

# FORGIVENESS *as a way of life*

## Living as imitators of God

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. - Ephesians 4:31-5:2

**Our thesis: Big sinners with a big Saviour are big forgivers.**

**Read:** "The Cruelty of Apartheid and the Wonder of Amazing Grace" (9-5)

**"If you could lick my heart, it would poison you"** snarled a Jewish holocaust survivor in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.<sup>1</sup> By nature we are just like him. Forgiveness is not the normal human inclination, revenge is.

**But the Gospel challenges** our sinful urge to exact revenge and tells us to forgive those who wrong us. Impossible? No, because the Gospel *enables* us to do all that it requires of us. Exactly how that works we will discover as we go on, but first, there's a wee assignment:

**Your Forgiveness Assignment:** Think of one or two people who, whenever you think of them, leave a bad taste in your mouth. Done? Now, as we do this lesson, keep their faces and the ways they have hurt you in mind. This will ensure that our study is relevant. We want to learn how the Gospel can heal real hearts of real hurts. At the end, there's a forgiveness workshop to help us apply what we have learned. Now, to get us ready, will you join me in praying: **"Lord Jesus, you have forgiven me much. Teach me to become as great a forgiver as I am a sinner."**

## I. FORGIVENESS DEFINED

**How would you define forgiveness?** Give it a think for two minutes, write down your answer, and, if you're willing, share it with the group.

**When God tells me to forgive someone,** what exactly is he telling me to do?

**A. What forgiveness is not.** God is *not* telling me to pretend bad things have not been done to me. Nor is he telling me to excuse the people or minimise the hurt they have caused. Nor is he telling me to erase the hurts from my memory. God is telling me to apply the Gospel to the reality of my pain.

<sup>1</sup> *Shoah*, Hebrew for "calamity," is a nine-hour film detailing the horrors of the Holocaust. It features interviews with Jewish survivors, Nazi concentration camp staff and their civilian collaborators.

**B. What forgiveness is.** Dr. Ray Pendleton, professor of pastoral counseling at Gordon-Conwell Seminary (USA), observed that people tend to *collect* their hurts as if they were gold coins, and store them in a treasure chest. And, as each new hurt is put in the chest, the lid is opened and the whole hoard of wrongs is shown to the offender as punishment. The problem is, the "treasure" is worthless fool's gold. Rather than enrich us, it embitters us and keeps us in a permanent state of vengeance. Ray says,

**"Forgiveness is a gift of grace that I the wounded party give to the one who has sinned against me. It is a precious and costly gift. It is costly because, instead of inflicting pain on the person who hurt me, I choose to bear the pain of their sin against me. I literally give away the 'treasure chest' of my hurt—the one thing I could use as a weapon to punish them in the future."** This is why Tim Keller says "Words are not the currency of forgiveness, pain is."



The Treasure Chest of Hurt

**Forgiveness is a Gospel drama in which we mimic God!** One highly popular form of theatre in ancient Rome was "mime"—the art of silent mimicry. Paul picks up on this in Ephesians 5:1 (lesson masthead). When we are wronged, he says, we are to be mimics (*mimetes*) of our heavenly Father. When we sin, our Father forgives for Jesus' sake. So, when we are sinned against, we forgive "even as God for Christ's sake" has forgiven us. Likewise, in Colossians 3:12,13, Paul says, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

**A Gospel-driven definition of forgiveness:** "Forgiveness is my releasing the guilty person from the punishment due to them for their sins against me—just as the Father releases me from the punishment due to me for my sins against Him." Notice that our forgiveness is totally *derivative*, that is, the fact that it even exists, and, the power to do it, are derived from the Gospel.

## II. THE TWOFOLD IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

**A. God requires it.** It's "The Law of Grace." The Great Forgiver demands that we forgive like him. Is that fair? Really! How can God require *me* to forgive when I'm the one who has been wounded? Who is God to think he has the right to interfere in my affairs? Because he is *God*, and...

**1. Because every sin** is a violation of his law of love, it's a sin against him. It was observed by his all-seeing eye, committed under his jurisdiction, recorded in his book, is subject to his judgment, and is therefore, *his* proper business. (David - Ps.51:4)

**2. Because every sin** against you as one of his loved daughters or sons is very much his business! (Matthew 18:6 give us a glimpse into God's heart regarding his loving care for those who believe in him.)

**3. Because as forgiven ones**, it is a matter of *justice* and *fairness* that we forgive others.

**Read** Matthew 6:12 - St. Augustine called this phrase in the Lord's Prayer "The Awful Petition". Verses 14,15 clarify why forgiveness is such *serious* business.

**Read** Matthew 18:21-35 - The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. What was this man's problem? Did he ever think to identify with and *mimic* his master who had forgiven him?

**QUESTION:** Is Jesus teaching here that we earn or lose our salvation based upon our forgiveness of others? If not, what do you think he *is* he telling us?

**OUR VIEW:** *Perhaps* Jesus is saying that our readiness to forgive is one of the surest proofs of our conversion. That we could receive God's forgiveness, then turn round and refuse to forgive someone else, is inconceivable. Put simply: *If the ones claiming to be forgiven refuse to forgive, they are not among the forgiven ones.* Jesus took this matter seriously, so must we.

Yes, forgiveness is a struggle, but if we are not willing to do battle with our unforgiving hearts, we need to heed Paul's advice:

"*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you, unless, of course, you fail the test?*" (2Cor.13:5)

### B. Our Spiritual Health Demands It

**Unforgiveness corrodes its container.** When we refuse to forgive, we will either try to *bury the hurt* (fake forgiveness) or "*collect the debt.*" Fake forgiveness solves nothing. The pressure will build and, like a whistling kettle, we'll release the steam of bitterness, "*defiling many.*" (Heb.12:15; Jas.3:5ff)

**Dr. Tim Keller** lists five ways we may try to "collect the debt."

- 1) We may act cold toward the person.
- 2) We may become demanding of them.
- 3) We may become self-righteously "merciful".
- 4) We may damage their reputation by warning others about them. (I'm just "sharing my pain.")
- 5) We may rejoice when they are hurt or fail.

### Dr. Jay Adams' 3-fold forgiveness test:

Can you say to the one who has hurt you:

- 1) I will not mention it to you again. (One of the devil's names is "*Diabolos*" - "to hurl against".)
- 2) I will not dwell on it myself. (Phil.4:4-8 tells us what to dwell on. We do have a choice.)
- 3) I will not mention it to others. Gossip is "*confessing someone else's sins.*" ) We have not truly forgiven if we're running round marshalling an army of sympathisers.

### Forgetting vs. not remembering against

Your memory can't be erased. Don't beat yourself up if memories of past hurts pop up, but be quick to repent if you enjoy it. Remembering is not sin. God remembers our sins (his memory can't be erased) but, for Jesus' sake, he does not remember them *against* us.



**Called to forgive?**  
A Rwandan Massacre Survivor - *National Geographic* 06-97

**Note:** Sin can have a long-term impact. Where there has been serious emotional, physical or sexual abuse, our wounds will be deep and forgiveness may be a long *process* of repeated forgivings. The damage done may surface years later, so new and deeper levels of forgiveness may be needed. Many churches offer excellent lay counselling services. In some cases, it will be wise to seek a professional Christian counsellor. The important thing that we deal with our hurts rather than let them keep us locked in a prison of pain. If you suspect you need outside help, by all means, seek it.

## III. WHY IT IS SO HARD TO FORGIVE

**It is hard to forgive because...**

**A. ...we are reluctant to pay the painful price of forgiveness.** We want to reserve the right of revenge because we are hurting and forgiveness offends our sense of justice. The guilty person must be punished. How easy it is to slip into the role of the Unmerciful Servant!

**B. ...we are very aware of the sins of others, but quite unaware of our own.** Read Jesus' "specks and beams" in Matthew 7:3-5. He

makes it clear that if we don't live in the sinner's place, our self-righteousness will make it virtually impossible to show mercy to other sinners.

**C. ...we think, "They should know better than to do that!"** **Fact:** Sin blinds us to our evil. **See:** Luke 23:24 and 1 Corinthians 2:8. Amazing! The men who so carefully plotted Jesus' execution would not have done it had they possessed God's perspective. "Father forgive them!" cried the South African man as he was burned alive. Why? How? Did his murderers *really* know what they were doing? Isn't it the same with those who hurt us? Let's learn to make that dear brother's prayer our own: "Father, forgive them!"

**D. ...we think, "But they keep on hurting me!"** After teaching the twelve how to deal with hurtful people, Peter (who else?) raised the issue of multiple offenses with his now famous, "How many times must I forgive, seven?" Jesus' answer was shocking. "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven"—picturing God's *unlimited* forgiveness. Then, to be sure Peter could not wriggle out of the noose, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt.18:15ff).

#### IV. A FORGIVENESS CHECKLIST

*Of course forgiveness cannot be achieved or maintained by following a list of steps,* so, please don't think of the following as "The Nine Steps to Forgiveness". Think of it as a **Gospel Checklist** to guide you toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not come by our *trying* to forgive. It is the **fruit** of something—Gospel faith. When we are in our Father's presence, not as frightened orphans, but as loved sons and daughters, his Spirit will enable us to do the humanly impossible—love and forgive *other* sinners.

#### FORGIVENESS: IT'S A GOSPEL THING!

**Ready? Here's our checklist:**

**A. REMEMBER/ACKNOWLEDGE the wrongs and hurts stored up in your heart.** Look inside your "Treasure Chest of Hurt". The only way to heal a boil is to lance it to release the infection. Is there someone you avoid, dislike, are bitter towards, or just plain hate? **Make a list** of these people and the ways they've wounded you.

**B. ACCEPT that God is sovereign over your life.** Those among us who have been traumatised by physical, emotional or sexual abuse may wonder, "God, do you really love me; are you really good?" "Where were you when I was being hurt?" "If you love me, why didn't you protect me?" We may even feel that God needs forgiving. But, we must realise that God is not the offender. As difficult as it may be to comprehend, God, for his own reasons, allowed these things to happen. Read Ephesians 1:3-14. *Carefully.* This describes

*your past, your present and your future.* He does love you. Let go of your unbelief. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you. Romans 8:28 is true, and one day, we will understand all mysteries and God himself will wipe away every tear (Rev.7:17;21:4).

**C. LET GO of your identity as a "victim."** **We cannot emphasize this enough.** If we define ourselves as victims, sinners are always "*those people out there who have hurt me*". That casues us to lose sight of the Cross and the fact that *we too* are bit sinners who need forgiving.

**Please understand** that we are in no way trying to minimise the fact that some of us have been victims of the most grievous evil. But to live as a victim is to be locked in a prison of self-centredness in which we are unable to either repent or forgive. Victims don't need a saviour, only sinners do. What's more, those who remain in the victim role can become a danger to others. It is well documented that victims often become *victimisers* as their unhappiness sours not only their lives, but the lives of all those round them. (Eg. 9-11.)

**“Victims don't need a Saviour, only sinners do.”**

**Praise God** that the Gospel meets our deepest needs! But, the Gospel is for sinners only. Grace runs only one way—down hill to the needy. So, if you find yourself stuck in the victim role, *run* to Jesus; *run* to the sinners place where the refreshing streams of grace can begin to flow in your life again. There, in fellowship with the One who was wounded for your transgressions and bruised for your iniquities, you will find forgiveness for *your* sins **and** the power to forgive those who have wounded you.

#### D. "PREACH the Gospel to yourself."

In it's simplest form, the Gospel is: "*Jesus died for sinners; Jesus is my righteousness.*" The cross of Jesus is not an *illustration* of God's love, it is the *fountain* of his forgiveness of us, and the source of our ability to forgive others. Are you ready to "mime" God? (Eph.4:32ff)

#### Take the two BIG Gospel steps (Col. 2:6)

**1. I am a (the) BIG Sinner!** (1Jn.1:8; Rom.7:15-19; 1Tim.1:15) "*Dear Father, if you were to count my sins against me, I would be lost and hell-bound. I know that if this person who sinned against me had a record of all my sins—my outward actions and secret thoughts—he would be disgusted at the sight of me. There has never been even one day—one hour—that I have loved and lived like Jesus...*". (There. That should get you started.)

**2. I have a BIG Saviour!** With the eyes of your heart (Eph.1:18), LOOK at Jesus. Notice we did not say, "Think *about* Jesus," rather, **look at** him. Do what the writer to the Hebrews said:

"Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of the majesty on high. Consider him who endured such affliction from sinners so you not grow weary and lose heart..." (Heb.12:2-3)

Talk to him about your hurts. Consider his hands and feet and side, still scarred by his sacrifice that makes you clean. **It is in this place** and this place alone, that you can extend to others the pardon that has been and still is, so freely yours.

**E. FORGIVE each offense you have remembered.** Are there offenses you are unwilling to let go of? Lay them before Jesus. Ask him to give you the power to let them go as he died to let your sins go. Now...

**F. RELEASE the offender.** Some have found it helpful to burn the list. Prayerfully, consciously in the presence of God...

**1. Repent of your sins of bitterness, anger and unforgiveness.** (Don't be ashamed to ask others to pray with and for you.)

**2. By faith, release the offender.** As you do, the Holy Spirit will begin to release you from bitterness and the desire to repay evil with evil (1Pet.3:9). **Remember the "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus' feet.** He contrasted her love for him, and Simon's lack of love for him. What made them differ? "He who has been forgiven much loves much, and he who has been forgiven little, loves little" (Lk.7:47). When we have a fresh sense of our sin and have tasted God's forgiveness afresh, we can take a step that only grace could conceive.

**Now we should begin to...**

**MOVE BEYOND FORGIVENESS.** Forgiving the person (canceling their debt) is the first step toward the goal of loving them.

**G. GO TO THE OFFENDER - Matt. 18:15ff.** Yes, this is hard, but it is the only way reconciliation is possible.

Go in person if at all possible. If not in person, "go" by phone, letter, e-mail, or by proxy through a mutual friend or family member. Seek the offender. Let them know they are truly forgiven. Happy endings are not guaranteed. They may even be rare, but, by faith, do your part and let God take care of his part.

**NOTE:** In cases where there has been abuse, "going" may not be wise or safe, so seek the counsel of others. Normally, though, "going" is what Jesus would have us do.

**H. BLESS the Person in Prayer.** Is forgiveness that does not result in Godlike love for the forgiven one true forgiveness? ("Love" here may take the form of pity as when Jesus wept over Jerusalem.) **If you're not yet convinced** that this is the right course of action, listen to Jesus who loved us when we were his enemies, telling you, "Love your enemies and pray for them." (Matt.5:43-48) Pray what? If they are lost, pray for their conversion; if they are believers, ask God to show them the same mercy he is showing you in Christ. In any case, pray for their good. (Read **1 Peter 3:9-12** prayerfully.)

**I. DO GOOD to the offender. Develop a "love strategy" to reach out to them.** (Review "The Cruelty of Apartheid and the Wonder of Amazing Grace" story.)

**Romans 12:19-21** "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. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' [shamed him into repentance as you love him] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

**Overcome evil with good? Yes!**

**REMEMBER:** Our goal is not only to forgive the wrong, but to move redemptively into the forgiven one's life for his or her good.

**We saw in Lesson 8** that repentance leads to evangelism. *Forgiveness does too.*

**When we forgive an offense** for Jesus' sake, we call the offender to join us in a Gospel feast in which we taste the sweetness of God's free grace together. Our act of forgiveness points them to a higher forgiveness that was won on a Cross and is theirs for the taking.



**READINGS**

**1. The Cruelty of Apartheid and the Wonder of Amazing Grace** - An African widow confronts the man who murdered her family. **9-5**

**2. I'm Still Learning to Forgive** by Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch holocaust survivor. **9-6**

**3. Special Circumstances & Considerations:** dealing with the complexities of forgiveness. **9-7**

**4. A Forgiveness Workshop** **9-9**

**5. Self-Centeredness and parental abuse** - from Dr. Larry Crabb's *Men and Women*. **9-11**

# The Cruelty of Apartheid, and the Wonder of Amazing Grace

by James Krabill †

**I**MAGINE this scene from a recent courtroom trial in South Africa. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is something over 70 years of age. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found implicated in the murders of both the woman's son and husband some years before.

**It was indeed Mr. van der Broek**, it has now been established, who had come to the woman's home a number of years back, taken her son, shot him at point-blank range, and then burned the young man's body on a fire while he and his officers partied nearby.

**Several years later**, van der Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband as well. For many months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, van der Broek came back to fetch the woman herself. How vividly she remembers that evening, going to a place beside a river where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as the officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, "Father, forgive them."

**And now the woman stands** in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa's Truth & Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So, what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?"

**"I want three things,"** begins the old woman, calmly but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."



Photo - Courtesy of MS Encarta Africana

She pauses, then continues, "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me."

**"And finally,"** she says, "I want a third thing. I would like Mr. Van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven."

**As the court assistants come** to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he has just heard, faints. And, as he does, those in the courtroom, friends, family, neighbors—all victims of decades of oppression and injustice—begin to sing, softly, but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."



† "Apartheid" in Afrikaans means "apart, separate" and refers to the (past) practice of forced segregation that subjugated the coloured peoples of South Africa to the whites.

This incident took place during the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Hearings in South Africa and is a matter of court record. The Rev. Maake Masango, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa, was in the courtroom and reported the details to Stanley Green, president of the Mennonite Board of Missions. The author, James R. Krabill, is the editor of *Keep the Faith Share the Peace*, the newsletter of the Mennonite Church Peace and Justice Committee. It appeared in Vol. 5 Number 3, June 1999 and is used with his permission.

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# I'm Still Learning to Forgive

by Corrie ten Boom

**I WAS IN A CHURCH in Munich** where I was speaking in 1947 that I saw him—a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat, the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment of skin... *"Betsie, how thin you were!"*

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent. It was the first time since my release that I had seen him and my blood seemed to freeze. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: *"A fine message, fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"* And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my handbag rather than take that hand!

*"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,"* he was saying. *"I was a guard there. But since that time,"* he went on, *"I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein!"* again the hand came out, *"will you forgive me?"*

And I stood there—I whose sins had to be forgiven again and again—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours



as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior "condition"—that we forgive those who have injured us (Matt. 6:15).

***"If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespasses."***

I knew this not only as a command of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had kept a home in Holland for the victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.

Still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. *"Jesus, help me!"* I prayed silently. *"I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."* And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And, as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ***"I forgive you, brother!"*** I cried. ***"With all my heart!"***

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5: *"... for the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*



# Special Circumstances & Considerations

## *forgiveness in complex situations*

**NOTE:** We are not implying that special situations exempt us from forgiving. We only mention them to acknowledge that the *process* of forgiveness will be more complex in some situations than others.

### 1. Forgiveness with—or without—Reconciliation

**We need to understand the difference between *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*.**

**FORGIVENESS** is our judicial decision to pardon the sinner in obedience to the Gospel.

**RECONCILIATION** by definition is the *healing* of the broken relationship because a change has taken place in the hearts of *both* parties—*repentance* in the offender's, *forgiveness* in the victim's.

**But**, what if there has been no admission of guilt, no confession of sin, and no repentance on the offender's part? Should you then act as if nothing ever happened—i.e., pretend that there has been a reconciliation? No, but we must be careful we don't fall into the "debt collection" mode. (See page 9-2, B)

**If the offender refuses to repent**, we can and must be gracious and forgive. And *more than forgive*, for Jesus' sake, we will love, pray for, and bless the offender in the hope that they will repent so that reconciliation can follow. Such "happy endings" bring glory to God, peace to us, and joy to the angels in heaven (Luke 15:7).

**The Old Testament story of David and Saul** is a textbook case of how to righteously deal with an enemy. Despite Saul's repeated attempts to murder him, David had multiple opportunities to kill Saul, but swore he would not raise his hand against the Lord's anointed. When David heard Saul had been slain in battle, rather than rejoice, he composed the heart-wrenching lament in 1 Samuel 1:17-27. David is a "type of Christ" here, though Jesus went infinitely further than simply sparing us rebellious sinners, he laid down his life to pay the price *for* our rebellion.

**This is not to say** that when we forgive, an offense is always over and done with. There may be circumstances in which a matter should be pursued.

### 2. Confronting the Offender with His Sin

**Church Discipline and/or Civil Actions** are not necessarily ruled out by God's demand for personal forgiveness. In some cases, if the offender is not dealt with, other people may be in danger of being hurt by them.

**Some sins** go beyond the bounds of personal offense, i.e. when a crime is committed against a "higher authority" such as the church (e.g. immorality or heresy) or the state (e.g. criminal conduct).

**Important considerations regarding** **A. personal**, **B. ecclesiastical** (church) and **C. civil** offenses:

**A. PERSONAL OFFENSES** - The Scriptures teach that we are to go to the offender *in a spirit of gentleness* for the purpose of *restoring* him (Gal. 6:1). But, if the offense is serious and there is no repentance, Jesus gave us a clear set of guidelines to follow.

**Caution:** The Lord does not want us to have a litigious spirit that rushes to pursue every offense. He taught clearly that there are times when we must let the sin go (Matt.5:20; Lk.6:29). We will need wisdom to help us know which are serious enough to warrant the following process.

#### **JESUS' FOUR-STEP RESTORATION PROCESS IN MATTHEW 18:15-18**

a. **I go to the** \_\_\_\_\_ **and tell him his** \_\_\_\_\_. And, if he \_\_\_\_\_, then I \_\_\_\_\_ him. I have \_\_\_\_\_ my brother.

b. **If he does not listen (repent), then** \_\_\_\_\_.

c. **And if he still does not repent, then** \_\_\_\_\_.

d. **And if he still does not repent, then** \_\_\_\_\_.

**DISCUSS:** What will be the outcome when church leaders are reluctant to take up matters of discipline as Jesus commanded?

- ♦ **What** might motivate such reluctance? (See: 1 Cor. 5:2)
- ♦ **What** would be the impact on the *offended* party (the complainant) in such cases?
- ♦ **What** impact would the church's willing blindness to sin have on the guilty party?
- ♦ **What** would be the impact on the Body of Christ (a) internally, and (b) externally before the watching world if a congregation refuses to faithfully discipline errant members?

## B. ECCLESIASTICAL OFFENSES

**The following goals should be kept in view:**

- a. the **restoration** of the offender
- b. the **purity** of the Church,
- c. the **honor** of Christ, and...
- d. the **protection** of God's people from wicked men (I Cor. 5:1ff; Matt. 18:15ff)

## C. CIVIL OFFENSES

**The following considerations must be respected:** (See: Rom. 13:1-7)

- a. the **demands** of the civil law,
- b. the **respect** of the justice system among the general public (no corruption),
- c. the **compensation** of the victims of crime, and,
- d. the **protection** of society from the offender's criminal behavior in the future

**What about a believer taking another believer to the law courts?** Paul wrote: "*Instead, suffer yourselves to be defrauded.*" (1 Cor. 6:7) But, here we must avoid *two* tragedies: shaming Christ by taking brothers and sisters to court—and—"sweeping sin under the carpet" as the Corinthians did (1 Cor. 5:1ff). Ignoring sin will not make it vanish. On the contrary, such mock peace dishonors God, honors the sinner, and keeps the offender *from* repentance.

**Under what conditions might you take someone to court** who *professes* to be a believer, but instead of showing fruit in his or her life, continues to abuse other people?

**1.** First, get your *church elders* involved in the case. Why? It is the church who has accepted their profession of faith and received them into membership. Jesus made clear that the elders have the right to judge the validity of a person's profession, and either admit or remove them from membership in the visible body of Christ.

**2.** Dr. Jay Adams has written two excellent books which outline the biblical process for dealing with serious offenses in the church such as adultery, theft, heresy, etc.. (See below)

**A.** The church elders get involved and call the offender to repentance.

**B.** If they repent, restoration is in order (viz. 2Cor.2:5-11; Gal.6:1) .

**C.** If after a time, they do not, they are put out of the church (1Cor.5:12 - as per Jesus' instruction in Matt.18:18).

**D.** Then the aggrieved believer is free to take the one who has been declared an unbeliever to the law courts.



**Highly recommended for pastors, churches and concerned laypeople:**

**1. *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*** - by Jay E. Adams, Zondervan, 1980

**2. *Handbook of Church Discipline*** - by Jay E. Adams, Zondervan, 1986

# A FORGIVENESS WORKSHOP

## *Giving away the Treasure Chest of Hurt*

**REMEMBER**, forgiveness is about *your heart* and is not to be made contingent on someone else's repentance.

**PRAY.** Ask the all-wise Holy Spirit to show you the people you need to forgive.

**PREACH the Gospel to yourself.** Remember the lesson of Luke 7:47: "*He who is forgiven much, loves much; he who is forgiven little, loves little.*" Identify with the woman.

**COMPLETE the list** of specific offenses you need to deal with. (IV. A. page 9-3)

- A. hurts others may have asked forgiveness for** but you have not let go of
- B. hurts others are unaware of** because you have not yet pointed them out
- C. hurts others are aware of but refuse to ask forgiveness for**
- D. unfulfilled expectations you have for them** (*legitimate unmet needs*)

A word of caution. Sometimes we have unjust expectations of others that become *demands*. If this has happened, repentance is in order.

- E. the "old bones"**—*hurts inflicted by those now dead or impossible to locate*

**WRITE DOWN the specific steps** you will take to deal with each item you listed.

We don't want to be legalistic here. We do want to treat this matter of forgiveness as seriously as Jesus does. Review the "Forgiveness Checklist" if you need help.

**GIVE IT AWAY! Now, for the glory of God**, asking the Spirit's help, with your eyes fixed on Jesus your Great High Priest who is interceding for you, take those hurts to him, give away the "treasure chest". Let it go. Forgive. Forgive as you have been forgiven.



**OPTIONAL: If you would like, write a letter to God (a prayer)** in which you state your forgiveness of the people who have sinned against you. (Use the reverse side.)

***Gracious Father, Son and Holy Spirit,***

***In Jesus' name - for his glory and my joy,***

***Amen***

**Remember,** if you continue to struggle with forgiveness, seek the wise counsel of another believer who can pray with you.

**And,** *never* feel ashamed if you need to ask for professional help.

# SELF-CENTREDNESS

*as a defense mechanism in deeply wounded souls*

**L**arry Crabb, noted Christian psychologist and author, relates this terrible story of parental abuse. He says we must respond to these kinds of wounds in people with compassion and sensitivity, but at the same time, be ready to help them face the dangers of becoming self-centered and isolated from others in an attempt to protect themselves from further hurt. He writes,

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**I was in Pittsburgh** speaking to a church group on building relationships. After I had completed one of my lectures, a woman in brown slacks and a flowered blouse approached me.

“Dr. Crabb, I really appreciated what you had to say about establishing solid relationships,” she said. “But I have a real problem. No matter how nice someone is to me, I feel like they might turn on me at any moment.”

I asked her whether she had any idea why she reacted this way. In response, she told me a tragic story.

This woman had been raised by parents whom I can only describe as unspeakably evil. From the time she was five years old until she was ten, her father sold her to the landlord every month in exchange for free rent. Each time her father drove her to the landlord’s house, knowing that his daughter would be subjected to perverted sexual acts, he would warmly express his love and appreciation for the “help” she was providing the family.

While I was still reeling from this story, she told me about another incident.

When she was about three years old, she discovered an old-fashioned heating duct in the floor of her second-floor bedroom. This duct opened directly into the ceiling of the living room below, and by lying flat on the floor with her face pressed against the iron grate, she could look down into the living room without anyone knowing it.

A few days before Christmas, she used her newly discovered peephole to watch her parents wrap Christmas gifts in the room below. She was so happy and excited, dreaming of dolls and toys and pretty clothes, that she never noticed her mother leave the room.

Suddenly she heard footsteps behind her, and there was her mother, standing in the bedroom doorway watching her. Rather than enjoying her

daughter’s pleasure in peeking and chiding her lovingly to wait for Santa Claus to come in a few days, the mother burst into a rage. She grabbed the child, yanked off the heating vent, pulled the grate up, and stuffed her into the duct. She replaced the grate and left the little girl in that duct for three days.

When I heard these tales of horror, my immediate reaction was to wish this woman’s parents were within reach. I wanted to punch them, strangle them, and beat their heads against a wall until they bled. Even now I don’t feel terribly apologetic for this reaction.

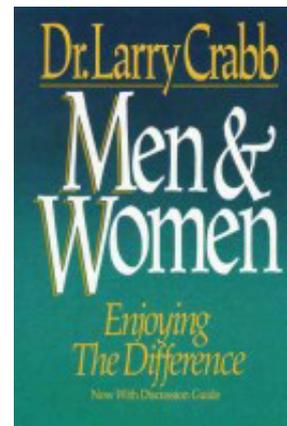
But as she continued to explain the difficulty she felt in trusting people to be good to her, it became clear to me that she needed to do more than face the wickedness of her parents and repair the damage they had done to her identity by their brutal treatment.

After we had talked some more about the horrors of her past, I asked her, “This may sound like an odd question, but I wonder, are you able to worship God?”

“No!” she said immediately. “I remember praying to God when I was in that duct, asking him to let me die, I think that was the first time I ever prayed. And he didn’t come through for me then. How can I worship a God who wouldn’t protect a little girl from that kind of abuse? She was enraged at God.

Abused by her parents and feeling abandoned by God, she had determined that there was only one person she could rely on—herself.

As a result, in all her relationships, she demanded that others *prove* themselves worthy of her trust. she expended great energy trying to discern whether people genuinely cared about her. when she found a flaw in their love, which of course she always did, she angrily retreated, just as she had with God.



To her, the command to love others, was an intolerable burden imposed by an insensitive God, and it made her even more furious if anyone admonished her to be more other-centered. Her commitment to preserve her own self against the harshness of an uncaring world seemed not only necessary but completely legitimate. Her commitment to herself did not strike her as stubborn, arrogant, or wrong. To her it felt thoroughly justified, necessary, and right.

This woman was living a self-centered life.

If she was to be restored to the joy of womanhood, she needed more than understanding and affirmation, more than learning to forgive her wicked parents. She needed forgiveness for her angry commitment to finding herself through her own resources, a commitment that daily involved her in violating the command to love God and others.

this woman could define her own self-centeredness as a more serious problem than the hurts and disappointments and wounds that life had brought her, horrible though those were, she would continue to demand help from God but never learn to humbly thank him for his forgiveness.

We do need an approach to relationships that takes seriously our commitment to ourselves, an approach that refuses to justify an attitude of defiant independence of God, an approach that puts us in a place where we recognise the grace of God as our most valued possession.



***Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference***, Larry Crabb, Zondervan, 1991, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 240 Pages. Excerpt pp. 34-37

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Grace4Life on the web: <http://www.grace4life.org>

***Dr. Crabb's book is most highly recommended.***