

INTRODUCTION

Can you relate to this? The caller on the Christian radio program goes on for what seems like eternity, listing the many ways her father wronged her, years earlier. The husband of an unfaithful, albeit remorseful, wife confides with tears to his counselor that it is impossible to ever trust his wife and open his heart to her again. The pastor in the wake of a church split wonders how on earth he will ever find the strength to apply what he has for years preached on forgiveness.

Not a Solo but a Choir

What is the common refrain from this chorus of pained voices? “Help! We can’t forgive!” We must admit that the struggle to forgive someone who has wronged us is universal. Indeed, the fight to forgive

is “common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13). The factory default mode of every person is to be “unmerciful” (Romans 1:31). Sadly, this gravity of grudges is common in Christian circles as well. Jay Adams sees this clearly and writes with great honesty,

Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of the Christian home and church running smoothly. In a world where even those who have been declared perfect in Christ sin, there is much to forgive. Christians who must work together closely find themselves denting each others' fenders, now and then taking out a taillight or two, and at times even having head-on collisions. Under such conditions, forgiveness is what keeps things from breaking down completely [emphasis added].¹

Non-Forgivers Pay a High Price

If you are struggling with forgiving someone in your life, you are not alone ... even in the family of

¹ Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1994), 7.

God, where believers are clearly encouraged to exist together in a culture of forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Yet you must not allow the frequency of this struggle to be your excuse for being a non-forgiver. When Christians don't forgive, *it costs too much*. Just take a moment and consider what non-forgivers leave in their wake:

- ▶ *Changed relationships.* They are never quite the same again, if left unreconciled. Proverbs is clear: "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a citadel" (18:19).
- ▶ *Destroyed friendships.* This goes one step further. Instead of merely changing the *feel* of a relationship, non-forgivers will often *cease to maintain* the relationship at all. It totally disappears from the map! There is no effort at contact, no concern for well-being, and no regret from the absence. You can count on it: "He who conceals a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends" (Proverbs 17:9).
- ▶ *Ministry casualties.* Sometimes the carnage of bitterness results in the break of a ministry

partnership. How ironic: ministries *united* around the gospel *divide*! Paul and Barnabas were not immune to this (Acts 15:36–41). The two ministry-minded women Euodia and Syntyche were not immune to this (Philippians 4:2–3). Neither are we.

- ▶ *Personal isolation.* Getting burned one too many times can find us running to a quiet room and a dark corner. You don't want to be around people anymore because they may hurt you again. Your *trust* in others is gone. You look with suspicion at people in your past, mistrust people in your present, and are cynical about people in the future. Just remember, though, that being alone is never safe (Proverbs 18:1).
- ▶ *Withered fruit.* If you choose to be a non-forgiver, you will also pay the high price of stalling your growth into Christlikeness. Every believer enjoys the indwelling presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9–11; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Spirit leaves an incredible footprint in each believer's life—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). However, a non-forgiver stands *against* what the Spirit is working toward in his or her life.

- ▶ *Untamed tongues.* You might be the *nicest* person in the church lobby on Sunday, but if you refuse to forgive someone, you are the *most violent* person in the church lobby. Jesus said that violence starts in the heart with hatred (Matthew 5:21–22). Gossip and slander are birthed in bitterness.
- ▶ *Unattractive witness.* All of the above yield in non-forgivers fruit that is inconsistent with the gospel's work in their lives as believers. This was Paul's concern as he deployed a church member to reconcile the two ladies in the Philippian church. He wrote, "I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3).

Read through the list again: changed relationships, destroyed friendships, ministry casualties, personal isolation, withered fruit, untamed tongues, and unattractive witness. This is serious stuff! It's serious enough to do something about it. Life is too short. The gospel is too powerful. God's glory is too important to be content with anything less than forgiveness.

Get Packed

This is why I want to invite you to take a trip with me. With our traction strong in the text of Matthew 18, I want us to walk the “Pathway to Forgiveness” with Jesus. There are five stops on our journey:

- Stop 1: Admit your hesitancy
- Stop 2: Remember your story
- Stop 3: Guard your heart
- Stop 4: Fear your Lord
- Stop 5: Enact your forgiveness

I don't know who has wronged you. I don't know how far you must go to forgive someone. But I do know the way you will travel to get there. It's the same pathway our Lord outlined for his disciple Peter. It is timeless. It is sufficient. It is freeing. Here's my promise to you: if you complete this journey, you will find fresh resolve and abundant grace to be the forgiving disciple that Jesus Christ desires.

So let's begin our trip. Forgiving an offender in your life will be our final destination. Matthew 18 will serve as our GPS. Bring coffee.