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Tell the One Who Hurt You, “I Forgive You”

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

Telling someone what you have learned about God’s forgiveness is one thing. Telling someone who has hurt you, “I forgive you” is another story altogether.

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

It would be so much easier for me if “kind” and “compassionate” were in reverse order. “Kind” is an action-oriented word. “Compassionate” is a feeling-oriented word. Placing them in that order calls upon me to act kindly toward a person whether the feelings precede those actions or not. I would rather wait until I feel like it. God in His wisdom understands, however, that so often action needs to precede feelings. The first and foremost action is that of forgiveness.

Now before we go too much further, let’s clarify what forgiveness is because there are many misconceptions. Forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting, almost pretending that something never happened. God certainly forgets. He tells us in Jeremiah 31:34b:

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

God is able to completely forget and clear out of His thinking or remembrance the wrong that I have done. When I try this, I end up feeling guilty that I must not have forgiven a person when their offense to me keeps rising up in my mind. Forgiveness is as much a process where I must daily die to myself and allow Christ and His love to rise

up within me. Joseph of the Old Testament is a great example of one who does not forget. He remembers quite well what his brothers did to him. Through a painstaking process, he works toward reconciliation with his brothers. James R. Bjorge in his book, “Living in the Forgiveness of God,” writes,

“Forgiveness happens when past resentments are dealt with, not just discarded; are owned, not disowned; are recognized, not repressed; are released, not retained” (p. 60).

Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it excusing. Forgiveness is not a matter of sweeping under the carpet what someone has done to us. Realize that just a few verses before we are told to forgive “*just as in Christ God forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32), we are also told, “*In your anger do not sin*” (vs. 26a). Nor is forgiveness a matter of “time heals all wounds.” Sometimes time will only cause bitterness to take root. God’s Word warns, “*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry*” (v. 26b).

Forgiveness involves in our relationships what it did with Jesus on the Cross—the canceling of the debt we believe someone owes us. This does not mean we leave them off the hook. Rather, it means that we take “the knife” out of our “gut.” In “The Art of Forgiveness,” Lewes Smedes writes:

“When you forgive a person, this does not mean you are immediately healed.

When you forgive a person, this does not mean you are going to be buddy/buddy. When we forgive a person, this does not mean we surrender the right to restitution or justice when appropriate. When we forgive a person, this does not mean that we trust them, yet. When we forgive a person, we are not avoiding pain; we are opening the door to healing. When we forgive, we take the journey at the pace we are able to handle . . . the deeper the hurt, the longer the journey” (pp. 177-178).

The hardest thing for me to get a hold of emotionally and relationally is that forgiveness is not dependent upon first hearing that someone is sorry. If that were true, Jesus would never have prayed, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). In light of these words, the words of Ephesians 4:32, “. . . *forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you,*” stir my heart and burden me. How can this be in my life? I feel so inadequate to the task. Here I am helped by Henri Nouwen’s words in “The Return of the Prodigal Son”:

“I have often said, ‘I forgive you,’ but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return, if only the praise for being so forgiving! But God’s forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few

conditions between me and the one who I am asked to forgive” (1994, pp. 129-130).

Forgiveness in light of this is not an easy matter. There is often a feeling of injustice left within me. It is on this note that the words of Philip Yancey in “Amazing Grace” are helpful:

“At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy” (p. 93).

Even in light of this, I still find forgiveness to be an ongoing learning and growing process in my life. What helps me most of all is to remember that forgiveness ultimately is God’s. I am the vessel through which His forgiveness is to flow. It is not my forgiveness that I must muster up on my own strength. Rather, it is allowing His forgiveness to flow through me to others.

The story of Corrie Ten Boom has shed light on this for me over and over. Corrie Ten Boom, author of “The Hiding Place,” tells how she and her family secretly housed Jews in their home during WW II. Their illegal activity was discovered, and Corrie and her sister, Bessie, were sent to the German death camp, Ravensbruck. There Corrie would witness many being put to death, including her sister. Following the war, Corrie spent her days proclaiming the love of Christ.

“It was 1947 and I’d come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth that they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that that’s where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God

casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, ‘no fishing allowed.’ Then some faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It 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 skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard—one of the most cruel guards. 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 pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remember him. I was face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. ‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘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 again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could 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. . . . ‘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 out 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 the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit” (pp. 53-55).

“I forgive you.” They are not easy words to say, but they are words that can free us and bring healing, if not to the one to whom we speak them, then at least to ourselves. Pattie Davis, daughter of Ronald Reagan, recalls a moment in her father’s life following the attempt on his life:

“The following day my father said he knew his physical healing was directly dependent on his ability to forgive John Hinckly. By showing me that forgiveness is the key to everything, including physical health and healing, he gave me an example of Christ-like thinking” (p. 70).

Forgiveness is not excusing. It is not forgetting. Nor is it tit for tat. Some get that impression from Matthew 6:15:

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

God’s forgiveness toward us is unconditional. No strings attached. It was

offered and paid for on the Cross before we were born. So what does this verse mean in our lives and relationships? I believe that if I say to someone in my life, “I will never forgive you,” I am in essence saying to God, “You can have your way with me; your love can flow through me to anyone in my life except for this one person.” Refusing to allow His love and forgiveness to flow through me to another person places me in a dangerous position. I then begin to shut my heart to God. It is not that He is unable to forgive me, but rather, that I am unwilling to receive it and be a conduit for it.

We are called to be proclaimers of the Gospel. One of the tougher ways we may be asked to do this is through the act of forgiveness toward someone who has hurt us. They might never respond. That doesn’t change what we are asked to do. It does not necessarily mean that we place them in a position of trust again in our life. It does mean, however, that we allow God to have His way with us. Sheldon Vanauken once said,

“The best argument for Christianity is Christians; their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths” (p.85).

When we are able to offer with joy and unconditional love the words, “I forgive you,” we offer the best argument for Christianity that I know.

Prayer: Those words are not easy to say. How did you do that on the Cross, Jesus? As they nailed you to that beam, you prayed for their forgiveness. Help me. Help me to say those words, “I forgive you,” to those in my life. I want your love to flow through me to them. I do not want my heart to become closed to you. Help me Jesus, for I cannot do it on my own. Amen.

Challenge: Is there someone who sinned against you, and you find yourself unable to forgive them? In the confidence of His grace, ask God to help you be the vessel through which His grace and forgiveness can flow.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4

From the Book of Concord: “There is, however, attached to this petition a necessary and even comforting addition, ‘as we forgive our debtors.’ He has promised us assurance that everything is forgiven and pardoned, yet on the condition that we also forgive our neighbor. For just as we sin greatly against God every day and yet he forgives it all through grace, so we also must always forgive our neighbor who does us harm, violence, and injustice, bears malice toward us, etc. If you do not forgive, do not think that God forgives you. But if you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven—not on account of your forgiving (for he does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it, as the gospel teaches) but instead because he has set this up for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise that matches this petition in [Luke 6\[:37\]](#), ‘Forgive, and you will be forgiven.’ Therefore Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord’s Prayer, saying in [Matthew 6\[:14\]](#), ‘If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. . . .’” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, p. 453.93-96).