

CARING ENOUGH TO **NOT** FORGIVE
“Don’t Forgive - When “Forgiveness” Is One-Way
Matthew 6:12-15, I John 4:19-21
March 8, 2023

In Matthew 6, Jesus calls us to work on forgiving each other. Here in the Lord’s Prayer (9-13) He invites us to ask God to “*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*” He is inviting us to work out our struggles with each other in a two-way forgiveness that brings reconciliation between those in conflict with each other.

However, many preachers and teachers distort this statement into making forgiveness an only one-way ordeal. But a one-way forgiveness is not really forgiveness. So I want us to look at this in this second of the series, Caring Enough to **NOT** Forgive, by looking at Not forgiving one-way.

Let me give you an example of one-way forgiving. A man “called home to see how his father was recovering from his heart attack only to discover that his mother was now in the hospital. At first they wouldn’t tell him what was wrong; finally his sister let it out that she was in the psychiatric ward after taking an overdose of drugs. His sister explained, “We didn’t call you or tell you because you don’t care about the family anymore, you’re too good for us now.”

The man “had never been cut so deeply in his life. He didn’t sleep for two nights. His sister didn’t know that he’d been sending a fourth of his paycheck home each month to help cover the expenses for his Dad’s hospitalization. She didn’t know how often he called home, so what she said was not just unfair, it was really untrue.

The man “prayed about it a lot, all night, in fact. He decided he’d never say another word about this to her. After all, she’d been carrying quite a load at home. He’d just forgive her.”

“One way forgiving seems generous, thoughtful, and self-sacrificial. It’s generous, but not truly genuine. It’s thoughtful but not thorough. It’s self-sacrificial, but the sacrifice is seldom sufficient to restore the relationship.”¹

¹ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 25-26)

The confusion comes as we equate love with forgiveness. Love is an absolute necessity in the forgiveness process, for it begins recognizing the other as a valuable person to the Lord our God, but it is not forgiveness. Love sees the other as precious again, regardless of the wrongdoing, but love is not forgiveness. Love leads us into the forgiveness process as we begin to see each other as valuable and then we can begin to trust the other to move into letting go of the past and then working through the hard steps of the hurt and pain that was given. Love leads us to forgiveness, but love is not forgiveness!

But, when love is seen as forgiveness, then forgiveness ends up becoming one-way, the offended bearing all of the hurt and pain and injustice on their own, while setting the other free. This self-sacrificial love is a gift, but it is not forgiveness.

However most writers, including preachers and teachers, see one-way forgiveness as THE Way to forgive. But one-way forgiveness works only like this: 1) “The man who forgives pays a tremendous price - the price of the evil he forgives. 2) If the state pardons a criminal, society bears the burden of the criminal’s deed. 3) If I break a priceless heirloom that you treasure and you forgive me, you bear the loss and I go free. 4) Suppose I ruin your reputation. To forgive me, you must freely accept the consequences of my sin and let me go free! 5) In forgiveness, you bear your own anger and wrath at the sin of another, voluntarily accepting responsibility for the hurt he/she has inflicted on you.”²

Sacrificial, one-way forgiveness is not really forgiveness. Forgiveness seeks reconciliation between those in conflict, but if only one gives forgiveness without the other seeking forgiveness, there is no real forgiveness given, but rather just the accepting the other person as valuable. This is loving the other, but it is not forgiveness. There is no resolution to the conflict and the one wronged has to bear the full weight of the wrong done. That’s not forgiveness! It is an attempt to remove the problem, not solve the problem. Genuine forgiveness in an active relationship is a mutual interaction, both recognizing their own part of the wrongdoing, and both working to resolve the conflict.

We can seek to change our feelings about the other person who has wronged us; we can change

² (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 27-28)

the way we interact with the other person; we can even change our own behavior around that person; but until the tough part of interacting with the other and working through the conflict, there is no forgiveness given, because there is really no resolution to the conflict. It's just one person swallowing hard and pressing on, with no guarantee of anything changing between the two. Nothing is being done to right the wrongs - only one party just trying to forget that it ever happened. That's not forgiveness.

“In the family, when one sibling must make a silent adjustment to an alienated relationship with another, the interpersonal conflict (between two individuals) gets absorbed and turns into an intrapersonal conflict (conflict within the one). The hurt which exists between the two is internalized by one of the two. Loneliness results. The problem has just been move, not removed.

“In a marriage, when one partner chooses to make a private adjustment to painful trauma between the two, it may reduce the tension that separates them, but at a price. And as one person pays that price, loneliness increases, distance widens between them, and the marriage suffers a serious loss of openness and genuineness (intimacy). Turning the pain of a relationship inward is no favor to the person or the relationship. The tensions are not being reduced, they are just getting recycled.

“In working relationships, when one person opts to forgive in quiet acquiescence, the staff spirit may show improvement, but the progress is temporary. The trust level is blocked along with the obstructed communication. The loneliness of one human privately doing the work that rightfully belongs to two, of one person needing to secretly stifle the longing for open clear communication in order to maintain a surface of cooperation, slowly separates colleagues and turns them into polite strangers. The frustration is not being dissipated, it is displaced.”³

One-way forgiveness is not forgiveness, but rather an attempt at avoiding further conflict in the relationship. However, this rarely works. Without both parties being involved, there is no resolution of the problem, only deepening the gap between the two involved. But this way of “forgiveness” is being touted as the real way to forgive another. Sadly it only makes the problem deeper.

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 30)

You see, “the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, not release. The task of forgiving is the reconstruction of the relationship, not pious retreat from real relating. One person cannot do the real work of forgiving alone...it takes two to reconcile, two to realize that we are back in right relationships again. Trying to do all this in one-way action is a lonely way; one-way actions leaves one wanting.”⁴

So let’s look at how God desires that we forgive. God saw all of our sin, and came to understand that we were unable to free ourselves from that sin. At first, God used the sacrifice of animals to “remove” the sin of the people, but that kind of sacrifice became meaningless to the people. The animal paid the price for the person’s sin, but it did not really bring forgiveness.

So God presented a new way of bringing forgiveness to us. He sent His own Son, Jesus, to come here onto the earth to teach us the way that God wants us to live with - and among - each other. Using the Laws and Commandments of the Old Testament, Jesus invited us into a right relationship with the Lord our God in the two-way process of forgiveness. When we come to realize our sin, we confess that sin, and seek the Lord to forgive us. It’s the process of working out the sin problem between God and the people. God didn’t just wipe away our sin and set us free from the consequences. God demanded that we come to Him, confess that sin and then seek His forgiveness. THEN God, who is a forgiving God, takes that sin and throws it into the sea of forgetfulness and remembers it no more.

It is not just God wiping away our sin and freeing us to continue to sin against Him. God demands that we humble ourselves first, in recognition of what we have done against His Laws and Commands, and then confess our sins. Not that God doesn’t know them already, but that we come to understand our sins for ourselves, and then we seek forgiveness. It’s two-way forgiveness, the sinner seeking forgiveness and then God forgiving us through Jesus Christ.

Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sin as a pathway for us to find forgiveness. Out of love for all of us, Jesus sacrificially gave of Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for the penalty of sin. However, the forgiveness of our sins comes as we confess those sins and cry out to the Lord in the Name of Jesus for

⁴ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to NOT Forgive*, pg. 31)

forgiveness of them. If we do not confess, we are not forgiven. But if we seek to renew our relationship with the Lord, it begins with us seeking forgiveness, and then the Lord forgives us.

But then, God demands that as we have sought forgiveness from Him, in relationship with Him, so we are to forgive those who sin against us **IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM**. It's not a one-way forgiving, but a two-way forgiving, both recognizing the wrongdoing they have done, and confessing it and forgiving it.

So we have to genuinely love our brother and sister, our neighbor and even the stranger, in order for forgiveness to begin. But we cannot just forgive one-way, lest the relationship continue to dissolve and resentment continues to grow and we grow further and further apart.

So Jesus tells us that in order to be forgiven, we must be forgiving. God forgives us as we forgive others. Likewise, in order to receive forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive others. If we refuse to forgive others is to then refuse forgiveness for ourselves, because we break the cycle of forgiveness and there is no more given to us.

But that means that we must love each other. I John 4:19-21 tells us that we receive God's love so that we can love each other. But if we fail to love our brother or sister, we cannot say we love God. If we love God, we must love each other, and that is the beginning of forgiveness of them for the wrongs they do against us. If we love them, then we must be willing to work with them to find forgiveness.

So two-way acceptance is the way to forgiveness. Mutual love for each other is the heart of true forgiveness. Reconciliation in love for each other is the goal of genuine forgiveness. Forgiveness comes only through resolution of our conflicts. Forgiveness indicates that the two persons are intentional in redeveloping the relationship with each other.

Let's pray. Father it is so easy for us to want to sweep the wrongs of others away from us or under the proverbial rug in an effort to get rid of them. But it doesn't work that way. We must love each other enough to work out our struggles in order that a close relationship begins again. But we must have the willingness to begin in love. So help us not to forgive only one-way, but to take the difficult step to confront the wrongdoing, and to work on it enough so that forgiveness is extended two ways. Only then can we find peace and real love again. Thank you for Your example of forgiveness given to us in the love of Jesus. Help us to do the same, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN