



**Unit 3: Return the Favor**

**Sermon Series Title:** The Necessity of Forgiveness

**Sermon 2:** What Forgiving is Not

**Bible Passage:** Jeremiah 31:34; Luke 23:34; Matthew 5:39; Philippians 1:6

**Background/Context**

Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. She had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

"Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked.

John hesitated, then said, "Sure, for my sister."

As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, John watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence, "Doctor, when do I die?"

John thought that giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life.<sup>i</sup>

Forgiving is not easy. But I believe that many of us are like the little boy who was asked to give blood to his sister. Forgiving seems terribly difficult, if not impossible, because we don't understand what forgiving is and what it is not. The place for many of us to begin the process of forgiveness is freeing ourselves from a misunderstanding of what forgiving is not.

**A. Forgiving is Not Forgetting**  
**(Jer. 31:34)**

The old saying "forgive and forget" seems to be rooted in a beautiful verse of Scripture: "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin" (Jer. 31:34).

This is a wonderful truth about God, but we are not God. Forgiving does not give us immediate amnesia. When we choose to forgive, we do not erase the tapes of our minds and hearts, editing out all that was wrong. I have talked to many people who feel that they have failed to forgive because they cannot completely remove the wrongs of the past from their minds.

I believe that truth would be better expressed by the words, "Forgive and refocus." When I forgive, I am not saying that I can or should forget what has happened. I *am* saying that I make the decision to change the focus of my life—moving my attention away from the wrong that I have suffered. Remembering is important because God wants us to learn from what we've experienced and not repeat the same mistakes (see Phil. 3:16). Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is refocusing my life and relationships so that I can be free to receive the future God wants for me.

**Application Point:** When you seek to forgive, do you expect yourself to act as though hurtful experiences never happened? Have the words, “forgive and forget” made forgiving impossible for you? Would changing your approach to “forgive and refocus” make forgiving possible for you more often? Apply this truth to a hurt that is difficult for you to forgive.

## **B. Forgiveness Is Not Saying the Other Person Is Right (Luke 23:34)**

Some of us believe that forgiving is the same as waving a white flag of surrender and admitting that we were wrong, and the other person was right.

In Luke 23:34, we read the words that Jesus spoke at the very moment that He was being nailed to the cross. He said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." Jesus never said that His executioners were right in what they were doing. They could not have been more wrong. They crucified the sinless Son of God. Jesus did not assume guilt by forgiving His murderers.

And neither do we. We do not make another person right or ourselves wrong when we forgive. When we forgive, we show that something more important is at stake than who is right and who is wrong. The most important choice is whether we will remain shackled to the pain of the past or, by forgiving, be free to move forward into the future. Forgiving is not an admission of guilt; it is a decision to be free.

**Application Point:** Have you confused forgiving with an admission of guilt? Have you held on to some hurtful experiences because you wanted to stand up for your innocence? Do you understand that you can forgive without blaming yourself for the problem? What does Christ's example teach you about forgiving?

## **C. Forgiving Is Not Giving Up Control of Our Lives, But Reclaiming It (Matt. 5:39)**

One Sunday, I handcuffed myself to a young volunteer to illustrate what happens when we don't forgive. As long as I kept the boy a prisoner, unable to move about freely, I was a prisoner too. At the end of the children's sermon, my handcuff key wouldn't work. Had it not been for a kind policeman present, I would've spent the entire service handcuffed to a little boy!

Some of us don't forgive because we believe that forgiving those who hurt us give them control of our lives. In fact, just the opposite is true. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "If anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt. 5:39). If someone insults you by backhanding you across the face, you don't have to hit him back. You can show your attacker (and the world) that the love that is in your heart is stronger than the hatred in his hand.

When I forgive, I am not giving anyone else control of my life. When I forgive, I am reclaiming the control of my own life by freeing myself from a hating heart. When I forgive, I say, "You may have hurt me, but you won't control me."

**Application Point:** Have you hesitated to forgive because you fear that forgiving might give the person who hurt you more control over your life? Have you clung to your rage as your only defense against a powerful person? In Christ, you can release that pain and

take charge of your heart. You can prove that the love in your heart is stronger than the hurt you've suffered.

#### **D. Forgiving Is Not the Instant End of Pain (Phil. 1:6)**

First Baptist Church in Woodruff, South Carolina, has a beautiful bell in its steeple. On special occasions, a member of the staff named James would tug on the huge rope. The bell would begin to rock back and forth, and the sound could be heard all over the community. When James let go of the rope, the bell did not immediately stop ringing. It continued to ring slower and slower until finally it fell silent.

Forgiving begins with the decision to let go of the rope of resentment, but the bell of pain and sadness keeps ringing for a while. We need not expect forgiveness to end our pain instantly any more than we might expect surgery to end our discomfort instantly. We are not fair with others if we insist that they never hurt again after forgiving us. Forgiving is not the instant end of our pain. It is the beginning of the end of our pain.

While we heal from the pain of the past, we can cling to the promise of scripture. "I am sure of this, that He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." When we make the courageous choice to forgive, God will begin and, one day complete, His healing work.

**Application Point:** Have you felt disappointed that you forgave someone, but your pain did not suddenly end? Have you demanded that others immediately "get over" the mistakes for which they have forgiven you? Remind yourself that forgiving is just the beginning of the end of your pain. God will complete His good work in you.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert E. Coleman, *Written in Blood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1972), 28.