

The Freedom to Forgive

✖ Every day in our world, in our society and in our individual communities, somebody is treated unfairly. Someone is hurt, even though he or she didn't deserve it. Someone is lied to or lied about. Someone is ignored or attacked. Someone is singled out or discriminated against. Many of us don't have to look far to find such mistreatment—because we're the ones who experience it!

If you've been the object of slanderous gossip at church, or passed over for a promised promotion on the job, or harassed because of someone else's prejudice and fear, join the club. We all feel the pain of unfair treatment at some point in our lives.

Unfortunately, few of us know how to handle being mistreated by others. We get hung up on the who, what, when, how and why of the offense, justifying our anger, and never entertain the notion of forgiveness—at least not right away. After all, we think, why should we forgive someone who has treated us wrongly?

This is a relevant question for Christians to ask. Our Savior and model, Jesus, was treated unjustly—and yet as He hung on the cross, He said, "'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'" (Luke 23:34, NKJV). He didn't get hung up on the mistreatment He was receiving; instead, He was quick to forgive.

We should be, too. But of course, that's easier said than done.

I know. I was 5 years old when my father, Martin Luther King Jr., was shot to death while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. The date was April 4, 1968.

I grew up very angry because my father had been unfairly taken from me at such a young age. And in the years that followed, three more deaths in the family sent me into an even deeper abyss of hatred and anger.

In 1969 my Uncle A.D., my father's youngest brother and the man who taught me how to swim while we were on a summer vacation in Jamaica, drowned mysteriously at his home a few days after returning from this vacation. In 1974 my grandmother, Alberta Williams King, was shot to death while playing "The Lord's Prayer" on the organ at our family church, Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta. Two years later my 20-year-old cousin, Darlene King, A.D.'s daughter, died of a heart attack while jogging.

The pain of so much death and loss left me feeling so angry that I started drinking as a teen-ager. Later, as a law student at Emory University, I contemplated suicide.

But as I held the knife in my hand, I heard the Holy Spirit whisper, "People are going to miss you." I put the knife down

and eventually sought counseling. My life began to change—even more dramatically after I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in 1995.

Since then the Holy Spirit has been teaching me how to conquer the “unforgiveness factor” in my life. He’s been teaching me how to overcome my anger and forgive, even in the face of treatment that is wrong or unfair.

Often when people do things to us that we feel we don’t deserve, we spend an inordinate amount of time trying to get back at them or nursing a grudge against them. But what would have happened if Jesus had harbored anger toward His accusers or contemplated revenge against them as He hung on the cross? He would never have completed His mission to reconcile us back to God!

The truth is, whenever we harbor ill feelings, they poison our spirits and prohibit us from reaching our goals and walking in our destinies. Proverbs 23:7 reminds us that “as [a person] thinks in his [or her] heart, so is he [or she].” That means that if we dwell on thoughts and feelings that are negative, we will end up living out the negative; but if we dwell on thoughts and feelings that are positive, we will live out the positive.

No matter how others treat us, we must not focus on their negative actions but on the positive rewards of responding as

Jesus

would. Jesus didn't get hung up in anger and revenge but focused on the greater good. He forgave His wrongdoers, canceling the power of their wrongs to control Him in any way.

They Do Not Know What They Do

Certainly Jesus could have tried to get even with those who crucified Him. But He recognized that they "did not know what they were doing." He understood that He was dealing with people who had imperfections—faults and weaknesses that kept them from dealing with Him fairly.

In order for us to forgive others when we've been mistreated, we, like Jesus, must acknowledge that people are imperfect. Even Christians are imperfect.

When we are born again, it is our spirits that are immediately made new. Our souls—our wills, minds and emotions—and our bodies are still old. Every day we must deny our old selves, renew our minds through daily meditation on God's Word and choose to be like Christ in all that we do. But it's a slow process.

Often we find ourselves still acting out of emotion or impulse—the old self—rather than from a renewed mind. When that's the case, we can have all the knowledge and intelligence in the world and still make wrong decisions that hurt others. As Romans 8:6

says, "to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace."

All of us have said and done hurtful things that we've later come to regret. We must recognize that other people do the same.

Does this mean we shouldn't hold people accountable for their wrongful actions? Not at all! When Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do," He wasn't saying, "Father, forgive them, because what they're doing is OK." He was saying, "God, don't hold this against them."

Jesus didn't deny that what they were doing was wrong; He simply forgave them. What a contrast to our typical reaction when someone does something wrong to us!

We tend to hold a grudge against him for life. "I will never trust him (or her) again," we say. Caught up in our suffering, we feel justified in our refusal to forgive the person who has caused us so much pain.

Women have to be particularly careful in this regard. Our nurturing nature can lead us to nurse, feed, and give life to our emotions of hurt, anger and betrayal.

The longer we feed, the greater the bond; the greater the bond, the more difficult it is to sever the tie. When we constantly feed our negative emotions, we end up in bondage to them. They

take

control of us, and we begin to do and say hurtful things that rival the things our offenders have done and said to us.

If the crucifixion means anything, it means that through Jesus Christ we have been given another chance in life. Now, as Christians, it's our turn to extend the same "second chance" to others.

Keeping in mind our own need for forgiveness, we're called to live a lifestyle of forgiveness, praying the way Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:12: "'Forgive us our debts [wrongdoings], as we forgive our debtors [wrongdoers].'"

Tearing Down the Walls

Jesus forgave His wrongdoers because He knew they were imperfect. He also forgave them, I believe, because He knew that people need the kind of true fellowship that only forgiveness can bring—fellowship with God first and then with one another.

Jesus' crucifixion removed the rift that existed between God and all humankind. Now, as His followers, we are called to remove the rifts that exist in our various relationships. As 2 Corinthians 5:18 tells us, "God...has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Few feelings are more painful than the feeling of alienation from the people around us. We all need fellowship with other

people! For this reason, the worst thing we can do when we've been mistreated is to hold a grudge or try to retaliate; these things only strain the relationship further and cause more alienation. We must forgive instead, taking that first step toward reconciling the relationship.

When Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," He wasn't removing His wrongdoers' responsibility; He was removing their guilt.

And by removing their guilt, He was tearing down the wall of defensiveness that alienated them—and us—from God.

That's what happens when we forgive people: They no longer feel the need to be on the defensive because we have sent the message that their actions are not our focus; rather, the relationship is what is important to us. In other words, we've let them know we're not willing to allow anything—not even their hurtful words or deeds—to separate us from the love we should have for one another.

When we don't forgive, however, we erect a wall that keeps us from reconciling and sharing love with the ones who've mistreated us. Forgiveness, on the other hand, opens the door for reconciliation and makes possible a new, lasting fellowship based on love.

Forgiveness brings with it a wonderful sense of freedom. When we forgive others, we're free from the anger, frustration and

anxiety of holding a grudge or trying to get even. When others forgive us, we're free from the guilt and fear that makes us want to seclude ourselves and duck behind every wall.

Once we understand that no one is out to get us, that we don't have to watch our backs for fear that we're going to get stabbed, then we can begin to feel the peace and freedom necessary to open the way for true fellowship with others.

Forgiving Anyway

But what if the people who mistreat us never admit their mistakes or ask for our forgiveness? Do we still have to forgive? The answer is yes. If Jesus could find the strength to say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"; if He could find the mercy in the midst of a blood bath to forgive His transgressors, despite their lack of remorse; then certainly we in our smallness can forgive those who have treated us unfairly, whether they ask for it or not.

It doesn't matter who begins the process—the one who needs to ask forgiveness or the one who needs to give it. Forgiveness is always the healthy way to go. When we choose not to forgive, we end up holding on to what causes us pain. We become weighed down by negative emotions that hinder our emotional and spiritual

growth.

Consider the physical body: When food we've eaten is "held" too long and not removed in due time, it turns toxic. It becomes a poison that can create sickness and disease and eventually kill us.

Similarly, the emotions that we attach to an offense can become toxic. If we hold on to them, they can sicken us and eventually kill us. Forgiveness is the only way to remove the poison—and the sooner, the better.

We must forgive. Yes, it can be difficult. Our old self is still active. Our anger, pain and sense of betrayal cry out to be fed.

But if we look to Jesus as our example and allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds day by day, we can conquer the unforgiveness factor in our lives. I know. We can be free at last.

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