

Don't Hold On to Your Hurts

Jesus commands us to forgive, yet most of us treat His words as suggestions. We must learn to release all offense.

☒ All of us have been wounded at some time in our lives, many of us deeply. And it's not something to take lightly. People experience real pain when they or those they love are hurt by another person. Yet we know that the Bible commands us to forgive—and that extending total forgiveness to our offenders is the only way we will ever find true freedom and release.

Certainly if our offenders would put on sackcloth and ashes as a show of repentance, it would be much easier to forgive them. But remember, at the foot of Jesus' cross no one seemed very sorry. There was no justice at His "trial"—if you could even call it that. A perverse glee filled the faces of the people who demanded His death: "'Crucify him!'" they shouted (Mark 15:13, NKJV). Furthermore, "those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!'" (vv. 29-30).

What was Jesus' response? "'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'" (Luke 23:34).

This must be our response as well.

Jesus could have said, "I forgive you." But such words might have been misinterpreted and wasted, like casting His pearls before swine (see Matt. 7:6). Instead Jesus asked the Father to forgive them, a far more grand gesture.

Asking the Father to forgive them showed not only that Jesus Himself had forgiven them and released them from their guilt but also that He wanted His Father to refrain from punishing them. It was not a perfunctory prayer; Jesus meant it. And it

was gloriously answered! These offenders were among those who were converted after Peter's address on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:14-41).

God has given us a mandate in His Word regarding forgiveness: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13, NIV).

It's not a suggestion. We must totally forgive those who hurt us.

Totally forgiving someone doesn't necessarily mean you will want to spend your vacation with him or her, but it does mean that you release the bitterness in your heart about what the person has done. We can take our example from the way God treats us.

How does He forgive? Unequivocally and unconditionally. He never holds our sins, which are many, against us or tells others what we did. In practical terms, total forgiveness encompasses all of the following aspects:

1. Being aware of what someone has done, and still forgiving.

Total forgiveness is not being oblivious to what an offender did; it is not covering up, excusing or refusing to acknowledge what happened. Total forgiveness is achieved only when we acknowledge what was done without any denial or covering up—and still refuse to make the offender pay for his crime.

Total forgiveness is painful. It hurts when we kiss revenge goodbye. It hurts to think that the person is getting away with what he did and nobody else will ever find out. But when we are able to fully acknowledge what he did and still desire in our hearts that God bless him in spite of his wrong, we cross over into a supernatural realm. We begin to be a little

more like Jesus; we begin to change into the image of Christ.

2. Choosing to keep no records of wrong. The Bible says that love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5). Love is a choice. Total forgiveness is a choice. It is not a feeling—at least at first—but an act of the will. It is the choice to tear up the record of wrongs we have been keeping.

We clearly see and acknowledge the evil that was done to us, but we erase it—or destroy the record—before it becomes lodged in our hearts. This way resentment does not have a chance to grow.

We must learn to erase the wrong rather than file it away in our mental computer. When we do this all the time—as a lifestyle—we not only avoid bitterness, but we also eventually experience total forgiveness as a feeling—and it is a good feeling.

3. Refusing to punish. Refusing to punish those who deserve it—giving up the natural desire to see them “get what’s coming to them”—is the essence of total forgiveness.

Our human nature cannot bear the thought that someone who hurt us would get away with what he has done. It seems so unfair! We want vengeance. But vindication is God’s prerogative alone. In Deuteronomy 32:35 He tells us clearly, “Vengeance is Mine, and recompense” (NKJV).

4. Not telling what they did. There is often a need to talk with someone about how you have been hurt, and this can be therapeutic if it is done with the right heart attitude. But if sharing is necessary, choose the person you tell very carefully, making sure that person is trustworthy and will never repeat your situation to those it does not concern.

Anyone who truly forgives, however, does not gossip about his offender. Talking about how you have been wounded with the purpose of hurting your enemy’s reputation or credibility is a

form of punishing him. We divulge what that person did so others will think less of him.

When I recall that total forgiveness is forgiving others as I have been forgiven, I remember:

* I won't be punished for my sins.

**Nobody will know about my sins, for no sins that are under the blood of Christ will be exposed or held against me.

5. Being merciful. When it comes to being merciful, this is our Lord's command: "Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). In the Greek language, mercy is the opposite of wrath or justice. One difference between grace and mercy is that grace is getting what we don't deserve (favor), and mercy is not getting what we do deserve (justice). So when we show mercy we are withholding justice from those who have injured us, and that is one aspect of godliness.

There is a fringe benefit for those of us who show mercy: We will also be shown mercy (see Matt. 5:7). This shows that total forgiveness is not devoid of self-interest. "The merciful man does good for his own soul" (Prov. 11:17).

6. Showing graciousness. True forgiveness shows grace and mercy at the same time. There is an interesting Greek word, *epieikes*, that means "forbearance" or "tolerance." In Philippians 4:5 this word is translated "gentleness."

It comes down to our English word "graciousness." It implies an exceedingly rare act of grace. It cuts right across a legalistic spirit, which is what comes naturally to most of us. This concept is quite threatening to those of us who think that being inflexible for the truth is the ultimate virtue.

Graciousness is withholding certain facts you know to be true in order to leave your enemy's reputation unscathed. Graciousness is shown by what you don't say, even if what you could say would be true.

Self-righteous people find it almost impossible to be gracious; they claim always to be after “the truth,” no matter the cost. Total forgiveness sometimes means overlooking what you perceive to be the truth and not letting on about anything that could damage another person.

7. Letting it start in your heart. Total forgiveness must take place in the heart or it is worthless, for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). If we have not truly forgiven those who hurt us, it will come out—sooner or later. But if it has indeed taken place in the heart, our words will show it. When there is bitterness, it will eventually manifest itself; when there is love, there is “no cause for stumbling” (1 John 2:10).

Because forgiveness takes place in the heart, reconciliation is not a necessary prerequisite. Those who believe they are not required to forgive until their offender has first repented and been reconciled to them are not following Jesus’ example on the cross. If He had waited until His enemies felt some guilt or shame for their words and actions, He never would have forgiven them.

8. Relinquishing bitterness. Bitterness is an excessive desire for vengeance that comes from deep resentment. It heads the list of things that grieve the Spirit of God (see Eph. 4:30-32). And it is one of the most frequent causes of our missing the grace of God. “[Look] carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15).

We must, therefore, begin to get rid of a bitter and unforgiving spirit; otherwise, the attempt to forgive will fail. Relinquishing bitterness is an open invitation for the Holy Spirit to give you His peace, His joy and the knowledge of His will.

This is extremely important when it comes to the matter of reconciliation. If I have totally forgiven a person who has hurt me, I will have no bitterness, and I should not feel the slightest bit of guilt or shame for not wanting a complete restoration of that relationship.

Even if there never had been a friendship in the first place, if someone has greatly wronged me, I can forgive him and yet see it as totally reasonable not to invite him to lunch every Sunday.

How can we be sure that there is no bitterness left in our hearts? Bitterness is gone when there is no desire to get even or punish the offender, when I do or say nothing that would hurt his reputation or future, and when I truly wish him well in all he seeks to do.

9. Forgiving God. Although we often do not see it at first, all of our bitterness is ultimately traceable to a resentment of God. Why? Because deep in our hearts we believe He is the one who allowed bad things to happen.

Only a fool would claim to know the full answer to the question, "Why does God allow evil and suffering to continue when He has the power to stop it?"

But there is a partial answer: He does so in order that we may believe. There would be no need for faith if we knew the answer about the origin of evil and the reason for suffering. I know only that it is what makes faith possible.

God can turn evil into blessing. He causes things to work together for good. God did not send His Son into the world to explain evil but rather to save us from it and to exemplify a life of suffering. Jesus suffered as no one else has or ever will.

One day God will clear His own name from the charge of being unjust, but in the meantime, we need to trust Him and take Him

at His Word that He is just and merciful.

If we will patiently wait for God's purposes to be fulfilled, in the end—this is a guarantee—we will say that He has done all things well, even in what He permitted. He was never guilty in the first place, but because He sometimes appears to us to have been unfair, we must relinquish our bitterness and wholly forgive Him.

10. Forgiving ourselves. There is no lasting joy in forgiveness if it doesn't include forgiving ourselves. It is as wrong as not forgiving others because God loves us just as much as He loves His other children, and He is just as unhappy when we don't forgive ourselves as He is when we hold a grudge against others.

Put simply, we matter to God. He wants our lives to be filled with joy. That's why He commands us to forgive even ourselves.

Total forgiveness brings such joy and satisfaction that I am almost tempted to call it a selfish enterprise. In fact, studies show that the first person to experience delight when forgiveness takes place is the one who forgives.

So, for your own sake, obey God. Let go of your hurts by forgiving—totally—those who have wounded you.

Forgiveness 101

Of his more than 3,500 sermons, R.T. Kendall says the message in his book Total Forgiveness is the most vital.

A noted Bible teacher and former pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, England, R.T. Kendall has given his share of sermons. But he says the message in his book Total Forgiveness (Charisma House) has garnered an overwhelming response. He

spoke with us about what it means to release offense.

What prompted you to write this book?

It was born in the greatest trial of my life at the time. An old friend, Josif Tson, said to me: "R.T., you must totally forgive [those who hurt you]. Until you totally forgive them you will be in chains. Release them, and you will be released." Nobody had ever talked to me like that before. But it was the greatest single word anybody ever said to me.

How can someone know whether he or she has totally forgiven?

We do not tell people what "they" did to us; we will not let them be afraid of us; we will not let them feel guilty for what they did; we let them save face, as God lets us save face; we assure them that their secret is safe with us forever; we do not do it once—total forgiveness is what we do every single day as long as we live; and finally, we pray for them—as Jesus did, that they will be forgiven, let off the hook.

What are the consequences of not forgiving totally?

Spiritually, we grieve the Holy Spirit. Physically, holding a grudge can cause high blood pressure, arthritis, kidney disease and other ailments. Emotionally or psychologically, it will shape your personality so that you become unpopular with people; they avoid you because you are a constant complainer.

What would you say to someone who feels they have been hurt so deeply they cannot forgive?

I would assure them I do understand their hurt. But not forgiving is always counter-productive. They are hurting themselves more than they realize.

How has this message changed you personally?

Totally forgiving those who have hurt me is the greatest thing

I ever did in my life. I cannot exaggerate this. It has shaped my personality, my marriage and my preaching.

Is it possible to forgive and forget?

Total forgiveness is not forgetting. We do not play games with ourselves. We never forget what they did, nor are we required to. In fact, it is not true forgiveness unless we know what they did but still forgive.

What would you say to those who struggle with forgiving themselves?

Not forgiving ourselves is a combination of self-pity and self-righteousness, and we must come to terms with the fact that God wants us to forgive who are hardest on themselves are usually hardest on others. And the closer we come to forgiving others, the easier it will be to forgive ourselves.

How have others responded to this message?

Of all my sermons on record (about 3,500, if you can believe that), my message on total forgiveness brings the greatest response of all I have ever preached.

How has unforgiveness hindered the body of Christ?

Immeasurably. Forgiveness is almost certainly the greatest need in the church today. Unforgiveness divides members, marriages, pastor and deacons, pastor and pastor, friends. It destroys unity, grieves the Holy Spirit and delays revival.

What are the benefits of forgiveness?

It can in some cases hasten the baptism of the Spirit. It will save homes. It will bring mental health quicker than 1,000 hours of psychiatric counseling (and I am not against this). The sooner a person forgives, the sooner they can live with themselves, like people, be liked and enjoy God's presence.

R.T. Kendall pastored Westminster Chapel in London for 25 years. He is the author of more than 30 books, including *The Word and the Spirit*, *The Sensitivity of the Spirit* and *Total Forgiveness*, all from Charisma House.