

ABSOLUTE FORGIVENESS

How to Enjoy Biblical Forgiveness

**by Dr. Jim Binney, D.Min.
603 Stallings Road
Taylors, SC 29687**

“HOW DO I FORGIVE?”

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” (Colossians 3:13)

A broken-hearted wife sat across from me. She had recently learned that her husband had been unfaithful. She looked deeply into my eyes and through her tears, she asked, “Brother Binney, I know I am supposed to forgive him, but HOW do I forgive?” Like a flaming arrow, this question pierced my heart. I had never been asked this before. I had counseled many on the need of forgiveness, but never on the actual method. This wife wanted to know how to translate her obligation into action.

The most common need I encounter in my counseling is the issue of forgiveness, not personal forgiveness from God, nor forgiveness of self, not even finding forgiveness from another but the need of letting go of anger and bitterness toward some offender. Where does one go to learn how to overcome this problem? To whom can we turn for answers?

Our supreme example for life is the Lord Jesus Christ – “... *because as he is, so are we in this world.*” (1 John 4:17). We are to emulate Him in every area of life: **in humility** “*If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet.*” (John 13:14); **in love** “*And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us...*” (Ephesians 5:2); **in holiness** “*... as he... is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.*” (1 Peter 1:15); **and forgiveness** “*... even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*” (Colossians 3:13). If we are to emulate Christ, then we must forgive as He forgave. How did Christ forgive?

HE FORGAVE BY SUFFERING FOR THE SINS OF OTHERS

It is generally understood that we must suffer as a consequence of our own sins. However, the thought of suffering for the sins of others is abhorrent and contrary to every fiber of the natural man. At the heart of Christ’s forgiveness was His willingness to do this very thing.

Furthermore, Christ Himself admonished us to follow His example of suffering: “*Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you...*” (John 15:20). Paul develops this thought further: “*Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*” (2 Timothy 3:12). Suffering because of others is a staple part of Bible expectations for the believer. In fact, one is hard-pressed to identify any human suffering that is not traceable, directly or indirectly, to the sinfulness of another human being. The suffering often takes the form of persecution.

Even persecution doesn’t demand a *willingness* to suffer for another. It is that very willingness which John addresses in I John 3:16: “*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and*

we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” In this verse, John extends the theme of persecution to the *willingness* to suffer for others out of love.

Truly then, the beginning of Christ-like forgiveness is a willingness to suffer because of the sins of others. When you think about how much personal suffering is caused by another’s wickedness, it is overwhelming! The victims number in the millions! Perhaps you are one. No one was ever more of a victim than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and His willingness to be a victim is ours to copy and the key to our forgiveness.

HE FORGAVE BY PRAYING FOR HIS ENEMIES

“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44). These were not hollow platitudes preached by our Lord. This was His practice, vividly illustrated on the cross when he prayed: *“...Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”* (Luke 23:34). Within this prayer we find the heartbeat of His forgiveness.

First, he appealed to God on behalf of His enemies. In the midst of scorn, beating, and unspeakable shame, He was concerned for others. Even today, this magnificent love is evident in His ongoing ministry of intercession (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Second, He focused on their weakness rather than their wickedness: *“... they know not what they do.”* He could have seethed in anger toward these people who nailed Him there, but He chose to look at their degree of innocence rather than their degree of guilt. Their innocence was in their ignorance as to who it was they were crucifying. “He meant they were ignorant of the enormity of their crime. They ‘knew not’ that it was the Lord of glory they were crucifying. The emphasis is not on ‘They KNOW NOT’ but on ‘They know not WHAT they do.’”¹ The Apostle Peter alludes to this fact when he refers to the killing of the “Prince of life,” *“And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers.”* (Acts 3:17). Ignorance is not innocence, but it is a reason for mercy. Paul admits that he *“... was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.”* (1 Timothy 1:13). Christ’s forgiveness was illustrated by His merciful attention to the ignorance of His malefactors. Should the angry and bitter among us do any less?

Third, Christ’s prayer included a desire for restoration of His enemies, rather than retaliation against them. He could have called *“... more than twelve legions (72,000) of angels.”* (Matthew 26:53) to deliver Him, and wreak havoc on His detractors, but He did not. His prayer was for forgiveness, not vengeance. Indeed, ministering was His life and the purpose of His death. *“... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it...”* (Ephesians 5:25-26).

Unforgiveness is seen in a spirit of revenge, but to forgive as Christ forgave demands we pray for our enemies – for their healing, forgiveness, restoration, or salvation. It is a selfless concern for others. In truth, who is better qualified to pray for an offender than his victim? Why? Because he knows from first-hand

experience the awful depravity of the perpetrator. He has seen the depths of his need. What a victory the enemy achieves when he can thwart God's plan of helping sinners through the prayers of their victims, by displacing those loving prayers with thoughts of hatred.

HE FORGAVE BY FOCUSING ON THE PRINCIPLE OF SIN VERSUS THE PERSON OF THE SINNER

During the Gulf War, I found myself getting angry at Saddam Hussein every time I saw his face in the media. I wanted to gouge his eyes out, beat him to a pulp, and choke him into oblivion (all in Christian love, of course). Then I came under conviction that Hussein was the wrong target for my anger. I should be mad at the power of Satan, "... *the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.*" (Ephesians 2:2). My enemy was not some tin-horn dictator of a third-class world power. "*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against ... powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*" (Ephesians 6:12).

This principle is addressed by Paul when he wrote, "*Be ye angry, and sin not ... Neither give place to the devil.*" (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger with sin is anger directed against a person. Anger without sin is anger directed at the principle of sin behind the person. Jesus' forgiveness was one which focused on the principal of sin and sought to destroy it. "... *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil,*" (1 John 3:8) (not the workers of the devil). Our Lord Jesus Christ recognized the fact that there was an insidious force behind the barbarous acts of his executioners, and it was that force He targeted, not the pawns manipulated by Satan to commit murder.

HE FORGAVE BY ENVISIONING GOD'S HIGHER PURPOSE IN ALLOWING HIS PAIN

The essence of Christ's forgiveness is seen in His willingness to suffer personal loss to accomplish God's will. In the plan of God for individuals, personal tribulation is often the means of accomplishing a higher goal. "*Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.*" (2 Corinthians 1:4). God permits suffering in the life of believers to give them the opportunity to experience His comfort for the purpose of ministering comfort to others in similar straits.

This is one reason that we are admonished to adopt an attitude of gratitude "... *for all things*" (Ephesians 5:20) and "[i]n every thing" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Why? "... *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*" Forgiveness is "accepting the ongoing consequences of an offender's actions and seeing how God is using them to benefit my life."²

To forgive as Christ forgave, one must be willing to see through the eyes of faith and believe that "...*He hath done all things well,*" (Mark 7:37), and that "... *all things work together for good.*" (Romans 8:28).

Life's seemingly cruel misfortunes can actually be part of God's grand design for good. No one knew this better than Joseph who was thrown in a pit by jealous brothers, then sold into slavery where he later endured an unjust prison term. Years later, as Prime Minister of Egypt, after having personally averted a world-wide famine, he stood before his brothers once again. His brothers, though fearful after learning of the true identity of this powerful man, were reassured with Joseph's inspired words: "*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good ... to save much people alive.*" (Genesis 50:20). That spirit in the midst of life's calamities, is forgiving as Christ forgave.

This process of forgiving as Christ forgave needs some qualification. Forgiveness must be viewed as a process rather than an experience. Some well-meaning people have said, "To forgive is to forget." This concept has bred much ill-placed guilt in those who have been unable to forget. It reveals an erroneous view of God, as well as the human mind. For example, when the Bible teaches that God ". . . will not remember thy sins," (Isaiah 43:25), it is in reference to bringing them up again. Young phrases it this way: "The things you have done contrary to my law, I will not call to mind."³ As Adams says, "Forgetting with reference to God can mean no more than the willingness to 'bury' the issue, to raise it no more."⁴ Therefore, forgiving to God means the refusal to entertain the thought of our sins not eradication of memory. The belief that God literally forgets our sins diminishes His omniscience. To believe, on the other hand, that He chooses not to remember magnifies His grace.

The same is true of man's mind. Forgiveness is literally choosing not to recall the bad memory. This choice has physiological implications. Dr. Louis McBurney, M.D., has lent us some valuable insight into the physical aspects of forgiveness. He illustrates the process of forgiveness in the human brain: "In essence, it has been shown that memories are stored as physical structures, protein molecules. They are present in our brain cells and remain permanently. Each time a specific area of the brain is stimulated, a particular memory is recalled . . . When a specific memory trace is replayed repeatedly, that recording is brought to awareness. We are familiar with this process in 'memorizing' facts. We go over and over some information until it is readily recalled. The same thing happens with emotionally charged memories, whether positive or negative. If we have been hurt, the event and its associated feelings are deposited in our nerve cell computer. We can then either review that memory, rehearsing it into a vividly enhanced mental image, or we can choose not to allow its repetition, relegating it to the unconscious. That mental, neurochemical act is forgiveness. The memory is still there, but when life stimuli bring it to mind, we choose to extinguish it rather than reinforce it. So the forgiveness is not a one-time magical act that removes all memory and pain, but a continually repetitive choice . . . a process rather than an instant cure."⁵

In other words, "Forgiveness means no longer continuing to dwell on the sin that was forgiven. Forgiveness is the promise not to raise the issue again to the offender, to others, or to himself."⁶ The offended party has a choice; he can choose to nurse a bitter memory, or he can neglect it into forgetfulness.

Another option is available as well. Not only can one ignore a memory until it fades away, he can choose to concentrate on a positive thought instead. This emphasizes the active role of forgiveness rather than the passive. He can meditate on the quarrel he had or he can choose to think higher thoughts. Paul teaches that we should think on “... *whatsoever things are true... honest... just ... pure ... lovely ... of good report...*” (*Philippians 4:8*). As one redirects his thoughts to these things, he automatically neglects the negative memories. For example, he can choose to esteem his offender, to pray for him, and to bless him. He cannot do these things and think evil of him at the same time. This conscious thought process automatically enhances godly “protein molecules” while simultaneously shrinking the ungodly ones through neglect.

The best and most spiritual solution to bitterness that I have found is to meditate on the forgiveness of Christ. “*Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee...*” (*Isaiah 26:3*). Countless people have reported finding freedom from the bondage of anger and bitterness through this plan. The wife who asked me, “How can I forgive?” later reported that she has indeed found forgiveness in her heart for her husband. Their relationship was healed because she had learned to forgive “... *even as Christ forgave.*” (*Colossians 3:13*).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pink, Arthur W., *The Seven Sayings of the Savior On The Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 15.
- ² Family and Friendship Calendar, 1992.
- ³ Young, E.J., N.I.C., *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol. III, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 162.
- ⁴ Adams, Jay, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 66.
- ⁵ McBurney, Louis, *Counseling Christian Workers*, (Waco: Word), p. 170.
- ⁶ Adams, p. 65.