

Mercy Triumphs When We Forgive

☒ Everyone expects a few rough spots when relating to people. If you have kids, my guess is that you've had mud tracked in on the living room carpet, a window broken from a stray baseball and perhaps a car fender dented when your novice driver made a solo run to the grocery store.

Or maybe you've experienced an upset over something as minor as a family member's missing an appointment or forgetting to take a phone message. These minor 'bumps' on the road of life are usually dismissed with a casual, "Oh, you're forgiven. Forget it. It's OK."

What is harder to dismiss, however, is the ache of a deep, personal hurt that continues to generate inner turmoil. You're convinced the pain has lodged permanently in the lining of your heart.

I can relate to that kind of pain. For years my personal diagnosis could well have been charted: "Undealt-with pain. Bruised. Tender. Internal bleeding."

In such situations our response is never as simple as, "Forget it. It's OK." This isn't like getting mud on the carpet. We can't just phone the rug cleaners in the morning and have them remove

the pain by afternoon.

A Stain in the Heart

Whatever the source, emotional pain invariably lodges in the heart. Undealt with, it remains like a stubborn stain, coloring everything we do with its sorrow. It prompts us to close our hearts in self-protection, building walls between us and God and between us and those around us.

This kind of penetrating pain rarely goes away on its own. It burrows underground where it fuels anger and resentment, then surfaces when something or someone triggers it again.

What help is there for people locked in bitterness and wounded by unfair treatment? What is the way out of these painful prisons?

The Bible is clear: Jesus holds the key that will unlock the doors of our emotional prisons (see Luke 4:18). The key is forgiveness.

The Son of Man can relate to our frailty. He is present in our pain and wants to rescue us from its trap.

Satan, however, prefers to keep us ensnared in our pain and bitterness. His strategy is to immobilize us by causing us to harden our hearts. Then he can frustrate God's plan for expressing His love through His children.

The Way of Escape

The good news is that God has given us a way to walk out

of our hurts and wounds (see 1 Cor. 10:13). His way of escape? Forgiveness.

Someone has said that forgiveness is love's toughest work and biggest risk. The act itself is simple, but because hurts occur within a storm of complex emotions, we rarely feel like forgiving.

For years I protested: "I've done everything I can do to make this marriage work! Howard needs to do something." Convinced that I was the innocent party, I closed my heart to Howard and lived longer than I care to remember with pain and unforgiveness churning inside me.

Let's face it, forgiveness is not an automatic human reaction. Giving in to the desire for revenge is a much more natural response.

But the earthly ministry of Jesus showed us what real forgiveness is all about (see Matt. 5:21-24). It is about relationship.

Unforgiveness will always block our relationship with God, and that affects all our other relationships.

Jesus came to reveal the Father's heart of love—a love that impacts others with genuine mercy and heartfelt forgiveness. This is the message of the kingdom of God.

God's heart is that we give love without looking for something in return. But how do you do this if you're deeply wounded by a husband's unfair treatment? How do you forgive well-meaning parents

who caused painful hurts?

Scripture leaves no loopholes in admonishing us to forgive (see Mark 11:25). But within ourselves, we don't have what it takes to leap over the hurdles of our hurts and offer forgiveness. Has God called us to something we cannot do?

Yes! And the sooner we know the depth of our inability to forgive, the better.

God at Work

This was a revelation I came to gradually in my attempts to improve my marriage. As my husband, Howard, and I worked to resolve certain issues, our relationship was growing stronger and more open. But when he answered me abruptly or lost his temper over what I thought was "nothing," anger crept in, and I reached for my old scorecard of his failures.

At the suggestion of friends, Howard and I began counseling with a pastor and his wife, Dick and Marilyn Williamson. One afternoon, Dick posed a hard question about my relationship with Howard. "Jane, why do you continually go back to his behavior? Why can't you let go and forgive him completely?"

I knew immediately what Dick was talking about, but I didn't know why unconditional forgiveness was not flowing out of me for Howard.

Dick pressed in with another approach. "OK, then, let's talk about your relationship with your father."

That was easy. "We were very close. Like two peas in a pod. I always respected him as a man of God."

Dick wanted a fuller picture. "Do you ever recall a time when you hopped up in his lap and he gave you hugs and kisses?"

I scrambled for a memory. Thick silence fell over the table as the true picture of my relationship with Dad dawned on me.

Dick broke the silence with his matter-of-fact statement. "Jane, you have some very strong feelings toward your dad. Negative ones."

The only feelings I was aware of were ones of admiration and esteem for Dad as a man of God. "No," I protested, "I really loved him."

"Well, if you really want to be released from the emotional pain and unforgiveness you're carrying, you'll need to identify these feelings. In the next few days, if some old memories start surfacing, just start talking about them. I'm sure Howard will listen."

A few days later, an old memory of my dad came to mind. I asked Howard if he'd come upstairs because I needed to talk about something important and I needed him to listen.

I started talking and, as I did, real feelings emerged. My voice wavered as I described a painful childhood memory.

Howard immediately began fidgeting with a book, flipping it nervously open and shut and doodling with his fingers across the cover. Finally, I stopped in mid-sentence.

"Howard, I feel like you're not even interested in what I'm saying." Angry, he turned red and moved to leave the room.

I stood up with tears rolling down my cheeks and said, "That's just how it is with men. They really don't care about women and children. They can't give them the time of day."

The vow I'd made as a child came echoing back to my remembrance, "No man will ever hurt me like Dad hurt Mother."

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

I had made a judgment against all men, including Howard, who took the brunt of it. Now I genuinely wanted to make things right, yet somehow I could not seem to forgive him from my heart.

"I seem stuck at this same place, unable to really forgive Howard," I sighed one afternoon as I sat at Dick and Marilyn's table.

Dick slowly and deliberately quoted from a passage in Luke's gospel: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:36-37).

He paused, then added, "The definition of mercy here is, don't judge, don't condemn, forgive. But before you can give mercy and forgiveness to another, you must first apply this principle to your own

life.”

For a long time I’d been trying to forgive Howard. But there was always that unseen boulder in my heart blocking my best efforts.

In order to forgive unconditionally, I needed to quit judging myself and to embrace God’s forgiveness for me. But forgiveness begins with an understanding of mercy.

Often we have a sentimental picture of mercy. But God’s definition is much more pointed toward redemptive action.

Jesus encountered people caught in the grip of sin, yet He didn’t judge or condemn them. Instead, He mercifully extended healing and forgiveness.

A moment of great release came after I reported my outburst about “all men” to Dick and Marilyn. We talked about my need to forgive my father and Howard and to release all men from the judgment I had against them.

Dick began leading me through a prayer of forgiveness. As I spoke, a deep, deep pain began surging through me.

Then a depth of forgiveness such as I have never known swept over me. I was so in touch with our Lord’s incredible love that nothing in me wanted to withhold forgiveness or mercy.

Forgiving the Debt

It’s hard to describe the impact of what was evolving in our family. Howard, whom I’d judged as uncaring and hard-hearted, began

to look like a different person to me. When the Spirit does the work,
we see as Jesus sees.

At lunch one day, a friend mentioned that the Lord had spoken to her through the story of the ungrateful servant. Though the servant had freely received mercy from his master regarding a debt he owed, he refused to extend mercy to the person who owed a debt to him (see Matt. 18:21-35).

Thinking about this story made me realize that although Howard and I had learned much about forgiveness, there was one more step to be taken. Not only are we to forgive others for what they have done, but also we are to forgive them for what we perceive they “owe” us.

In our relationships, some of our expectations for respect and responsible behavior are healthy and legitimate. They are based on our understanding of love in action (see Rom. 13:8).

But what if we come to realize those legitimate desires will never be fulfilled by imperfect human beings? The only thing left is to forgive the debt.

I needed to forgive Howard for what I believed he owed me—past and present—and release him from any future expectations of perfect behavior I might have of him.

Later that week, I was working upstairs in my office when Howard came in to ask my forgiveness for something he’d done.

I knew I
needed to bring up the issue of canceling the debt.

“Howie, I’ve been holding you responsible for a long time
for a debt I felt you owed me. As of this day, I am totally
releasing
you.”

The Lord’s presence descended quietly into the room in a
way we’d never experienced. We held each other and wept as we
prayed.
All debt was now canceled.

That day the enemy was stripped of his power to wreak
havoc in our home and our marriage. For two days, Howard sat
in his
rocking chair, weeping quietly, utterly drained and too weak
to move.

Something powerful had happened in the spiritual realm.
The Lord was touching Howard with His healing power in a new
depth of
release.

The Fruit of Forgiveness

Shortly after the canceling of the debt, we began talking
about the painful patterns we had set up in our marriage. We
agreed
that our pattern of relating to each other had been negative
from the
moment we “brought in the baggage” with our marriage vows.

I came into marriage with voracious needs for love and
acceptance resulting from the pain of my childhood. I came
with the
expectation that Howard would not only meet my needs, but also
become a
source of life to me.

Howard talked about insecurities he'd struggled with since childhood, the tremendous pressure and disappointments he'd felt at work when we were first married and how panic gripped him at having the responsibility of a family.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I now understood why Howard had become so distant.

In our vulnerability, the Holy Spirit's presence tangibly enveloped us. We were learning to walk in the truth of God's Word and in the power of the resurrected Lord Jesus.

No longer would we be reaping from our foolish ways. Instead God would be producing the fruit of love, mercy and forgiveness in us—His way.

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