

Forgiveness & Freedom

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

Forgiveness and Freedom

The dictionary defines “**forgiveness**” as 1) give up the wish to punish, not have hard feelings at or toward someone, and 2) give up all claim to; not demand payment for. 3) restore the relationship to its previous state.

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.....If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:32,36).

“Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30)

“Forgive him? Are you kidding? After what he has done to me? I can never forgive him!”

“Forgive me? How could God forgive me? You don’t know what I have done.”

“How could I have done such an awful thing? I can never forgive myself.”

These are the confessions I hear every day as a pastor. Confessions from people who have grown up in churches, grown up with godly parents, *and yet* grown up without ever fully understanding God’s forgiveness and its intended effect on every level of their lives.

The tragedy of all this is the *bondage* people find themselves in when they do not grasp the immensity of God’s forgiveness. Allow me to numerate **4 different types of bondage’s** that they find themselves in **as a result of not understanding God’s forgiveness.**

1) It is a bondage that stifles their ability to love and accept those they know in their hearts most deserve their love.

2) It is a bondage that cripples marriages from their outset.

3) It is a bondage that is often passed from generation to generation.

4) It is a bondage that chokes out the abundant life Christ promised to those who would believe.

That is why I felt compelled to share this message on forgiveness. Only by truly understanding God’s forgiveness and making it a part of their lives will people be delivered from this bondage. Only then will they be able to live the Christian life to its fullest.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is “the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you.” For example, a debt is forgiven when you free your debtor of his obligation to pay back what he owes you.

Forgiveness then involves three elements:

1) injury,

2) a debt resulting from the injury,

3) and, a cancellation of the debt.

All three elements are essential if forgiveness is to take place. **Before we look in more detail at this process, however, we need to trace the sequence of events that lead to bondage when this process is abandoned.** This is important because I believe most people who suffer from an unforgiving spirit do not know that unforgiveness is the root of their problem.

All they know is that they just “can’t stand” to be around certain people.

- 1) They find themselves wanting to strike out at people when certain subjects are discussed.
- 2) They feel uncomfortable around certain personality types.
- 3) They lose their temper over little things.
- 4) They constantly struggle with guilt over sins committed in the past.
- 5) They can’t get away from the ambivalence of hating the ones they know they should love the most.

Such feelings and behavior patterns often indicate that people have not come to grips with forgiveness of God and the implications of that forgiveness.

TAKING HOSTAGES

We are all painfully aware of what it means for somebody to be taken **hostage**. We are outraged when the news of such an atrocity reaches us. **And yet when we refuse to forgive others (or ourselves, for that matter), there is a sense in which we hold them hostage.** Let me explain.

When a person is taken hostage on the international scene, the abductors usually want something. It may be:

- 1) **money**
- 2) **weapons, or**
- 3) **the release of prisoners.**

The message they send, in essence is, **“If you give us what we want, we will give you back what we have taken.”** There is always some type of condition, a ransom of some sort.

When individuals refuse to forgive others for a wrong done to them, they are saying the same thing. **But instead of holding people hostage until they get their demands, they withhold:**

- 1) **love,**
- 2) **acceptance,**
- 3) **respect,**
- 4) **service,**
- 5) **kindness,**
- 6) **patience,**
- 7) **or whatever the others value.**

The message they send is this: **“Until I feel you have repaid me for the wrong done to me, you will not have my acceptance.”** If we go back to our definition, we can see that the element missing from this scenario is **cancellation of the debt. Persons who refuse to forgive refuse to cancel the debt.**

THE REAL LOSER

A person who has an unforgiving spirit is always the real loser, **much more so than the one against whom the grudge is held.** This is easy to see when we take a closer look at the things most people withhold from the those they feel have wronged them. **Unforgiveness, by its very nature, prevents individuals from following through on many of the specifics of the Christian life and practically necessitates that they walk by the flesh rather than by the Spirit.**

Think about your own experience for a moment. Think back to the last time someone really hurt you or wronged you or took something that belonged to you, whether it was a possession or an opportunity.

Let me ask some questions for you to ponder on?

1) Immediately following the incident, did you feel like running out and doing something kind for the person, **or did you feel like retaliating?**

2) Did you consider responding in gentleness, **or did you think about letting loose with some well-chosen words?**

3) Did you feel like giving in and accepting the situation, **or did you feel like fighting for your “rights”?**

If you were honest, you probably identified **more with the latter option in each case.** These are the normal responses to being hurt or taken advantaged of. **But think of these responses in light of what Paul says, and you will begin to understand why an improper response to injury automatically impairs a person’s walk with God.**

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.....If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23,25).

In a broad sense Paul’s list here includes all the things we naturally want to hold hostage from the people who have hurt us. We rarely want to give our **LOVE** to individuals who have hurt us. We certainly have **NO JOY** or **PEACE** when others have injured us in some way. We **ARE NOT** generally **PATIENT** with or **KIND** to people who have wronged us. We could go right down the list.

Paul accurately describes the responses of the unforgiving person:

“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are...enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying.....and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

First reason:

An unforgiving spirit prevents a person from being able to walk consistently in the Spirit. The only choice is to walk according to the flesh. The consequences of such a life are devastating, and Paul discusses what will happen:

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:7-8).

The corruption Paul mentions has nothing to do with hell. He is talking about the consequences on

this earth. If a person--believer or nonbeliever--makes decisions according to the impulses and desires of the flesh, the result will always be corruption---a wrecked and ruined life. Those persons who have not come to grips with the concept of forgiveness have by the very nature of unforgiveness set themselves up to walk according to the flesh. When that happens, they are losers every time. By withholding patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and the rest, the individual is held hostage by the flesh and, thus, is the ultimate loser.

A CONSUMING CORRUPTION

Second reason:

The destructive nature of an unforgiving spirit is such that it is not limited to one relationship. Resentment and other negative feelings spill over into other relationships. This is the second reason a person with an unforgiving spirit loses out in life.

Unfortunately, people are rarely aware when hostility from one relationship affects their ability to get along with others. So they try and try----unsuccessfully---to work out their differences with others, never recognizing the real source of the problem. Once they tire of trying to change, they excuse their sensitivity as part of their personality and expect people to “work around” them, emotionally speaking. They develop a “**take-me-or-leave-me-but-don’t-try-to-change-me attitude,**” and in the process they hurt people they love the most.

I see this spill over most often in marital relationships. When a husband and a wife come in for marriage counseling. I begin by asking their relationships with their parents. Almost without fail, one of them feels some bitterness or resentment toward a parent (or parents). Sometimes both of them have these feelings. Oftentimes the root of their marriage problems is found in some hostility they have been hauling around, sometimes since childhood.

In almost every case, the counselees have a legitimate complaint; they have really been wronged by their parents. But their inability or unwillingness to forgive ends up hurting them, not their parents!

THE REJECTION CONNECTION

Third reason:

The third reason a person with an unforgiving spirit loses out in life is closely tied to the other reasons we’ve just discussed. When a person is wronged in some way, whether in **marriage, business, friendship, or some other relationship, rejection occurs.** The classic case would be when a guy breaks up with his girl friend because he has found another girl. **In her struggle with rejection the girl swears she will never trust another male.**

It is easy to see where hurt resulted from rejection. But if we plug this concept into other sets of circumstances, we can see it holds true in every case where forgiveness is needed. The following incident comes from the life of another pastor who related this story. This incident which set him and his son at odds for years, illustrates how an unforgiving spirit has feelings of rejection at its roots.

When his son was about fourteen, he discovered he had some musical talents. He began spending a great deal of time playing the piano, primarily by ear. That meant a great deal of pounding chords with very little melody. To the father it sounded all the same.

One day on his way upstairs the father stuck his head in the living room and said, “Son, is that all you know?” To his uninformed ear, it sounded as if he had been playing the same song for hours! The son immediately stopped playing. And he never played for his father again. The son would wait until his

mother and father would leave the house, and then he would spend hours practicing and practicing. The father began hearing from others what a fine pianist his son was, but he never heard another sound from the piano in the living room.

Some years later--when his son was in his twenties--their conversation turned toward his music. The son gave him his version of what happened in the living room that afternoon, and he confessed that he had resented his father from that day on. Why? It really was not a big deal to the father. He did not mean anything serious by what he said. But to his son, as a teenager, what he had communicated was this: "That he (father) did not accept him or his music." Many times young people interpret what their parents say to them to mean: "I do not accept you or your music."

Obviously his son was too young to understand that his father's comment was directed at his music, not at him as his son. And the father was too insensitive to understand that the budding young artist saw little distinction between his work and his personhood. And so the father crushed him; and the son held it against him. By his son's own admission, the resentment he held in his heart toward his father spilled over into other relationships in his life, primarily those having to do with authority.

What I want you to understand is that the cause of his resentment was perceived rejection. I say "perceived" because the Father did not intend to reject him. The son's response, however, was the same as if it had been intentional.

Lost and Found

After years of listening to people recount how they have been hurt and mistreated by parents, spouses, kids, employers, and even pastors, I am convinced that at the beginning of each story is an experience that has been interpreted as rejection. As the rejection evolves into an unforgiving spirit, and eventually into bitterness, it takes a terrible toll.

The person is left with a deep sense of emptiness, an inner sense that something is missing. Consequently, the individual seeks to regain what has been lost---and almost always in the context of relationships that are unrelated. Let me give you an example to illustrate.

A pastor I know told me the following story. He said a father brought his daughter in for counseling after the father learned she had recently had an abortion. As the father began conveying his concern about the spiritual welfare of his daughter, it became apparent to the pastor that the girl deeply resented her father. It was also clear that the daughter felt no remorse about what she had done, and she frankly did not want to be there.

She paid no attention to anything being said until the pastor began to explain the usual sequence of events that leads a young girl to become sexually active. The he described what a father-daughter relationship should be like: how a father should spend time with his daughter, how he should show her proper affection and praise her for her character and accomplishments. He explained that when a father loves his daughter, she does not feel compelled to look for love the way his daughter had.

Before he could finish what he was saying, the girl interrupted, looking at her father, she said, "You never loved me that way! You never spent time with me! You never listened to anything I had to say!"

Then to the shock of the pastor, she turned to him and said, "I have never had love the way you described it, but I am willing to give anything to get it." As she spoke, she slowly slid her skirt up several inches.

An extreme example? Maybe, but not unrealistic. Some people will go to almost any extreme to

find what they have lost through intentional or unintentional rejection. People harboring unresolved resentment can feel driven to explore all kinds of avenues--usually ones that are not in keeping with the Christian life.

THE WAITING GAME

The Fourth reason:

There is a fourth reason an unforgiving spirit can devastate a life. Since the person with the unforgiving spirit is usually waiting for the other person to make restitution, a great deal of time may go by. During this time, fleshly patterns of behavior and incorrect thought processes develop. As I mentioned before, other relationships are damaged. Even after an unforgiving spirit is corrected the side effects can take years to deal with especially in the area of relationships.

The irony of the situation is this: **By refusing to forgive and by waiting for restitution to be made, individuals allow their personal growth and development to hinge on the decision of others they dislike to begin with.** They allow themselves to be held hostage. They say,

- 1) **“If he apologizes.”**
- 2) **“If she comes back to me.”**
- 3) **“If he rehires me.”**
- 4) **“If they invite me.”**

They play the game of waiting for others to make **the first move**. In the meantime they allow an unforgiving spirit to weave its way into the total fabric of their lives.

Another ironic element is that sometimes the person who has done the wrong has no idea anything is wrong. A senior in the high-school department of a church of a pastor friend of mine had a good relationship with his son who was serving as youth pastor at the time. His son began to notice that Alicia a member of the youth group was not as friendly as she had been and that she became less and less involved in the youth department. He would make a point to speak to her, but his kindness was rarely returned.

After several months went by, he took the youths skiing. It so happened that late one evening on the trip Alicia approached his son the youth pastor and said she needed to talk. She began by apologizing for her attitude. She admitted she had been hurt by him and she had been holding something he said to her against him for some time. Then she asked him if he knew what he had said that hurt her so badly. His son thought and thought and came up with nothing.

She looked surprised, reprimanded him for his insensitivity, and said, “Several months ago, I spoke to you in Sunday school and told you our family had just bought a new pet.”

He still drew a blank.

She continued, “you asked me what we got, and I told you it was a bird. Do you remember what you said then?”

At that point he remembered the conversation as well as his response to the news that her family had acquired a bird. “Yes.” he said, “I do remember. I told you birds were messy and asked why didn’t you get something more useful like a dog.”

He immediately apologized, and his friendship with Alicia was restored. **Unfortunately, months were wasted because she would not deal with her hurt, and he did not know he had done anything.**

A great deal of hurt and rejection we face is unintentional. The seeming lack of concern on the part of those who hurt us is often not an attempt on their part to be insensitive.

SOME CHOOSE TO LOSE

From what we've examined in this teaching, I hope you clearly understand this: **A person who harbors unforgiveness always loses. Regardless of how wrong the other person may have been, refusing to forgive means reaping corruption in life. And that corruption begins in one relationship including the relationship with God, and works its way into all the rest.**

Holding on to hurt is like grabbing a rattlesnake by the tail: you are going to be bitten. As the poison of bitterness works its way through the many facets of your personality, death will occur---death that is more far reaching than your physical death, for it has the potential to destroy those around you as well.

MAKING THE PLUNGE

- 1) Have you been hurt?
- 2) Has somebody, somewhere in your past, rejected you in such a way that you still hurt when you think about it?
- 3) Do you become critical of people in your past the minute their names are mentioned?
- 4) Did you leave home as a child or a college student with great relief that you were leaving, swearing you would never return?
- 5) Have you worked hard all your life not to become like your parents?
- 6) Are there people in your past upon whom you would enjoy taking revenge?
- 7) Have you made a pastime out of scheming about how you could get back at them or embarrass them publicly?
- 8) Were you abused as a child?
- 9) Maybe even molested?
- 10) Did you suffer through your parents' divorce as a child?
- 11) Were your parents taken from you when you were very young?
- 12) Were you forced by circumstances to pursue a different career from the one you originally wanted to pursue?
- 13) Were you unable to attend the school of your choice because of financial reasons?
- 14) Were you pushed out of a job opportunity by a greedy friend?
- 15) Were you promised things by your employer that never came about?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be on the brink of being set free from a bondage that you did not even know was keeping you a victim. You may be about to understand for the first time why you act the way you do in certain circumstances and why you cannot seem to control your temper. You may be on the verge of receiving the God-given insight you need to restore your war-torn home---this time for good.

Whatever your situation, whatever has happened in your past, remember that you are the loser if you do not deal with an unforgiving spirit. And the people around you suffer, too.

I am sharing this so that you may be set free. In the process you may experience some pain. In some instances, it may be pain you have worked for years to avoid. Yet that pain is necessary for healing to take place.

It is my prayer that you will read this teaching carefully and prayerfully. It is my goal to bring old truths to bear on the damaging experiences of your life. And in doing so, I hope to give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to make you whole.

Questions for Personal Growth

- 1) What does the word forgiveness mean?**
- 2) What are the three essential elements of forgiveness?**
- 3) Name for reasons why the person with an unforgiving spirit is the real loser?**
- 4) What insights have you gained with regard to your past circumstances and your present actions?**