

## Forgiveness is for me? (September 2011)

Growing up, I was steeped in the adage “forgive, forget and move on.” The Bible does encourage us to forgive. However it is not an easy thing to do when we have lost our innocence, our identity, our hope or our confidence.

Ephesians 4:31-32 admonishes us to “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger...every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.”

First, let me say that forgiving is **not** forgetting. To forgive means to “not hold accountable, to pardon, to absolve, to release a debt.” To forget means to “remove from memory, to overlook.” But it is impossible for us to forget a hurtful or traumatic event because our brains were designed (by God) to develop and hold memories.

In order to begin the process of forgiving, we must first grieve our loss. Depending on the severity of the loss, this may involve tears, yelling or even throwing things (in a safe manner, of course). I remember taking a hatchet to an old school desk, the initials of my abusers scored into the surface, and hacking it into small pieces of kindling. What a relief. That antique was of little importance compared to the losses I experienced as a child. I grieved without hurting anyone and made the point with myself. I mattered! What happened to me mattered!

In our ministry sessions we use a bird cage to model the impact of unforgiveness. We tell the person, “If you are trying to make someone pay for the fact that they hurt you, then you have to stand in front of the cage and hold the door shut so the offender cannot escape. If you turn loose, they will get away.”

It only takes a few minutes of holding the cage door shut for them to understand that they have also put themselves in prison—just on the outside of the door. They are stuck. They cannot move.

The idea that you can **make** someone accept responsibility for your pain (even though they may have inflicted the injury) is truly a fantasy. All too often the offender has already denied it or forgotten about it and flown the coop. So, again, who gets stuck? You, holding the door closed to an empty cage.

I recently saw a sign which read, “A plan without a goal is just a wish.” The goal of forgiveness is to release myself to be free to become more like Jesus Christ. If you desire to be free of the bondage of unforgiveness so that you can focus on being who you were created to be, then you have to make a plan to achieve that goal. You have to decide to forgive because of the freedom it brings to YOU.

These steps may take time, but if you:

1. Acknowledge the root of your pain—inflicted by others or by yourself.
2. Identify what was lost. What did you not receive that was owed to you?
3. Grieve your loss of innocence, hope, confidence, etc.
4. Understand that what was lost cannot be regained.
5. Release the debt.
6. Step away from owning the responsibility of trying to hold the one who hurt you in a cage.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean there will be reconciliation. Sometimes the circumstances do not merit maintaining a safe distance. Sometimes they do. You will have to make a decision about what is best for you. Ask the Lord.

How is forgiveness for YOU? Forgiveness sets you free to move into a place, emotionally and spiritually, where you can focus on being your true self rather than the one who must exact judgment on another person. After all, that is God's job. What a relief to be free of the burden of unforgiveness.

My new adage is “remember, grieve, forgive and embrace freedom.”