

Prayer Requests & Praises

Leaders: *Distribute a can of soup, tuna, beans (whatever you have on hand) to each group attendee. Ask each person to hold the can in their hand with arm extended in front of them, as long as they can, while you talk. Now proceed with the lesson, you will find that it only takes minutes or maybe even seconds for that small can to become extremely heavy.*

Why Should We Forgive?

We are physical, spiritual and emotional human beings. All three of these foundational cores of our being are important. And yet sometimes we want to ignore our emotional health and expect it to just grow in health or heal its unhealthy on its own. It’s our emotional makeup that calms a crying baby or soothes a frightened child. Our emotions give us passion and compassion, joy at weddings and births, and sorrow at funerals and lost loves. But leaving our emotional makeup to itself, without consideration and care, will inevitably lead us, no matter how insignificant an issue may seem, to carry emotional weight. As light as that soup-can may have felt in your hand at the beginning, some emotions feel incredibly insignificant. But left unchecked, unresolved, or unattended, some emotions can become heavy, and even unbearable.

While extremely positive emotions can make us feel as though we can float: the excitement of success at a job well done, being in love for the first time, holding your newborn in your arms for the first time. Negative emotions, anger; bitterness; resentment; defensiveness; jealousy; unforgiveness, can weigh us down.

- *Can you look at your life, past or present, and identify how one or more of these (or any other negative emotion) has weighed you down? If you are comfortable doing so, please share with the group how this effected you.*

While most of us carry the weight of these emotions to some degree, some have become crippled by negative emotions. We can see an example in the life of a college professor, Bob.

Bob was a brilliant man and a forerunner in special education. Years ago another professor did and said some things that hurt Bob’s reputation and prevented an expected and well deserved

promotion. Bob was devastated, and he became so angry and bitter that it turned into depression. He sought help from psychiatrists who put him on anti-depressants and kept him in therapy for years.

Bob became so dysfunctional that he was put on disability until he retired and now needs a briefcase to carry all his prescription medications. He has been in and out of hospitals for physical and mental issues. His Christian wife stayed, but the marriage was destroyed and his children suffered greatly. He is over seventy years old now, and though he is faithful in church, reads his Bible daily, and talks about God, he still talks about the man who “ruined his life.”

- *Was it the slanderous professor, his slander or something else that ruined Bob’s life? If something else, what?*

Satan cannot change God’s love for us, nor can Satan take away our salvation. It is, therefore, more effective to spend time trying to make us ineffective and unfulfilled in our Christian walk. How can a committed Christian become so defeated? One answer is the most powerful tool of Satan’s arsenal: unforgiveness. Unforgiveness is the #1 cause of the destruction of relationships. It destroys lives. It destroys families. It destroys marriages. And it destroys churches.

What happens to us when we allow unforgiveness into our hearts? Let’s read Jesus’ words in Luke 11:24-26 (New Living Bible). *“When an evil spirit leaves a person, it goes into the desert, searching for rest. But when it finds none, it says, ‘I will return to the person I came from.’ So it returns and finds that its former home is all swept and clean. Then the spirit finds seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they all enter the person and live there. And so that person is worse off than before.”*

When we commit our lives to Christ, Jesus kicks out demonic (or ungodly) activity from our hearts. Even so, the enemy tries to lure us back into some of our old ways and take away the victory in our daily lives. This is what happened to Bob. He didn’t lose his salvation, but he lived a sad, empty life. God has told us to put out of our lives the old emotions that can rule our emotional, physical and spiritual life.

Ephesians 4:30-32 says - *And do not bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, the Holy Spirit is the one who has identified you as God’s own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. (New Living Bible)*

QUESTIONS

- *Could it be that we can get rid of bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior with kindness and forgiveness? How?*
- *Why is it so hard to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply?*

- *Is there anything someone can do to you that you would consider unforgivable?*
- *Author Paul Boese once wrote, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” What thoughts does this quote bring to you mind?*
- *If unforgiveness is so destructive and forgiveness so healing, why is it so hard to forgive?*

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What Forgiveness is Not

Last week we talked about unforgiveness: its crippling effects, Satan’s vested interest in making it a part of our life, and its ability to steel our joy, peace, and victory. Unforgiveness can often sneak up on us, undetected and unseen. Many people fail to realize that it is a cause of anger, depression, bitterness and rebellion.

Think about Ephesians 4:30-32. *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**”*

Many Christians have learned to control negative behavior, but bitterness and unforgiveness are much too common among even among those who follow Christ. Satan may not be able to provoke us to rage, anger, harsh words, or slander, but too often Satan can get into the heart of a committed Christian with unforgiveness. Why? One big reason is that we don’t really understand forgiveness.

➤ *What are common conceptions of forgiveness, which make forgiveness so hard?*

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand true forgiveness is to determine what forgiveness is not. Feel free to offer your comments and thoughts as we go through each of these points.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. The old cliché of forgive and forget is simply not possible nor is it Biblical. Hebrews 10:17 says that God will remember our sins no more, but God, being omniscient (or all-knowing), cannot forget. What it means is that God will never use the past against us. Psalm 103:12 says *God has removed our rebellious acts as far away from us as the east is from the west.* We can’t forget what was done to us, but we can choose not to use our memories as ammunition against the offender.

Forgiveness is not unconditional trust. You can forgive someone and still protect your vulnerability. If someone has stolen from you, you can forgive that person, but you would be foolish to allow him or her unsupervised access to your things, or to put that person in a position to steel again.

Forgiveness does not mean you must tolerate abuse. If someone is abusing you, even though you forgive, you can take necessary steps to protect yourself and, if the situation warrants, prosecute.

Forgiveness does not mean you become a doormat. You can forgive past abuse, yet at the same time stand firm against future abuse.

Forgiveness is not a feeling. You don't have to feel like forgiving an offender to make the choice to forgive.

Forgiveness is not letting the offender off the hook. It simply moves the offender from your hook to God's hook. When God said "*Vengeance is mine,*" was it because God's ego wanted all of it? No, God knows how destructive vengeance is to our soul and spirit.

Forgiveness is not necessarily a reward for its the recipient. Some people are afraid to forgive because their offender, they feel, does not deserve its gift. While forgiveness *may* be a time of healing for a forgiven, it will always be of greater benefit to the forgiver.

- *Did any of these points surprise you? If so, which ones and why?*
- *Does knowing what forgiveness is not change the way you feel about forgiveness issues in your own life?*

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What Forgiveness Is

Last week we learned what forgiveness is not, the previous week we talked about the severe damage that unforgiveness can bring to our life and illustrated this damage through Bob the professor who could not forgive.

Here is a different story with a different outcome. A young woman was brutally raped, disfigured, and then murdered. The man was caught, convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Her parents, while struggling through the grieving process, chose to forgive the murderer. A few years later a member of Gideon spoke at their church. They asked him if he would take a Bible to the man in prison and tell him that they had forgiven him. The Gideon agreed, and when the man came to Christ he wrote a letter to the parents, telling them that he had received Christ, and how sorry he was that he had committed such a horrible crime against their daughter. The parents were overjoyed with the man’s salvation and communicated with him faithfully for several years. When he came up for parole they pleaded for his release before the parole board and offered to sponsor him. He was paroled and lived with them until he married a few years later.

The end of this story is different from Bob’s story because they knew the power of forgiveness. Instead of living the rest of their lives in bitterness, they chose to walk in forgiveness. So just what is forgiveness? And, just as we did last week, feel free to comment after each of these points.

Forgiveness is commanded by God. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught us that God forgives us as we forgive others. In Matthew 6:14, immediately after teaching the Lord’s Prayer Jesus said *“If you forgive those who sin against you, God in heaven will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, God will not forgive your sins.”* That’s a pretty strong statement. Notice, this is not a conditional statement. There is nothing that says you don’t have to forgive if the offender isn’t sorry or if the offense was just too hard to bear. Jesus said we **must** forgive all who sin against us.

Forgiveness means resolving to live with the consequences of another’s sin. It does not demand revenge or repayment for the offenses suffered. The truth here that is often overlooked is that we live with the consequences of the sins weather we forgive them or not.

The question is what will our attitude be and will we allow the incident to control the rest of our lives?

Forgiveness is a choice. It is an act of will, not an emotion. Again, you don't have to feel forgiveness toward someone in order to make the choice to forgive.

Forgiveness does not benefit the offender. Although sometimes the offender must deal with consequences for their behavior, such as the murdered who went to prison, most of the time our offenders live on unaware or uncaring that we are holding anger and bitterness. Forgiveness benefits the forgiver.

Forgiveness turns the offender over to God so God can work in the offenders life. Only God knows the true heart of the offender, and only God knows what is needed to bring the offender to justice and/or repentance. Even if we don't see it, rest assured that God will bring true justice.

Forgiveness is possibly the most powerful tool we have against the enemy. If we learn to walk in forgiveness, we have a covering of love in our hearts that Satan cannot penetrate. In forgiveness, there can be no rage, no anger, no bitterness, no resentment, and no jealousy.

These truths very much apply to the story of the parents of the murdered girl.

- They were greatly hurt by the man but they knew obedience to God was more important and more powerful than their pain.
- I doubt they felt forgiving when they made the choice to forgive, but they knew Jesus commanded forgiveness, and they were obedient.
- The forgiving couple still lived with the consequences of the man's sin. I can't imagine the pain of identifying their daughter at the morgue. They didn't have the opportunity to watch her marry and have children. They lost time with her that they had enjoyed and knew there would be none in the future. But, instead of living with bitterness, they chose to accept the loss of their daughter and forgive her murderer.
- By choosing to forgive their daughter's murderer, they not only lived the rest of their lives in peace, but set in motion a way for him to become a Christian and live a Godly and productive life.
- In this case, there was eventually a benefit to the murderer. But the immediate benefit was to the parents. They could have lived like Bob, spending their later years in misery, constantly blaming their unhappiness and poor health on a criminal. But by forgiving, they not only lived in joy and peace that only God can give, they were instrumental in bringing a sinner into the Kingdom.

Although forgiveness may not always manifest itself to the level it did in this couple's lives, forgiveness can bring about extraordinary transformations in every life. While worldly thinking requires retribution that is rarely satisfied, forgiveness leads to contagious peace and resolve that once seemed impossible.

- *Are any of the above points of forgiveness hard for you to understand or to accept? Why?*
- *Do you think that understanding what forgiveness is and is not will make it easier for you to forgive those who have hurt you?*
- *Can you use this information to help a friend who is dealing with hurt or offense?*

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How to Forgive

In the past three CARE Group meetings we have talked about the damaging effects of unforgiveness, we discussed what forgiveness is not, and finally we learned what true forgiveness is. Today we will talk about how we can apply principles of forgiveness in our own lives.

Walking in forgiveness may be one of the hardest things we will ever do. But the sooner we let go of the offense and forgive the offender, the sooner we can enjoy the peace and joy that forgiveness brings. Here are some steps to the process of forgiving.

We must admit hanging on to unforgiveness is our problem. Our natural desire is to put the blame on the offender. Have you ever said or thought any of the following examples:

- *“If she would just stop saying those lies I wouldn’t get so mad.”*
- *“He was wrong and until he apologizes I won’t talk to him.”*
- *“I was the one treated unfairly, and I won’t give in until they make it right.”*
- *“No one should have to live with the pain she caused me.”*

As long as we continue to blame an offender for our feelings and behavior, we are ignoring our own accountability. We are also feeding all the negative feelings that keep us in bondage.

We must remember that without God we can do nothing, and that includes dealing with bitterness. Only God can reveal the bitterness in our hearts for what it is, and only God can give us the grace to handle it. *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* *Philippians 4:13 NKJV*

We must completely forgive the offender. Forgiveness and bitterness cannot occupy the same space. Even if the offender is dead, and we are carrying unhappiness and bad habits because of the way we were treated; even if we were totally innocent, we must choose to forgive. Remember, forgiveness is a choice, not an emotion, and we can choose to forgive even if we don’t feel it.

The best way to completely forgive is to speak it (daily if necessary) - to say “I choose to forgive this person.” In time it will become a reality. How does this work? Remember the “Moonies” and “Hara Krishnas” of the “60”s? How did they get rebellious teenagers, who wouldn’t take the garbage out at home without whining, to work long hours, beg on the streets, and give all

the money to the organization? Their greatest tool of control was chanting. They taught the kids to chant all the things they wanted them to believe. And they believed them! Consider also the faithful members of Islam. Five times a day they get on their knees and chant passages from the Koran. These are good examples that show how the words we speak get into our heart and soul and become truth.

We must not feed the bitterness of unforgiveness. Whether speaking about physical, emotional or spiritual things, nothing grows without nourishment. Once you have chosen forgiveness, do not feed and ultimately revive the bitterness. We can feed bitterness by our words and actions, but the greatest nourishment to bitterness is continued thoughts. When negative feelings permeate our thought life they manifest in our words and actions and feed negative feelings such as bitterness and unforgiveness. *“But we have the mind of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 2:13.* That means, with God’s help, we can control our thoughts.

Paul explained this best in Philippians 4:8 *“Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies”* (Message Bible Translation). When new offenses come, state your choice to forgive. When thoughts of old offenses come into your mind, repeat your choice to forgive. Replace all negative thoughts with positive ones, and repeat, and repeat, and repeat again your choice to forgive.

Remind yourself that unforgiveness is not a weapon. Proverbs 25:21-22 says, “If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads. And the LORD will reward you.” Perhaps this is why vengeance does not belong to us, but belongs to God. When we refuse to forgive we fuel the flame of hurt and anger inside us rather than punish the offender.

Pray for the offender. In Matthew 5: 44 Jesus said, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and ***pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you***, that you may be sons of your God in heaven.” This, again, is a choice, an act of will. Praying for your offender helps keep your thoughts positive.

Remember that only God can heal our pain. There is nothing an offender can do to pay for the pain he or she has caused or to bring healing. It would seem that apologies and restitution, or even vengeance would make us feel better, but be assured, they do not. Nor do they heal the pain. But Jesus said that God *“hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted.”* Luke 4:18. Turn your pain over to Jesus and let Him heal you. It will take time, but He can do it.

Recognize the source of the offense. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul reminds us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” This passage of scripture likens the life we live to a spiritual battle and iterates that our enemy is not another person, but Satan and Satan’s minions. In that respect, to hold too much anger and blame at an individual who has been attacked by the same enemy would be much like a prisoner of war kicking a fellow prisoner because of the abusing captor. All though we see in the physical dimension, the spiritual dimension has equal, if not greater, effect on our life, our wholeness and our happiness – or the lack thereof.

Sometimes the person we really need to forgive is ourselves. There are people who feel so guilty for their own sins project unforgiveness on others in an attempt to relieve their own guilt. There are also incidents where we have been the catalyst for another’s offense, and forgiving the offender would mean admitting our own offense. When we forgive ourselves for all those things we feel guilty about it is much easier to forgive others.

Unforgiveness is heavy. It might be the heaviest emotion we can carry. So let us choose not to bare it, let us choose to lay it down. We may not be able to completely kill the root of bitterness in our hearts, at least on this side of Heaven, but we can choose every day to walk in forgiveness.

- What point in tonight’s lesson is the easiest for you? Will you share, for the aid of the group, how you have benefited from following this principle?
- Which point tonight is the most challenging? Why?

Close in Prayer: (Care Group Leader: I have written a specific prayer, feel free to amend this prayer, but keep the theme, as I think this can be a time of healing and a release of unforgiveness for members of your group).

God, tonight we thank you for this amazing gift you have given us – your forgiveness in all our short-comings. We are flawed, but your forgiveness has transformed us to flawless, and we thank you. This gift, too, extends into our lives as we forgive others. We are transformed when we refuse to allow bitterness, hurt, anger, and scorn to grow its roots in our emotional and spiritual lives. I pray that you would help each of us to choose to forgive those people we know we have refused to forgive – and as we do, that we would be renewed. I pray that you would also reveal to us those places in our lives that we are unaware, where unforgiveness has already made a home. Help us to recognize it, help us to let go of it, and help us to forge a life that refuses to invite it back. Finally, God, I pray that you would help us to be the friend, the brother, the sister, the daughter, the son, the mother, the father, the co-worker, the neighbor or even the spouse, that would be an instrument of healing and forgiveness in the lives we encounter who are trapped under the devastating weight that is unforgiveness. Thank you for your gift that heals us, thank you for your gift that frees us, thank you for your gift that give us life – filled up and running over with goodness. In Jesus name we pray these things. Amen!