

Urban Legends: Forgiving Means Forgetting
May 6, 2018
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Introduction

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34 NIV)

Matthew 6:14-15 tells us that we must forgive if we expect to receive forgiveness from our Father in heaven. But do we misconstrue this directive to assume the Bible commands us to forgive *and* forget? Perhaps because of how we’ve been raised or somehow emotionally guided by those around us we tend to believe “forgiving means forgetting”. But is that true or it is just a spiritual urban legend?

Digging Deeper

THE MYTH: Forgiving Means Forgetting

It is not AMNESIA.

- Forgiveness is possible (and necessary). But forgetting, well that’s where it gets tricky. If someone tries to say they’ve forgiven and forgotten, it’s possible they haven’t really forgiven. Perhaps we should say we will choose to no longer remember the offense. In the quick act of saying we will forget, we may not be fully processing the wrong that has been done or the long term damage it may have done. And acknowledging the wrong is essential to real forgiveness. Have you ever said to someone who has hurt you that “all was forgotten”? Was it really? Did the recollection of that wrong resurface at a later point and cause issues in your relationship?

It is not EXCUSING.

- Many times we will accept an excuse as some form of emotional payment for a transgression because we know “they’ve had a hard time of it” or “they don’t know what they’re doing because they are battling (x, y, or z).” And yes, maybe it pacifies some area of our brain to pass the blame of hurt off on the difficulties others have faced rather than deal with the fact that we ourselves have been hurt. But does that change the pain that you feel? Does that give the offender a get out of jail free card for future misconduct? No, we cannot make excuses for people or allow ourselves to continue to be subjected to abuse, but we can offer understanding. Are you guilty of trying to excuse the behavior of others based on their particular circumstances? How can we most effectively offer love and understanding to someone we believe hurts others due to their own brokenness or distance from God?

It is not DOWNPLAYING.

- Forgiveness is not cheap, and it does not excuse the harm that was inflicted upon us. But many people mistakenly buy into the premise that it is the “Christian thing to do” to help the offender feel better about the offense. Have you ever said to someone who hurt you “oh it’s ok” or “it’s no big deal, I’m fine”? Responses like that (especially in the face of an egregious hurt) are not generally authentic and do very little to mend the broken pieces. So the question becomes, how can we learn to acknowledge an apology without justifying it or excusing the offender from the

wrongdoing? If you have found the key to being able to forgive without downplaying the offense, has it helped with healing your hurts? Did this manner of response cause reconciliation or separation from the person who caused you harm?

THE TRUTH: Forgiving Means LETTING GO

It is STRONG.

- “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” — Mahatma Gandhi. Forgiveness is often misinterpreted as weakness. But it takes a mighty dose of strength to refuse to allow the misdeeds of others to occupy space in our hearts and minds. When we make the powerful choice to forgive we become free to fully realize the abundant life God has waiting for us beyond that hurt. Lack of forgiveness often manifests itself internally in the form of depression, bitterness and anger that can hold us back from living our best life. Have you struggled with an inability to forgive? How do you think it has impacted your mindset, behavior or even the people around you?

It is FAIR.

- You may be asking “How is forgiveness fair if the other person really hurt me and doesn’t even seem to care about it?” Maybe we would find greater peace if we could let go of the need we feel to act as judge and jury when it comes to making sure the scales are weighed evenly in all of our disputes. Have you ever considered forgiveness to be a gift we can give ourselves? It is a gift of freedom. By letting go of what is hurting us, we acknowledge the pain, rightfully place the burden of judgment in God’s hands and free ourselves to live in the present. How have you been set free in this way through an act of forgiveness? What did the experience teach you about the character of God?

It is GOD’S WAY.

- Read Matthew 6:14-15. Forgiveness is God’s way. We are blessed by God’s forgiveness so we can bless others with our forgiveness. But we will never experience the fullness of God’s blessing unless we make room for it by forgiving others. Have you ever been so stuck in a feeling of anger or bitterness towards someone that you could feel it blocking your ability to interact with them (and everyone) in a godly way? How did your knowledge of how God views forgiveness help you overcome this?

Conclusion

Lord, we pray that you strengthen us with the ability to give others what you so freely and graciously offer to us: forgiveness. We know that to live our best life for You, we must recognize the stronghold that bitterness and anger can have on our souls and how it distracts us from carrying out Your will for our lives. We know that forgiving does not always mean we forget what happened. We seek Your help in choosing to no longer remember the painful offenses inflicted by others in their brokenness because we too recognize the great need for forgiveness for our own acts of brokenness. Amen.

Be kind and loving to each other, and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ. (Ephesians 4:32 NCV)