



Forgiveness

Forgiving ...

Starting Over

Marie was on the way to her son's game when she decided to stop for a quick bite to eat. She pulled into the drive-through lane, stopped to place her order, and rolled down her window. She found herself face-to-face with a young man holding a gun to her head. Marie asked what he wanted but the man just motioned with his gun. She asked if he wanted her purse, hoping someone would hear her through the restaurant sound system and intervene. She dropped her purse out the window. The gunman didn't leave. He looked across to the other side of the car. She then realized there was an accomplice on the other side.

The gunman motioned toward the backseat and Marie decided that whatever they were going to do, they wanted to get in the car with her. With that frightening thought, she hit the gas pedal. At the same moment, the gunman shot her in the jaw. The bullet went in one side of her face and out the other. He picked up her purse and fled with the other man, not realizing there were witnesses who noted the license number of their car.

Marie, drenched in blood, drove around to the window and asked for help. One of the workers drove her to a hospital two blocks away. As they prepared Marie for surgery, she mentally focused on the face of the gunman so she would be able to identify him, if necessary. She didn't want to forget his face. While Marie was in surgery the police apprehended two suspects.

The next year of Marie's life was filled with surgeries, physical pain, emotional changes, court appearances, the care of loved ones, and anger. She didn't realize the extent of her anger and hatred toward the man who shot her, but she could forget neither his face nor what he had done. The gunman pleaded guilty, apologized to Marie in court, and helped convict the accomplice to this and other crimes. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

Marie didn't want to feel like a victim. She wanted to be strong. She thought if she gave up her anger she would feel weak. A friend asked if she was fearful of the time when the gunman would be set free. Marie replied that she had daydreamed about him walking into her house, but this time the story was reversed — she would shoot him in the jaw. She wanted him to know the pain she lived with, to know how it had affected her family and turned her life upside down.

As time went on and Marie's life started to calm down, she found herself wanting to sit down and talk to the man who had shot her. She wasn't sure why, but the desire was there and finally she acted on it, waiting several months for her wish to become a reality. She wasn't going in anger; she simply wanted to talk to him face-to-face.

She met with him in a conference room at the prison, accompanied by liaisons. For a moment Marie didn't know what to say. She asked him about his upbringing and he told her stories of his life. She told him about her family and the difficulty her sons had with the shooting. Marie told him how she was hurt, physically and emotionally, and talked of changes in her daily life and family. The young man and Marie shared stories. They expressed no anger; did not raise their voices. After a short break, Marie found herself saying something she had never expected; it just came out of her bullet-pierced mouth. She called the gunman by name and said, "I-I for .. give you."

Marie notes that she went to the prison for herself. But the gift of forgiveness brought a change to Marie's life and the life of the young man from the streets who had shot her. After the man was released on parole, Marie contacted his parole officer. Knowing his upbringing, Marie wondered if he would need help finding a job and offered to help. She was told that he had not only found a job but was doing well, finding new life after his time in prison. Marie met with him again, together with his parole officer. She found out that their visit in prison had made quite an impact on him, as it had on her. The anger was gone. Forgiveness was given. Lives were changed.

The Gift of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is something that flows to us from God and through us to others. The Bible uses the word "sin" to describe the wrong and selfish things we do. "Sin" means missing the mark. Picture a bull's eye on a dartboard. God could point to the bull's eye and say, "This is what I expect of you — perfection." He wants you to love Him and others perfectly, with all your heart, mind, and strength. But as we look at our lives, we see that we have missed the mark. We all fall short of God's expectations. We can't make ourselves okay in God's eyes.

We need someone else to fulfill God's expectations for us and make things right with Him. The one who did that is Jesus Christ. Because Jesus was 100 percent human, He faced all the temptations and difficulties we face. Since Jesus was also 100 percent God, He did not give in. His perfect life is a substitute for every one of us. Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection fulfill God's expectations of us and make us perfect in His eyes. Because of Jesus, God forgives us.

What Is Forgiveness?

What is forgiveness? It's not just a response to an apology; it's not just a feeling. Forgiveness is a choice, an action. Forgiveness is a gift from God in which He removes our sins and does not remember them anymore. It is a freeing gift. Forgiveness is the gift of peace with God through Jesus Christ.

You'll notice the word "gift" is used many times in the previous paragraph because that is what God's forgiveness is all about. It is a gift of grace. Grace can be defined as "undeserved love." If I were to send you a gift in the mail today for no reason, it would be a gift of grace. You haven't done anything to deserve it; I would just be giving it to you out of love. Likewise, we haven't done anything to deserve God's forgiveness. It is a gift of grace from God, given because He loves us.

Sometimes it is difficult to forgive others because forgiving seems like approving of what they did as right or okay. But that's not what forgiveness means. Sin is never right or okay. But as we realize how completely God has forgiven us — for every thoughtless, mean, or selfish thing we have ever done or will ever do — we are moved to respond by forgiving others. Through God's forgiveness we realize His peace in our lives. His peace allows us to move on beyond the offense, instead of harboring anger and bitterness.

God is perfect, so He forgives perfectly. Once He forgives you, He doesn't hold a grudge or continue to feel angry about being let down. Since we are not perfect, we forgive imperfectly. The forgiveness we offer others can be tainted by our hurts and anxieties. Forgiveness is a process for us. But with God's help, and by His example of forgiveness, you can lay aside the hurt.

The Forgiving Father

In the Bible we find a story Jesus told to illustrate God's amazing love for us and the power of forgiveness:

There was a father with two sons. The father was a wealthy landowner, a respected man in their village. One day, his younger son demanded his share of his father's estate. This was unheard of. It was like telling his father he wished he were dead! But the father divided his property between his two sons as requested.

Soon afterward the younger son packed his bags and traveled to a distant country. There, undisciplined and careless, he spent the entire inheritance on wild living. After all his money was gone, a famine hit the country and the young man had nothing. He was so desperate he took a job feeding a farmer's pigs and craved the corn cobs in the pig slop. There was no help or hope in sight.

His pathetic situation brought him to his senses. He had hit bottom. He thought about the farmhands working for his father; they had three meals a day. He decided to return home and ask for a job as a farmhand. He planned carefully what he would say to his father: "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me back as a hired hand." Hurting, hungry, and sorry for his selfishness, he went home to his father. His father was waiting and watching for him. When the son was still a long way off, the father saw him coming and ran to him. As a respected, elderly man, he would never run, but he ran to embrace this lost child! Heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started the speech he had planned, but the father wouldn't hear of it! Instead, he called for his servants to bring the best robe and put it on his son! Who do you think had the best robe in the house? The father. He wanted his son to be covered in his own robe. Then the father said to put a ring on his finger. This was most likely a family signet ring that would tell the son he was definitely part of the family — not a hired hand. He also had sandals brought for his son (bare feet were for servants). Finally he called for a celebration feast! "My son was dead and is alive," he proclaimed. "He was lost and is found!"

Do you remember I said there were two sons? The older one was working in the field when he heard all the hoopla. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant told him, "Your brother has come home and your father killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in the celebration. His father tried talking to him but his son wouldn't listen. Angrily, the older son complained, "Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief. But have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then my brother shows up, who has thrown away your money on prostitutes, and you go all out with a big party."

The father was probably sad that his older son didn't understand. He reminded his son that they were together all the time and everything that was the father's was also the son's. This was a time to celebrate. "This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!" (This parable can be found in Luke 15:11-32.)

This story Jesus told gives us a great picture of undeserved love and forgiveness. It illustrates the kind of love that God has for us. Our self-centeredness causes us to run away from God, but He continues to watch for us, run to us, and to bring us back to the family. We have squandered so many of the gifts God has given us, but His welcoming arms are open in love and forgiveness.

The story also illustrates the ugliness of un-forgiveness. Rather than rejoicing with his father and brother, the older son was filled with selfishness and anger. He stewed in anger and risked missing out on the joy of family, friends, and workers celebrating the gift of forgiveness. Perhaps he finally understood after the conversation with his father and went inside to join the party, or maybe he stayed outside, feeling unappreciated, self-righteous, and unwilling to forgive.

Forgiveness is a tough business. It requires us to put aside our indignation and value the person who has wronged us. It is a humbling thing to do. The father, with his arms outstretched in acceptance and forgiveness, willing to humiliate himself because of love for his child, reminds me of another man with outstretched arms who had an undying love, even through a humiliating death, and who was dying to forgive.

Dying to Forgive

One Friday afternoon a man was dying. The time passed slowly; the waiting seemed endless. There was nothing that any of his loved ones could do to help. They tried to console each other. The dying man even tried to console them. As he spoke his last words, it became increasingly difficult for him to breathe.

Everyone around tried his or her best not to notice what was happening, but death is hard to ignore. Especially this death. His calloused, gentle hands, which played a vital part in his life, were constrained. His touch had meant so much to so many people. There was a lot of activity nearby. There were others facing the same fate. There were attendants talking among themselves. They acted as though they were in charge, but it was obvious God controlled the living and dying. The skies played a disturbing chorus of thunder booms and lightning clashes. The sky grew dark in the middle of the day.

Hours passed. So did the man.

The man's name was Jesus. He died near the city of Jerusalem in the year 30 A.D., when He was about 33 years old. He was sentenced to die by crucifixion, even though the ruling governor could find nothing He had done wrong. The governor gave in to the cries of the people yelling, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Jesus was led away to die. Soldiers nailed His hands, outstretched, to a cross. They nailed His feet, one on top of the other. They crucified Him along with criminals and mocked Him for claiming to be the Savior of the world.

Jesus smelled of sweat and blood. His mother, Mary, and His followers cried out as grief filled their hearts. The ground was spotted with broken bones and blood, aged in the sun from crucifixions gone by. The observers were stained with sin. Jesus' heart throbbed with the pain of loneliness. The stench of death was right under His nose but He didn't flinch. Then He died.

But that's not the end of the story. On Friday, Jesus died. On that Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead! After making sure that more than 500 people saw that He truly was alive, Jesus ascended into heaven to prepare an eternal home for all those who live and die believing in Him as their Savior. (The accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection can be found in Matthew, chapters 27-28; Mark, chapters 15-16; Luke, chapters 22-24; John, chapters 19-20.)

Jesus died on a Friday we now call "Good Friday." It was a good Friday for us because on that day Jesus paid the penalty for all our sins. Because He rose from the dead, we know that by believing in Him we will rise to live with Him forever. Jesus, who was true man and true God, was sent from heaven to die for us. His death won forgiveness and eternal life for us. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself all God's anger at our sinfulness, and all the punishment we deserve. In return, He forgives all our sins. Knowing what Jesus Christ has done, we can be confident that our sins are completely forgiven!

The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus for us lead us to our motivation to forgive others. Allow His life-giving, sin-forgiving death to be forever ingrained on your heart. For it is at the cross and the tomb from which He rose that we find out what true life and true forgiveness are all about. As we do that, we hear Jesus call us to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

As You Have Been Forgiven

Sometimes, motivated by God's love, we forgive others more readily than we forgive ourselves. But the same truths apply to you! God forgives you, and if you find it difficult to believe that and forgive yourself, focus on God's ever-ready forgiveness. Read the story of the forgiving father again. God is that loving father abundantly pouring forgiveness on his son. He pours forgiveness on you just the same. Remember that again and again until it makes its way into your heart.

When Jesus taught His followers how to pray to God, He told them to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." He connected the forgiveness we receive with the forgiveness we offer to others, making it clear that we are to pass on the gift we have received from God. What a gift it is! If someone asks for your forgiveness, you are compelled to forgive because you know God has forgiven you. Forgiveness changes lives. Remember that God promises not to remember your sins once they are forgiven. As God has forgiven all of our sins because of Jesus, He will bring you to forgive others and yourself, giving you the freedom to move on and enjoy the abundant, forgiven, and eternal life He has planned for you. Allow Jesus Christ to bring out His best in you as you forgive and live in the light of His love. Rejoice in the new beginning Jesus has given you. Enjoy the gracious forgiveness of Jesus Christ. You are dearly loved by a forgiving God!

Forgetting?

It Can Be Done

Frank shook his head. "She's held a grudge for 35 years and I guess now she'll take it to her grave," he said. He was speaking about his sister-in-law, Louise. The grudge was against her own sister, who years before had persuaded their parents to leave her an inordinately large share of the family estate. Louise had not spoken to her sister since then, but, preoccupied with her resentment, would tell the story to anyone else who would listen. "It's distorted her whole life," Frank said. "It seems she'll never be able to forgive and forget."

Unfortunately this describes more people than just Louise. Many people poison their lives by holding on to resentments and grudges. Can anything be done to help them forgive and forget? The answer is "Yes"!

What's in the Way?

In my experience as a counselor, I have seen that there are two categories of people who have problems with the process of reconciliation (re-establishing friendship by resolving a disagreement).

The first are those who, like Louise, feel such outrage at another person's behavior that forgiveness seems out of the question. Some may even say, "I can never forgive her for that." They *can* forgive; what they mean to say is, "I *will* never forgive her for that."

The second are those who cannot or will not forgive *themselves*. They have hurt someone else and the damage seems irreparable. The problem is often compounded by the fact that the one whom they believe they have hurt — usually a family member — is no longer alive. He or she died before there was a chance to apologize and ask for forgiveness. There are also those preoccupied with traumatic memories.

What gets in the way of forgiving and forgetting? Some might say it's God's way of punishing them. Others might say it's other people or circumstances that force them to repeatedly remember the offense. Still others might say the individuals prevent themselves from forgiving.

As Far as East From West

Let's consider those three explanations. First, that un-forgiveness is divine punishment for human misbehavior. Actually, nothing is more emphatically stated in the Bible than God's willingness to forgive. "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions [sins, or misdeeds] from us*" (Psalm 103:12).

How far is the east from the west? You might as well ask how long, wide, high, and deep is outer space. Imagine infinity, something without a beginning or an end. That's how complete and unending God's forgiveness is. God wants to forgive us so we can have a restored relationship with Him. For that very reason, God sent Jesus to live a perfect life and die to pay the penalty for everything you or I have ever done wrong. God now says that because Jesus paid our penalty, we are forgiven.

And, there's more! God not only forgives, He also forgets. "*I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and remembers your sins no more*" (Isaiah 43:25). God erases your sins and then He forgets about them. He does not hold them against you.

Forgetting Is Possible

But while God chooses not to remember our wrongs, sometimes those who have been wronged cannot forget. That brings us to the second possible explanation: Forgiveness is not possible because circumstances and other people force us to recall the events that cause us pain.

Forgiving and forgetting does not mean erasing the memory as though it never happened (the usual sense of the word "forget"). It's more like when you do someone a favor, they thank you, and you reply, "Aww, forget it." You mean, "Don't feel indebted to me."

If Louise forgave her sister, the memory of her sister's inheritance would not continue to hurt her. She would stop feeling offended by it. The *painful emotions* would be forgotten. Since un-forgiveness is not divine punishment, and isn't caused by circumstances or other people, it follows that the obstacle to forgiving must be ourselves. It's important to recognize and remove the obstacles that lie in the path to healing. With Louise, the obstacle is her outrage at being hurt. She is angry at her sister and she has punished her sister by carrying a grudge for 35 years. What Louise may not realize is that the grudge has cost her much more than it ever cost her sister. When we cannot forgive ourselves, we continue to suffer. It's a way of punishing ourselves and coping with guilt.

Making Forgiveness Real

Normally, knowing that God forgives is considered good news. But for some, the fact that God forgives all wrongs is just an abstract concept with no connection to their real world of anger and pain.

When you are wounded or cause someone else pain, you wind up in an emotional ditch. It is normal to look for a way to avoid being there alone. If I hurt someone else, I might look for a way to justify what I did by imagining the other person deserved it, that we're both in the ditch. If someone else hurts me, I might try to hurt them back so we both end up in the ditch together. I'm not interested in forgiveness because I feel like someone needs to pay for my pain.

The desire to even the score demonstrates the retaliation principle — an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That principle perpetuates wars between nations, between races, and between religious groups. It never ends anything except people's lives in acts of ever-increasing brutality. This principle comes from the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. When God instructed His people to take an eye for an eye, He was defining fair punishment, not demanding retaliation. Retaliation forms of justice create endless cycles of pain.

Forgiveness stops the destruction. It can reconcile nations, cultures, races, economic groups, and warring religious groups, just as it can heal the division between individuals and bring peace to the conflict raging within a troubled mind. Forgiveness picks you up out of the ditch and puts you back on level ground, instead of pulling the other person down with you.

Dealing with Your Pain

What are you to do, then? Since you know that the obstacle to forgiveness is often pain, then you need to confront it along with the hurt, embarrassment, humiliation, resentment, and guilt.

Marge and Carl are an example of a couple that needed to deal with their feelings in order to resolve the crisis in their marriage. Marge and Carl had three teenage children and had been married for 20 years.

Marge knew that their marriage had become somewhat routine, but with three teenagers to mother and Carl's job taking most of his time, how could it be otherwise? Their sex life had diminished to the point where they had intercourse infrequently and seldom with passion. But isn't that what people should expect to happen in mid-life?

All of Marge's rationalizations were useless when she discovered that for at least three years Carl had been seeing another woman. At first she couldn't believe it, and fully expected Carl to say it wasn't so. But he didn't. Looking like both a naughty boy and an old man, Carl made no defense. "It's true. I'm sorry," he said. "What can I say?"

Marge was livid. She screamed and called him every name in the book. She hated him, despised him, and cursed him. Too guilty to retaliate, Carl left the house and spent the night in his office.

Marge told the children she was sick and went to bed, but they heard her crying. She was so humiliated and hurt that she wanted to die. She was too embarrassed to face anybody, especially her children.

When Carl called the next day, she hung up on him. The phone rang again immediately and she didn't answer. It kept ringing until finally she picked up the receiver.

"I think we need to talk to our pastor," Carl said.

Marge hadn't expected that. "I'll never call him!" she said.

"Then I will," Carl said.

Later, as they sat together in their pastor's office, Marge said, "I know it sounds unchristian, but I'll never forgive him. Never, never! I just can't do that!"

The pastor didn't argue with Marge because he knew she had to confront the hurt she was feeling first. Carl's unfaithfulness had humiliated her and she hated him for that. Forgiveness was literally out of the question until she dealt with that.

Carl, on the other hand, wanted to settle things simply and swiftly. He did not want to discuss feelings. "The affair is over," he said. "It won't happen again, I promise."

"That's helpful and important," the pastor told him, "but first you need to tell Marge and me how you feel about what's happened."

The pastor was helping Carl and Marge do what's necessary in order to forgive and forget. They had to let out their feelings in the presence of another person — someone who could be objective, who cared enough to listen and help them heal, and who could lead them through it to a conclusion. Carl and Marge needed to share what was going on inside them. They had to put words to their feelings so they could understand them.

After a while, Marge was able to genuinely forgive her husband. She also was able to recognize how she had contributed to the dissatisfaction in their marriage. Carl was able to forgive himself for the damage he had done to their marriage because he realized that God had forgiven him and loved him in spite of what he had done. Once past the guilt of his adultery and the resentment toward his wife that he thought justified his actions, he was able to forgive Marge. Both Carl and Marge were forgiven and forgiving. They were led to an essential understanding of themselves and their feelings. Such a confrontation is the first step to reconciliation in any broken relationship.

The Role of Anger

Usually the first and most deep-seated reaction to being hurt is anger. If I bump my shin on an inanimate object, I feel anger. If someone hurts me, betrays my trust, makes me feel bad, or cheats me out of something that's rightfully mine, my anger can escalate quickly into rage and to hatred.

Anger is primarily a reaction to an injustice. If I believe that I have been treated unjustly, I naturally, and rightly, feel anger. That anger, however, can prevent me from forgiving and forgetting since it perpetuates the hurt I feel at being treated unfairly.

Anger is a secondary emotion. It's usually a response to a more basic feeling of hurt, guilt, fear, or pain. If another person makes me feel guilty, I may become angry at him or her. When you are hurt or afraid, you may become angry as a reflexive action, a way to strike back when you feel you have been attacked. If you are reluctant to confront someone who has hurt you (because you fear the person or the confrontation itself), you may find another way to vent. For example, you may talk to others about the person who hurt you, or express your hostility in other indirect, but destructive, ways.

Whatever the source — injustice, guilt, or fear — you will be unable to forgive and forget until you can find a way to deal with your anger.

God's Role in the Process

We have referred to God as the one who forgives. But He also takes our hurt and anger on Himself. We have fragile egos; God does not. We are impatient, while God is long-suffering. We seek revenge, but God offers forgiveness when we rebel against Him. You can use God as a lightning rod for your anger, pouring it out to Him in prayer just as the writers of Psalms 7, 10, 17, 28, and other parts of the Bible shared their angry feelings with God.

You can also express to God your anger at Him. You may consider it disrespectful to direct anger at God, but sometimes He might be the one with whom you are most angry. When a person's anger has no specific focus or an easily identifiable cause, he might say he's angry at life or Lady Luck or the Fate that seems to be shaping his destiny. Sometimes a person may even choose other people as scapegoats for anger that is actually directed toward God.

The great sufferer in the Old Testament, Job, directed his anger at God when he asked sarcastically, "*Does it please You to oppress me, to spurn the work of Your hands, while You smile on the schemes of the wicked?*" (Job 10:3).

Our quarrels with God and others often are desperate attempts to “hang in there” in a frustrating world where injustices occur too frequently. Perhaps you share the same angry thoughts that came to Job and want to aim the arrow of your rage at a God who seems to be ignoring your situation or even seems to be taking a hand in creating it. Express your anger. God already knows about it.

God accepts your anger and frustration with compassion. He cares about your pain. He wants to show you the way out of your anger and help you heal from the pain.

Healing Leads to Forgiving

If you’re trying to forgive but are not forgetting, you’re probably still too hurt and, therefore, too angry. In fact, you may be inwardly raging over what has happened to you. Let it out in a safe situation — talk to a friend, write about it, talk to a pastor or counselor — until the anger begins to subside.

Your memories can heal if you deal with them in a healthy way: bring them out in the open and let them go. You need to relive the memories with all the emotional baggage in the presence of someone you trust. You need to tell someone who will listen and point you to God because He is the source of all comfort. You may need to go through the memories more than once, depending on the severity of the hurt and the depth of your anger, but the pain in the memories will begin to diminish.

The problem is that we tend to hold onto the memories. We’re creatures of habit, so we want to keep things — even our pain. Sometimes we even rationalize clinging to bad memories as necessary reminders of how others have mistreated us. Focusing on how others have hurt you relieves you of the responsibility to be accountable for your feelings and lets you imagine that you are innocent.

Maybe you’re reluctant to forgive and forget because then you’d have to face how resentful, or even hateful, you have been.

Change and healing are very difficult. One change leads to another, and gradually you adopt a different way of looking at things and people. It’s easier to leave things as they are and maintain your comfortable perspective. Don’t take the easy way out. Resentment and bitterness will ultimately destroy you. You *need* to forget.

Forgiving Allows Forgetting

Forgetting does not mean developing amnesia or repressing memories (covering up the memory of an event because it is painful to recall). That is a kind of forgetting, but not a healthy forgetfulness. Repression is an obstacle to healing bad memories, not a result of forgiveness.

Instead of leading to amnesia or repression, forgiveness takes the sting out of memories. It neutralizes them so they slip into forgetfulness because you don’t need them to perpetuate resentment. The memories, however, may remain because of the good feelings that result from being reconciled. Forgiveness represents an end, a closure with the past, and gives you a fresh start.

Jesus once said that He had come to “*release the oppressed*” (Luke 4:18). Nothing can oppress you like a painful past. When the past comes to a healthy conclusion so that its pain no longer colors your present or casts a shadow over your future, you are free indeed. The weight is lifted from your back. As the forgiver, you can feel better in every way: spiritually, emotionally, and sometimes even physically.

Those Who Don't Want Our Forgiveness

It is possible that someone has offended you and doesn't care about your forgiveness. They may not ask for it, acknowledge they need it, or even accept it if you offered. How can you forgive someone like that?

Suppose, for example, that instead of saying he was sorry about his unfaithfulness, Carl told Marge he wanted a divorce. That wouldn't be asking for forgiveness, but permission to marry someone else. In that situation, the blow to Marge might have been much more severe and her healing much more complicated.

It is difficult to forgive someone who doesn't seem to know that he or she did anything wrong, or who doesn't care whether you offer forgiveness. But your choice to forgive and act in a loving way toward the one who hurt you does not have to depend on his or her readiness to respond. Forgiveness is a process, and your spirit of love might inspire a change of heart in the one who hurt you.

The best way to start forgiving is to pray for God to show you how to do it. Prayer is a powerful way of expressing your needs and desires, of letting out all the pain and memories that oppress you. When you pray, ask God to reconcile you with the person who hurt you, and see that person as being open to reconciliation. If you're praying for your own healing, see yourself as already healed while you say the words to God.

In either case, be assured as you pray that God wants reconciliation. Paul, a leader of the early Christian church, said, *"All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In the Old Testament are these assuring words: *"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds"* (Psalm 147:3). God is in the business of reconciliation.

Some people will tell you that time heals all wounds. By itself, time heals nothing. In fact, some things get even worse. Anger can turn into hatred and bitterness can grow even more bitter over time. The healing you seek requires the good use of time. Your responsibility is to pray for healing and to let go rather than hold onto the pain. As a result, God becomes involved in your problem, brings healing to your broken heart, and binds up *your* wounds.

Your concern about the unwillingness of others to receive the gift of reconciliation you desire is also God's concern. His desire for all people to be reconciled to each other and to Him was demonstrated in His willingness to let His Son, Jesus Christ, become one of us and work out the reconciliation in this world. He, too, however, lives with sorrow that not all people are interested in having what God offers.

Actually, it's a gift to be able to live in a positive way in our kind of world where disappointment is commonplace. God wants you to have this gift and offers it to you through Jesus. He knows what it's like to suffer and be rejected. There is comfort for us in knowing God shares our experience in that regard, as well as in all others.

Though God is unlimited in what He can do, He has chosen to allow this fallen world to continue and to permit us to go on living in it rather than putting an end to it. Much of what happens in this world runs counter to His good will for us. But God promises to use, in a positive way, even the negative things we experience in our life (see Romans 8:28).

Just as Jesus rose from the dead after His death on the cross, so God will ultimately bring us to the point of victory over every evil. For now, we wait with confident hope of triumph.

From Today into Tomorrow

God loves you more than anyone else in this world can love you. We all need to be reminded of His love over and over again, and churches do exactly that. If you don't have a church home, find one that recognizes we are all imperfect people who need God's forgiveness and clearly proclaims God's unconditional love. Lutheran Hour Ministries can help you find such a church in your area. Just call 1-800-876-9880.

Allow Jesus Christ to bring out *His* best in you as you forgive and live in the light of His love. Rejoice in the new beginning Jesus has given you. Enjoy the gracious forgiveness of Jesus Christ. You are dearly loved by a forgiving God!

*Check out LHM's online store
for a variety of ministry resources*

If you would like to get hard-copy booklets
of this item, you can do so by going to

<http://www.lhmgift.org/storefront/products.asp?by=topic&id=7>.

There you will find this and other **Project Connect** booklets,
with many titles in Spanish as well. Subjects like peace,
divorce, forgiveness, cancer, gambling, post-traumatic
stress disorder and loneliness are only a few of the topics
sensitively addressed in these concise, Christ-centered volumes.



Portions of this booklet are reprinted from the following:

"The Gift: Forgiveness Is for You" by Tim Wesemann, © 2001 Int'l LLL "How to Forgive and Forget"
by Dr. William E. Hulme, © 2001 Int'l LLL

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