

Foundations Lesson #17

Forgiveness, Part 1

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he quotes Psalm 32 saying, "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:7-8). It's a **great** blessing to be forgiven by God, one he's freely bestowed upon all who have faith in Christ. But we are under obligation to give away what we have received.

Mt. 10:8b [Jesus speaking] Freely you have received, freely give.

So we must forgive others in the same way that God has forgiven us. As Ephesians 4:32 says,

Eph. 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

The standard of what we've received from the Lord is the same standard that he calls us to give away. We can appreciate how completely, how incredibly, how wonderfully God has forgiven us, but we also have to appreciate that what we've received from the Lord, we're required to pass on to others. God's forgiveness is at the same time both a great blessing and a great challenge. It's a great blessing because we get to receive it and live in the glorious freedom that comes from being so lavishly forgiven. But it's a great challenge because we're now called to exercise the same abundance, the same generosity, the same lavish blessing in our relationships to others.

QUOTE President Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners coming back into the Union of states after they had finally been defeated in a bloody civil war. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take dire vengeance upon them, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away."

Abraham Lincoln knew how to forgive. The first thing on our outline we want to study is the forgiveness of God, which is Roman Numeral number one. That's where it all starts. It starts with God. It starts with his nature.

QUOTES William Arthur Ward wrote, "We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive."
Someone has said, "Forgiveness is symbolized by the fragrance a plant gives off when it's trampled. Are you a rose or a stinkweed?"

Forgiveness is a part of God's nature; it's a part of who he is. It's hard to imagine, but the One who sits enthroned above the universe he created, the One with all power, all wisdom, and all knowledge, the immortal God who lives in inapproachable light and great glory – **he** has a heart that longs to forgive. He rejoices in every opportunity he gets to extend forgiveness. He doesn't extend his forgiveness capriciously or haphazardly, but he delights in every circumstance where he can legitimately extend forgiveness. **The Almighty** loves to pardon, and we see relentlessly throughout human history that he's gone to great extremes to do whatever needs to be done so that he can pardon.

I say this because we need to know God. We need to know who he is and what his ways are. But again, I also say this because we need to know who we are called to be. I'll be honest, I'm not nearly as forgiving as I need to be. The more God transforms me the more I become a forgiver, but I've got a **long** way to go. Maybe you do, too. I'd encourage you, when you see the huge gap

between your nature and the nature of God, please don't get discouraged. Be glad that he's perfect. Rejoice in his great goodness. But also realize that he's in the life-transformation business. No matter how far you or I have to go, he'll help us get there. Our job is to let him. As long as we provide him with zero resistance, we'll be just fine.

Ex. 34:6-7a And he [the LORD] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

He is a forgiving God! Hallelujah!

Ps. 86:5 You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.

Dan. 9:9 [Daniel is praying] The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;

Mic. 7:18 Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.

Then, there's an absolutely mind-boggling verse in Jeremiah chapter five where...

Jer. 5:1 [the LORD is speaking to Jeremiah, and he says:] "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.

God told Jeremiah that just **one person** was enough! In a great, great tragedy, one person who dealt honestly and sought the truth apparently couldn't be found. I say that because God ended up thoroughly demolishing the city. But on that occasion he was willing to forgive enormous sin for the sake of just one truly righteous person. To me, that's incredible. It shows us a part of the heart of God. So we see that forgiveness is part of God's nature, a part of his heart.

Then, under the old covenant, it was provided by the blood of sacrificed animals. Shortly after the first man and woman had fallen into sin, Scripture tells us that...

Gen. 3:21 The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

So here we have to ask the question, "Where did God get garments of skin from?" The answer is that, most likely, he got them from having sacrificed an innocent animal. It was the blood of an innocent, sacrificed animal that had to be shed so that sin could be forgiven. God loves to forgive, but he won't violate the requirements he's established **just because** he loves to forgive.

Lev. 4:20 and do with this bull just as he did with the bull for the sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.

There are many other verses listed on the outline which say similar things. You can look them up if you like. In each case, the blood of a sacrificial animal had to be shed in order for the sin to be forgiven. So that's how it was done under the Old Covenant.

Under the New Covenant, the New Testament, it's still innocent blood that has to be shed in order for sin to be forgiven. That hasn't changed. But now instead of the blood of lambs and bulls and goats, it's the blood of Jesus Christ that's been shed, once and for all. So Jesus has ushered in the New Covenant with his own blood. The Israelites understood that innocent blood had to be shed in order for sins to be forgiven. So when John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (that's John 1:29) they knew what he was talking about. It wasn't a mystery

to them. They understood John meant that Jesus was God's sacrifice, who by the shedding of his innocent blood would atone for the sin of the world.

Eph. 1:7 In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

Heb. 9:26-28 But now he [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Mt. 26:28 [Jesus speaking] This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Heb. 9:22b and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

So we can be very grateful to God for the wonderful and powerful provision he's made for us to have our sins forgiven through the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ. Next, let's look at the forgiveness of God modeled by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lk. 23:33-34a When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

That's a pretty incredible statement uttered by Jesus. He'd just been slandered, beaten, scourged, mocked, and crucified, even though he hadn't done the slightest thing wrong, yet the only thing coming out of his heart was, "Father, forgive them." Amazing. In order to get a better perspective on Christ's forgiveness, I need to read from Romans 12. Paul, the author of Romans, here says,

Ro. 12:17-21 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" [which, in that culture, was a sign of repentance]. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What's Paul telling us here? He's saying that if somebody wrongs you, forgive them. Treat them well. But while you're treating them well and forgiving them and not counting their sins against them, leave room for God's wrath, because God may want to deal with them. God's justice may demand that they suffer consequences for what they've done. On the other hand, God may want to be merciful to them. God is God. He does what is best 100% of the time, without fail. So for us, it's important to forgive, to treat our wrongdoers well, but it's OK to leave room for the possibility that God could exercise vengeance on them for what they've done.

Jesus goes one step further. He doesn't just say that **he's** forgiving those who were responsible for having him killed, he goes beyond that and asks the Father to forgive them. He asks the Father to wipe out the record of their offense in the books of heaven. I imagine God the Father did exactly what his Son requested. That means that, when those who were responsible for Jesus' death (like Judas Iscariot, members of the Sanhedrin, Pilate and perhaps a few others) would stand before the Judgment Throne of **The Almighty** to give an account of their lives, their sin of having had a part in killing the Son of God would not even be mentioned because it had been forgiven; because there was

no record in heaven of their having done that. So we see how profoundly Jesus sets the example by forgiving his enemies completely.

About three years later, Stephen was unjustly condemned to die just as his Lord had been. We see that Stephen followed the example of his master.

Ac. 7:59-60

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen did the same thing that Jesus had done. He was asking **God** not to hold the sin of his murderers against them. As difficult as it may be to do that, I believe it pleases **The Almighty**, because his heart is to forgive.

Then on our outline we see that God's forgiveness is received by those who turn to him.

Ps. 32:3-5

When I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. *Selah*

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

So when David, the author of Psalm 32, presents himself to God, acknowledging his sin, that's when God forgives. As we can see from these verses, it's not a good idea to give God the silent treatment, **especially** about our sin. I once saw a bumper sticker that said, "I'm always willing to be forgiven." We receive that forgiveness from God when we turn to him.

Mk. 4:11-12

He [Jesus] told them [his disciples], "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

Again, we see that the forgiveness of God is received by those who turn to him.

2Chr. 7:14

if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

1Jn. 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If we do the confessing, God will do the forgiving and the purifying. So if you, as a believer in Jesus Christ, have sinned and you want God to forgive that sin, all you need to do is confess that sin to God. Don't pretend it didn't happen. Don't make excuses, because God doesn't forgive excuses, he forgives sins. Don't minimize your wrongdoing by saying it wasn't that bad. Admit your guilt. Don't try to hide anything, because God already knows every detail of what you did. Confess your sin to the Lord. Admit your wrongdoing and ask for his pardon. That's how you receive the forgiveness of **The Almighty**.

One author relates the following incident:

STORY

A certain prophet had been gifted with revelatory insight into people's lives. During an evening service he ministered to a Presbyterian pastor and his wife. By the Spirit, he revealed the couple's past, uncovered their present situation and then disclosed to them what was to come. This work of God greatly impressed the couple, and as the prophecies were

fulfilled, one month later the Presbyterian minister brought two other pastors, each with their wives, to another service.

The second minister and his wife marveled at the accuracy and truth in the prophetic ministry, as did the husband of the third couple. Then the man of God turned to the third minister's wife. As he began to speak of her past, suddenly he stopped. Then he said, "There was a very serious sin in your past." The woman, with her worst fear seemingly coming upon her, turned pale and closed her eyes. The prophet continued, "And I asked the Lord, 'What was this sin that she committed'? The Lord answered, 'I do not remember!'"

Although many times this minister's wife had asked for cleansing, still she could not believe the depth of God's forgiveness. From everywhere but the prison of her own mind, her sin had been paid for and removed. And now, in his great mercy, God was removing it from there as well. [Holiness, Truth, and the Presence of God] by Francis Frangipane]

Is. 43:25 "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Heb. 8:12 For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

When God says that he'll remember our sins no more, it's not that he has a senior moment and his memory fails him. That never has happened and never will happen. He's simply letting us know that he'll never again count those sins against us. He won't even bring the matter up. The sin has been completely paid for by the blood of Christ, and because payment in full has been received by God, freedom in full should be received by us.

Ps. 103:12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

When God forgives, he forgives thoroughly, completely, with nothing left to pay. One preacher has said that when God forgives our sins he throws them into the sea of his forgetfulness and posts a sign at the shore that says, "No Fishing Allowed." We get ourselves into trouble when, after we've repented of our sin, we still **feel** guilty. We are not to live by our feelings, we are to live by faith. **God wants to be believed.** Let's not disappoint him and grieve him by wallowing in sin that he's forgiven.

Foundations Lesson #17

Forgiveness, Part 2

Roman Numeral number two on our outline covers the great need for believers to forgive. As we saw earlier, to whom much is given, much is required. So I'd like for us to turn to probably the most important passage of Scripture that deals with the subject of forgiveness – not only God's forgiveness but also our need to forgive. It's in Matthew's gospel, chapter 18, beginning with verse 21. It says,

Mt. 18:21-35 ²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

By the way, in the original Greek language, they would have used the same words to mean 70 times 7 (which would equal 490) or 77 times. Since it's unclear which is intended, some translations

render it one way, some the other way. Whichever way Jesus intended when he spoke this parable, I believe the truth being communicated is the same: Forgive so often that you lose count! Forgive without keeping a record. I believe that's his point. Continuing with verse 23, it says:

²³“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

³⁰“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³²“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵“***This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.***”

From the heart. It's not just a matter of how we behave towards those who've wronged us, it's a matter of our attitude on the inside. God knows every thought we have; he knows every attitude we have. He expects our forgiveness to be so complete that it's not just a matter of how we treat those who've done us wrong, it's even a matter of how we feel towards them.

So that we better understand this parable, I want to give some explanation about the amounts of debt that were incurred by the characters in the story. In the currency of the day, one denarius was equal to one day's wage paid to a common laborer. It was also the price of one sheep. One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii. So the first debt of ten thousand talents – mentioned in verse 24, the one forgiven by the king – was equal to 60,000,000 days' wages, or the price of 60,000,000 sheep. The second debt of a hundred denarii – mentioned in verse 28, the one which was not forgiven by the main character in the parable – was equal to 100 days' wages or the price of 100 sheep.

The debt of 10,000 talents which was forgiven by the king was so enormous, so overwhelmingly staggering, that no servant would ever have been able to pay it back. There was not even any **hope** of repayment. But the debt of 100 denarii, even though it was significant, could have been paid back. It would have required time; it would have required sacrifice, but at least it was possible. To gain a bit more insight into this story, Psalm 37 verse 21 gives a name to those who borrow and do not repay. It says,

Ps 37:21

The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously;

So Scripture defines those who borrow and do not repay as being wicked. In the light of all this information, the request made by the servant to his king: “Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything” is blatantly unrealistic. You might even say it's downright pathetic. And the servant's inability to pay would have defined him as a wicked man. The king, in an act of sheer mercy, generosity, and kindness forgives the debt and lets the servant go.

When the forgiven servant leaves the king's presence and finds a fellow servant who owes him a

hundred days' wages, the fellow servant makes exactly the same request: "Be patient with me and I will pay you back." Now that's a reasonable request. Again, it would have required time and sacrifice, but at least it was doable. The first servant's response to that request makes up the three most horrible words in this story: "But he refused."

With that background in mind, let's begin to make application of this story to our lives. Clearly, Jesus is wanting us to identify with the servant who's the main character in the parable, and God himself is portrayed as the king in the story. What's the main point of this parable? ***We need to forgive others.*** But the story can also be conveniently divided into three sections, each of which gives us a reason why we need to forgive.

So in verses 23-27, we must forgive others because of how lavishly God has forgiven us. The debt of 60,000,000 days' wages is a picture of the debt of our sin before ***The Almighty***. There's no way any of us could ever have repaid that debt. Even attempting to pay it back would be an exercise in sheer futility: can't be done; impossible; downright hopeless. If you thought you were a pretty good person before God saved you, you need to think again. You have no idea how holy God is and, compared to his great holiness, how sinful you've been. You'll never appreciate the riches of God's forgiveness until you appreciate the enormity of your debt of sin that he has forgiven.

SONG

He paid a debt he did not owe. I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. And now I sing a brand new song: Amazing Grace. Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.

Eph. 1:7-8

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Eph. 2:4-5

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Col. 3:13

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

The weight of sin that was credited to our account that we needed to repay but were incapable of repaying, that made us even more wicked because we couldn't repay it, that weight of sin was forgiven by ***The Almighty*** himself when we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. He canceled the debt. He let us go free. We must forgive others because of how lavishly God has forgiven us. To whom much is given, much is required.

Then we see in verses 28-31 that we must forgive others because of our testimony to the world. Who's upset in these verses? The other servants. The Scripture says they were "greatly distressed." Why were they distressed? Because the servant who'd been forgiven an insurmountable debt now refused to forgive a much, much smaller debt. The other servants were distressed because they somehow believed that what this man had received, he needed to give away; that what the king had done for him should serve as an example for him to live by. The other servants are a type of the people of this world. When we believers don't forgive, we act unlike the Great King we're supposed to be representing, and the people of this world are distressed. They know a hypocrite when they see one. They know when we're walking in God's ways and when we're not. If you or I hold grudges, keep a record of wrongs, and are unforgiving, and then think that our behavior won't distress the people of this world, we need to think again. Our testimony to the lost will be badly damaged by our ungodly behavior.

In the 16th chapter of the book of Acts, we read a story that shows us the importance of having a testimony of forgiveness. Beginning in verse 35 it says,

Ac. 16:35-40

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the

order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.

But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

On the surface of things, Paul's statement to the officers might seem like he was either proud or offended, but I don't think that was the case. The day before in court, the magistrates had ordered that Paul and Silas be stripped and beaten, which was highly illegal for the magistrates to have done, since both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. The problem was that the magistrates were unaware of their wrongdoing. Paul handled the situation in such a way that the magistrates learned of their grave error but, more importantly, they were also made aware of the mercy and forgiveness they received at the hands of ministers of Jesus Christ. Probably, Paul and Silas were hoping that the magistrates would remember the forgiveness they'd been shown and so in possible future court cases they'd be inclined to show kindness to the Christians in Philippi. Either way, we must forgive others because of our testimony to the world.

Then, going back to Matthew 18, we must forgive others because of what God will do. In the parable Jesus has given us, the master, the king, calls the first servant back in. He calls him wicked. He says, "You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" That's the issue. That's what Jesus is getting at. We need to have mercy on our fellow humans just as God has had mercy on us. To whom much is given, much is required. Freely we have received, freely we must give.

Then we see the horrible end encountered by the unforgiving servant as the master, the king, in anger turns that servant over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed, which is obviously for the rest of his miserable existence. Verse 35 is the key, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Jesus is a gentle lamb but he's also a roaring lion. God takes this thing called forgiveness **very** seriously. Let's read a few other Scriptures.

Mt. 6:14-15 [Jesus speaking] For 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.

Lk. 6:37 [Jesus speaking] "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Mk. 11:25 [Jesus speaking] And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

So we need to forgive others because of what God will do.
The Scripture also records some other teachings of Jesus on forgiveness.

Mt. 6:12 [Jesus teaching on prayer] Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Lk. 11:4 [Jesus teaching on prayer] Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation."

Lk. 17:3b-4 [Jesus speaking] “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.”

I also need to mention one man who gives us an amazing example of forgiveness – amazing because he lived long before Jesus taught on forgiveness or modeled forgiveness. He lived even before the Law of Moses was written. He forgave without the benefit of all the teaching we have from Scripture. Even though he suffered 13 years as a slave and a prisoner because of what was done to him unjustly, he forgave because it was in his heart to forgive. His name is Joseph, the 11th son of Jacob and great-grandson of Abraham.

Gen. 50:18-21 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him [Joseph]. “We are your slaves,” they said.

But Joseph said to them, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

What had Joseph's brothers done to him? When Joseph was about seventeen years old, his brothers had thrown him into an empty cistern. They were going to leave him there to die, but they changed their minds and sold him into slavery to some foreign merchants instead. More than twenty years later, when Joseph had become second-in-command of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world at the time, he had the authority to do whatever he wanted to his brothers. Instead of any retaliation, Joseph speaks kindly to them and lets them know that he'll continue to provide for them and their children. In the passage we just read, Joseph gives two reasons for extending forgiveness to his brothers. First, he realized that it was God's place, not his, to exercise any vengeance. He says to them, “Am I in the place of God?” Joseph understood that it was up to God, and only God, to execute judgment, so it wouldn't have been appropriate for him to do so. And secondly, he understood that in everything that happened to him, God had a plan.

So we need to learn something about forgiveness from this story. When somebody wrongs us, mistreats us, spitefully uses us, or does whatever else they might do, God has a plan – and his plans are **always** good. We choose where to place our focus. We can either fix our gaze on the bad things the **humans** are doing **to** us **in** the circumstance, or we can focus on the good things **God** is doing **for** us **through** the circumstance. We choose what we concentrate on, but our outlook determines our spiritual health. God only does good things – all the time. We need to believe that and look for that no matter what happens. Joseph saw what God was doing, and when we see what God's doing, it's much, much easier to forgive the terrible things humans may do to us.

Foundations Lesson #17

Forgiveness, Part 3

On our outline, Roman Numeral number three explains forgiveness so that we might better understand what it is and what it's not. Forgiveness is described as my surrendering any **right** and any **desire** to hurt someone else for hurting me, my choosing not to say or feel, “you owe me” because of what that person did. When we forgive, we pardon. We give up any resentment and any desire to punish the other person because of the pain they've inflicted on us.

In Christ, all of our rights have been nailed to the cross. All we have left are responsibilities.

When we accepted Christ into our lives, we accepted him not just as Savior, but also as Lord. Lord means he's our master. Lord means we serve **him** and do whatever **he** wants. That means we have no rights, we only have responsibilities. So when we feel like believing or saying to someone, "you owe me," we have to remind ourselves that God says not to do that and, therefore, we have to get our hearts purified because we have the responsibility of pleasing God. One author has said that forgiveness involves a positive attitude toward the offense rather than a negative attitude toward the offender. Forgiveness views the offender as an instrument in God's hand. And forgiveness recognizes that bitterness is assuming a right we do not have.

Let's say someone has stolen some money from you. If you were to choose not to forgive them, we could compare that to your locking them up in a jail cell. Every time they want something or act in a way you don't like, you remind them of their guilt; you remind them of the fact that they owe you. So you've got them right where you want them – behind bars. They're in bondage to you. You're holding the key to their jail cell in one hand and the evidence of their guilt in the other.

Then Jesus walks by. He wants you to unlock the cell and let them go free. He reminds you that you were in a jail cell when he met you, and he released you just because you asked him to. Then he wants you to give him the evidence of the other person's guilt you have in your hand. What are you going to do? If you choose to do what Jesus wants, you'll be far, far better off than if you make any other choice.

Now that we've taken a look at what forgiveness is, let's look at what it's not. Forgiveness is **not** making excuses for someone else's wrongdoing. Forgiveness is not saying, "Well, they were just having a bad day." They may very well have been having a bad day but that doesn't change the fact that what they did was wrong. Forgiveness is not a matter of calling wrong right. Forgiveness doesn't cover the offense with a coat of paint and then say, "Doesn't that look nice?" No. Genuine forgiveness acknowledges that genuine wrongdoing has taken place. It just chooses not to retaliate and to keep loving despite what was done.

Also, forgiveness is not a matter of denying the pain. It's not a matter of saying, "I'm not hurting," when actually I am. Denying reality does not bring us closer to God. Lifting our reality up to God and in faith asking him to change it does. Sometimes we even try to fool ourselves, but God knows exactly what's true and what's not. He cannot be fooled. Let's excel in being honest and transparent before **The Almighty** and before people.

I'd also like to point out that there can be a fine line between forgiveness and encouraging someone else's addictive or abusive behavior. If I let George borrow my car and he gets into an accident and totally destroys my car, and then he does the same thing a second time, when he asks to borrow my car for the third time I may say, "not until you can prove to me that you've learned to drive better." Now if I say that to him because I haven't really forgiven, then God isn't pleased. But if I'm saying it even though I have truly forgiven, and yet I feel George needs to learn to value other people's property, then I'm actually loving George enough to teach him responsibility. We have to remember that God doesn't always give us what we want, but he always gives us what we **need**, that which is **best for us**. If my not letting George borrow my car the third time is best for him, I'm actually treating him the way God would want me to treat him, even if he gets upset and accuses me of being unforgiving.

Then, if we've forgiven the offense against us, we won't curse it, nurse it, rehearse it, or reimburse it; we'll disperse it and let God reverse it. (By the way, that's not original. I got most of it from Marilyn Hickey – she's a lot more clever at using words that rhyme than I am.) There's a lot of truth in that sentence, so let's go over it carefully one word at a time.

When we've forgiven an offense, we won't curse it. What do we do when we curse something? We're angry. Perhaps we're fuming. We're churning on the inside. We're upset. We're vexed, chafed, and irked. And when we handle it like that we get results – absolutely we do. What kind of results do we get? We get things like ulcers, high blood pressure, or nervous disorders just to name a few.

But we also don't nurse it. When we nurse an offense, we stroke ourselves. We wallow in pity and tell ourselves how dreadfully we've been treated, how sorry people should feel for us, and how

miserable we have the right to feel because of what was done. Please remember, whenever you throw a pity party for yourself, the devil will bring the cake and the balloons.

Next, we don't rehearse it. What's playing in the theater of your mind? If you continue to rehearse the offense you'll never get over it. It's like picking a scab open again and again so it never has the chance to heal.

And we won't reimburse it. There's a famous line from a gangster movie where the head villain says, "I don't get mad. I get even." When we forgive an offense, we won't plot revenge; we won't try to get even. We won't want to do that because God has said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." As Christians, vengeance has never been a part of our job description. That only belongs to God.

We have to understand that we haven't been created, we haven't been designed, to carry unforgiveness. Just like a donkey can't carry a pickup truck on its back without collapsing under the weight of it, unforgiveness is a crushing load whether we realize it or not. If you're carrying unforgiveness, you are suffering the consequences. Unforgiveness is like a poison that's slowly killing us, destroying us from the inside out. We do ourselves great harm – spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically – when we choose not to forgive. The orientals have a saying, "The hand that smears another with mud must dirty itself first." We suffer the consequences when we choose not to forgive.

So what do we do with the offense? We disperse it and let God reverse it. Dispersing it means letting it go. We discipline ourselves to behave, think, and feel that the offense has been covered by the blood of Christ, so we're free to treat the offender as though they were completely innocent. And when we disperse the offense, God reverses it. Whether we realize it or not, our unforgiveness ties the hands of ***The Almighty***. I've seen it over and over and over again. So long as we hold the offender in the little jail cell we've created for them, God doesn't deal with them. When we try to do the job God has designed for himself, not us, to do, God backs off and lets us see exactly how ineffective our methods are. But once we do things God's way, he responds to our obedience by now working in the person who's caused the offense.

I have three testimonies I'd like to share.

testimony #1

In an oriental nation, a man walked into the pastor's office after a church service. He had a sharp dagger, and he told the pastor he was going to kill his wife, his father-in-law, his mother-in-law, and then he was going to commit suicide. When the pastor asked him why, he replied, "I am a dying man. I have incurable tuberculosis. I am constantly coughing. During the war, I was a bulldozer operator, working on the front lines risking my life to make bunkers and roads. I sent all the money I made to my wife, and when the war ended I barely had enough money to come home. But she had run away with another man, taking all my savings. When I begged her to come back to me, she adamantly refused."

The man did receive Christ as his savior, but he could not bring himself to forgive his wife. The pastor told him that the best way of forgiving his wife was for him to bless her. "Pray to God that He will open the door of heaven with blessings for her," he counseled.

The man flatly rejected that advice initially. But after more encouragement, he started to bless his wife, with clenched teeth at first. He prayed, "O God, I bless... my wife. Bless... her. And... give her salvation. O God, give her a blessing."

As he kept on blessing her in prayer, his heart changed. In less than a month he was completely healed of the incurable tuberculosis, and his countenance was transformed. He was praising God that through these circumstances he had found Jesus!

It's amazing what our bodies will do when our spirits are out of whack. When we have unforgiveness, anger, vengeance, hatred, or any other kind of bitterness in our spirit, we shouldn't be surprised at the physical maladies that will show up in our bodies. The second testimony is about...

testimony #2

A minister from the South who was teaching a large group of people on prayer. After he taught on "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," he encouraged

the people to forgive all those who had wronged them, and the whole congregation prayed a prayer of forgiveness. A woman testified that when she forgave, God immediately opened up her right ear, so that she could hear again. Months earlier at a sports stadium, someone had set off an air horn next to her ear, and since then she had been deaf in that ear. When she forgave that person, God healed her.

I love that testimony. No one prayed the prayer of faith for healing over her. No one anointed her with oil in the name of the Lord. No one laid hands on her. At the moment of her healing, **she** wasn't even asking God for healing. She just decided to obey God and forgive. It seems that God was so pleased with her decision that he decided to do a miracle for her.

testimony #3

In India there's a man named Yesu Paddam Bandela, whose name means "sitting at the feet of Jesus." He had just come home from the university as a young man and stepped into the prayer chapel where his father ministered. Although they had been there for many years, only 125 people had come to know Christ out of Hinduism.

His dad was praying for an Indian with a big turban on his head. Yesu Paddam Bandela stepped through the door in time to see this man reach under his shirt and pull out a knife. While Yesu's father was praying with his eyes closed, the man raised the knife and plunged it deep into the chest of the elder Bandela. Yesu could not stop the man because he was too far away. Yesu ran to his father. As he held him in his arms, the words he uttered were, "Yesu, you must forgive him," and then he died.

At the trial, Yesu sat on the witness stand and the judge said, "Is the murderer of your father in this room?" Yesu pointed to the man and said, "Yes sir, that is the man. He's the man who raised the knife and murdered my father." And then he said, "Your honor, my family and I have made a decision that we do not hold this man accountable for his deed. We forgive him on the wishes of our father and by our own desire. We forgive this man for what he's done."

The judge could not believe it. The courtroom sat stunned. Then the judge said, "Well, sir, you can forgive him but the state of India will hold him accountable to the minimum degree of the law." Twenty-four months later he was released from prison.

When he got out, the man raised the hand with which he'd murdered that man of God and with hand raised high, he boasted, saying, "With this hand I killed the father of Yesu Paddam Bandela." Those were the last words he spoke when his hand began to curl up, his arm pulled against his chest, his right side became paralyzed, and he fell over and died in the presence of the family of Yesu Paddam Bandela.

That incident spoke to the city of Figuwada, and a church with 125 people now has 40,000 members – 40,000 people who from every drop of one man's blood would find a cause and a rally cry to stand and say, "If he could forgive, we can forgive and we can be forgiven."

That story reminds us that until we let it go, God won't deal with it. God won't bring a miracle nor will he bring justice as long as you and I are holding onto the wheel. We have to let it go.

Foundations Lesson #17

Forgiveness, Part 4

Turning to page two of our outline, Roman Numeral number four deals with making sure true forgiveness has taken place. This section has been designed to be completely practical. Here you and I get to determine whether or not we've **really** forgiven. As we've already seen, there's a whole lot at stake. I don't know about you, but I've encountered many people over the years who **said** they had forgiven, but they actually hadn't. Maybe they knew it was the right thing to do in the eyes of God, so they claimed to have forgiven, but their demeanor and their attitude painted a whole different picture than the confession of their mouths. In our zeal to be right before God, we can even deceive ourselves, so let's take a very careful look at these five tests. They're here to help us.

1) Do you have a desire to bring it up again? or to talk about it? We can ask those questions because when God forgives you, he has no **desire** to bring up your past sins. We humans know what it is to exercise self-control. Maybe we feel like talking about something but we know it would be the wrong thing to do so we refrain. God's forgiveness isn't like that. When he forgives us, he does it **from the heart**, which is why he tells us that we have to forgive others from the heart. So if you still have that desire, that longing, that yearning to let the other person know how much they hurt you, to set the record straight, to point out their ungodly behavior, then you may have forgiven partially, but you still have a ways to go.

2) Can you remember the incident without any negative feelings? What about talking about it? Do you have any anger? resentment? revenge? Spiritual healing is taking place when the instant replay of our victimization is playing in the theater of our mind and we have lost interest in watching it. I imagine Joseph could have pictured the expressions on his brothers' faces when they threw him into the cistern, or when they sold him into slavery to the Ishmaelites. But that wasn't an issue to him any more. Why? Because God had a plan in bringing him to Egypt, and what was important to Joseph wasn't what his brothers did **to** him, it was what his God had done **for** him, bringing him to Egypt so that he could save most of the known world at the time from a deadly seven-year famine. Sometimes we don't really forgive, we just stuff our emotions lower so they don't bother us. But what's suppressed will eventually still come out.

It's also important not to dismiss unforgiveness because it's small. I've heard people say, "Oh, it's just a little grudge." The size doesn't matter. What matters is the condition of the heart. I've never heard people say, "Isn't that a cute little beastie? Isn't that snarl precious? Aren't those little fangs just adorable?" No. It's a beast. Kill it. If you don't, it'll grow up into a vicious, ferocious, destructive monster that will eat you alive. Deal with it. You'll be glad you did.

3) Can you thank God for the lessons learned in the pain?

Ro. 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Can you thank God for the good things he was doing for you in the midst of your suffering? If you don't know what those good things are, ask the Lord. He'll show you. We tend to focus on our pain, but as we submit ourselves to God, the pain, the trials of this life, have a way of transforming us into Christ-likeness better than just about anything else can.

Ro. 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

2Co. 4:17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Remember, God never wastes your tears. Whatever pain you suffer is producing in you an eternal glory that far outweighs the pain, and it's not even close. And we should also remember that God feels our pain more acutely than we do, because he is holier than we are. Everything that has ever happened on this earth first had to pass before the throne of **The Almighty** for approval before it could happen. That means every pain, every trial, every hardship you've ever faced had to pass before the throne of **The Almighty** for approval before it was allowed to come your way. There are a lot of trials and hardships that may want to come into your life, but God says no to **them**. Why? Because he only allows those that'll be of benefit to you. He does everything in your life for your good. So when God does say yes, there's always a purpose for his allowing those things. There's always good that will result. We need to thank God for all the good he does for us, in good times and in bad, in pleasure and in pain, in joys and in sorrows. If you can honestly say that you're grateful for the lessons learned in the pain, then you've already experienced one of the evidences of true forgiveness.

4) Have you accepted your part of the blame for what took place? Now I suppose it's possible that you were 99.9% innocent. Rarely, that does happen. But we tend to be much, much more sensitive to the pain we're **experiencing** than we are to the pain we're **causing**. When was the last time you intentionally thought about how it must have felt to be in the shoes of the other person? ...to be on the receiving end of what you had to say with the tone that you used? By nature, all of us are insensitive. We tend to think a lot more about me, me, me, me, me than we do about the other people that are involved. It takes work; it takes being intentional, to **become** sensitive.

I can remember a few incidents from my past that were terribly painful for me, but thinking about it years later I could see that 85% of the reason that I was treated so badly was because I'd been very insensitive. I didn't see that at the time and, unfortunately, I didn't even **try** to see that at the time. But if I'd made the effort to try to feel what the other person was feeling, the situation would have been healed much more quickly.

Many years ago after a church service, a man came up to me to get some advice. He informed me that he was experiencing relational conflict. When I asked him several questions, he admitted that it was 5% his fault, so I encouraged him to repent before God for what he had handled badly and then to go to the other party and apologize for what he had done wrong. He flat out told me that the other party needed to apologize first because it was 95% their fault. So I asked him, "Do you want to be right with God or don't you? God will never hold you responsible for what the other person did wrong, but you'll have to give account before **The Almighty** for every careless word **you** have ever spoken (Matthew 12:36). What kind of verdict do you want when you stand before God's judgment throne?" *He didn't like that answer.* Hopefully, after he left the church that night, he changed his mind and did what was best. Either way, all of us need to accept our part of the blame for what has happened.

5) Are you praying for those who hurt you? Do you have a desire to **bless** the offenders? Why do I ask that question? Because God wants to bless them. He's impartial in his love for people. If you're in the process of forgiving, I would encourage you to pray blessing over the people who've wronged you. Continue to pray blessing over them until you can do it wholeheartedly, joyfully, without hesitation or resentment.

When you go through these five tests to determine if you've really forgiven, the goal is **not** to feel good or bad at the outcome. That's not the issue. The issue is that we have to find out whether we're pleasing God or not. If we discover that we've come to the place of true forgiveness, we can be very grateful to God for having worked that grace into our hearts. We acknowledge his goodness to us and rejoice in the outcome. But if we find that we haven't forgiven, or we've only forgiven partially, we can still rejoice and we need to rejoice. Why? Because now at least we're aware of it. Let's remember, it's the truth that will set us free. If we discover the truth that we haven't really forgiven, now at least we can ask God to deal with what we know is inside of us.

So how do we handle unforgiveness when we discover it in our hearts? As I've said before, there's a part that belongs to God and there's a part that belongs to us. We cannot do God's part and he will not do our part. It's our responsibility to have the vision, the passion, and the commitment to

be totally free from unforgiveness. We need to hate what God hates and love what God loves. We need to be in agreement with God's heart. We need to feel as strongly about the sin of unforgiveness as God does, and we need to cry out to the Lord in our desperation, asking him to change us. He is in the life-transformation business. So our part is to desire, for all we're worth, to be free from the unforgiveness, thus pleasing God. God's part is to change us. We're totally incapable of changing ourselves. Just like a broken toy cannot fix itself, so also we sinful human beings cannot make ourselves holy. Only God can do that. So as we do our part and ask and trust God to do his part, he'll take care of business. He'll change us into people who've forgiven from the heart.

When I was in my twenties, I was in a situation that was extremely difficult and very painful. That situation lasted about a year and a half, and I was treated very badly by a small group of people. When I left that situation, I was committed to forgiving them, and indeed I had forgiven to the best of my knowledge and my ability. A few months later, I had to battle with unforgiveness all over again, so I prayed and trusted God until my heart was clear again. To my surprise, this kept on happening once or twice a year for the next 5 years. As I look back at that incident, I believe God was bringing me into complete forgiveness just like someone might peel an onion, one layer at a time. I don't claim to understand all the intricacies of the timing of God, but some matters require more time to heal than others. Our job is simple, though. **Whenever** we find that there's unforgiveness in our hearts, we have to let God deal with it. If we just do a really good job of submitting to **The Almighty**, he'll take care of everything else. Extending true forgiveness may not be easy, but it's always worth it. Amen. God bless you all.