

Forgiven Then, Forgiven Now, Forgiven Forevermore



**“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered.” Romans 4:7**

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Preface

It is quite probable that someone reading my words this moment is fighting an inner battle with a ghost from the past. The skeleton in one of yesterday's closets is beginning to rattle louder and louder. Putting adhesive tape around the closet and moving the bureau in front of the door does little to muffle the clattering bones. You wonder, possibly, "Who knows?" You think, probably, "I've had it . . . can't win . . . party's over."

The anchor that tumbled off your boat is dragging and snagging on the bottom. Guilt and anxiety have come aboard, pointing out the great dark hulks of shipwrecks below. They busy themselves drilling worry-holes in your hull and you are beginning to sink. Down in the hold, you can hear them chant an old lie as they work: "The bird with the broken pinion never soared as high again. . . ."

Allow me to present a case in opposition to these destructive and inaccurate accusers. It may be true that you've done or experienced things which would embarrass you if they became public knowledge. You may have committed a terrible and tragic sin that was never traced back to you. You may have a criminal record or a moral charge or a domestic conflict that, to this moment, is private information. You may wrestle with a past that has been fractured and wounded by a mental or emotional breakdown. Futile attempts at suicide may add to the previous scar tissue and increase your fear of being labeled "sick" or "nervous." It is possible that you live with memories, covered now by the sands of time, of an illicit relationship or a financial failure or a terrible habit or a divorce or a scandalous involvement. You feel that any one of these things might mar or cripple your reputation if the dirty details ever spilled on the table of gluttonous gossipers.

But wait a minute. Before you surrender your case as hopeless, consider the liberating evidence offered in the Bible. Take an honest look at men and women whom God used in spite of their past! Abraham, founder of Israel and tagged "the friend of God," was once a worshiper of idols. Joseph had a prison record but later became prime minister of Egypt. Moses was a murderer, but later became the one who delivered his nation from the slavery of Pharaoh. Jephthah was an illegitimate child who ran

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around with a tough bunch of hoods before he was chosen by God to become His personal representative. Rahab was a harlot in the streets of Jericho but was later used in such a mighty way that God enlisted her among the members of His hall of fame in Hebrews 11.

Still unconvinced? There's more. Eli and Samuel were both poor, inconsistent fathers, but proved to be strong men in God's hand regardless. Jonah and John Mark were missionaries who ran away from hardship like cowards but were ever-so-profitable later on. Peter openly denied the Lord and cursed Him, only to return and become God's choicest spokesman among the early years of the infant church. Paul was so hard and vicious in his early life the disciples and apostles refused to believe he'd actually become a Christian . . . but you know how greatly God used him. We could go on and on. The files of heaven are filled with stories of redeemed, refitted renegades and rebels.

How magnificent is grace! How malignant is guilt! How sweet are the promises! How sour is the past! How precious and broad is God's love! How petty and narrow are man's limitations! How refreshing is the Lord! How rigid is the legalist!

There is not a single saint who sits in a single church free from a few things he or she is ashamed of—not one of us! The one who thinks otherwise is worse than all the rest combined. In plain, garden-variety English, we were all taken from the same dunghill. And so we all fight the same fight with the filth of the flesh regardless of how loudly we sing, how piously we pray, or how sweetly we say hello.

Mark it—when God forgives, He forgets. He is not only willing but pleased to use any vessel—just as long as it is clean today. It may be cracked or chipped. It may be worn or it may have never been used before. You can count on this—the past ended one second ago. From this point onward, you can be clean, filled with His Spirit, and used in many different ways for His honor. God's glorious grace says: "Throw guilt and anxiety overboard . . . draw the anchor . . . trim the sails . . . man the rudder . . . a strong gale is coming!"

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“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

1 John 1:9

Introduction

**“If you do not forgive...neither will your Father in Heaven
forgive you...”**

Mark 11:26

When Jesus died on the cross He not only paid for all the sins that had ever been committed but that ever would be committed. There is nowhere in The Bible that says you need to ask for forgiveness. The Bible says you must repent your sins which simply means to confess the sin, be sorry you committed the sin, and try to change your ways so you don't do it again. Sin is sin. There are no adjectives in The Bible describing sin as to which sin is worse than another. The Bible also says we are all sinners. That includes you, me, Billy Graham, and The Pope.

Just like Jesus forgave us, we need to forgive others. Jesus gave us the two very important commandments: “Love one another as I have loved you” and “Forgive one another as I have forgiven you.”

In a small, rather out-of-the-way cemetery in Upper New York is an unmarked tombstone bearing the single word, “FORGIVEN!” Nothing more or less—simply “FORGIVEN!” A person cannot help wondering, “What was forgiven, and by whom?” What happened that caused someone who knew the identity of the body that lay in an unmarked grave to leave behind that message? Was it a husband who deeply had hurt a wife? Was it a prodigal son who had wandered far from the ideals and aspirations of his father? Or, was it someone who had tasted richly of the grace of God and wanted everyone to know that he had been forgiven? The secret has long since been buried with the remains of a person forgotten by life, but there is one thing for sure, the great need for forgiveness exists today!

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A man or woman never reaches so high as when he stoops to forgive someone. In this business of daily living it is inevitable that sooner or later we tread upon the rights of another—a friend or business associate, a husband or a wife. Whether it is with malice or simply thoughtlessness, we find ourselves in the position of needing and having to give what no one else can give—forgiveness. Some 2000 years ago Jesus Christ gave us the example as He looked upon those who had become His executioners and cried, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”

The Apostle Paul instructed that we be “kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32, KJV). In those words we have the great rationale for forgiveness—if God has forgiven us, then we have no right or reason to fail to forgive someone else. When it came to grudges and resentment toward another, Jesus was very blunt. He said simply, “If you do not forgive, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your sins” (Mark 11:26).

What does it mean, really to forgive someone else? Insight into the true nature of forgiveness comes from the Greek word for forgiveness which we find in the pages of Scripture. The Greek word is *aphiamj*, which means literally to “give up the right to compensation for what someone has done to you.” The record is removed, so that you no longer have any right to expect redress for what has happened.

Newspapers carried the story of several government officials who had been charged with corruption in the city of Salonika, Greece. Before they could be tried, mice devoured files in the civil court archives and ate up the evidence. That, of course, is not quite a picture of forgiveness. If, however, those who had been charged had wronged an individual, and the individual, willing to forgive them of his own accord, destroyed the evidence against them, then there would have been nothing to use as evidence. Forgiveness would have been

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complete! None of us lives so perfectly that we do not find ourselves in the position of having to ask for forgiveness.

Forgiveness means that you put something aside—completely and finally—as though it had never happened. If you say, “Well, we just won’t talk about that anymore,” you may have declared a truce, but you have not really forgiven a person. You have simply buried the hatchet with the handle sticking up so that you can use the incident as a whip against the other if he gets out of line—or, should I say when he gets out of line, because in our human frailty we are bound to stumble.

Forgiveness must be a healing balm that covers the wounds of our human frailties and binds up the fractures of our human relations. Forgive we must—even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us.

Will God Forgive Anything?

**“If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”**

Psalm 130:3-4

"One must forgive one's enemies," said Sigmund Freud, "but not before they have been hanged." Such graciousness! One who adopts that attitude must hope never to have enemies himself, for the person who cannot forgive burns the bridge over which he himself must someday certainly pass.

Some things are difficult, perhaps almost impossible to forgive without God's help, but His help is there. Have you ever thought much though about what the consequences would be if God adopted the same attitude towards us? Like Freud, we think, "I'll never forget that [whatever you chose to call the person] as long as he lives!" We mean it, too! And that is exactly why some people honestly feel that God can never forgive them. They are convinced that God treats us the same way we often treat each other.

How about it? Does He? Or was the author of Psalms right when he wrote, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared." (Psalm 130:3,4). Will God forgive anything? I mean, is there any sin so great that He says, "I'll never forgive you?"

In pondering this issue, let's take a look at three words which dealt with varying degrees or issues of wrongdoing. In the Old Testament, several words were used which described human failure. The first word, "transgression," was a word that dealt with the intention and purpose to do wrong. The act of wrongdoing was usually premeditated. A person did something--a theft, a murder, a sexual relationship with his neighbor's wife, even stealing a piece of fruit in the market--and the word signifies rebellion against authority. A refusal to stay within the boundaries of what is right. This is the attitude of sin. It is a reflection of deliberate wrongdoing when the person knows better than he or she does.

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The second word, "iniquity," referred to the act of sin itself. The base meaning of the word suggests something which is twisted, crooked, or untrue. Eventually it described a lack of conformity to what was right. Attitudes which are wrong eventually are played out in acts of wrongdoing. Every injustice, every sinful deed, begins with a thought, and that thought eventually is embodied in an act which you strive to justify.

The third word, "sin," is the one which is most commonly used in the Old Testament, and this word meant "missing the mark" as an arrow which has fallen short of its target. It meant "deviating from the right path," as would happen when a person comes to a fork in the road. He hesitates with uncertainty and then takes the wrong turn in the road. It may be an innocent mistake, yet no justification can excuse the fact that he took the wrong road.

Do you remember how David, in a moment of weakness, yielded to the flesh? Because he was the king and very powerful, he justified his wrongdoing and took Bathsheba, when she was the wife of another man. David used all three words in describing what he had done--transgression, iniquity, and sin! He openly and candidly admitted his moral failure, and then sought and found the forgiveness of God.

Is there any sin which God will not forgive? David was guilty of murder, of adultery, and the abuse of authority, yet God forgave him.

As David himself said, "You are kind and forgiving, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you" (Psalm 86:5). Thank God, He is more gracious to forgive than we are. Think about it.

Revenge, Repression, or Forgiveness

**“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**

**The judge called it "strength." The prosecutor called it "refreshing."
And the general public called it "crazy!" It was the response of
forgiveness which a 70 year-old woman had towards the man who cut
her throat and sexually assaulted her.**

**Madge Rodda was a church organist, and on the night she was
molested, she had been practicing music in church, and afterwards
stopped by a local restaurant to get something to eat. When she went
to a restroom, she was suddenly apprehended by a man who had a
stocking pulled over his face. He eventually became her attacker. She
had every right to be angry and bitter. Most people would have been,
but she wasn't. She forgave the man. When James Bridle was
sentenced to 17 years in prison for the crime against Madge, she
showed up in court to offer forgiveness and a Bible to the man she
could have hated.**

**What she did startled the judge and the prosecutors who commented
that most people would have wanted the very worst for their
attacker--but not her. She said, "There was never any time when I
didn't forgive him. Nobody else in the world may love this man, but
God loves him."**

**Madge may have played the organ in her church, but she also listened
to some of the messages. She knew clearly the importance of
forgiveness. Madge realized that when we carry a grudge and nurse a
thirst for vengeance, we become victims twice. Have you, even in a
small way, been in the position of this little woman? Someone hurt
you. You may not have been molested as she was, but, nonetheless,
you became a victim of an injustice. Someone did something to you
which caused grief and pain. How did you respond? Did you say what**

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Madge said, "I'll tell him that it doesn't matter what he's done"? Or did you say, "I hope he gets what he deserves."

When you are confronted with wrongdoing, you have one of three choices: (1) Revenge, (2) Repression, or (3) Forgiveness. There are no other alternatives. For a few moments, let's analyze the consequences of each. Most people live for revenge. But violence only begets more violence, and the cycle is unending. It results in continued pain and anger. Rachel Saint understood this. Her brother, Nate, was one of five young men killed by Auca Indians (now known as Waoranis) on a sandy landing strip beside a jungle river in Ecuador.

Rachel eventually lived and worked with the tribe who had slain her brother. At least two guns were accessible to these five who had determined that, if necessary, they would lay down their lives before they resorted to violence. The Aucas thought that Rachel had come to take revenge for what they had done. When they learned that she was there to make peace, they were decimated. Their whole culture was based on revenge. There was no word in the Auca language for forgiveness. But she introduced it.

The second alternative to wrongdoing is to repress the incident. Try to block it from your memory, refuse to think about it. But repression doesn't work. It is still there, like a cancer underneath the surface. Like a dormant volcano, it eventually erupts with deadly spew that poisons a life.

The third alternative, the one that Madge Rodda chose to follow, is forgiveness. And why should anyone forgive? In simple terms, if you should ever have need for God to forgive you, you had better forgive, for Jesus said, "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).

David: Failure and Forgiveness

**“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.”**

Psalm 51:17

The world remembers its own by their greatest achievement; they remember God's own by their greatest failure. That's the way it has been century after century. David, a man after God's own heart" was beloved and blessed under the most devastating of circumstances. Repeatedly Saul sought to kill him so his own son, Jonathan, David's best friend, could be king; nonetheless, God had a different plan but David's greatest failure left a blight on his career that demonstrated his humanity.

Wrote Samuel, the prophet, "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the King's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11:1, NIV). Read history and you will see a pattern--wars were never fought in the cold and dead of winter, but in the spring when the grass is green and food is plentiful. David's first failure was that he stayed at home instead of leading the army of Israel against its enemies.

The text continues, "One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof on the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful" (2 Samuel 11:2). Whoa! Let's put this in perspective.

First, if you go back and read 2 Samuel 2 and 2 Samuel 5 you will see that right-or-wrong the culture allowed more than one wife, and David had taken at least six women to be his wife so when he looked over the ramparts and saw Bathsheba bathing, he should immediately have turned away. Instead he inquired, "Who is that woman? I've never noticed her before!" You know the rest of the story, no doubt.

I'm reminded of an incident that took place many years before when the Hebrew children were taking possession of Canaan. A man whose

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name was Achan saw a beautiful Babylonian garment, and a wedge of silver, and hid them under his tent floor. When God revealed to Joshua what had happened, Achan explained, "I saw... I coveted.... I took!" (Joshua 7:20). David could have said the same thing!

You know the rest of the story! Bathsheba came to the palace and when David was intimate with her she became pregnant with his child. This was followed by David's engineering the death of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

Time does not allow my exegeting Psalm 51 where David poured out his heart with scalding tears begging for forgiveness, asking God to "restore...the joy of his salvation."

Now we are hundreds of years downstream from David's failure, yet his failure has been duplicated by vast numbers of individuals the world over who never thought about the consequences of a few moments of pleasure. Infidelity is the root cause of 85% of broken homes, hearts, and marriages.

It is true that Psalm 130 says, "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. Ponder the words of Achan: "I saw... I coveted.... I took!" God's forgiveness does not remove the consequences of your failure!

Taking what does not belong to you can destroy the relationship you have with your husband or wife. What's the solution? First, avoid the very appearance of evil. That means don't allow yourself to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Control your thinking or else your thinking will control you! 2 Corinthians 10:5 says you can bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ! Learn a lesson from David that is valid in our culture today!

Forgiveness for the Things God Hates

“When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.”

2 Samuel 11:26-27

“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him,” wrote Solomon 3,000 years ago. Numbers three and four on that list of character disorders which the Bible calls sins are “hands that shed innocent blood,” and “a heart that devises wicked schemes.”

I have no way of knowing whether Solomon thought of the circumstances of his own family, especially involving his own father and mother, but he well could have. His father was David; his mother, Bathsheba. “In the spring, at the time when kings go to war,” begins 2 Samuel 11:1, David stayed at home. One evening when he was on the rooftop of his palace, he saw a beautiful woman bathing--the woman who eventually became Solomon’s mother. Do you remember the story of how David took Bathsheba and slept with her? After all, he was the king, and he was not accustomed to having anyone deny him.

But then when Bathsheba became pregnant as the result of this adulterous affair, David’s conscience began to deeply trouble him. Bathsheba was married to another man, and a good man, at that. For David to take Bathsheba as his wife, Uriah had to be destroyed, and it had to appear to be a grave accident. Without taking time to recount the details which I would encourage you to read for yourself, if ever a man devised a wicked scheme and shed innocent blood, it was David who was responsible, completely and fully for the death of Uriah, the rightful husband of Bathsheba.

Just a minute, you may be thinking. Is this not the one who took a slingshot and in the name of the Lord and went against Goliath? Is this not the one who wrote, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...” (Psalm 23:1, KJV). And, of course, the answer to all these questions is yes.

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Should you take the time to ponder the six things which God hates and look at the life of David, you will find an example of almost every one in David's life. He was proud and arrogant. He lied. His hands shed innocent blood. His heart devised the wicked scheme to put Uriah in the forefront of the battle, then order the troops to pull out leaving him exposed to the enemy. His feet rushed to do evil, and he deliberately hurt the woman who became the object of his lust.

Though Solomon did not mention his father's adulterous affair with his mother, he undoubtedly thought of the consequences which followed his wrongdoing: the death of his half-brother who was the love child of David and Bathsheba, the public humiliation which came as the result of his sin and the ongoing conflicts which resulted in his personal, immediate family because of what David did.

But--and this is the point that I want you to get--there is forgiveness and healing for our wrongdoing, no matter what it may be. As the Psalmist--perhaps David himself--wrote, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Psalm 130:4). David paid a price for his wrongdoing--a substantial one, yet in repentance he poured out his heart before God and asked for God to restore the joy of his salvation (see Psalm 51).

Friend, if you see yourself in these six things which God hates, do what David did. Confess your wrongdoings, forsake it, and find God's strength to overcome your human weakness. This is what grace is about.

Complete Forgiveness

**“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**

Amidst the heather of beautiful Scotland lived a country doctor many years ago. This Scottish physician was greatly loved by the villagers and patients of the wee town in bonny Scotland, so when he died he was greatly missed by his village. His wife, though, did not share his disposition or love for people, and upon his death she examined the financial records which were found in the doctor's office. On several pages were written these words in the doctor's hand in bold red ink: "Forgiven—too poor to pay."

The widow, believing that she could collect the forgiven debt, instructed her attorney to enter suit against the forgiven patients of her deceased husband. When the matter reached the court, the judge examined the accounts. He turned to the widow and asked, "Is this handwriting in red ink that of your husband?" "It is," she replied. "Then," said the judge, "there is no tribunal in the land that can demand payment of any account over which the deceased has written the word Forgiven." And the case was dismissed.

Forgiveness is really a legal concept. In the first century, the Greek word for forgiveness meant "to give up the right to something," hence, to give back your right to redress a grievance. To give forgiveness and yet hold a grudge against someone is really no forgiveness at all.

I am thinking of the young wife who sat in my office for counseling. Her husband had been unfaithful to her, but then realizing how deeply he loved her and wanted her, begged her to forgive him, promising that it would never happen again. Finally she blurted out, "Well, I guess I can forgive him, but I can never forget it." To say I can forgive but not forget is like saying, "For the moment I will not demand your

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punishment, but if I ever have any reason to question your integrity, I'll quickly remind you of your failure." Such is not forgiveness at all.

Esther York Burkholder was driving at this when she wrote, "Most of us find forgiveness one of the most difficult virtues to put into practice. 'I can forgive...but I can't forget.' This is a rather paradoxical statement. For in our hearts we still hold a grudge which rankles and festers and does us more harm than to the offender."

Man's forgiveness is different from God's, for man's forgiveness is marred by his hesitancy to forget. God's forgiveness is complete. How many times does God expect a person to forgive another? Is it once under some circumstances; or twice, or three times, or even thirty times?

On one occasion Peter, the big fisherman, came to Jesus with this problem of forgiveness. Perhaps he remembered his competitor's fouling his fishing nets, or taking his favorite fishing spot, so Peter put the question to Jesus, "How often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me, as many as seven times?" This was quite liberal for blustering Peter, yet Jesus responded, "Not seven times but seventy times seven." In other words, "Always forgive."

The Apostle Paul told us that we ought to forgive because of God's forgiveness to those who have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To the Ephesians he wrote, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave You." (Ephesians 4:32).

Perhaps you are thinking, "I just cannot forgive." If you feel like that, may I pass on to you a formula for forgiveness that I have never seen fail? Begin earnestly to pray for the one who has hurt you, asking God to give you the grace to forgive, and soon you will discover your hate has turned to pity, and you will find the grace to forgive and to forget.

What It Really Means to Forgive

**“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
Luke 23:34**

FORGIVEN! No word in all the English language quite speaks to the heart of man as does this one word. Pause for a moment and pronounce the word several times: forgiven, forgiven! Forgiveness involves three areas of relationship--and the three, like the structure of a honeycomb, are all intertwined.

A problem in one area results in secondary implications in the others. Forgiveness involves your relationship with God; secondly, your relationship with others; and finally, your relationship with yourself. The one big difference, though, between your relationship with God and with ourselves and with others is that when it comes to our relationship with God, we must ask for forgiveness, while we must learn to extend it to ourselves and to others.

In other words, we must learn how to forgive others and to forgive ourselves, but never do we have to forgive God. Yet it is your relationship with God that is the basis of learning to forgive and to seek forgiveness as necessary in those other two areas.

To forgive means that you have been hurt, that your fundamental rights have been violated, and that you are willing to give up your right to redress or to compensation for what has happened to you. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul said, "Be kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." That phrase, "even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you," becomes the model of our learning to forgive each other.

Because God has forgiven us, we have no right to refuse to forgive each other and ourselves as well. The true nature of forgiveness demands that the act of wrongdoing be put completely away to let God deal with it. Again God's forgiveness is the model. "As far as the east is from the west," wrote David in Psalm 103:12, "so far has God removed our transgressions from us." Following the elliptical course

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of the earth, scientists have measured the distance from the north to the south pole--12,420 miles, give or take a few inches, but the east and the west, friend, never meet.

Rudyard Kipling wrote, "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet." When you forgive someone, you have got to bury the wrong done to you and treat it as though it had never happened. Two men were discussing the reactions of their wives when they get into arguments, and one said, "Well, when we get into an argument, my wife gets historical." "No," remarked his friend, "you mean she gets hysterical." "No," replied the first. "I used the right word. I meant historical because she keeps bringing up the past."

True forgiveness puts the deed aside as though it had never taken place. "Well, I'll forgive you this time, but if you ever do this again, we are through." Is that really forgiveness? It is merely an indefinite probation--the breach of which brings the full weight of the law for the first offense. Forgiven--what a beautiful word!

When the widow of a country doctor looked over the books of her deceased doctor husband, she discovered that he had written, "Forgiven--too poor to pay" across the page of many who owed her husband vast sums of money, and she, not having the grace to forgive so much, went to court to collect. The judge threw out the case. "What has been forgiven in his own handwriting," he contended, "cannot be collected by another." When the righteous Judge of the Universe forgives us, what right have we to try to make another pay? Yes, how beautiful that word--forgiven.

Forgiven Once and For All

**“But with you (King David speaking to God) there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.”**

Psalm 130:4

A student caught cheating on an exam, stops going to church. A mother of a child with disabilities lives in constant torment, convinced that God is punishing her child because she lived with her husband for a year before they were married and conceived her child during that time. A senior citizen--the victim of three heart attacks--sends a large check to a man who was his business partner forty years before with a terse note saying, "I had to get this off my chest before I meet my maker..."

All three face a common problem--a troubled conscience producing guilt that tears apart their hearts and lives. Many today, not understanding the nature of God's forgiveness, live lives that are full of frustration and self-condemnation. Take for instance, the man who wrote and said, "I am the most frustrated, confused, defeated individual you will ever hear about. I have a wonderful family, wife, 3 boys, and 1 daughter, all saved, yet I am so miserable. You said something on your program that may be the key to my need. You talked about forgiving yourself.... I just cannot forgive myself for..." He then went on to mention something that had happened years before.

Those skeletons in the closet keep making their lethal forays, stealing our peace of mind and leaving their muddy footprints in our lives. Most messages such as I have just mentioned revolve around moral problems, usually ones that took place a long time ago. They all result from the failure really to understand the nature of God's forgiveness, which results in the inability to forgive yourself.

The next two minutes can free you from the shackles of a burdened conscience. Observe carefully. First--the case for God's forgiveness is found in the pages of the Bible. If the Bible is true, as I believe it is, then forgiveness is based upon the nature and character of God Himself. In the pages of Scripture, God promises forgiveness to us provided we turn from our sin to a Savior and confess our need for

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forgiveness. Have you settled it in your mind that God would not lie? If you have, the next question you must ask is: Did I confess my failure to God?

David, a man who knew the guilt of moral failure, wrote, "But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you." (Psalms 130:4, NIV). Isaiah spoke of God, saying, "He will abundantly pardon," (Isaiah 55:7). Micah wrote, "He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19, ESV). The New Testament says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Did you confess your failure? Some of you could say, "I have asked God to forgive me hundreds of times!" Well, did He do it? He promised to. Suppose your son came to you and said, "I did wrong, Dad, and I want you to forgive me," and you said, "It is all right, son. I forgive you." If he came to you the next day and said the same thing, and the next day, wouldn't you say, "Son, I told you yesterday that I forgave you. It's settled!"

Surely God must feel the same way when we refuse to accept the fact that when He forgives us, as though we had never sinned. Learning to forgive ourselves is one of the most difficult tasks that ever confronts a person.

Forgiveness – A Finale

**“But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.”
Psalm 130:4**

On a cold winter's night many years ago a woman was brought into a hospital with severe burns that covered her face and a large portion of her body. The examining physician immediately recognized that shock had set in, and that the woman had very little chance of survival. The husband was notorious for his drinking, and he had come home intoxicated, and in a fit of anger had poured scalding water over his wife. When police arrived at the hospital where the dying woman was taken, they brought with them the husband, along with a magistrate whose responsibility was to prepare formal charges of murder against the man if his wife died. By this time the husband had begun to sober.

Arriving at the bedside the magistrate leaned over the body of the woman, careful not to touch the bed and cause her more pain, and asked, "Now please tell us exactly what happened." The woman turned her face from side to side to avoid looking at her husband who stood at the foot of the bed. Realizing that the woman had only a short while to live, the magistrate again pressed the question, "Please," he said, "tell us exactly what happened." Finally, her eyes came to rest on the hands of her husband and slowly raised her eyes to his face. For a brief moment the suffering seemed to drain from her face, and compassion and tenderness were evident. Speaking in a whisper she turned to the magistrate and said, "It was just an accident; I forgive him." And with a faint shadow of a smile on her face, she lay still.

Seldom in the daily business of family living does a person ever face such a gigantic problem involving the very sacrifice of one's life, as did this woman; yet none is exempt from having to forgive the trespasses or the wrongs that are done to us. The person who cannot forgive actually burns the bridge over which he himself must pass one day. But I think an even greater burden than that sustained by the person who is hurt, is the emotional burden that a person must bear until he comes to God and finds His forgiveness and healing.

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I am thinking of a personal acquaintance of mine, a man who is healthy and about as happy and well adjusted as anybody you will ever meet; but it was not always that way with Billy. Like the man who was responsible for the death of his wife, one morning Billy woke up in jail with a thick head and a massive hangover. Prison officials informed Billy that in a drunken rage, he had killed both his wife and his mother-in-law. He was about as low emotionally as a man could be. He attempted suicide and even that failed. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he would have ended his life if he could, but even at that he could not quite succeed. A preacher-boy from a Christian college began visiting the prison and sharing with the men that there is forgiveness with God which enables us to learn to forgive ourselves.

Years ago David wrote in the book of Psalms, "But with you there is forgiveness (meaning with God); therefore you are feared." David knew something of the burning pangs of conscience, knowing that he was responsible for the death of another. There is little chance that I'm speaking to someone who is directly responsible for the life of another, as David was; but as sure as you are two feet tall, I can be relatively sure there is someone listening who has deeply hurt someone he loves. Is it you? As David said, "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Psalm 130:4).

When You Pray, Forgive

**“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”
Mark 11:25**

Of the four Gospels, none is more to the point and straightforward than the account of Jesus' life as rendered by Mark. Because of his close relationship with Peter who, himself, was a pretty blunt, leave-nothing-unsaid sort of a person, many scholars believe that Mark simply reflected Peter's thoughts.

With that in mind, may I remind you that some of the most uplifting, positive words of Jesus are also recorded by Mark? For example, Mark tells about the time Jesus was talking with the disciples and said, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). Then Jesus said, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (v. 25).

Ponder those words, “When you stand praying...forgive...” “Just a minute.” you may be thinking, “What does God have to do with my relationship with other people?” In one word, everything! Prayer reflects a vertical relationship between you and God, but forgiveness is a picture of the horizontal relationship between you and someone else.

Jesus is saying that personal, answered prayer is conditioned upon your relationships with others as well as with God. But that's not the way we like it. We prefer to get what we want from God at the same time we snub people or are angry and bitter with them. But it doesn't work. Immediately after Jesus gave the disciples the prayer we know as The Lord's Prayer, He made this statement: “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

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You can't have it both ways. If you want God's forgiveness, you must learn to forgive others. If you want God to answer your prayers, you have to turn loose of the bitterness and let Him deal with some situations.

Question: Why is it so difficult to do this? The answer is that you feel more in control, more in charge, when you are filled with anger. But the very opposite is true. We also feel that forgiving someone is a matter of weakness, a giving in to the other, capitulating. But it is none of these. It is turning loose; it is letting go.

The Bible teaches that to forgive someone is to give up your right to hurt that individual because he hurt you first. It isn't letting the person off the hook, but turning him over to God. And believe me, when you do this, the burden lifts and the anger and hatred in your heart is replaced with God's love.

A rabbi who had lost his family in the Holocaust said that he forgave Hitler for the horrible loss he had sustained because he chose not to bring Hitler to America with him. That's wisdom. In their book *How to Forgive When You Don't Know How*," authors Mary Grunte and Jacqui Bishop write, "When you forgive, you reclaim your power to choose. It doesn't matter whether someone deserves forgiveness; you deserve to be free."

Should you take time to do a study of how the word forgive is used in the Bible, you will discover that in the vast number of occurrences, it relates to an individual's response to wrongs that others have done to him or her, rather than to seeking God's forgiveness for what the individual has personally done. It includes wrongs done by husbands and wives, by brothers and sisters, by business associates, by neighbors and by friends. Alexander Pope once wrote, "To err is human, to forgive divine." He was right.

The Full Extent of Forgiveness

**“Be kind and compassionate to one another,
forgiving each other,
just as in Christ God forgave you.”
Ephesians 4:32**

Archibald Hunter says that forgiveness is “surrendering my right to hurt you because you have hurt me.” “Not exactly,” says Richard Smith, saying that this is too easy because we let the offender off the hook. Richard is a missionary and counselor who has made a lifetime study of cultures and relationships—how people relate to each other. Richard and his wife Connie recognize that forgiveness is important—very important, but they are also convinced that a lot of people mouth empty words of forgiveness, glossing over acts of wrongdoing at the very time they hold on to bitterness in their hearts.

“Forgiveness means releasing the other person from your judgment and trusting God to handle it, even to the point of extending mercy, if that is His choice,” writes Richard. Are both men saying the same thing, simply using different words? Or is there a basic difference?

I’m convinced that a lot of people make a stab at forgiveness but simply gloss over the severity of wrongdoing and the consequences of sinful actions which have been directed against them as a victim. Knowing that Jesus said we must forgive each other if He, in turn, forgives us, they say what they think they are supposed to say.

We make statements like, “After all, he’s just human.” Or, “Well, it was your fault just as much as it was mine.” Sometimes we ignore the problem which continues to fester and grow, saying, “We’ll just not talk about this any more because every time we get into a discussion about this, we both get angry and say things we shouldn’t say.”

After I spoke on the importance of forgiveness, a woman told me about the brutal murder of her son. The youth who had killed her only son was sent to prison, yet her heart was filled with rage. After all, the victim was her only child, and he had tragically been denied a chance to grow up. He had been cut down in his youth, unfairly and unjustly.

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Of course she was angry. Yes, she was also a Christian. Yes, she knew mentally she had to forgive. She had the solution in her head. But she just couldn't do it.

The more she thought and prayed about it, the more she began to see the issue from God's perspective. She knew she couldn't gloss over the murder. What had happened was horrible. Not just to her son, but to her as well. Some way, she began to realize vengeance wasn't her responsibility. It was God's. And that's when she began to realize God had to deal with the murderer and she believed God would do just that.

"But the kid in prison doesn't know about God," she thought. Did she confront her son's murderer? No. She chose instead to send him a Bible with a long letter, explaining how she felt, telling him that God whose Son cried out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" as He was being crucified would also forgive him as well.

"Don't do this," the warden at the prison urged her. "You're wasting your time," he added. But she did. "And when I did that," she said, "the burden lifted and only then I could forgive him."

Richard is right. "Forgiveness means releasing the other person from your judgment," putting the perpetrator of wrong in God's hands, allowing God to do whatever He chooses to do, whether it is to extend mercy to him or to exact the full measure of judgment, which is His right to do—not yours. I'm convinced it is more than just giving up my right to hurt you because you hurt me. It means trusting God to handle the situation, leaving it to Him who alone knows the hearts and the weakness of the flesh. That is what real forgiveness is all about. Nothing less will do.

Facing Failure, Finding Forgiveness

**“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD.
“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.”
Isaiah 1:18**

A medical doctor who says, "Look, this is what's wrong with you, and this is what you need to do to get rid of your problem" has done you a great favor. He has both accurately diagnosed your illness, and told you exactly what you need to do to be rid of the pain and suffering which brought you to his office. He's done you a great service. But a doctor who either ignores your symptoms or glosses over them, saying, "Look, everybody has aches and pains. Don't worry about them!" has done you a great disservice.

After I spoke in a certain church, a man met me at the door and said, "I liked what you said, but an awful lot of people are going to be very angry with you!" "And why is that?" I asked. "Because you didn't sugarcoat it; you told them the truth!" But isn't that what God did with us when He described the rebellion of the human heart which the Bible calls "SIN"? God never excused the foibles of an unfaithful mate, saying, "Surely this kind of behavior is a token of the aberrant behavior of humankind's evolutionary climb towards a better world." No! He called it "sin," but in labeling our problem, God offered a solution--repentance leading to forgiveness and cleansing!

**God still says, "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD.
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18).**

Man's refusal to diagnose the problem presents a far greater problem--a sickness which results in death. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The deadliest sins are the consciousness of no sin."

The good news is that there is forgiveness for your sin--no matter what it is. Illustrating that truth, Jesus told the story about a young man who became dissatisfied with his boring existence. He convinced his father that he should be given his inheritance, which he took and

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quickly squandered in riotous living and cheap thrills. Eventually, the money was gone and he found himself cleaning out the pens of swine--something which is pretty repulsive to anyone, but especially to a Jewish lad who viewed pigs as unclean.

In telling the story, Jesus pointed out that there came a time when he "came to himself." Today we would say, "he came to his senses." He began to reason--the same thinking which God said we are to do--that things were better for his father's hired hands than for him. He said, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." (Luke 15:18-19), and that is exactly what he did.

Facing the reality of your failure, regretting what you have done, turning away from it, and then going back to the Father, is what is necessary to bring peace of mind and find the forgiveness of God today.

Restoration--being at peace with the Father--is the end result of dealing with the issue of sin. It is all part of what salvation is about. Take time to read the story for yourself, found in Luke 15 in your New Testament. There you will see that the father received the son with open arms! He quickly forgave him, and there was rejoicing in the household.

St. John Chrysostom once said, "For to sin, indeed is human; but to persevere in sin is not human but altogether Satanic." He's right! If you see yourself in the picture I've just described, the way back is difficult but it is a well worn path. Get moving today! The Father is yet waiting!

I Forgive You With All My Heart

**“But if you do not forgive others their sins,
your Father will not forgive your sins.”**

Matthew 6:15

If ever there was a living saint, it was Corrie ten Boom. Should you ever have the opportunity of visiting Amsterdam, take the train from Central Station for a 20-minute ride to Haarlem, a delightful Dutch town. Walk past the city square and just off this, past the old church where Corrie’s nephew was the organist, there you will find a watch shop made famous by the movie, “The Hiding Place.”

Here lived a Dutch family, committed Christians, when World War 2 broke out. Seeing so many Jews being rounded up and sent on one-way trips to the concentration camps of the Third Reich, the ten Booms decided to fight back in their own compassionate way by making their home a “safe house” for Jews who would be hidden, given new identity papers, different clothes, and money to escape the Gestapo’s grasp.

Hanging in the window of their clock shop was a small triangular sign advertising the famous Tissot watches made in Switzerland. When the sign was out, it was safe for Jews to come to the ten Boom watch shop, but when it was missing, this was a sign that they should come back at a later time because they deemed it unsafe.

A neighbor, however, figured out what the Tissot sign in the window was about and reported the ten Booms to the Gestapo. They were eventually arrested. Within a few days Corrie’s aged father died, and she and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbrück Concentration Camp. There Betsie died; and a week before Corrie was scheduled for execution, through an administrative fluke, she was released. God had spared her life.

After the devastating war ended, Corrie went back to Germany as an ambassador of good will, and wherever she went she stressed the importance of forgiveness. One evening, however, her message of reconciliation was put to the test.

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Having just spoken in a bombed-out church, she was standing in the front greeting people when walking down the aisle was a man she recognized—one of the guards who had been at Ravensbrück who had cruelly whacked the women on the buttocks as he drove them to the showers when they had first arrived there. He was wearing an old brown topcoat and carried a hat in his hand, but when she saw him in her mind's eye, she envisioned the skull and the crossed bones on the visored cap of the SS guard and the altogether too familiar blue-gray uniform he had worn.

Reaching the front of the church, he extended his hand towards hers saying what a fine message she had brought. Corrie was frozen. Hatred welled up in her heart. Touching him was the last thing she wanted to do, but she remembered how she had just told the people that if we do not forgive each other, God will not forgive us either.

“God,” she prayed, “help me to forgive him.”

Corrie told how a warm feeling began at the top of her head and surged through her body. Suddenly she extended her hand and said, “I forgive you... I forgive you with all my heart.”

Writing of that experience she said, “Forgiveness is not an emotion.... Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart” (Tramp For the Lord, p. 85-88).

If Corrie could forgive someone like that, can God not help you to do the same thing with the one who has offended you? The very act of forgiveness, though, involves both the offended as well as the offender. Jesus taught that both the offended and the offender are to reach toward the other in resolving the conflict.

Turtles and 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

So you think you have problems, do you? Consider the plight of a woman who held a rummage sale to get rid of her junk and put some money in her purse at the same time.

Elmira collects turtles—big ones, small ones, green ones, brown ones. All kinds of them. So she decided to sell some of them on the junk table. "We have lots of turtles," she explained, and the turtles sold; but a rather small turtle turned into a big problem.

Elmira was her husband's second wife, and wife number one had also collected turtles. In fact, she asked that one of them serve as the final resting place of her ashes upon her death.

Later when Elmira began searching for the turtle which was the urn containing the ashes of her husband's late wife, she remembered. A woman had bought the turtle explaining that she wanted to turn it into a cookie jar.

Yes, she hopes to locate the buyer who hopefully hasn't yet had time to convert the turtle-urn into a cookie jar. It's unclear how her husband responded to the sale of his late wife's turtle, but I can tell you for sure that the experience proved to be a test of the strength of their relationship.

Of course, we have to let go of the past, but letting go that way can be rather painful as well. Coping with the unexpected is always a challenge to your relationship—whether it is an accident that your wife has, or your husband gambles behind your back, or you learn that your husband, who was supposed to go fishing, actually went to Hong Kong or Las Vegas with his secretary.

"I can forgive but I will never forget," a woman sat in my office and told me. Honestly, that's like burying the hatchet with the handle

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sticking up out of the ground for ready reference should there ever be a failure in the future.

Of course, the memory of a person's failure—whether it is selling the turtle that contained the ashes of your late wife or the failure of your husband to honor his wedding vows—is something that you will bear to your dying day. But whether or not you release the wrong is entirely another matter.

To forgive someone is not to say that what the person did is OK; it isn't. But it does say, "OK, I put this matter in God's hands and let Him deal with it." Most of the time it means we put something aside. We let it go. Actually the word used in the New Testament when the writers of Scripture talked about forgiveness means "to give up" or "to take away." I think of it like this. "When I forgive you, I give up my right to hurt you because you hurt me."

Vast numbers of people live with brokenness from the past. The anger and bitterness never goes away but becomes the poison in your system that you would like to project to your enemy. It doesn't work that way.

God's grace and help always bring healing to the person who has forgiven, allowing gradual healing to take place. No, it doesn't always happen at once. At times it is a slow process as you forgive, forgive, and forgive again. But it will happen.

I have no way of knowing if the woman who bought the turtle at a rummage sale realized it was not a proper container for chocolate chip or oatmeal cookies, and returned the purchase; but I do know that no matter how careful we are, and how much we love the other person, we eventually "sell the turtle," drop and damage it, or simply misplace it and have to say, "I'm sorry; forgive me."

Have You Really Forgiven?

**“For he is the living God and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.”
Daniel 6:26**

When someone has wronged you, is it enough to say, “I forgive you!” or is there more to this whole business? Says Philip Wagner, “The process of healing is not an instant ‘I forgive you’ and then you go on with your life. It may take months for you to find complete release; however, saying and meaning, “I forgive you!” starts the process. Real forgiveness is both an act and a process. The act is giving up your right to hurt another because someone hurt you; the process is the complete work of healing in your heart and your relationship which allows you the intimacy, trust, and friendship you once enjoyed.

Not sure that you really have forgiven someone? In his little book *Healing a Broken Heart* Wagner suggests that there are eight questions you can ask yourself which help you know whether or not you meant those words, “I forgive you!”

Question #1: Are you willing to talk about the wrong that has taken place? Often the person who refuses to talk about the issue is only sealing off the offence in an inner cell of the heart, something akin to putting the memory in a dark vault where it can be resurrected or retrieved at will—something like a weapon for future use. Talking about something—not digging for more details but sharing thoughts and feelings—ventilates the wound. This includes praying together, letting God be party to your thoughts and feelings.

Question #2: Do you take responsibility for your part in what happened? Or are you a “no fault,” the kind of person who always blames the other for what happened. Yes, there are times when the fault of wrongdoing rests very much on one side of the issue, yet the mark of a healthy person is the ability to recognize personal responsibility, no matter where it leads.

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Question #3: Do you find yourself reacting to someone who reminds you of the person who offended you? Transferring your feelings towards an innocent person is evidence that you still bear resentment, perhaps even hatred, towards someone who has never really been forgiven.

Question #4: Can you honestly ask God to bless the person who wronged you? Remember Jesus told us that we are to pray for our enemies, including those who spitefully use us and persecute us. Your being able to do that is an evidence that your forgiveness is real and authentic.

Question #5: Do you believe forgiveness is essential in the Christian life? In other words, do you believe Jesus meant what He said when He told the disciples that if they did not forgive each other, God would not forgive them (see Matthew 6:14-15)?

Question #6: Are you waiting your time for revenge or repayment? There's a difference. Revenge means you want to get even—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (which leaves you both blind and toothless). But repayment means you are waiting for some form of restitution—a gift, something which would be enough to let go of your pain.

Question #7: Do you have an investment in holding the past against that person? Actually that's a form of blackmail. You lean on the person who hurt you for special favors, preying on his guilt, perhaps never saying anything, but subtly holding the wrongdoing over his or her head. Sometimes that emotional blackmail is blatant—not subtle, but in either case, if it's there, you still need to forgive.

Question #8: Again, ask yourself, "Have I really forgiven?" That's a question which only you can answer. But you do know, and so does God, and probably so does the person who would desperately like to be really forgiven.

The Process of Forgiveness

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them,
for they do not know what they are doing."
Luke 23:34

"Sorry!" Ever hear someone say that? What you wanted to hear was something less flippant, more sincere, more meaningful. But all you got was, "Sorry!" One word which may have stung more than it helped. What you really wanted to hear was, "Please forgive me for the terrible wrong I did. I am deeply troubled by what I've done and want you to know, so help me God, that I will never, never do this again! Please forgive me."

When wrongdoing has taken place, there are two parts to the healing process. Obviously, the first is serious, meaningful confession of wrongdoing, asking the person you have hurt to forgive you. Then Part Two is the response of the one who has been hurt. Both are necessary to real healing, yet whether or not the person who did wrong comes through with what you would like to hear, you—the victim—can rid yourself of the terrible burden of hatred and the desire for revenge through forgiveness.

Part of the difficulty is two-fold: First, to forgive runs counter to our old nature. We don't like to forgive; we prefer to make our enemies suffer, to grovel in the dust, to feel something of the pain that we felt. There's something else that makes it hard. We tend to think that to forgive someone is saying, "What you did to me is OK!" Both are wrong.

To forgive someone doesn't mean that you are saying, "What you did is OK." Rather it means you take the wrong you have suffered along with the consequences and say, "God, I yield this to you. Hatred is too heavy a load, and revenge is too exacting for me to bear. I put this whole thing in your hands, remembering that you said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' so, God, here it is. You take it."

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But I hasten to say that much like marriage, which is both an act and a process, forgiveness is both an act or decision of the will and an ongoing process which has to be repeated—sometimes many times.

In her book *Tramp For the Lord* Corrie ten Boom, a self-effacing Dutch woman who was a venerable saint, tells about meeting one of the prison guards from Ravensbrück Concentration Camp after the war, and when she saw this man coming down the aisle of a church, wanting to shake hands with her, hatred rose in her heart. Telling of how she quickly prayed for forgiveness, she adds that forgiveness is an act of the will and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. She is saying that you make the decision to forgive, then your emotions follow. Of course you don't feel like forgiving! Nobody does. But forgive you must, if you want healing.

As long as you refuse to forgive, your soul bears wounds that fester and the infection only spreads. Hatred and the desire for revenge are poisons which literally can kill you.

The ongoing process of forgiveness takes time. It's the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in your life as Jesus works His life through yours. How does this play out? You will see something, hear something, remember something, smell something; and when you do, the hatred and the emotions of the wrong will rise like a dark cloud over you. You will see your spirit cloud and your joy will dissipate, and that's when you say, "Lord, I forgive this person. I put this in your hands and I don't want it back." It's also when you have to tell Satan to stop bugging you with the memory and praise God that He brings healing and hope for tomorrow.

The Cost of Forgiveness

**“In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”
John 1:4**

The most striking Christmas card I have received in years came with the headline: **HISTORY IS CROWDED WITH MEN WHO WOULD BE GODS.** Underneath were the images of nine powerful historical figures: Alexander the Great, Tutankhamen, Julius Caesar, Maharishi Yogi, Adolph Hitler, Vladimir Lenin, Napoleon Bonaparte, Gautama Buddha, and Mao Tse Tung. Even those who flunked world history would recognize some of those names. Who would deny that these individuals aspired to reign as gods with supreme power and authority?

The Caesars proclaimed themselves to be gods and demanded the worship of a god. But what made the card unique was the message inside which read, **BUT ONLY ONE GOD WHO WOULD BE MAN.** Underneath was the reproduction of a Dutch painting depicting the infant Jesus in the manger with Mary and Joseph looking on. Amazing but true is the fact that many would be god, but only one God would be man.

Theologians call it the incarnation, a word that comes from the Latin which means “in flesh.” Question: Did God really become man? And, if so, did God cease to be God?

The record of Scripture is profound and clear at the same time. It says that God the Father loved the world so much that He gave His only Son. Stop! Think about that for a moment. God, the Son, became willing to lay aside His role as God, sitting at the right hand of the Father, to be born of human flesh. The up side of that is simple: God understands my weariness, my heartache, my pain, my suffering, even the limitations of my joy and happiness. God became man, completely human, completely normal.

The Babe born at Bethlehem grew to manhood experiencing the emotional ups and downs of adolescence, and became an adult male, completely physical like any male today. John gives us this record so

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beautifully in the introduction to the Gospel which bears his name. He says, “Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is himself God. He created everything there is--nothing exists that he didn't make. Eternal life is in him, and this life gives light to all mankind. His life is the light that shines through the darkness--and the darkness can never extinguish it” (John 1:1-5, Living Bible).

It is here that the whole issue pushes our understanding because being completely human and completely God means something different, something marvelous, something—yes, supernatural. Paul explains how Jesus laid aside His exercise of deity to become man, in Philippians 2.

Was Jesus, Who was born at Bethlehem and lived most of His life in the city of Nazareth to the north of Jerusalem, like us in the sense that He was tempted and torn, at times, between right and wrong? The record says He was in every way tempted as we are, yet without sin. As man He was able to sin, but He was also able not to sin--which gives us hope as well.

Amazingly, Jesus said, “I forgive you...go and sin no more!” Only God could do that. Many men would be god, but only one God chose to be man. Amazing, yet true. When John says that God so loved us that He sent His Son, he adds something powerful. He says, “that whosoever believes on Him should not perish [or be lost] but have eternal life” (John 3:16). That is the bottom line, and if you miss that truth, you have missed the point of the whole issue. God loved. God gave so that you might have life for all eternity.

Good News: Forgiveness

**“If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.”
Psalm 130:3-4**

“To err is human; to forgive, divine,” said the wise man long ago. It’s true, but of all the transactions which take place between people, none is more difficult than to seek and give forgiveness. There’s good news, however. Forgiveness is the key to emotional and spiritual healing and the passport to your future happiness. It’s God’s way of eliminating the cancer of hatred and anger which rips the fabric of relationships apart much as a little boy tears the wrapper off a candy bar.

The Psalmist wrote, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Psalm 130:3,4). Who was the author? Probably David, one of the greatest personalities of all time, a man who earned the respect of generations not only for what he did but for his humility in acknowledging his sins and failure.

A few minutes ago I used my computer to scan the text of the Bible to see how many times the phrase, “I have sinned,” appears in the Bible. A rather wide group of people cried out, “I have sinned,” but only David said, “I have sinned greatly!”

Was David that much worse than others? Not necessarily. But what David did gives us insights to what we must do in coming to grips with the necessity of forgiveness. First, he acknowledged his personal failure. When he had a sexual relationship with another man’s wife and ultimately was responsible for his death, David could have said, “I couldn’t help it. I was just overwhelmed with Bathsheba’s beauty.” Even though he was king, he wasn’t exempt from the consequences. His conscience convicted him and he knew that his sin was not only against Bathsheba and her husband, he had sinned against God. ”My sin is always before me,” said David, adding, “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...” (Psalm 51:4).

Forgiven Then, Forgiven Now, Forgiven Forevermore

Do you want to silence that voice within which says what you have done is wrong? Then do what David did: First, admit your wrongdoing, then take the second step: Ask God to forgive you. David cried out, "O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you" (Psalm 41:4). It takes strength to do that, but with it comes the reward of peace and joy. The New Testament says if we confess our sins, God is faithful and will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness or wrongdoing (see 1 John 1:9). The word to confess really means to agree. It was the word which you would use when you wanted to match two sticks which were of equal length and size. It means that your heart says, "Yes, God, I agree with your verdict. I sinned."

It's also interesting to notice that when David asked for forgiveness, he also asked for healing. Can you relate to that? Frankly, it's a lot easier to find God's forgiveness than it is to forgive ourselves and to get on with the process of putting our lives together after a hideous failure. That involves inner healing– which brings us to the third step in the process of restoration: Cooperate with the Lord in bringing healing to your life and the lives of those whom you have hurt. My definition of forgiveness is this: "I give up my right to hurt you because you hurt me." That process of giving up something means I have to release the bitterness and the pain as well as giving up my hatred of myself, the resentfulness which I feel towards myself because in a moment of weakness or lust, I destroyed what I really love and want. Thank God, David was right: There is forgiveness with God which allows you to forgive yourself as well.

What Does It Mean To Repent?

When we read Psalm 51 (written by David after his sin with Bathsheba), we begin to realize how lacking our confessions really are.

Often we treat repentance as a statement—an “I’m sorry, please forgive me” that checks a box and (hopefully) alleviates our guilt. But if we look closely at Psalm 51 we see that repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning toward God—a process that doesn’t merely alleviate guilt but cultivates deep joy.

So how do we grow in a joy-giving habit of repentance? Here’s how.

Rule 1. Define the sin.

The first step to meaningful confession is understanding what sin is. David uses three different words for it in Psalm 51: “Iniquity,” “sin,” and “transgressions” (v 1-3). Each term has been deliberately chosen for its unique meaning in Hebrew. “Transgressions” implies a rebellion against God’s authority and law, “Iniquity” means a distortion of what should be and “Sin” is a missing of the mark. David is making it clear that his sin is deep—there is no minimizing or excusing it.

Rule 2. Appeal to God’s mercy.

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love” (v 1). Here, David appeals for forgiveness based on what he knows about God’s character: that God is merciful. David knows that God is committed to him in a relationship (or covenant) of “unfailing love”—and when we come before God in repentance, we do so on the basis of his covenant with us through Christ.

Rule 3. Avoid defensiveness and see God rightly.

David's sin hurt multiple people. He committed adultery, orchestrated a murder, and tried to cover it all up. And yet he says to God that "against you, you only, have I sinned" (v 4). How can that be?

Well, if we think of sin as failing to hit the mark, then we have to ask, "Whose mark are we missing?" The answer, of course, is that it's God's mark. So although our sin does hurt others, and repenting to those people is important, sin is ultimately against God, since it's his ways that we have failed to live up to, and his image-bearers whom we hurt.

Rule 4. Look to Jesus.

David's reference to hyssop in verse 7 is not accidental—"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean". He knows hyssop signifies purification (see Exodus 24) with blood, and he knows that blood alone can make him whiter than snow. What he doesn't know is how this will be done fully.

But we do. Instead of relying on an animal sacrifice, we look to Jesus, who "has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9 v 26). His blood is enough to make us "whiter than snow" (Psalm 51 v 7).

Rule 5. Ask God to break you and heal you.

David prays, "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice" (v 8). When God reveals our sin to us, it's painful. David was already a sin-broken man; he just didn't fully realize it until God sent the prophet Nathan to show him his sin and break him all the way. Like a doctor resetting a

fractured bone, it is God who breaks, God who sets, and God who heals.

And this is all mercy: 19th-century British pastor Charles Spurgeon wrote that seeing our weakness, and experiencing God's power to save, teaches us "a heart-music which only broken bones [can] learn ..."

Rule 6. Be comforted by the Spirit.

Next David prays, "Do not ... take your Holy Spirit from me" (v 11). But the very fact that David is grieved over his sin is a sign that God's Spirit is at work in him. This is true for you as well. Have you ever been so discouraged by your sin that you've wondered, "How can God love me? Surely I'm not really a Christian." Take comfort in knowing that the very grief you're experiencing is a sign that you have the Spirit of God working in you, causing you to hate what God hates.

Rule 7. Rejoice and proclaim truth.

In verses 12-15, David is asking God to make him so joyful about his salvation that he can't help but teach other sinners the forgiving ways of God—"Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise". This is important, because so often we do the opposite—we're inclined to wallow in our sin and draw back from serving others, whether in church or in our communities, because we think we're unworthy. But here David says the joy of forgiveness for sin should compel us to speak of that good news with friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors.

Rule 8. Resolve to obey.

We can check all the boxes, do all the steps above, and say all the right words, but if in the back of our minds we're planning to sin in the same way again, then grace isn't truly taking root. What God desires is the mark of true repentance—a heart that is “broken” by sin and truly “contrite”.

As Puritan pastor and writer Thomas Watson wrote, “Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet” (*The Doctrine of Repentance*, p 63). If we come to God with a heart like that, he “will not despise” it; he will accept it, and accept us, because of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (v 17).

Time to respond

What sins are weighing on your heart? What guilt have you been trying to cover with distraction? Or are you submerging yourself under the weight of it as a form of penance, rather than taking your sin to the cross, where it’s already been paid for?

Take some time now to work through the steps above, and rejoice in the incomparable grace offered to you in Christ!