

Forgiveness: The Power That Heals

by Dick Innes, M.A.

Some years ago during a visit to Yellowstone Park, one writer observed that the only animal that the grizzly bear would share his food with was a skunk. It wasn't that the grizzly wanted to share his food but rather that he chose to. With one swing of his powerful paw he could have crushed the skunk. So why did he allow the skunk to eat with him?

Because he knew the high cost to getting even.

Clever bear!

Undoubtedly he learned the hard way. Strange that we humans often aren't as smart. Sometimes we carry grudges for years, often repressing them from conscious memory, and end up hurting ourselves more than the ones we would like to get even with. We fail to see how damaging an unforgiving spirit is.

In his book, *None of These Diseases*, Dr. S.I. McMillen says, "Medical science recognizes that emotions such as fear, sorrow, envy, resentment and hatred are responsible for the majority of our sicknesses. Estimates vary from 60 percent to nearly 100 percent."

I read one report of an astonished patient who was told by his doctor: "If you don't cut out your resentments, I may have to cut out a part of your intestinal tract."

Fortunately, the man took the doctor's advice. He had been nursing a bitter grudge against a former business partner. He went to see this man, resolved their differences, and forgave him. When he returned to the doctor, his physical condition had cleared up.

**“Not to forgive is to be
imprisoned by the past.”**

That advice isn't new of course. The greatest physician who ever lived, Jesus Christ, pointed out 2,000 years ago the importance of forgiveness. When he encouraged us to "forgive seventy times seven," he was thinking of our physical as much as our spiritual well-being. As Dr. McMillen says, he knew that a forgiving spirit would save us from "ulcerative colitis, toxic goiters, high blood pressure, and scores of other diseases" including ulcers, asthma, arthritis, neuro-dermatitis, and heart ailments—all possible effects of resentment.

Some time ago in an article in *Time*¹ inspired by Pope John Paul's forgiveness of his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, journalist Lance Morrow says that "the psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business.

"Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other's initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and

response, of outrage and revenge, tit for tat, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past."

But to forgive is to be free from the past.

Jesus Christ pointed out another disturbing truth about an unforgiving spirit when he said "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."²

I believe what Christ meant was that an unforgiving spirit on my part is a sure sign that I haven't truly shown remorse to God for all my failures nor experienced fully his forgiveness.

Furthermore, an unforgiving attitude is destructive to personal relationships. It goes without saying that many close relationships, especially marriage relationships, are destroyed not so much by what has been done but by what hasn't been done—forgiving one another.

Wherever I fail to forgive my brother, a wall of resentment builds up between us and eventually we become estranged. But once I forgive him for his offense towards me, we become close again and feelings of love are restored.

However, forgiveness needs to be genuine and not just a religious or sentimental act because it is "the right thing to do." If our forgiveness isn't genuine, resentment will poke its ugly head out at the most unexpected times—like when a couple get into an argument, they start dragging up events from the past that they still feel resentful about. Obviously those things haven't been forgiven. Forgiveness may not forget the past but it can bury it.

Forgiveness can be very difficult if we have been hurt deeply but how do we forgive someone when he doesn't even feel he has wronged us?

According to one author, Susan Jacoby, we can't. She feels that "real forgiveness cannot take place without an acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the part of the person who is chiefly responsible for causing pain."³

If this is so, some of us are going to carry grudges for a long, long time. True, when a person acknowledges his wrongdoing, that certainly makes forgiveness easier. But when he doesn't, which is often the case, forgiveness becomes a choice. We can choose to forgive or not to forgive.

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We need to realize, however, that forgiveness is essential perhaps not so much for the wrong that has happened to us, but because of our resentment towards the one who has wronged us. Lack of forgiveness is caused by this resentment—a mixture of hurt and anger. Therefore, to forgive genuinely, one needs to face and deal with his hurt and anger.

To resolve our hurt and anger, we need to be totally honest and admit exactly how we feel. Then we need to get these feelings off our chest-not by lashing out and hurting the other person, but by "speaking the truth in love,"⁴ or by writing out our feelings until they are completely dissipated.

To forgive another, however, is not to ignore justice. Pope John Paul forgave his would-be-assassin, but the man stayed in prison, and rightly so. And where we want others to forgive us, if we are genuine, we will want to do all in our power to make a just restitution.

When God forgives us, he does so on the basis of both his justice and his love. His justice required a just sentence and confirmed death as the penalty or price of man's sin. But his love paid that price when he gave his Son, Jesus Christ to die on the cross in our place as the just retribution for our sins and wrongs. Therefore, God can freely forgive us and not in any way violate his divine justice.

The important thing is that we respond to God's love and forgiveness by acknowledging our sin and wrongdoing and accepting his free pardon. And then, in appreciation to God for his forgiveness of us, let us freely forgive others as we ourselves have been so freely forgiven.⁵

Forgiveness frees and heals the forgiver. Have you been freed?

Notes:

1. *Time*, Jan. 9, 1984.
2. Matthew 6:14-15, (NIV).
3. *McCalls*, 1983.
4. Ephesians 4:15.
5. Colossians 3:12-13.

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