

CARING ENOUGH TO FORGIVE SERIES #3
“FORGIVE - BY RELEASING THE PAST”
Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4-14, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
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Tony Evans gives us a great illustration of how to deal with the past. He says, “If you spend all your time today thinking about your failures or successes yesterday, then you will ruin your tomorrow. When today looks too long at yesterday, we are borrowing from tomorrow’s time.

“Yesterday is like a rearview mirror. When you go somewhere in the car, you use a rearview mirror. A rearview mirror shows you what’s behind you. You need a rearview mirror but you only need a rearview mirror to glance in, not to live in. You don’t move forward by focusing on a rearview mirror; you move forward by focusing on the windshield. If you live in a rearview mirror, you will hurt somebody. But in front of the rearview mirror is a much bigger piece of glass called the windshield. The windshield shows you where you are going and that’s a lot bigger than where you have been. Don’t let yesterday mess up today, which will ruin tomorrow.

“While you are driving forward in your Christian life, every now and then look in your rearview mirror. Take a peek in your rearview mirror to see what’s behind you so that you don’t make a wrong turn while you’re moving forward. Just don’t stare too long.”¹

The past has a way of controlling our today and our tomorrow, if we let it. If we dwell on the things that have happened to us that has brought hurt or pain in our lives, we usually get stuck looking in our rearview mirror, and that can bring pain and hurt into the lives of others. It is best if we release the past and focus on the now in our lives.

I always like a statement in the movie Kung Fu Panda; “The past is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift - that’s why it’s called the present.” However, it is easy to say this, but so hard to live this. The wrongdoing that has happened to us usually controls our minds if we let it. So let’s look deeper into how we can forgive by releasing the past.

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 220, #670)

As we remember, recall, review, recycle, and rework past experiences, we hold on to them emotionally, even though we know rationally that they are in the past and cannot be changed. The past exists only in memory and in consequences. But sometimes the harder we work on getting the past out of our lives, the more we are confined and regulated by those past events. The resentment those wrongdoings have created in us holds us captive, demanding that we strive to somehow change the past and create different outcomes than what we are faced with right now. We continue to dream about what life would look like if those wrongdoings hadn't been done to us, and we strive to make it right one way or another by remembering and rehashing through that wrong done to us.

But remembering the past only captures our present and holds our future at ransom. Instead of accepting the past as it is, and then adjusting our life by accepting the consequences and exploring new ways to use them for the good for our life, we refuse those possibilities and are then bound to look back and try to remake them or undo them. We get so fixated upon those wrongdoings that it is as if time stops and we are stranded in that one time of hurt and pain, desperately trying to make them go away. That fixation influences the way that we live today, and it consumes any future possibility for us.

When painful experiences affect our lives, we are often stuck in a sort of time warp that keeps us reliving and remembering the event over and over. For a short time, this is not a bad thing, because our hearts have to have time to work out the hurts. But to become trapped in the past only brings failure to the future because we are constantly looking at the past. We just want the event to be undone, or to change the unchangeable, or that some sort of atonement be made for the experience that has wronged us.

But as we do that, suspicion creeps into our minds and we begin to suspect all the worst in current activities because of the past experiences. This constant dwelling in the past eliminates any risk-taking on our part that might create trust in that person who has hurt us before. We only think the worst about them, and so we hold back any possibility of something new happening. As we do that we begin to demand that the other person, the wrongdoer, create the changes that will make everything right for

us. We step back and release our own energies for doing something, and demand that the other person provide the control, the security or the trustworthiness that will bring about the necessary changes that will make the whole situation into a new condition. In so doing, we get trapped by the past.

Yet we are told by the Lord that we need to take responsibility for our own actions and making our own future different. We heard in Isaiah 43:18-19, “*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*” We have to stop looking backwards in the rearview mirror, to begin to see the new things that the Lord is bringing to us. Otherwise we’ll get stuck recycling all the things of the past, reliving them over and over, again and again, hoping that something will change. But that’s the definition of insanity - doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result. By living in the past, we practice insane behavior, with no hope of recovery. We must stop looking backwards and begin to live in the moment NOW. God is creating something new for us, but we have to get our heads out of the past and see the present that God is creating. Unless we look forward into what is happening now, we will miss all the marvelous things God is doing in our lives.

And that is where forgiveness comes in. “Forgiveness is letting what was, be gone; what will be, to come, and what is now, to be. In forgiving, we finish our demands on past predicaments, problems and failures and say good-bye to them with finality. We cancel predictions, suspicions, and premonitions of future failure, and we welcome the next moment with openness to discover what will be. We make a new transaction of affirming integrity between us now...

“Forgiveness is willingly accepting the other on the basis of our loving and leveling, of our caring and confronting, and agreeing to be genuine with each other here, now and in the future.

“Forgiveness is being willing to let it be with the best that we can achieve now and move on into the future without repressing my own spontaneous response to you or seeking to restrict your” response.² It’s moving forward, letting go of the past and striving for the future.

² (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 52-53)

And that is exactly what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:4-14. He recounts the good, the bad and the ugly, and makes the statement, “*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ*” (vs. 7). He’s putting an end to the past performances that have dictated his life and lets them be in the past. He is releasing the past from any dominance over him.

Then He looks at what is available to him right at the moment, “*What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...*” (vs. 8). It’s a time of new faith, rejoicing in the here and now, growing stronger because of the joy and the pain, and reaching out to embrace what is and what can be as we live in the moment. He is removing the value of his past pain and hurt, to begin to relish in the presence of Jesus Christ. He’s taken his eyes away from the rearview mirror, to look at the present blessings of the Lord.

And finally he begins looking at the future: “*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*” (vs. 12 & 14). There is so much promise from the Lord that we have to look forward to, making new goals for ourselves and hoping for the prize of maturity as we move into the presence of the Lord Jesus. We begin to look forward to the future that welcomes us.

The only way for us to move forward in our lives is to release the past, look fully at what we have at the present, and then press on toward the future goal. Looking constantly into the past confines us to the past and limits, if not eliminates, the future possibilities. We cannot live in the past and expect to have an abundant life, or a hopeful future. We’ve got to let the past go.

The problem comes when we struggle to release the past and rather depend upon it to guide the rest of our lives. It is hard for us to look at any problem and see our own part in it. We’d rather just deny any part in it and put it into the lap of the other person, for them to take full responsibility for the situation. Unless we actually go through the self-evaluation process to see our part of the wrongdoing,

we remain locked into the anger, irritableness, frustration, impatience, and jealousy that the past event has brought onto us. We must let go of our defensiveness, and realize that it takes two to struggle through the problem so that it can be resolved. And then we boldly seek reconciliation with the other.

Letting go helps us to take our eyes off of the rearview mirror, to see what's happening right this moment, and to begin to look out beyond ourselves to see the possibilities around us for new life experiences. As we let go of the past, we begin to recognize that there is no changing the events of yesterday, but there is changing the way we see life today. As we let go of the past, we begin to find God's healing in all of His blessings flowing into our lives as we seek to follow Him. The painful past is eased and replaced by the beautiful comfort and peace that only the Lord can give to us. Releasing the past enables us to find love for the other again, letting go of the anger and hatred that developed toward the other because of the painful experience.

In essence, what we need to do is to say "Good-bye" to the past, break the connection that the past has with us, and to stop letting the past speak into our present and future lives. In any conversation on the telephone, when the two speaking to each other are finished with that exchange, a good-bye brings finality to the conversation. We hang up the phone on the other, looking forward to the next opportunity we might have with them. But there is an end to that conversation.

In releasing the past, we are putting an end to our connection with those events, and we are turning our focus on the next new possibilities we have before us. "There is power in the act of saying good-bye. It is a clear signal that one situation is finished and another is beginning. It is a decisive statement that this moment with its relationships is terminating and a new moment with a different network of relationships is here."³ It is closing the door on all of the past hurt and pain, and turning to face the beauty in the new room that we are in. It is opening ourselves up to the new things that God is presenting to us to help us look forward to the future unafraid.

And that is what the Apostle Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians. Listen to these

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 57-58)

words from chapter 5, verses 16-21. (READ 2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

Once more we have the progression of forgetting what lies behind, recognizing what is now, and reaching out to the future. Paul begins by saying, “*so from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view*” (2 Cor. 16). He’s saying that the old things are no longer in control of our lives, and that we must move on to no longer live for ourselves but to release the past. Whatever happened previously is no longer the guiding principles for our lives.

And Paul moves us from the past, into the present. “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone, the new is here!*” (2 Cor. 5:17). At this point we find that the past trespasses are released and the peace of the Lord can penetrate our lives and give us rest.

But he doesn’t let us stay in the present, with its temptation to return to the past. Paul encourages us to look onward, to the hope of the future. The past sins are forgiven, the new is come, and the future is now open up to us to find our relationship with the Lord once again. “*God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation*” (2 Cor. 5:19).

That is the progression that God has with us, forgiving us of our sin and freeing us from the wrongs we have committed in the past. And it is His way for us to deal with each other, forgiving each other’s sins against us, freeing us and them from the past, and then guiding us into reconciliation with each other.

Let me give you an example of what I mean in all of this. “Oil and water don’t mix. This concept is exemplified in any bottle of salad dressing where things have settled and the oil and water have separated.

“In order to bring that oil and water back together, the bottle must be shaken. However, the togetherness won’t last forever. As soon as the bottle sits for a while, the ingredients will separate again. They go back to their own department. They go back to separate bedrooms. They go back to separate seating places. They go back to separate communities. They go back because it is intrinsic to

their nature that they will not mix.” (The same thing happens when conflict brings hurt and pain. And the separation can remain permanent as we constantly remember the hurt or the pain and try to relive the past so that we can try to make it better, somehow. Or we can find a solution to the separation problem and find a creative way to initiate a mixing solution. Our willingness to release the past and work through the forgiveness process is the key factor.)

With that in mind, “mayonnaise does not have to be shaken even though it is also comprised mostly of oil and water. This is because mayonnaise also contains an emulsifier - eggs. An emulsifier is that which brings things together that otherwise could never come together. In mayonnaise, the egg brings together two entities that would not normally mix with one another. The egg infiltrates both so that they are able to come together and be a solid substance.

“The cross of Jesus Christ acts as an emulsifier to bring people together [who have become separated or hurt because of sin] - even those who would not normally come together.”⁴ Through the reconciliation of Jesus by His forgiveness of our sins, we can begin to firm up our own relationship with Him. But we can also then begin to work to forgive others of their sins and work alongside each other to bring reconciliation in our relationships with those who have hurt us. In so doing, we are creating a solid relationship that moves forward together, releasing the past and rejoicing in the possibilities of the future.

But that involves risking trust once again with the one who has wronged us. Venturing forward to rebuild a relationship involves risking trust in the other one. Trust is rebuilt only when a risk is taken to work toward the reconciliation of the relationship. “When one is aware that a desired outcome is dependent upon another’s behavior - and one stands to lose more than would be gained by success - yet risks the outcome into the other’s hands, trust is expressed.

“Our life is a series of trust ventures: [a reconciliation process involves] trust risked, risk rewarded, new trust ventured, and new risks taken. Living is a constant movement between the twin

⁴ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, pg. 244, #747)

tensions of trust and risk. As they go hand in hand, or they join hands in willing forgiveness, we grow”⁵ together once again and the new relationship develops, brought together by the love of Christ Jesus living within us.

As the Human emulsifier, Jesus first risked a renewed relationship with each one of us, and through His death on the cross has made forgiveness possible for our sins that separate us from God the Father. He gave His all for us in order that we might not have to pay for the cost of our sin. Jesus died our death, to bridge the gap between us and God, so that when we put our full trust in Him, as we risk a new relationship with God, we find complete forgiveness of our sins, and our past is released to create a brand new future.

And Jesus calls for us to do the same thing in the relationships that have brought us hurt, or pain, or injustice, so that by His grace infiltrating into each of our lives, we can solidify a new relationship with the other through Him. And it begins with our love for the other, seeing them as a valuable person in the eyes of God, and then releasing the past event that has caused the hurt or pain.

Let us humble ourselves before the Lord Jesus, so that He might enable us to give up looking in the rearview mirror at all the failures of the past, and begin to see the present and future possibilities that come through forgiveness and reconciliation with the other. Let’s pray

Father, we are so easily creatures of the past, who are stuck in remembering the events that have caused great harm to us. Yet that remembering only brings the pain back into our minds and lives again and again. Give us the courage today to see what You are already doing for us so that we might take our eyes off of the past, and begin to rejoice in the present. Then help us to practice forgiveness, and work toward the igniting of a new relationship as we release the past and hope for the future, risking trust once more in those whom we love. Help us to start again in developing a firm foundation of trust, first realizing Jesus’ example of bring us back together with You through His love, and then following His example in growing stronger in our relationship with the other wrongdoer who has brought us pain. Grant us the strength we need to walk with Jesus so that He might lead us into a loving commitment to one another as we release the wrongs of the past and live toward the future hope of being with You. This we pray in Jesus’ strong and powerful Name. Amen.

⁵ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 59)