

Introduction

A little boy visiting his grandparents was given his first catty. He practiced in the veld, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to his grandma's back yard, he spied her pet duck and on an impulse took aim and let fly. The stone hit its target, killing the poor duck instantly.

The boy panicked. In desperation he hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me *he* wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of, Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck," and Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he couldn't stand it anymore. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed her duck and asked for forgiveness. "I know, Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you! I wondered how long you would let Sally make you a slave."¹

Richard Hoefler told that story in his book, "Will Daylight Come?" to illustrate the truth that forgiveness frees and unforgiveness enslaves.

Last week after duly noting Paul's call to Christ-like living in Colossians 3:1-11, verses in which he told us that there are certain sinful patterns in our lives that we need to *put off*,...

¹ Leadership Magazine, Christianity Today, Inc., To Illustrate: Forgiveness by Steve Cole; Leadership 1983, pg. 86.

...we discovered in verses 12 and 13 that he also wanted us to *put on* a number of Christian virtues which would enable us to avoid the potentially devastating effects of harbouring unforgiveness in our hearts, whether in our friendships, family relationships or marriages. I promised then, that we would return to Colossians 3 and answer 4 important questions about forgiveness:

1. What exactly is forgiveness?
2. What do we need to be willing to forgive?
3. Why don't people forgive?
4. What are the consequences of unforgiveness?

I also said that we'd look briefly at what Paul refers to as "bond of perfection," and the importance of striving for the rule of God's peace in our hearts and demonstrating an attitude of thankfulness in life.

Before we do that, let's read the passage together again:

Colossians 3:12–15 (NKJV)

¹² Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. ¹⁴ But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. ¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Prayer

In the same way that many husbands and wives misunderstand the meaning of submission and servant leadership within the context of their marriage, many men and women misunderstand the meaning of confession and forgiveness.

That's why it is important for us to start with the question, "What is forgiveness?" a question which necessitates that we simultaneously consider what forgiveness is not. So...

1. What exactly is forgiveness?

- "Forgiveness is a *vertical commitment* that is followed by a *horizontal transaction*." We can also refer to the vertical commitment as *judicial forgiveness* and the horizontal transaction as *relational forgiveness*. Both aspects of forgiveness are essential, *in that particular order*.
- When we have been hurt by the words or actions of our spouse, child, or friend, our first response should always be a vertical commitment to God, followed by a horizontal transaction committed to pursuing reconciliation. Forgiveness *begins* with us giving the offense to the Lord. That does not mean that we pretend as if our spouse did nothing wrong, but it does mean that we do not carry the wrong with us because that leads to bitterness. It also means that we do not persist in treating our spouse in light of the wrong because that places us in a position of judgment and we dare not insert ourselves into God's position and mete out punishment for our spouse's offense as we see fit. We entrust ourselves to God's mercy and justice, and commit ourselves to defeating a sinful action with a virtuous response, just like Paul told us to in Romans 12:21:

Romans 12:21 (NKJV)

²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Our vertical commitment clears our hearts of unforgiveness and condemnation, so that we can deal with the wrongs committed against us in a way that is kind, patient, loving, humble, and encouraging.

- That doesn't mean for one moment that we just swallow the hurt we've suffered and act as if we weren't affected or offended in the least by what our spouse said or did. In fact, if we've been sinned against and the offender remains oblivious to the hurt he's caused, the Bible actually calls us to go to go to him and present him with his offense.

Matthew 18:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ *“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.*

Luke 17:3 (NKJV)

³ *Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.*

- We don't like phrases like “go and tell him his fault,” or “rebuke him.” That sounds like the exclusive domain of the pastor. Those words indicate conflict, and in our minds, conflict is *always* a bad thing. We need to realise that that simply isn't true; conflict is inevitable in a relationship between two imperfect people. How we deal with conflict is what determines the quality of our relationship. It is not in the least bit spiritually helpful for either party to sweep their hurts under the carpet and to carry on as if everything is 'a' ok. The Bible doesn't tell us anywhere to grin and bear it for the sake of our marriage.
- When we refuse to deal with a transgression against us we don't do so because we love our spouse and consider ourselves the peacemaker in our relationship, we do so because we love ourselves and as a result: loathe conflict, prefer pseudo-peace over God's peace, and place greater stock in our way of dealing with personal disputes than His. For our sake and ours alone, we want to avoid the hassle and discomfort of confrontation at all costs.

- But in the verses we read earlier on, we saw that the very thing we so desperately want to avoid, is the very thing that God commands us to do. He does this because when we fail to bring offenses into the light, they fester in the dark recesses of our hearts, slowly but surely contaminating and poisoning every facet of our lives.
- Luke 17:3 raises an interesting question, one we sometimes hide behind. Let's read it again:

Luke 17:3 (NKJV)

³ Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

What if our rebuke is met with resistance? What if we point out the offender's fault and they deny that they've done anything wrong? What if they refuse to entertain our call for repentance? What if they excuse their hurtful behaviour by telling us to grow up or lighten up? What if they turn the tables on us and blame us for their wrongful behaviour?

In all likelihood, at one time or another we will come across someone just like that; someone who can't or rather won't accept that they are wrong and as a result refuse to ask for forgiveness. Under such circumstances our responsibility towards God doesn't change. We need to make that vertical commitment. At the very least, judicial forgiveness needs to take place or we'll end up bitter, twisted and judgmental. Nor are we absolved of our duty to confront the individual with their offense. There needs to be a whole-hearted attempt at the horizontal transaction. But we cannot logically extend relational forgiveness to someone who refuses to ask for forgiveness. The biblical pattern is this: someone confesses, you forgive.

That is why we go to our spouse with the hope that their eyes will be opened, their heart will be grieved, and they will respond by confessing their sin against us and asking for our forgiveness which we will be ready to give because we have fulfilled our vertical commitment and aren't harbouring bitterness in our hearts. In fact in the following verse in Luke 17, Jesus tells us that we need to be ready to forgive again and again and again if necessary...and then some:

Luke 17: 4 (NKJV)

⁴ And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

- That verse communicates that forgiveness is often a process, not an event. We may find ourselves repeatedly having to confront an offense, and repeatedly having to forgive as forgiveness is sought. We may also find ourselves repeatedly having to go to the Lord with our vertical commitment as we struggle with old, angry thoughts, and hurt feelings that seek to consume us. At times such as this we need to be the repentant ones seeking the forgiveness of our spouse whom we've judged despite having made an earlier commitment before the Lord not to.

By way of reminder then: Forgiveness is a process which requires a vertical commitment (judicial forgiveness) followed by a horizontal transaction which entails confrontation, and hopefully results in repentance, confession, relational forgiveness, and ultimately reconciliation.

Before moving on to question two I feel compelled to point out five more things about what forgiveness is NOT, just in case these are the things which might trip you up in seeking to become more God-honouring in your confession and forgiveness:

- a. When we forgive a person, that doesn't mean we are immediately healed.
- b. When we forgive a person, that does not mean we will become best friends.

- c. When we forgive a person, it does not mean that we surrender the right to restitution or justice where appropriate.
- d. When we forgive a person, we don't automatically trust them as a result.
- e. When we forgive a person, we are not avoiding pain, we are opening the door to healing.

The second question we need to answer is:

2. **What do we need to be willing to forgive?**

- Our original passage sheds some light on this question. In verse 13, Paul tells the Colossians what their standard of forgiveness ought to be:

Colossians 3:13 (NKJV)

¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.

- We are to forgive as Christ forgave us. Praise God that Jesus wasn't selective when it came to what He would and wouldn't forgive. Can you imagine the consequences if our Saviour deemed a certain sub-set of sins unforgiveable, and declared that anyone who was guilty of those would have to face God's wrath. I'll hazard a guess that the moment I said that, some of us probably thought that even under those circumstances we'd be ok because we have never committed what we'd classify as serious sins.
- Just how many of the 10 commandments do you think you are guilty of breaking? We don't have time to go through all of them one by one, but I guarantee you that if you hold yourself up to them in light of Jesus' teaching in the gospels, particularly His teaching during The Sermon on the Mount, you will find that all of us are guilty of breaking all of the commandments.
- There is a distinction we need to make prior to turning to our third question.

The biblical call to confession and forgiveness is only to be followed in instances when a spouse or a friend has done something that the Bible calls *sin*. We do not need to ask forgiveness for something done as a consequence of human imperfection: forgetting to pick up something at the supermarket, accidentally dropping a treasured mug, or failing when trying to fix an electrical fault or baking a chocolate cake. In each of these instances it is considerate and loving to say sorry for the loss suffered or the hassle caused, but we certainly don't need to ask for forgiveness. We may have inconvenienced our spouse in these circumstances, but we didn't sin against them.

Question three is one that I really want us all to think about carefully. After all we've learnt about forgiveness particularly our responsibility to forgive others as Christ forgave us, why is it that we sometimes choose not to forgive? In his book, "What did you expect?" Paul Tripp identifies five reasons he refers to as the "dark benefits of unforgiveness" which serves as some sort of relational debt. Two of them are very similar so I'll only mention four:

3. Why don't people forgive?

- a. *Debt is power* – there is power in having something to hold over our spouse's head; power in using a husband or wife's failure against them. In those moments when we want our own way and are not getting it, it's handy having something that we can drag up out of the ditch of the past and use against our spouse. When debt I used as power, we hear questions like, "I can't believe you'd forget what you did to me nine years ago, but since you have, let me remind you."
- b. *Debt is identity* – Holding on to our spouse's sin makes us feel superior to them. It allows us to believe that even though we may not be spiritual giants, we're still more righteous and spiritually mature than they are.

Instead of measuring our self-worth by what God says, an exercise which doesn't always paint a pleasing picture, we simply compare ourselves to our erring husband or wife, something which is infinitely more satisfying. We may not verbalise our debt-based identity, but the meditation of our hearts focus on how comparatively kind, gracious, generous, and spiritual we are. Of course all the areas of strength for our spouse are conveniently ignored.

- c. *Debt is entitlement* – Because of all the wrongs our spouse has committed against us we feel a sense of entitlement; like they owe us something. Despite knowing that our attitude is wrong, we feel like we somehow deserve some sort of compensation for the hurt we've suffered. We may even feel like we deserve to hurt them in return, and instead of extending forgiveness concoct some sort of a malicious plan to inflict as much pain on them as possible; to get back at them for what they've done to us.
- d. *Debt puts us in God's position* – This is of course a position we should never place ourselves in but one we find ourselves in all too often. We are not the judge of our spouse. We are not the one who should dispense consequences for our spouse's sin. It is not our personal assignment to make sure they sense the appropriate amount of guilt or remorse for what they have done. But it is very tempting to ascend to God's throne and to make ourselves judge.
 - We may never have thought about our reluctance to forgive in this way, but when we stop to examine the condition of our hearts I believe that we will have to admit, albeit reluctantly, that what Paul Tripp has observed about the reasons why we don't forgive is right on the money.

That said, many still hold onto unforgiveness and they do so with impunity. They think that they can disregard God's commands regarding forgiveness and get away with it. But unforgiveness has dire consequences.

That brings us to our fourth question:

4. **What are the consequences of unforgiveness?**

- It leads to deception, lying, and a reluctance to confess on the part of the offending spouse because who wants to come clean about a transgression when all they ever get in return is disbelief, judgment, and condemnation.
- But the effect on the offended is even more sinister: the writer of Hebrews (12:15) tells us that in time a "root of bitterness" may spring up and cause trouble and defilement for all who are exposed to it. Paul understanding the danger of such a root exhorted the Ephesians (4:31) to put bitterness away. But it was the Lord Himself who spoke the most disturbing words on the issue of unforgiveness in teaching His disciples how to pray.

Matthew 6:12, 14–15 (NKJV)

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...¹⁴ "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

- First of all we need to understand that these verses have no bearing whatsoever on salvation. This passage is directed at people who already have a relationship with God. In it Jesus teaches His disciples a pattern of prayer and instructs them to address God reverently and lovingly as "Our Father."
- Christ's words also don't indicate that we somehow earn His forgiveness with our own. But what they do reveal, is that our willingness to forgive others demonstrates our felt need of forgiveness.

The person who does not forgive the offense of others fails to understand how much he himself needs forgiveness. In his commentary on Matthew, John Stott had this to say: “Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely trifling. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others, it proves that we have minimized our own.”²

- Here’s the bottom line of what Jesus was saying, “One cannot walk in fellowship with God if he refuses to forgive others (Barbieri).” “Forgiveness keeps our fellowship with God intimate (Constable).” And if we aren’t walking closely to the Lord we will fail to grow and continue to demonstrate immaturity in our conduct.

We won’t spend much time contemplating Paul’s comments in verses 14 and 15 but they are well worth a mention because in them he identifies a further three Christian characteristics/virtues, all of which contribute to our understanding of the importance of forgiveness:

Colossians 3:14–15 (NKJV)

¹⁴ But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. ¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

- The first characteristic is love. “But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection (v. 14).” Above what things? Tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. Love is the outer garment or the belt which holds all the other virtues together in order to make up perfection.

² Tom Constable. (2003; 2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Mt 6:9). Galaxie Software.

It is ultimately what compels or constrains us to manifest all the others virtues in our relationships including forgiveness.

- The second characteristic we are to pursue is the peace of God. When Paul told the Colossians to “let the peace of God rule (v. 15)” in their hearts, he was telling them to allow God’s peace, to act as an umpire in their hearts...

...to adjudicate whether their chosen course of action would make for peace or lead to conflict and disunity. It is indisputable that harbouring an attitude of unforgiveness does not lead to peace and unity in our lives, but to agitation and division

- The final characteristic is one we don’t consider often enough. Paul simply instructed our fellow believers at Colosse to “be thankful (v. 15).” It wasn’t the first time he encouraged them to count their blessings and be thankful. He did so in Colossians 1:12 and again in Colossians 2:7. In his closing comments of his first letter to the Thessalonians he exhorted them, “in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (5:18).” An attitude of gratitude helps us to appreciate and enjoy what and whom God has given us. I think it’s important for us to be thankful for our spouse and to tell them that we are. It’s hard to be thankful and unforgiving at the same time.

Conclusion