old country's ways of social status and stratum, but there was no indication of hostility, just forgiveness. Mathilda

could rest because she had learned to forgive as God in Christ had forgiven her.

### **RECEIVING GOD'S FORGIVENESS**

Have you honestly received God's forgiveness in Christ for your sins? He has taken the initiative for your sins to be completely forgiven. He has paid the penalty for them entirely with the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. What remains is for you to ask for his forgiveness and receive Christ and his work on the cross. Once you have received God's forgiveness through Christ into your heart you can begin to forgive your offenders from your heart.

### **FORGIVING AS GOD FORGIVES**

Are there people you need to forgive? Make a list of those who have offended you and note the offense. Then take the time to carefully pray through the list. Example: "Lord God, I forgive (name) for (what the person did) just as you have forgiven me in Christ Jesus."

Review the list again. Are there individuals in the list that you need to humbly confront, for God's sake? Are these individuals bringing shame to the name of Christ and his Church?

### **ASKING FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS**

Has the Lord brought to mind the faces of individuals you have wronged? Make a list of those individuals and develop a plan to ask for their forgiveness wherever and whenever it is possible.

### **Prayer**

My Lord and my God, thank you for taking the initiative making it possible for me to be forgiven completely and eternally through the blood of your Son and my Savior, Jesus Christ. Forgive me for all my sins. I receive your forgiveness into my heart that I may forgive others from my heart. I now begin a life of forgiving others as you have forgiven me. In Jesus' name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

### Questions to Ponder

1. Could I write a note like Ramona wrote to the other truck driver?
2. Am I “peace-faking” in any of my relationships?
3. Do I need to take the initiative toward forgiveness in any of my relationships?

## Chapter 15

### From Rest to Revival

This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.”

(Isaiah 30:15)

As a follower of Christ, you know that self-reformation is futile. Having declared spiritual bankruptcy, you came to Christ asking Him to live His life through you. He is your life; you live day-by-day in dependence upon His strength and presence.<sup>144</sup>

(Walter A. Henrichsen)

Church plants are notorious for picking up an assortment of people. Ours was no exception. Having never planted or pastored a congregation before,