



Forgiveness Is a Choice

by Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana

The Nuts and Bolts of Forgiveness

Thanks for checking out this booklet on forgiveness. Jesus forgives and you are called to forgive others. That can be so difficult. But think of what Jesus did for you and me! He poured out His life to forgive and free us from death. Forgiveness wipes clean the junk that holds us back. It brings into focus a life filled with hope and happiness. Forgiveness is important and essential in all aspects of our lives. As God rules your heart and the whole universe from horizon to horizon, there is no limit to this beautiful and powerful gift. Now, I hope I have your attention.

This booklet has stories, points to ponder, and thoughts on obtaining forgiveness in your life. As you read this ask yourself, “Does this apply to me?” Forgiveness is about relationships—so treat this like a conversation. Imagine we’re at a coffee shop and talking as friends.

I’m too busy.

Okay, I got it. Life is short and you’re in a hurry, but at the same time you’re curious about forgiveness. Check out these six points.

1. Forgiveness is a powerful healing gift that cleanses the whole world and restores the individual in and through God’s only Son, Jesus.
2. Forgiveness is demonstrated in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. By His actions, we have joy in our hearts and the ability to extend that same love to others.
3. Forgiveness restores broken relationships.
4. Forgiveness sets one free from guilt. There’s no more compensating for the guilt and feelings of shame. There’s no more medicating the pain and filling the emptiness with food, drugs, or alcohol.
5. Forgiveness allows us to stop hurting others because we have been hurt.
6. Forgiveness means wholeness and harmony are restored and peace prevails in our lives.

Let’s get going on forgiveness.

Forgiveness. It’s used over 190 times in the Bible. That makes it a pretty important concept. When you hear the word “forgive,” you might think it’s for the weak. But you know the real deal. To forgive is hard! At the same time, it pleases God and mirrors His love for humanity.

God invites us to partake of forgiveness. In the book of Psalms, the Lord tells us to *scarf down* His blessings like eating an incredible dessert! “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him” (Psalm 34:8). I like chocolate cheesecake. This dessert is amazing! Who can ever forget that wonderfully rich, frothy chocolate once it’s tasted? And the smell—the robust aroma from a cheesecake blended with chocolate is a marriage made in heaven. But what if I never had any cheesecake? How can I describe the experience? What would I know about the smooth, rich taste and smell as it moves across my senses of touch, smell, and taste? God knows His people well! He invites us to “hear, taste, see, and touch” the redemptive power of forgiveness through water, bread, and wine. Water and God’s Word of promise in

Baptism make us His child with all the rights and privileges that includes. Bread and wine are combined with God's Word for the forgiveness of acts not pleasing to God, temptations, and bad thoughts. When the words "you are forgiven" strike your ears and are fueled by the Holy Spirit, your soul is set free. We are a *hear-taste-see-and-touch* people. It is wonderful to be pardoned by a loving God in Christ. I can describe forgiveness because I have been forgiven.

Forgiveness is better than a fantastic dessert! Cheesecake is great, but after it's gone, that's it. In forgiveness, we have an unlimited source of joy. God's forgiveness resource runs deep. In Jesus there is the awesome ability to forgive others thousands of times over just as God forgives us. We are better for it, too. Forgiveness leads to less stress, a powerful inner peace, greater acceptance, and a fuller joy.

Many simply give up on the idea of forgiveness. It appears to have little relevance in their lives. They just don't *feel* it, so they ignore it. But who can blame them? Movies, TV, and gaming show us how revenge—not forgiveness—is the way life is. There are few plots today where the hero or heroine doesn't utterly trash the offending bad guy. With reckless abandon, evil is obliterated in a hail of gunfire, explosions, or physical torture. We live in a culture of revenge. Check out pretty much any recent movie. Do you remember when characters were identified by their actions and the color of their hat? The bad guy wore the black hat. The good guy wore the white one. Today, however, we think we are so sophisticated. Both hero and villain are killers. Both operate beyond the law. But here's the problem: both are self-determined and self-motivated as to who dies and how graphically he bites the dust. The bad guy kills for fun and profit. The good guy kills for enjoyment and the flair of killing. The lines are blurred: who's the hero?

If that weren't enough, when's the last time you played on your computer or gaming console? Many adventures in gaming are designed to fuel your anger. The manufacturers know that when your blood is *up* you release your fettered hostility. When you crush the enemy, you feel satisfied. What's really going on is that a chemical is released in your brain and a mild state of euphoria results. Gaming is a billion-dollar industry because it taps into this physical phenomenon. Whether intended or not, the message is that it's way cool to kill with reckless abandon and feel revenge as it surges through your veins.

But deep down inside you know that there is a *more excellent way*. Here's the "whatever" of forgiveness: it's the power of God's compassionate love in Jesus that trumps all that's thrown at you in life. So awesome is forgiveness that it calms the soul and, at the same time, builds and establishes relationships. Forgiveness applies in the home, the workplace, and in one's own heart. Let's get busy with it. Forgiveness helps us get through the rawness of life and persevere.

Who else wants to get in on this forgiveness ACTION?

Forgiveness is considered a critical component in healing. The medical community is looking at its healing applications. Don't be surprised that the medical world finds forgiveness as a secret weapon to health and long life. Doctors, medical specialists, psychologists, social workers, and pastoral counselors have all recognized that *refusing* to forgive kills both body and soul. There are many who have studied in detail the destruction brought on by harboring the desire to get even. Think of how your body and mind react. Check out how rapidly your heart beats, your head throbs, and your stomach twists in knots the next time you're cut off in traffic. Have you had a lousy week? Do you feel like everywhere you go you're being put down or kicked to the curb? Is your boss unappreciative? Does your family treat you like a second-class citizen? Have you got a co-worker who left you hanging with a big project? Maybe you're just tired and your body aches. The subject of forgiveness is for you.

Ever had the munchies and then plow down a giant bowl of ice cream, a bag of chips, or a few too many brews for no apparent reason? Truth be told, conflict may be driving your urge to eat or, in some cases, self-medicate. Lack of forgiveness is a big part of the issue. Is sleeping a problem? Sometimes it's an argument, a confrontation, or a re-awakened event that loops round and round in your head, driving you batty. Sometimes there's a whisper in the darkness that says, "You're a bum." It comes from someone you don't like very well and have decided you will *never* like very well. Hanging on to these lifelong grudges is pretty heavy stuff. Lack of forgiveness is at the root of many struggles we go through. This affects men and women. This is why so many call forgiveness a "gift." And it is. Christ won it on the cross. Its application is immediate and leads to peace and eternal life.

This is personal. (What are you thinking and feeling?)

Forgiveness allows us to confront the junk that clouds our memories and darkens our heart with guilt. The forgiveness of God in Christ is powerful. Forgiveness reaches into the past and brings healing to the *here and now*. The following paragraph has a list of troubling circumstances you may have encountered or brought on yourself. You're not reality challenged. You know what ugly looks like. It's offered to illustrate that forgiveness is possible, even in the darkest corners of our lives. By acknowledging the ugly in life, forgiveness leads to joy and freedom.

Do you have deep down hurts that keep you from being who you want to be? Have you hurt someone? Was it a malicious comment? Did you perhaps blog where you shouldn't have, and now you're in love with an old flame? It's wrong and it's killing you. Have you intentionally destroyed someone's stuff—perhaps “accidentally” throwing it in the trash? Did you bust it to pieces out of rage? Maybe you gave it away. Did you physically injure someone? Are you sitting in jail? Have you been molested or sexually assaulted as a kid—as an adult? Were you abused in a relationship? Are you the victim of a crime?

When you feel overcome with anger, give it up to God in Christ. When you are so hurt you want to put a “smack down” on the world, it's time to talk with someone before you act. If you're in counseling, continue to go; if you're taking medication, don't stop. If you have an injury that may be contributing to the raw feelings you have about someone or something, by all means do what it takes to get some help.

Forgiveness—what it is NOT:

- Forgiveness is not a position of weakness. It does not make you a loser with an L slapped on your forehead. It is not a lop-sided compromise or a complete giving in to the other person. To forgive means that you are strong. You are willing to lift the burden of pain off your shoulders and give it up to God. Some use the powerful phrase, “Leave it at the foot of the cross.” When the truth of forgiveness reaches into your soul, it lifts you up and sets you free.
- Forgiveness does not invalidate the pain. No way! Forgiveness gives you permission to acknowledge how badly you are hurt. It gives you the opportunity to speak of your abusive past, addictions, painful mistakes, or impulsive actions. Forgiveness opens the way to change your life. It offers freedom from the ball and chain of the past.
- Forgiveness is not a tool of manipulation. This requires discernment on your part. If you are involved in a dangerous relationship, seek forgiveness and get out. There is a distinct difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. We live in a fallen world where the power of Satan has influence and evil is present. You can forgive those who do you harm. But the cycle of abuse must end. Do not re-enter a relationship with someone who has hurt you. Bring in a third person to make sure it's the right thing. And it's best not to make that a relative or someone directly involved. Seek out a professional instead. There is a lot of backstory that goes on in abusive relationships. Those in the midst of abuse are often blind to the danger.
- Forgiveness is not easy, far from it. Naturally, there is one's pride to deal with, and it's been said that “no one ever choked to death swallowing his or her pride.” There is ego. There is, of course, the pain. Satan and the world want to portray forgiveness as something that is just too hard to do. One has to take a risk with forgiveness. Consider our Lord in this regard. Jesus entered our world and took on human form so that we can stand before God as a forgiven child.
- Forgiveness is a part of who we are as children of God. We are called upon to forgive whether we like it or not. What we discover when we forgive is a burden is lifted off our shoulders. We walk more upright. Our confidence is restored.

Forgiveness is a family “thing.”

The Bible is packed with beautiful words of forgiveness. Stories in Scripture prove that God loves His people and desires to forgive them. In Jeremiah 31:34, God declares, “No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of forgiveness often. He preaches it in the “Sermon on the Mount.” One of His parables is about an out-of-control son. It's found in Luke 15:11-31, and it tells us that forgiveness is a higher calling.

Though spurned and used by his son, the dad welcomes the renegade, wild man home in a loving embrace. Now forgiven, the father celebrates his son's return with a feast. The father forgives without regard for compensation or apology.

Forgiveness is found in the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. The first instance of forgiveness occurs in a family, and what a family! Talk about *family issues*. If you've ever wondered whether God loves you based on the quality and harmony of your family, or if He can work in terrible and absurd family situations, then spend a couple of minutes with Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau.

You have got to check this out! The boys are twins. But they are as different as night and day. Esau is the big brother—a man's man. He's the dude you want to take on a serious bear hunt to Alaska. He's an outdoorsman and a hunter—a predator like a wolf among prey.

Jacob, on the other hand, was the genteel younger brother. He's portrayed as a "mama's boy." He would rather stay at home and be with mom. The two brothers are a picture of opposites, different ends of a magnet.

Jacob wants the trophy of a first-born child. Although a twin, he was born second. In this case, he was "first loser." With the prompting of "dear, old mom," Jacob wears a disguise to fool his blind, old, dying father into thinking he is Esau. To *double-down* and guarantee he gets the prized first-born benefits, he cunningly offers Esau a bowl of soup—with a catch. Before Esau can whoof it down, he must promise Jacob his "rights" as big brother. For whatever reason, Esau accepts the soup as a fair price for the inheritance. So with mom's help, Jacob fools dad on his death bed and inherits it all: the land, sheep, house, and home.

Needless to say, Esau was not pleased with this turn of events. The hurt must have been overwhelming to be betrayed by his punk little brother. Saddled with the shame of being outwitted by someone so weak and betrayed by his own mother, Esau burns with thoughts of killing his brother, but Jacob bolts. After forming an army of fellow hunters, Esau goes after Jacob. But when they meet, something appears that's more powerful than fists or clubs or knives. Esau *sees* his brother Jacob and, overwhelmed, embraces and forgives him. Esau is free from the burning desire to hunt his brother down and kill him. He loves his brother even though Jacob deeply hurt him. In the end, it is Esau who leaves with a burden lifted. Through simple forgiveness, God changes hearts blackened by injustice and anger. Jacob wrestles with God who changes his name to Israel. From his bloodline come David, Solomon, and Jesus.

POINTS TO PONDER:

Through Esau and Jacob, think about how God shows us a more excellent way.

1. Ever been *scorned* by a family member? You now have permission to forgive them.
2. Ever been hurt by a parent who sees you as a *second-class citizen* in your own home? You can forgive them.
3. Ever *been taken advantage of or out-manuevered* by a family member over any type of property— car, house, land, money, insurance, or estate settlement? You can forgive them.
4. Have you ever undercut a family member? Have you taken advantage of them? Now is the time to *ask* for forgiveness.

Forgiveness can crush addiction.

This is an event that comes out of the ugliness of life. A person is recovering from addiction. He or she is a multiple rehab failure. At the moment of breaking free, there's another failure ... but why? Why, when he's so close to recovery, is there another slip? He appears to be a slave of addiction. What's the reason? The brutal feeling of withdrawal has passed. The desire to feel high sailed years ago. The pressures of life may be difficult but are now manageable. Still, somehow, the soul feels dark, empty, and hollow. Caseworkers, family, and friends sense this hopelessness and try to counter the futility with encouragement. The person thanks them for the vote of confidence, but in the end still feels numb and "dirty."

There is a flood of memories. The past looms its head. It was the sexual assault! The perpetrator is a trusted member in the community. No one knows it happened because you kept it a secret. The shame drives down deep and the message is chiseled into the heart: "You are dirty ... filthy." The merry-go-round of agony is full of anger, self-loathing, and overcompensating. There are thoughts of suicide. The anger! This doesn't happen to good little children. The secret is locked away from family and friends.

Then the guilt follows. The weight of self-blame crushes your heart. Even though you were a child, you blame yourself: “God would not love me. It is better to leave the church than get kicked out.” Then comes the sexual acting out. This isn’t about love, lust, or pleasure; it’s about control. You use sex as a tool to hurt and tear others down. Relief comes by way of self-medication. But it is short lived. The addiction is now in control: you have no job, and the family is tired of the thefts and fellow addicts coming around the house.

Then a person of kindness and compassion introduces you to God—the God who is foreign to you. The words “all are sinners and in need of forgiveness” carry a new and fresh meaning. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again. God in Christ stands ready to lavish freedom from addiction and pain by way of the cross—and with freedom comes *true forgiveness*.

All this time you thought forgiveness was for “little sins” like cutting someone off in traffic, being late for work, telling a “white lie.” It never seemed available to a druggie, a habitual liar, a thief, or someone who hates himself. Like a breath of cool mountain air, forgiveness pulls you from the dungeon of despair and unlocks the shackles of addiction. Forgiveness is Christ Himself lifting the burden of the sexual assault. Forgiveness dilutes the power of the perpetrator to nothing. Through the Holy Spirit, one has the power—yes, the *power*—to forgive the one who set the whole mess and hellish experience in motion.

Forgiveness is not absolving. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Crime warrants punishment. Forgiveness is saying, “Lord Jesus, I’m tired of carrying this junk in my life. I am taking off the burden of my anger and pain. I lay it at the foot of the cross!” Forgiveness is like a giant weight being taken off one’s shoulder! Gone is the desire to control others through sex or drugs. Construction replaces destruction. Gone is the fear of failure. Positive change occurs. The heart is set free by the act of forgiving and being forgiven. Sleep returns, as does a desire to be healthy and to have a more positive outlook on life. Relationships built on trust become the norm. You have an abiding sense of peace. A perspective of God as merely angry and judgmental is replaced with a compassionate and forgiving Jesus. It’s going to take time to rebuild one’s life. That’s cool; it’s possible in Christ.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. It’s true. Bad things do happen in life, but God triumphs!
2. Do you know someone like this? If you were talking to them about forgiveness, what would you say?
3. Are there things in your life you are ashamed of? It’s time to surrender them to a loving Savior.

Forgiveness is possible, even in marriage.

Check this out. If you’re married, *you know* about forgiveness. Couples may “love, honor, and cherish” the banner of their commitment, but without forgiveness none of those three things is going to happen. Forgiveness in Christ repairs damaged relationships and brings couples through terrible situations.

There’s a way back from the brink.

They were a good-looking couple: a perfect model for the plastic bride and groom that sit on wedding cakes. He considers himself a man of principle and self-confidence. He’s a person of faith, growing up in a religious family. Due to his travel schedule, he isn’t able to make it to church like he wants. The wife is a petite woman. She carries herself with an air of assertiveness. She, too, is religious. Both met at church when they were 13 years old. Their families know each other. Up to this point, they’ve been married five years and have two kids.

But they also have a 300-pound gorilla in their lives. For a long moment, they stare anywhere but at each other. Tears well up in their eyes. The wife speaks first. “I love you. When you’re gone I miss you. It stinks that you leave all the time.” The husband looks down. He says nothing. His face is twisted in pain to hold back the floodgate of remorse. The wife continues. “I didn’t plan on meeting anyone else. We have two kids, our families know each other.” She was pleading, “I don’t know what happened. The guy paid attention to me. He made me feel special. I had an affair. We had sex.” The husband exhales loudly as the wife sits and sobs. It’s his turn to talk. After a long pause, he draws his breath and says, “That’s why I asked who it was. You wouldn’t tell me. Remember when I asked what he looked like?” The wife looks up. “Yeah, I remember. I told you he had dark hair, was athletic, had brown eyes.” Another pause. This one’s longer than the last. The husband is shaking nervously, “So I went out bar hopping, and I found a woman who was the counterpart to your

guy. She was the same age, the same likenesses. I poured on the charm. We had sex. I did it to teach you a lesson!" But there is more to the story. The tension breaks as he wails, "Now the woman, whose name I barely know, is pregnant!" He cries hard, wishing he could wash it all away. His wife is sobbing uncontrollably.

They chose to mend the marriage. They go to church as a family. They think back to stories of their family going through the Great Depression. Eventually they realize it's their guilt that's killing their marriage. In time they come together as a husband and wife. They talk to the local pastor. He tells them about the power of Christ to forgive sins, regardless of how deeply they hurt someone. They stay together. Their commitment is to talk more. They're still married. He is in a different line of work. He takes full responsibility for the child he fathered out of wedlock. They have had an uphill battle to win back trust. But forgiveness in Christ wins out.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. What happened? Can you see what went wrong?
2. Lack of forgiveness is destructive. In this case, the marital void was filled with revenge.
3. Is forgiveness possible? Would you forgive in these circumstances? Could you forgive in such a situation?

What about when someone won't forgive you?

Here's what one spouse had to say about the idea of forgiveness: "I hate you. My disgust and loathing fuels my will to live. I hate you so much. If I could ask for anything in the world, it would be that I wake up and the first thing I hear is that you're dead."

"I tried!" How many times has that come out of your mouth? God tells us to forgive. You're convinced. You get it and you are a believer in forgiveness. So what happens when someone won't forgive *you*? Their burning anger and smoldering hatred is fired in your direction. You try to close the loop: you offer impassioned pleas on bended knee, flowers, a gift card, cash, even a promise to change your life. Nothing works. The damage is done and the wall of hostility is impenetrable! The person you hurt is entrenched in their dislike and desire not to forgive. This can go on for months and even years. Here are some thoughts and ideas.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. It's going to happen. Despite your best efforts, you fail. Be saddened, seek forgiveness, but don't be surprised. We are flawed without the redemptive love of Christ.
2. If you're doing something offensive and hurtful, then stop it. Use common sense. Forgiveness can't take place until there is a change in behavior.
3. The depth of their revulsion is theirs to own. Make it your prayer that someday they will forgive. Jesus tells us to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (see Matthew 5:44).
4. The offended person is not permitted to humiliate you. Despite what you've done, you're not their emotional punching bag. Being demeaned and shamed on the Internet or in any other public forum is not acceptable.
5. Be real. Honestly and openly apologize. Don't blame anybody or anything for the offense. The person hurt is not interested in your emotional issues, money problems or how tired or lonely you feel. Pull it together and say, "I am sorry." Explain the offense and how it hurt them. Close out by saying, "Please forgive me."

Remember that *in Christ forgiveness is powerful and life-changing*. Check out the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus expends a tremendous amount of energy telling His hearers that forgiveness is something you must do. "Leave your gift at the altar and be reconciled with your brother" (see Matthew 5:24). When Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" in Matthew 6:12, He wants us to ask God to forgive and, in turn, wipe clean the anger and pain we hold against others. Just to make sure we're listening, Jesus continues, "For if you forgive others their sins, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15). Lack of forgiveness is serious business and creates a deep chasm between the person and God's love. Pray for those that don't forgive you.

There's forgiveness in the workplace.

The workplace is often a place where forgiveness is essential. We enjoy what we do for a living. There is a great feeling of satisfaction in accomplishing a job, task, or mission. Many enjoy the feeling of teamwork and the spirit of competition with

other businesses. Of course, most people work because they need the pay. Responsibilities are expensive. We are a nine-to-five people, and our place of employment is a community where the need for forgiveness is important.

Does this sound like you? A good employee, you're interested in moving up the ladder. The potential for advancement energizes you. You work until the job is done. You delegate and take charge as it's appropriate. As a team player no one's better, and your annual review shows it.

So why is work so challenging? The problem is not the product, the work hours, the commute, the corporate ethics, or the facility. What then is the problem? It's the people. Agh! Maybe you've seen at least one of these where you're employed: a coworker who dominates meetings and drones on and on, or the one who's always sick—miraculously ill on Fridays and Mondays. There's the coworker you've been feuding with. (The odd thing is, at this point, neither remembers why.) Down the hall is the sulking friend who's still angry about his non-select for promotion. Two desks over is the colleague who's quiet and withdrawn; her spouse is dying of cancer. At the end of the row is the employee with more dangling religious trinkets than a Christian bookstore. But what a mouth! When she swears, paint starts to peel. To top it off, the supervisor can't make a decision to save his life! When the corporate office calls and deadlines nip at his heels he turns into the boss from hell—abrupt, mean-spirited, and rough on the staff. You are reminded of the fleet commander in the movie *Ben Hur*, as he addressed the condemned oarsmen: "Row well and live." The alternative, of course, was not a good one.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. Forgiveness in the workplace fulfills that calling of God to be a "beacon on a hill."
2. Forgiveness helps with harmony at work. When is the last time you prayed for your coworkers? We have a responsibility to pray for all of those with whom we have contact. So pray for your colleagues. That includes those you like and those who rub you the wrong way.
3. Forgiveness helps us leave the office a better place than we found it.
4. Forgiveness helps us understand the role of authority as part of God's great plan. "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. ..." (Romans 13:1a). We are to pray for our boss. God places those folks in authority over us.
5. When is the last time you asked a fellow worker to forgive you?

The workplace is a fertile ground to sow the seeds of forgiveness. Take note: forgiveness extends beyond church and family. It applies to the workplace; sometimes, *especially* in the workplace.

Forgiveness—it's the unfinished, beautiful story.

What follows is not my own story. A spiritual father named Pastor Michael told it. He is now in glory, benefiting from the forgiveness of Christ. The story relates how the lack of forgiveness is a dangerous burden.

"WEARINESS OF THE WEAPON – FORGIVENESS SET FREE"

Not long ago, an "unsettled" man was looking for a change. He slept poorly and seemed unable to develop deep, lasting relationships. One day he decided to go for a drive in the country. To his astonishment he found a monastery-like place of refuge. It was surrounded by a magnificent wall made of stone! The entrance had huge oak doors covered with Bible stories. He built up his courage and knocked. A kindly, old pastor opened the doors and welcomed him in. The man felt something was missing in his life and he joined the group. He was given a flax-colored tunic. The only house rule was everything was voluntary. Cool, he thought, he could leave at any time. No pressure.

Aside from prayer, worship, and meditation, the residents worked a large vineyard. The labor was hard. He didn't mind working with his hands. It gave him a feeling of satisfaction. The man was assigned a mentor to help while at the community. This spiritual father looked quite a bit like his pastor back home. A relationship of trust developed. Something wasn't right though, and the spiritual father knew. When kneeling for prayer, the man would gasp in pain. When pruning vines, he had difficulty turning the shovel or rake. On more than one occasion, the spiritual father saw blood seep through the young man's clothes. When the topic of forgiveness came up he would share a story about his past, but then, suddenly, he would become tight-lipped about details. The stories were never complete or whole—just like this man.

One day they were alone in the vineyard pruning and dressing the vines. The man spoke first, "I've got something I'd like to show you." There was a pause again. "It's time," the man continued. In a relaxed, pastoral way, the spiritual father said, "Sure." The young man loosened the rope around his tunic and revealed a very large pistol—a .44 Magnum! This canon was made famous in the *Dirty Harry* movies. The man's gun had no safety. It was rusty, dirty, and fully loaded: a very dangerous weapon. He had been packing heat for years and couldn't remember why. The weapon had worn a terrible sore into his side. It hurt when he turned suddenly or knelt in prayer. Occasionally, it drilled into his side and made him bleed.

The spiritual father asked him, "Been carrying that thing long?" The man replied, "Yeah, a long time. Man! It causes pain; it's killing me! I can't have friends because the gun's in the way. It's deadly. This thing has hurt others." He points to his side. "It hurt me over the years." The spiritual father asked, "You showed me the weapon. Now what would you like me to do?" The man thought for a minute. "I'd like to get rid of it, but I don't know how." The spiritual father then asked, "Do you feel comfortable giving it to me?" "I don't know," replied the man. Gingerly, he loosened the tattered holster and handed the weapon to the spiritual father.

The man misses the pain of the gun. For years it's the only *feeling* he knew. As the days pass, the man occasionally asks to see the gun. The spiritual father spends time with the man, they talk and the feeling passes. The man continues to feel better. Giving the gun over was the right decision; he knows that. He walks upright and seems happier. The burden is gone.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. How is forgiveness like this story?
2. Is it possible to be deeply religious and carry difficult burdens?
3. Does God love the man even though he carries a weapon?
4. Have you asked someone to help you be forgiven?
5. How do you think the story will end?
6. Does everyone move at the same pace when they seek forgiveness?

What about forgiveness and you?

We don't wake up in the morning planning to hurt others. Stuff happens. Were there words spoken that deeply hurt a loved one? Could it be you caused someone injury? Maybe you feel guilt over an event that ended in death. Guilt is a heavy weight to carry. Self-hatred can consume you like a raging brushfire. The roadblocks to forgiveness are obvious: pride, selfishness, and an unwillingness to admit you're wrong. It's easy to feel like you're getting the short end of the stick. We can be vindictive and revengeful if we do not seek forgiveness.

But there is another way, a better way. God knows where you're at and seeks to restore you in a wonderful relationship with Him.

Though you may feel beaten down like a whipped dog, remember there is a way to joy and peace. Ask God to pardon your sins for Jesus' sake. Be real and tell Him what breaks your heart. The power is in His forgiveness.

A four-step plan for forgiveness:

Here are a few ideas on how one seeks forgiveness. These are only suggestions. If they do not work for you, perhaps you can pass them along to others.

The four steps of forgiveness: **CCAA**. Many of you have seen these before. We teach them to our young people in church, and they're golden because they work. Before you begin, here are a couple of ground rules: First, remember it is God who has provided forgiveness to us as a wonderful gift. Second, in order for the process to work, all four steps need to be followed and in the correct order. We all reach that point of forgiveness at differing speeds.

Contrition (broken-heartedness) Seek to know true sorrow over what you have done. If a person is not sorry, it's hard to believe that one is asking forgiveness in a spirit of sincerity. A broken heart means looking inside yourself and seeing the heart is heavily burdened by what happened.

Confession (acknowledgment) No good thing can come from harboring our sins. If we bottle up the guilt, it will come out in other unhealthy ways. To say the words, “I’m sorry, please forgive me” is a vehicle to newness in relationships.

Absolution (freedom) Just as important as being broken-hearted and acknowledging our wrongdoing is the important action of being set free. *You* don’t do the absolving. This is where God, or one representing Him, or the person you’ve offended, sets you free. It is the *privilege* of the person who was wronged to extend his or her forgiveness. God who sees and hears everything gives you the opportunity to say you are sorry.

Amendment (positive change) “To amend” means more than simply changing or modifying one’s behavior, actions, and attitudes. To amend means to change for the better. It is a part of forgiveness we must do. A shepherd I knew once said there is “no forgiveness without renewal of life.”

Here is an example of **CCAA**: We take the pain (**contrition**) that causes us to grieve and express our anguish (**confession**). Then we seek the clearing of our guilt (**absolution**) from either the person we offended or God’s representative, a pastor. Finally, we move in a positive direction (**amendment**) and actively seek to change our thoughts, words, and actions.

F-O-R-G-I-V-E

To achieve forgiveness-awareness, try these actions:

- Forgiveness walks with friends and loved ones. Learn to let go.
- Observe it in your devotional life.
- Relationships—talk about forgiveness and its greatness to your spouse and kids.
- **Grow**: look back on your faith journey and how Christ has been with you always.
- Individually: in your alone time, take forgiveness with you.
- **Victor**, not victim or vindictive. Rise above it. Forgiveness removes the need for revenge.
- **Eternal**. Make a difference in the world. Jesus commands us to forgive.

If you can’t say it ... write it.

If the person who was wronged is no longer alive, it has been proven by numerous studies that writing brings about healing. Here is something you can try:

1. Find a quiet place where you can write.
2. Set a timer for 15 minutes.
3. Write a prayer to God about the person you have hurt and your need to be forgiven.
4. When finished you can do whatever you like. Read it aloud. Share it with a friend or your pastor. This is the beginning of a “prayer journal.”

There’s a place where the forgiven gather.

1. Church. You’ve got to *hear* the message of God’s forgiveness in Christ. This is so important. It is so real. As soon as the next church service comes around, get yourself there. Show up early. There are people there just like you with similar struggles, problems, relatives, and issues they wrestle with. When the pastor announces forgiveness and the sign of the cross is made, it’s as real as it gets! The burden is lifted; the shackles are loosed. You are forgiven and free!
2. Church isn’t the place to be entertained. Don’t go expecting to sit back and be amused. Change your perspective. Go to be forgiven!
3. Church is where Christ welcomes you. God knows how you feel. It’s the devil who doesn’t want you to go. What a comfort to know you are set free by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection! It’s Christ imparting His gift. Church is where forgiveness strikes your ears and touches your soul.

It’s time to forgive!

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