

The Forgiving Heart

It is unthinkable for a believer to be unforgiving, yet it happens again and again. In the following story about a brother in Christ by the name of E. L. Hamilton, we find an example of an unforgiving heart. He had once rebuked a Christian worker for having an unforgiving spirit toward a person. After a moment's thought, the lady replied, "Well, I guess I will pardon her, as you suggest, but I never want to have anything to do with her again." Truth is that the woman did not forgive—she only thought she forgave.

Ever since Adam and Eve, the absence of forgiveness has been a major problem in our world for believers and unbelievers. The absence of forgiveness, the lack of forgiveness, or an unforgiving heart, leads to sin such as anger, hatred, murder, strife, malice, gossip, slander, suicide, withdrawal or avoidance—which is fairly common—and what we call mental illness. Desperation, anxiety, or bitterness are the result of somebody who cannot forgive. Based on my experience as a counselor over the years, I have noticed that the absence of forgiveness accounts for a great majority of interpersonal conflicts. Whether it is in marriage or outside the marriage, in a nation, a state, a city, a home, or a church, unforgiveness is a major problem and unfortunately, a part of our sin nature. It is called sin by God and results from Adam's sin. That is the message of

Romans 5:12.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned... Romans 5:12 (NASB)

Reason For An Unforgiving Heart. The guilt of Adam's sin was imputed to us so we are inherently corrupt and completely unable to do any good work that earns eternal life. As a result, we have a problem with forgiving other people. Genesis 3:6 describes Adam's sin. In 1 Timothy 2:14, we are told that,

And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a wrongdoer. 1 Timothy 2:14 (NASB)

Satan had tempted Eve by telling her that if she ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, her eyes would be opened and she would become like God, knowing good and

evil. As a side note, a common belief is that the fruit was an apple, but we do not know that. But Adam was not deceived; he knew what he was doing. He knowingly ate and brought sin into the world. Afterwards, in Genesis 3:8, we are told that God visited Adam and Eve.



The Forgiving Heart In a Rose

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Genesis 3:8 (NASB)

I believe this was a theophany or a Christophany, an Old Testament appearance of Christ.

Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.” And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.” Genesis 3:9-12 (NASB)

There have been teachers who had fun with verse twelve. I believe Adam has often been wrongfully accused, because I believe Adam told God what he thought God wanted to hear. If you read his words literally, he told God the truth.

“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree and I ate.” Genesis 3:12 (NASB)

He starts off by telling the truth. But as we all know, you can tell the truth, and then you can tell the truth! There is information embedded in this verse that reveals his heart. I believe Adam already had a pride problem due to his sin and the first thing he reveals is pride. That is the same thing that happened with Satan when he sinned—he wanted to become like God. Satan had a pride problem. The first evidence of Adam’s pride appears here in verse twelve. The way this is worded appears that he is blaming God and his wife at the same time. Clearly, there is pride. I believe that as time elapsed, the tension between him and his wife increased because Adam had a problem with forgiving his wife. She is the one who ate and who clearly sinned first (1 Timothy 2:14). But it was his sin that caused the creation to fall and the guilt of his sin has been passed on to us. As time went by, Adam probably had a real problem with the fact that Eve

did what she did.

Some people have said that Adam ate because he realized that Eve had already sinned and was headed for hell; therefore, the only way for her to be redeemed was for him to also eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that a Savior would come. That is speculation since we are not told in Scripture what Adam was thinking. But it is not hard to imagine that after she ate and later offered the fruit to him, he said, “This is a great idea!” Yet at some point in time, he had some misgivings, some animosity, and at some point, maybe an unforgiving spirit.

Nature of An Unforgiving Heart. In Genesis 4:23, an unforgiving heart shows up again.

And Lamech said to his wives Adah and Zillah, “Listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech. Give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me, and a boy for striking me! If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times! Genesis 4:23 (NASB)

The implication is he killed the boy as well. Talk about a hard heart! So, early in Scripture, two major sins appear—a lack of forgiveness (Genesis 3) and holding a grudge (Genesis 4). At the center of these sins is an unforgiving heart. “I deserve better than this because you hurt me.” This is the uglier side of mankind and proof that man is truly sinful—right there with Adam and Eve. We are not any different. We may not have killed somebody, but I would suspect sometimes in our lives we wished somebody had died because they hurt us. We would like to see them disappear from this earth because they hurt us. We would like to kill them if we could and get away with it. Isaiah 64:6 echoes that reality.

For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; .
Isaiah 64:6 (NASB)

The Hebrew word for “filthy rags” in Isaiah 64:6 has the idea of a menstrual rag—really ugly and disgustingly dirty—filthy. God says, “Your righteousness is like a menstrual

rag.” That is bad news. Then in Jeremiah 17:9-10 we read the following:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, to give to each person according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds. Jeremiah 17:9-10 (NASB)

Jeremiah says no one can understand the deceitful, desperately sick heart. Only the Lord searches the heart, and He is the one who understands how desperately wicked we are, how desperately unforgiving we are towards people. God saw our helplessness. God knew we were helpless. We were and are in a mess. If you are a believer, you can say, “I was in a mess.” To a degree, we are still in a mess, but we are a forgiven mess. We have a heart problem, but we are forgiven. Romans 5:6 captures the idea and tells us that God made a plan to rescue us.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Romans 5:6 (NASB)

Before we became believers, we were all ungodly. Even now, in our actions, we are ungodly on occasions. I like the first part of this verse, “For while we were still helpless...” The word for “helpless” in the Greek has the idea of helpless but it can also mean weak, and sometimes it is translated as powerless. The idea is we were powerless to help ourselves. We cannot do anything about our ugliness, about our heart. There is nothing we can do. So, what did God do? He sent Christ, and He died for who? He did not die for the righteous man. He did not die for the man who thought he was superb. He died for the ungodly, the unrighteous.

We all qualify, we are all ungodly. If you are forgiven, you are a forgiven, ungodly person, although Scripture says you now are a saint. Believers are a saint positionally when God looks at us, He sees us through the blood of Jesus. But we are not perfect. We are not saints in a practical sense. We are still struggling in our sinfulness, but someday we will be transformed because of His promise, because we put faith

in Christ. Romans 5:8 is a great passage.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (NASB)

The message is that God loves us. God saw our ugliness and helplessness. God saw the mess that we were in, and He responded. He willingly went out of His way to help us. God did not just say, “Well, you deserve hell, that is where you are going.” God set forth a plan so we could know when the Messiah was going to arrive who would be born of a virgin, so that He would be sinless and then walk among us. The Messiah would be Jesus Christ who would show us that He was God so we could have our sins forgiven.

Jesus said in John 16:8 that He has sent the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of sin and righteousness. Why? Because in Romans 3:11 we are told that no person seeks after God. He does this so that we will respond to the good news that Jesus came to die for our sins so that we can be forgiven. That is why He did what He did.

Ephesians 2:8,9 tells us that faith is a gift. Do you know what God did? He gave you the faith. It is a gift! He gives it to us! Then in Romans 5:9 we are told,

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. Roman 5:9 (NASB)

God did all that so that we could be saved from His wrath. When we are told that we are justified, that means that we are declared holy. We are declared to be righteous, even though we are not. Because of Jesus, our sins are forgiven. We are legally, judicially, declared to be righteous and holy, even though we are not.

Colossians 1:13, 14 puts it another way.

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin. Colossians 1:13,14 (NASB)

Do you know how this was possible? First Peter 2:21-24 tells us how it was made possible. It describes the process.

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.
1 Peter 2:21-24 (NASB)

That is what Jesus did for you and for me and it does not sound like somebody who has an unforgiving spirit. When David sinned and committed adultery with Bathsheba, he frankly and honestly admitted his sin,

Against You, You only, have I sinned. Psalm 51:4
(NASB)

You say, “He sinned against Bathsheba.” Yes he did, but the ultimate violation was his relationship with God. When he sinned, he sinned against God. So God could have had an unforgiving spirit, but that would not be the attitude of one who has a forgiving spirit. Forgiveness goes out of its way to forgive, and Christ Himself died on a cross for us.

And He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 1 Peter 2:24
(NASB)

Read that again. “He Himself bore our sins in His body.” It does not mean that He became sin, because Scripture teaches us He was without sin. Our sins were imputed to Him in the sense that He took our sins upon Himself as if He had sinned. He then died in our place. He suffered the horror

and the agony of sin on a cross. He did it for us. He bore our sins in His body on the cross.

God’s Forgiving Heart. Is there somebody that you have a problem forgiving? Have you ever come to a point in your life where you are willing to suffer for someone? Psalms 103:12 reveals God’s heart of forgiveness. When God forgives, He forgives completely.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Psalms 103:12
(NASB)

That is terrific news! I love reading the verse. It reminds me of His forgiveness. Or how about Psalms 51:7.

Purify me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Psalms 51:7 (NASB)

I always thought snow was white, but I discovered there are different shades or degrees of whiteness. “Whiter than snow,” is the whitest white that you can have when Jesus forgives. Philippians 3:9 says we have the righteousness of Jesus.

...and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, Philippians 3:9 (NASB)

Because our sins are forgiven, we are as white as white can be. We have the righteousness of Jesus. Jeremiah 31:34 says that He does not remember our sins anymore. They are gone. He completely forgot them. How does God’s forgiveness compare to how we forgive others?

When we sin against God, He still loves us.

When others sin against us or offend us, we love ourselves.

When we sin against God, He truly understands us.

When others sin against us, we jump to all kinds of conclusions and imagine the worst.

When we sin against God, He suffers for us.
When others sin against us, we get angry and we
respond with hatred, gossip, and all kinds of sins.
When we sin against God, He eagerly forgives us.
When others sin against us, we foster that unforgiving-
ness in our heart by reliving it again, and again,
and again.

He forgets; we do not. He desires our best. He desires our fellowship. In fact, He wants us to be in heaven with Him someday. Yet, there are some people whom we have forgiven with whom we do not wish to be, but God wants to be around His believers! God is our example of a forgiving heart, is He not?

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you. Ephesians 4:30-32 (NASB)

Some of us will focus in on the middle part of that verse where it says, “Tender-hearted, forgiving one another.” That is how we are supposed to respond to one another. The last part of the verse says, “Just as God in Christ has forgiven you.” That is what we are to do. God willingly went out of His way to forgive us, and we are to be like Him. We are to respond in forgiveness, going out of our way to do so.

Colossians 3:12, 13 is another important passage dealing with forgiveness. There are lots of them in the New Testament.

So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion... Colossians 3:12 (NASB)

If you are a believer, you are chosen of God, holy and beloved. He loves you! Your sins are forgiven! Your old sins are forgiven! Your current sins are forgiven! All the future

sins that you will ever commit have been forgiven, (although you need a daily clean-up of confession and repentance). That is called parental forgiveness.

**...kindness, humility, gentleness and patience . . .
Colossians 3:12 (NASB)**

That is the opposite of pride.

... bearing with one another and forgiving one another, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Colossians 3:13 (NASB)

Evaluating Your Heart. There are two important keywords in this passage: “forgiving” in the early part of the verse, and “forgave” at the end of the verse. Both words come from an unusual Greek word. The normal Greek word is *aphiemi*, which is the word we use when we talk about forgiveness. But this word, *charizomai*, is an unusual word that has the idea of not just forgiven or forgiving, but freely forgiving. It has the idea that God freely forgave us, and so we are to freely forgive. The word “complaint” has the idea of blaming somebody.

Is there somebody that you are blaming, with whom you have a problem, and are having a difficult time? You blame them and blame them and blame them. When we go through the holidays, inevitably there are tensions in families. You read about it, hear about it and say, “Oh, I am so glad Christmas is over and all these relatives are gone!” Is that blaming? Paul says, “Whoever has a complaint against anyone...” (Colossians 3:13). As believers, we are not to complain and blame one another. We are supposed to be freely forgiving one another.

In his book, *You Can Win*, Roger Campbell told of a woman who had been treated wrongly by her church and came to him for help. He was sympathetic to her plight, but he also realized that she would not be delivered from her hurt feelings until she got a glimpse of the suffering of Christ. “Has anyone spat on you yet?” Campbell asked. “No,” she replied, shocked by his question. “They

did on Jesus,” he told her. Campbell went on to say that suddenly she saw his point. While she had certainly been mistreated by the people who should have known better, she had not endured the pain and shame experienced by Christ in His suffering and death for her sins. “My simple question,” Campbell writes, “changed her attitude about her persecutors, and she was able to forgive those who had snubbed and avoided her. Forgiveness requires humility. That was one of the core problems with which she was struggling. People who demand apologies are really proud people who want to humiliate another person. It is the worst type of an unforgiving spirit masked in piety.

Conclusion. Matthew 18:21-22 is a great example of humility. Jesus takes the whole issue of forgiveness to its pinnacle when He has an interesting discussion with Peter. This comes on the heel of a discussion about church discipline.

And then Peter came and said to Him Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Matthew 18:21 (NASB)

It is important to understand that the Jewish rabbis of the day had a principle they taught the people. They read the Old Testament and saw that on a couple of occasions God seemed to forgive people only three times. After that, judgment came. The rabbis wrongly, mistakenly, drew the conclusion that all they had to do was forgive people three times, and on the fourth offense, they did not need to forgive anybody. So, Peter suggests rather than three times, how about up to seven times? You ought to be impressed that I am thinking of seven times.

I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Matthew 18:22 (NASB)

Not three strikes, you are out. That was not the idea; instead, it is that you forgive as an act of humility. Some believers have problems forgiving once, let alone three, seven, or seventy times seven. Jesus says, “Stop counting, Peter! Stop counting; be humble, and forgive, and forgive,

and forgive.”

We began our study with a story about E. L. Hamilton, a brother in Christ, who once rebuked a Christian worker for having an unforgiving spirit towards a person. After a moment’s thought the woman said, “Well, I guess I will pardon her, as you suggest, but I never want to have anything to do with her.” Now here is the rest of the story. Hamilton said, “Is that how you want God to treat you? Do you want Him to say that He will forgive you, but that He will never have anything more to do with you? Remember, when Christ forgave, He cast your sins into the everlasting sea of forgetfulness.

How do you forgive? Or do you forgive? Whether it is at home or whether it is racial offense. It does not matter the kind of problem or situation. Maybe it is a problem with your husband or your wife. Maybe you have a problem with your children or your parents. Perhaps it is a problem at church or an issue in your nation or with a sibling. We need to forgive as God forgives, and we need to do it with eagerness by casting their offense into our everlasting sea of forgetfulness.

If you have difficulty forgiving somebody, confess your sin of unforgiveness and of an unforgiving heart. This works in my life when I am struggling to forgive somebody. I must recognize this is sin on my part. We always think it is their problem when it is actually our problem. If you cannot forgive, you have a deep sin problem in your heart.

Start by confessing your sin because you are not ready to deal with another sin until you are right with God. Second, thank God for the trial you are in. Third, ask God to change your heart and to reveal how you can show compassion, mercy, and love to the other person. Fourth, ask Him for help to forgive and forget the offense. That is how we forgive.

Remember, we are to forgive just as ... what? As God has forgiven us!

