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WE TALK GLIBLY ABOUT FORGIVING
WHEN WE HAVE NEVER BEEN INJURED;
WHEN WE ARE INJURED WE KNOW
THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE, APART FROM GOD'S GRACE,
FOR ONE HUMAN BEING TO FORGIVE ANOTHER.

—*OSWALD CHAMBERS*

WALKING WOUNDED

A friend told me as I was working on this book, “I don’t really relate to this subject—I just don’t struggle with bitterness or unforgiveness.”

While that may be true for a few, I’ve come to believe that, whether they realize it or not, unforgiveness is, in fact, a very real issue for *most* people. Almost everyone has someone (or ones) they haven’t forgiven.

I’ve seen it confirmed over and over again. For many years, whenever I have spoken on this subject, after defining and describing forgiveness from a biblical perspective, I have asked the audience this question: “How many of you would be honest enough to admit that there is a root of bitterness in your heart—that there are one or more people in your life—past or present—that you’ve never forgiven?”

I have asked for a response from tens of thousands of people, including longtime believers, Bible study leaders, and vocational Christian workers. It doesn’t matter what the setting is or who’s in the audience. In virtually every case, somewhere between 80 and 95 percent of the hands in the room have been raised.

It still affects me profoundly to think that the vast majority of

people sitting in church Sunday after Sunday (and many who are sitting at home, having left the church, disillusioned) have at least a seed—if not a forest—of unforgiveness in their heart.

In many cases, those raised hands reveal hearts that are still wounded, still bleeding, still suffering, still hearing the words, still seeing the offenses, still having a hard time getting over what happened.

In other cases, the hands represent hearts that have been anesthetized; they have become indifferent or detached, perhaps putting up walls to keep from getting hurt again.

Whatever the story behind each hand raised, I am convinced that unforgiveness in the hearts of God's people is not the exception—it has become the *norm* for most. They may have learned to live with it. They may be “coping.” They may mask it with laughter or bury it with busyness. But when they get honest with themselves and God, they are not free.

So while I'm well aware that there are other good books and resources available on this subject . . . I keep seeing that sea of raised hands. People just like you. I keep thinking of the eyes I've looked into and the stories I've heard from tormented—or jaded—hearts. More important, I keep thinking about how different people's lives can be once the walls are broken down, once they choose the pathway of forgiveness and are set free from the prison of hurt and bitterness.

Deep Slices of Life

We can't talk about forgiveness without acknowledging the reality of pain. If we were never hurt, there would be no need for forgiveness.

Truly, we are a generation of wounded people. And wounded people tend to wound other people. (You may have heard it said that the most dangerous animal in the forest is the one that's been wounded.) Just look around at all the violence and dysfunction. From road rage to racial tension. Peaceful protests morphing into seething riots. Kids walking into schools with guns and blowing people's heads off. Where does it all come from? More often than not, it is the result of harbored hurt and smoldering bitterness that has turned to anger, hatred, revenge, and violence.

When I speak of hurt, what comes to your mind?

You may have been forced to endure a childhood of sexual abuse. Perhaps it was a brother, a relative, or an older friend you trusted. Maybe it was your own father who used you to meet some twisted desire in his heart. Perhaps you're still trying to overcome haunting memories and the shame and anger that accompany them.

Maybe the abuse wasn't as much physical as it was emotional and manipulative. Perhaps the dysfunction in your home played itself out in ways that have complicated and convoluted nearly all your relationships ever since, and you've never stopped blaming your mom or your dad or your grandparents—somebody!—for giving you such a poor start to life.

*Is the ugly
residue of hurt
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was no?*

It could be a husband who is habitually distant and inexpressive, a mate whose priorities have never really been on the same page as yours, who regularly forgets or ignores things that matter to you.

It could be a sister or brother who's quibbled with you over both important and petty family matters. It's made your adult relationship with that sibling

strained and superficial, turning almost every holiday or family gathering into an awkward chore, another opportunity for taking sides and enduring insults.

Perhaps it's a new management player in the company you work for who has made you feel unvalued and marginalized. Perhaps it's a son-in-law who's brought pain into your daughter's life or has poisoned your relationship with your grandchildren. Or a pastor who broke trust with your whole fellowship by entering into an adulterous affair, making your church more soap opera than sanctuary. Or perhaps it's the "other woman" who through whatever circumstances became an interloper in your marriage, and now your anger and resentment toward both of them has infected your thoughts, your attitudes, and your daily routine.

Or if it's none of these . . . it's something. Someone. Some

situation that rears its head with painful frequency and brings all the emotions flooding back in like a torrent.

It's left you with a heart that often feels like it's tied up in knots. It seems like you're constantly at war, always on guard against an onslaught of conflicting feelings.

It's interrupted the free flow of worship and sweetness you used to experience in your relationship with God. You miss it. You miss Him. It's like going around each day with a low-grade fever—if not a dangerously high one! It's changed everything the word “normal” used to mean in your life.

The question is: *Do those wounds—past or present—have to define who you are, where you're headed, and how you get there?* Is the ugly residue of hurt just your lot in life?

And would you really believe it if the answer was no?

If You Only Knew

Matters that require forgiveness tend to hit us right where we live. They rarely play fair and can come with little or no warning. And though they may be similar to what others have experienced, they often raise their own set of tough questions.

For example:

What do you do when the problem is not simply an old wound from the past but one that's continually being opened and re-injured? How do you handle it when the activity that led you into your current state of anger and bitterness isn't a distant memory

but rather an ongoing occurrence (as a friend asked me just yesterday)?

Or how do you simultaneously forgive someone while also bearing the responsibility of protecting yourself—perhaps even your children—from the danger this person poses to you?

How do you deal with the sights and sounds, the flashbacks that crop up out of nowhere, the markers and anniversaries that continually roll around or unsheathe themselves at random times of day?

What about when your anger is focused not against a person who did something to *you* but against someone who has harmed a person you love? Should it not bring out the mother bear in you when your son is bullied at school, or your daughter is mistreated by other girls, or your husband is backstabbed by an unscrupulous coworker?

How do you forgive the white boy who spewed racial slurs at your black son on the soccer field when a complicated, painful fissure around this issue extends far back into past generations?

What about the guy who talked of marriage, who seemed like the man God wanted in your life, but in the end walked away, playing lightly with your heart? How do you deal with the damage he left in his wake?

Where do you even begin to forgive your wife, who's seemed to have become a whole other person in the past year, who's giving you every indication that she's enjoying the advances of another man and doesn't really seem to care what you think about it?

How do you respond to the person who writes,

Trouble has come upon my family. Where there should be love there is hatred, and where there should be compassion there is sorrow and fighting and arguing.

Or this one:

Please, please pray for my family. I am at the end of my rope with all the anger and unforgiveness and hatred in my family.

Truly, these are God-sized wounds that need God-sized answers. No formulaic words, no wave of a wand will put things back like they were. We can't press the "UNDO" button and hope to see our lives returned to the way we once knew them or the way we hoped they would turn out.

When the pain is this close, when the wound is this tender, when the offense is this obvious, how do we forgive?

Painful Realities

I want to begin sorting through these questions by just letting this one expectation settle in around us, as basic and obvious as it may seem:

Everyone will get hurt.

It's a fact of life. Pain is unavoidable in this fallen world. You

will be hurt, wronged, and offended by others. There's no way around it.

“You will have suffering in this world,” Jesus assured His anxious, bewildered followers (John 16:33 CSB), much as Paul would remind his young charge, Timothy, at a later time: “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). So the issue is not whether we're being particularly godly or not. For while obedience does bring its share of eternal blessing, it is equally true that problems and pain can and will rain down on the best of us—sometimes harder on Christians than others.

True, one person's experiences will differ from another's by specifics and degree. Some will experience pain that's far worse than that of others. But the fact remains universal that all of us will suffer harm of some kind . . . likely many times along the way. We will all encounter situations that provide fertile ground for resentment and unforgiveness to take root and bloom in our hearts.

That much is obvious. No disagreement there. But I want to challenge you to consider another observation that may not be quite so easy to accept:

The outcome of our lives is not determined by what happens to us but by how we respond to what happens to us.

Did you get that? The outcome of your life and mine—who we are, how we function, our personal well-being, our future, our relationships, our usefulness—none of that is ultimately determined

by anything that anyone has done or could do to hurt us.

Of course, we will be *affected* by the circumstances that form the backdrop of our lives. They will carve grooves into our hearts that will always be part of our experience. But those circumstances, horrendous as they may be, do not have the power to *control* the outcome of our lives.

As long as we believe that our happiness and well-being are determined by what happens to us, we will always be *victims*, because so much of what happens to us is beyond our control. There's no possibility of hope in that perspective—we can never be different, never be whole, never be free. To greater or lesser degrees (depending on how we have been treated or mistreated) when we place our identity in victimhood, we will always think of ourselves as damaged goods, destined to be dysfunctional people in a dysfunctional world.

We simply don't have any choice about many of the things that happen to us. Our only hope lies in realizing that we *do* have a choice about how we *respond* to life's circumstances—and it is those responses that determine the outcome of our lives.

Now that may not sound like good news to you. “You're telling me that *I'm* responsible for how I respond, no matter what

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someone else has done to me? That puts the burden back on *me*—what kind of encouragement is that?”

But to whatever extent you may have been imprisoned by your response to wounds inflicted on you by others, I assure you that embracing this truth is the starting place in your journey to freedom.

When we as God’s children realize that His grace is sufficient for every situation, that by the power of His indwelling Spirit we have the ability to respond with grace and forgiveness to those who have sinned against us—at that point we are no longer victims. We are free to rise above whatever may have been done to us, to grow through it, and to become instruments of grace, reconciliation, and redemption in the lives of other hurting people and even in the lives of our offenders.

Yes, we can be free—if we choose to be.

Keeping Count

There are essentially two ways of responding to life’s hurts and unfair experiences. Every time we get hurt, we choose to respond in one of these two ways.

The first, natural response is to become a *debt collector*. We set out to make the offender pay for what he has done. We may be overt or subtle, but until we get a satisfactory apology, until we determine that an adequate penalty has been paid, we intend on keeping the wrongdoer in debtors’ prison; we reserve the right to punish them for their transgression. This is the pathway of

resentment and retaliation—getting even, exacting payment for what they did.

Instead of releasing our grip on the offenses we've received and letting God be the one (the *only* one) who's big and strong enough to handle the problem in His perfect, just, and redemptive way, we grab hold of the hurt and refuse to let it go. We hold our offender hostage (or so we imagine).

Think Esau and Jacob. A birthright deceptively stolen. The lifelong expectation of opportunity and prosperity finally within Esau's grasp, but now—by a trick, a conspiracy worked up by a mother playing favorites—Esau's rightful pathway to a father's blessing is wildly derailed at the last minute.

“*So Esau held a grudge* against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob’” (Genesis 27:41 NASB). He was storing it up, biding his time, intent on getting his revenge . . . and then some.

But the problem is that being a “debt collector” does more than keep our offender in debtors' prison; it puts *us* in prison.

A colleague passed on to me a heartrending story he had heard a woman share with her church family, as the Lord was revealing her need to choose the pathway of forgiveness. Decades ago when this woman was a young girl, she and a little friend of hers in their small town went out one day to see the county sheriff, whose office happened to be in the same building as the town jail. The children had always considered the man to be their friend, the nice person with the uniform and the badge who was just fun to be around.

At some point in the afternoon, her girlfriend ran off to play, leaving her alone with the sheriff in his office. Suddenly, the look on his face began making her uncomfortable. The feel of the room became strangely tense and frightening. He moved close to her and whisperingly said, “If you ever tell your parents what I’m about to do to you”—pointing to the iron bars behind him—“I’ll put you in one of those jail cells.”

And with that, he proceeded to molest her.

The events of that day had occurred many years in the past by the time, as a grown woman, she finally told the story of how the man she thought was a trusted friend had shattered her childhood innocence. Thinking back to what the sheriff had said about locking her up if she were to report him to her mom or dad, she said, “I realize now that in my heart I put *him* in a ‘jail cell’ that day, and all these years I’ve kept him in that prison.”

When God finally opened her eyes to see what unforgiveness was actually doing to her (and to her marriage), she realized something else: on that day so many years ago, she had put *herself* in jail as well. And though the man was now long dead, unforgiveness and bitterness had kept her locked there—in a cell of her own making—for all those years.

Was it her fault for being taken advantage of by an authority figure? Of course not. That cannot be said strongly enough. But who had been hurt the most by her unforgiveness? And why should she be in “jail” for a crime someone else had committed?

Debt collecting is the natural response of sinful humans to

being harmed, abused, or mistreated. Invariably it produces the bitter fruit of deeper pain, resentment, and bondage.

But there is another way. A better way. God's way.

Letting Go

As an alternative to being debt collectors—the pathway of resentment and retaliation—God calls us to the pure, powerful choice of forgiveness—and to pursue, wherever possible, the pathway of restoration and reconciliation.

Actually, this is not presented in Scripture as an option. “As the Lord has forgiven you,” Paul writes in Colossians 3:13, “so you also must forgive.” There’s not a lot of gray area or wiggle room in there.

The Lord Himself was equally clear and direct: “Whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him” (Mark 11:25 NKJV). “*Anything* against *anyone*.” That pretty much covers the bases, doesn’t it! No offense is too great, no offender is beyond the boundary to which our forgiveness must extend. Our fellowship with God requires it and depends on it.

So if we as believers persist in unforgiveness, our hearts are forced to wrestle with the fact that our actions amount to disobedience. Forgiveness is not a take-or-leave option that only a super-Christian should be expected to take.

Yes, it’s unnatural. It’s supernatural. At times it’s almost unbelievable.

Ask the surgeon whose medical mistake cost my friend

“Heidi’s” mother her life. She had been rushed to the hospital with chest pains, yet was still visibly bright and alert when tests revealed that she had indeed suffered a mild heart attack. After a quick evaluation among a small group of doctors on staff, it was decided that an angioplasty procedure would be the best route for opening up the perceived blockage in her arteries.

She was immediately wheeled into surgery. Everyone expected her to be fine.

But sometime during the operation, the doctor inflated the balloon apparatus too quickly, too early. Her damaged heart began to fail irreparably, and she sank into a coma.

She died three hours later.

Heidi’s father was inconsolable. His wife of forty-two years—a marriage he had treasured with an intense love and loyalty greater than most—had been taken from him in a matter of moments for no good reason because of a surgeon’s goof-up.

The days that followed were almost too painful for Heidi to bear. Her kind, gentle father was transforming into a cyclone of anger, grief, despair . . . revenge! Unrelenting in his rage, tormented by his broken heart, he declared himself on a mission to “bring down that hospital!” Demanding a meeting with the hospital administration and the doctors responsible for his wife’s care, he vowed to face them and tell them that he was suing them all for everything they had . . . and living to see them suffer.

As the hospital staff and physicians anxiously awaited the arrival of Heidi’s dad for the confrontation, they trembled at the

thought of what they expected to hear. Nothing could have prepared them for what happened next.

On his way to the meeting, Heidi's dad began to realize that if he ever wanted to be free from this dungeon of anger and bitterness in which he found himself, he would have to do what God had done for him. He would have to forgive.

To the amazement of everyone in the room, as he walked through the door that day, he walked directly over to the man whose misjudgment had ended his dear one's life, extended his hand to him, and said, "The only way I'm going to be able to live with any peace the remainder of my life is to forgive you."

The people in the room sat stunned. The doctor began to weep. For what seemed like forever, he couldn't even let go of the hand of the man who had relinquished his right to retaliate.

Two people walked out of that conference room as free men that day—but none freer than the one who offered the release, the one who did the forgiving.

Like Drinking Poison

Again, nothing about forgiveness is easy. There's no question about that. It's hard to think about. It's hard to do. It's hard to keep doing. But if we could somehow back away from our own situation long enough, out where we could see it more clearly, where the wounds and the scars didn't hurt us every time we turned a certain way or made a sudden movement, we'd see something else.

We'd see that not forgiving only makes it worse.

Rudy Tomjanovich was a four-time NBA All-Star who appeared to be off to another award-winning season in 1977. This was supposed to be the year when his Houston Rockets team was poised to make a run at the title.

On the night of December 9, the Rockets were at the Forum in Los Angeles to play the hometown Lakers. The score was tied, and the second half was just beginning when a scuffle occurred between two of the players near midcourt. Tomjanovich, who was some distance away from the fighting when he first noticed it, began running at a full sprint to come to his teammate's defense.

One of the players involved in the fight, Kermit Washington, remembers catching sight of a quick, red blur out of the corner of his eye—Tomjanovich's red jersey—coming up fast behind him. Wheeling around, he pile-drove his fist into Rudy's face, sending him sprawling backward, the back of his head hitting hard against the floor.

In what has now become known to avid basketball fans as merely "the punch," Tomjanovich lay motionless for several seconds, totally knocked out. In fact, the combination of the swing catching Rudy in full forward motion was likened by doctors to a pair of locomotives colliding at top speed. His injuries resembled those of a person smashing into a windshield at 50 mph.

This wasn't just a bloody nose. (In fact, his wife gets upset even today when someone refers to her husband's injury as a broken nose. "The only thing on his face that *wasn't* broken," she says, "was his nose.") His entire skull had been knocked out of

line. His jaws no longer fit together correctly. Even his tear ducts had collapsed.

He had almost been killed.

The next season—five reconstructive surgeries later—Rudy tried to come back and play the game he loved. But only briefly did he rise to the level of performance he had attained before the split-second events of that single night. He retired shortly thereafter, realizing his skills had been compromised, not wanting to relocate his family to another city just to try extending his playing days a little while longer.

It had happened so fast, with hardly any warning. One day, his idea of “normal” had been the competitive life of a professional athlete. The next, it meant lying for hours in an ICU ward, not sure if he would live or die.

What put him there wasn't really intentional. Something sparked, one thing led to another, a situation just spun out of control. It happens like that sometimes, doesn't it? You can probably think of an event in your own life when things got heated, the pot began to boil over, and the next thing you knew . . . the damage had been done. There was no going back. The things that were said, the things that occurred—they forever changed your life.

*ONE DEFINITION OF
UNFORGIVENESS:*

*“Like drinking
poison and hoping
someone else
would die.”*

But when asked if he had forgiven Kermit Washington for the punch that ruined his playing career, Rudy responded, “Someone once told me that hating Kermit would be like taking poison and hoping someone else would die. I’ve always tried to remember that.”¹

Like drinking poison and hoping someone else would die. That’s a powerful word picture for what unforgiveness is like in the human heart. Though it may feel right, though it may seem justified, though it may appear to be the only option available to us, it is destructive and deadly to the one who drinks it. The very weapon we use to inflict pain on our offender becomes a sword turned inward on ourselves, doing far more damage to us—and to those who love us—than to those who have hurt us.

Finding Freedom

I realize that this journey into forgiveness may require you to delve into areas of your life that are sensitive and still hot to the touch. But I am also aware that our natural way of handling these hurts only results in keeping them sore and inflamed.

It is God’s way—and His way alone—that holds out any hope of healing and rescue from the inevitable troubles of life that we face.

It was no idle promise or wishful thinking for Jesus to say, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). To choose forgiveness and to walk in His truth is God’s prescribed pathway—your journey to freedom.

And only those who walk it will find out.

Making It Personal

- ✿ Is there a person or circumstance you have blamed for the way your life has turned out? How could accepting responsibility for your response to that person or situation set you free?
- ✿ Is there someone who has wronged you that you're still trying to make pay for their offense? How have you tried to exact payment from them? What is holding you back from forgiving that person, releasing them from their debt?
- ✿ Can you think of a situation where you retaliated or became resentful, rather than forgiving someone who hurt you? What were the results? How was your relationship with that person affected? How did your response change you? How did it affect your relationship with God?