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a resource in:

Relationships

Forgiving As Christ Forgave

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Forgiving As Christ Forgave

Laying the Foundation

The topic of “Forgiveness” really applies to how we interact with one another. Although the Scripture warns us to walk a separate distance from the world, we really treasure the opportunities we have to relate and have different experiences with one another. We begin to lay the foundation for this topic of forgiveness by asking ourselves the question, “Was there a need for Christ to forgive me?” I hope we would all agree that the answer is, “Yes, there certainly was a need.”

Let’s start out with a definition. The Greek word that is most often translated “forgive” literally means “to release, to hurl, to free.” So to understand “forgiveness,” let’s consider two words that begin with the letter “r” -- “remove” and “release.” Together they form a two-step process that must be followed for forgiveness to occur.

In order to continue laying the foundation for this topic, we need to travel just a little bit on the “Romans road.” We are told that no one is righteous:

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.” (Romans 3:10)

that all of us are sinners:

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

and that the sinner must die:

“The wages of sin is death . . .” (Romans 6:23)

If we stopped reading at that point, we would conclude that there’s no hope. But as we travel further on the “Romans road,” we do have hope because we read about God’s gift of life:

“ . . . but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

and His gift of love:

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

The Example of Christ

God didn’t even wait to see what our response would be, did He? Jesus Christ died for us while we were yet sinners! He was falsely accused, unjustly convicted, beaten unmercifully, and cruelly mocked.

Then with spikes through His hands and feet, He was nailed to a cross and hung up to die. His precious blood ran freely from the wounds on His forehead, His arms and feet. With His back deeply scourged and bleeding, He looked down from the cross on the hostile crowd who put Him there, and He prayed:

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

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Not a twinge of bitterness, but only love and forgiveness were in the words He said to those men who had placed Him there. Can we forgive as Christ forgave? We can if we have the mind of Christ:

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”(Philippians 2:5).

Understanding Redemption

In Ephesians we read,

“In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.” (Ephesians 1:7)

In order to understand “redemption,” let’s consider three concepts that are involved with redemption. The first is the payment of a ransom, which was accomplished by the blood of Christ. The second is “removal,” since the curse of sin was removed because the ransom price was paid. And the third is the “release” from the bondage of sin into the freedom of grace. That’s what Christ has provided for each one of us.

“To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him.”(Daniel 9:9)

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” (Psalm 32:1)

“For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.” (Psalm 86:5)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

It’s such a blessing to fellowship with believers who have taken advantage of the shed blood of Christ, have repented and been converted, and are walking in grace. We can see the results of forgiveness -- it is noticed in the faces, the smiles, and the emotions of love that flow from hearts that have been forgiven. Our expressions of greeting to others are not something that man has created, but they are a result of being forgiven and walking in the grace of God. That is what Jesus Christ has given to us through the forgiveness of sins.

Building on the Foundation

But it doesn’t stop there. If we continue to build on the foundation of forgiveness, we must talk about the commandments He has given to those who are forgiven. As a result of our relationships with others here on earth -- mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, children and neighbors -- we’re certainly going to have opportunities to exercise forgiveness from our hearts. Remember that forgiveness is a “removal” and a “release” -- it’s not a storing or harboring up.

Allow me to share a personal experience. Recently I came home from vacation on a Friday evening and the next day I wanted to get things wrapped up for the following week. As I turned on my computer, the first thing that appeared on the screen was: “non-bootable disk.” Everything that I had stored on the hard disk was gone -- I couldn’t get it back. But through the help of a friend and a process using old back-up disks, we were able to get back on track. The person who was helping me do the recovery told me what things I needed to get and said, “I’ll be back here on Monday morning and we’ll try to get this thing put back together.”

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So later on that morning, I walked into the local Staples store. On one wall there was a huge display of software, and in one section there was what is called “utility software” -- anti-virus software programs like Norton and McAfee. These programs aren’t production software, but their purpose is to enhance security and make our normal operations run more smoothly. It’s forgiveness. And just like the “utility software” that needs to be on our computers, “forgiveness” is something that needs to be in our lives. It’s a critical link in the path to the fruit of the spirit. In the world of electronics, we would call that a ladder diagram or ladder logic, where a series of things needs to be put together to get to the final result.

Forgive to be Forgiven

Forgiveness is one of those critical links that God commands us. As it says in Mark,

“And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:25)

And in the very next verse, there’s something that should cause each one of us to pause and think of the seriousness of having forgiveness be a part of our lives:

“But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” (Mark 11:26)

That’s a pretty clear sentence from our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And as Jesus prayed in the “Lord’s Prayer,”

“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9-10)

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

When you come to that sentence in Verse 12, for those of you who are comfortable marking in your Bibles, I recommend highlighting it as follows: highlight the three words, “*And forgive us*” and then highlight the three words “*as we forgive*.” As we each individually pray to our heavenly Father, we would do well to ask Him to forgive us as we forgive. That should motivate us and cause us to rely on His grace, so that we can be forgivers.

Forgiveness has No Limits

Peter asked Jesus how often we should forgive. Apparently he thought that seven times would be sufficient. I believe the rabbis of that day suggested three. But Jesus said, “*Until seventy times seven*” (Matthew 18:22). It doesn’t take much math to know that that comes out to 490. But in reality, Jesus was saying that there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive our brother.

Forgiveness is the central theme of the story Jesus told of the king who had a servant who owed him much but was not able to pay. So the king had that servant brought before him, and the servant begged for mercy because he was going to lose his family, his possessions, everything. And the king forgave him. Then this same servant went out to a fellow servant who owed him a small amount and demanded that the servant pay him. But he could not. And the servant who had just been forgiven a huge debt would not forgive his fellow servant who owed him a small debt. When the king heard about this great injustice, he called for the servant whom he had forgiven and told him,

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“Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.” (Matthew 18:33-34)

Jesus concludes the parable by giving this commandment to forgive:

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.” (Matthew 18:35)

Notice Jesus said that forgiveness must come from our hearts, not from our mouths -- that’s the “removal” and “release.” We are to forgive from our hearts everyone who trespasses against us.

“Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.” (Luke 6:37)

To forgive is a commandment of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness paves the way for fellowship. It develops a peace within our hearts and a love that we share one with another. In practical applications, forgiveness is an act of the will; it’s not a matter of “can” or “can’t” -- it’s a matter of “will” or “won’t.” Forgiveness is a response to an injustice, a turning to the good in the face of evil. It’s a merciful restraint from pursuing resentment or revenge. It’s the forgoing of resentment or revenge when the wrongdoer’s action deserves it, and the giving of gifts -- mercy, generosity, and love -- when the wrongdoer doesn’t deserve them.

Doesn’t that sound familiar? It’s just how Christ forgave us -- *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)*. As we give the gift of forgiveness, we are healed. Forgiveness is a freely-chosen gift, not a grim obligation. It’s the overcoming of evil with good, even as it says in Romans,

“Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

What Forgiveness is Not

Forgiveness is not merely forgiving or denying, or allowing time to pass and ignoring the effects of the wrongdoing. Forgiveness is not condoning or brushing the hurt aside (“Nothing really that bad happened; it was only this one time, and it won’t happen again”). Forgiveness is not excusing the person who did this because, “It really wasn’t that bad.” Forgiveness is not condemning (“They deserve to suffer for the way they wronged me”) or forgiving with a sense of superiority over that person. That’s not the way Christ forgave, is it?

Years after her concentration camp experience in Nazi Germany, Corrie Ten Boom met face-to-face with the most cruel and heartless guard that she’d ever met. He had humiliated her and degraded her and her sister. He had jeered as they stood in the delousing shower, now he stood before her with hands outstretched and said, “Will you forgive me?” She writes,

“I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus help me. Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand out into the one stretched out to me, and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms, and sprang into our clasped arms. Then, this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you with my whole heart!’ I cried. [Note the “remove” and “release.”] For a long moment, we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard, and the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God as intensely as I did in that moment.”

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.

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How to Forgive

How do we forgive? Everyone who has ever made an experience of confessing their sins to God probably remembers that moment in time. We were so thankful for that opportunity, because we realized the inner cleansing that came through that very experience as we are instructed in the Scripture. If we need to confess to God through prayer, or even in the presence of someone else, the wrongs that we feel others have committed against us, then we can go to Matthew 6 where we are instructed to forgive, and say, "I forgive you as I was forgiven." Forgive us as we forgive. "Remove" and "release."

In the Beatitudes of Matthew Chapter 5, we are directed to perform many actions that go against our nature. Forgiveness is something that doesn't come naturally to us; we need the grace of God. We need to be walking in grace in order to forgive completely. We need to bury the hatchet, and not leave the handle sticking up where we can reach down and use it again. We've heard the phrase, "I can forgive, but I cannot forget." But quite often, that's only another way of saying, "I cannot forgive." There have been times in each of our lives when there has been a hurt against us, but yet we can forgive. We may still remember the event, but the pain of that memory is gone as a result of the forgiveness. The grudge is no longer there, the ill will that we may wish on that person disappears; it is removed, and it is released.

Here's a simple example. Each one of us probably have had experiences with friends or relatives where things just didn't go very well. Maybe it was a poorly planned family vacation, or something in a relationship that started out as a bad day and ended up as a miserable week. And at that time it seemed like it was the end of the world. Maybe there were ill feelings and hurtful words. But yet, as there is forgiveness today, we can go back to that time and we can laugh. We hear the phrase, "We can laugh about it now." We can laugh about it now because there's been forgiveness of those hurtful feelings and words that were expressed at that moment. There's been a "removal" and a "release." Husbands and wives can foster their relationship by not remembering or keeping score, by not saving things up for future dates. We need to "remove" and "release." One criteria for family health is for members of the family to say often to each other these three statements, "I'm sorry." "I love you." "I forgive you."

Forgiveness: it's not an occasional act -- it's a permanent attitude, because of what Christ has done for us. He who forgives ends the quarrel. And we forgive to the degree that we love.

Forgiving Ourselves

One other thought about forgiveness -- we also need to forgive ourselves. I recently saw a statistic that said 86 percent of Americans pray to forgive others, while 92 percent pray to forgive themselves. There's a need to forgive ourselves. God does not wish us to remember what He is willing to forget, and, in most cases, what He has already forgotten. Sometimes we hear about the "sea of forgetfulness," and that Satan is a good fisherman. But we can also put up a sign that says, "No fishing."

I remember an experience I had many years ago, while visiting with some young people. We were having one of those lighthearted conversations about things in the past that had been forgiven. But another man who was several years older came up to us and said, "You're going to drown, fishing around in that deep sea called Forgetfulness." We know that when God forgives our sins, He removes them far away:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

God forgives and forgets -- He "removes" and "releases." Let's be sure we forgive ourselves.

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The story is told of a little boy who was with his parents on a trip to Washington D.C. As he stood and looked up at the Washington Monument, he saw a guard around the side. So he went up to the guard and said, "I want to buy it." And the guard stooped down and said to the boy, "Well how much money do you have?" And the boy reached into his pocket, pulled out a quarter, and offered it to the guard. But the guard told him, "That's not enough." And the little boy said, "I thought you'd say that." So he reached into his other pocket and he pulled out nine cents, and he offered that to the guard. Then the guard looked down at the little boy and said, "Son, you need to understand three things. First, 34 cents is not enough to buy the Washington Monument. In fact, 34 million dollars is not enough. Second, the Washington Monument is not for sale. And third, if you're an American citizen, the Washington Monument already belongs to you."

We need to understand three things about forgiveness. First, we cannot earn it. Second, it's not for sale. And third, if we have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and are walking in His grace, we already have it.

Forgiveness: The Balm of Healing

The apostle Paul said,

"Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark . . ."
(Philippians 3:13-14)

So we should also "press toward the mark." Paul may have had a very checkered past, but it didn't come up as he was writing. He wasn't dwelling in the past, he was looking to the future. He was seeing the souls that needed to be taught and the gospel of salvation that needed to go out, not only in his words, but in his life.

Error is the inevitable consequence of living. Mutual error is the inevitable consequence of relationships. Argument or faultfinding is the defense mechanism to preserve an ego that's in trouble. Confession is the sacrifice of ego at the altar of love. Forgiveness is the balm of healing that soothes and heals the wounds of error. Joy, peace, and the fruit of the spirit are stepping stones on the fresh new pathway, stretching out before the forgiver and the forgiven.

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."
(Ephesians 4:32)