A few weeks ago, we were talking with a good friend who made a comment that really got us thinking. He said he could not forgive a particular person because that person had not asked him for forgiveness. Are we held back from forgiveness in this way? What are the rules about forgiveness? And who exactly are we supposed to forgive? This made for some lively discussion in the car on the way home.

Out of that discussion grew an intense desire to find out all we could about forgiveness. That is what this Seeds for Growth grew out of. We figured if we struggled over the issues of forgiveness, others must as well.

**We started with the basics: what does forgiveness mean?**

We found that forgiveness has two faces. First, it means “to cancel a debt, to pardon or remit guilt.” That is what we had always thought it meant. But there is a second definition of forgiveness — to relinquish resentment against the debtor. This is harder to understand. We can cancel a debt, but how do we cancel a feeling?

Did you know the Bible does not define forgiveness? But it certainly gives us a model... God Himself. God cancels the debt and pardons those who confess and repent. 1 John 1:9 states this plainly, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* 2 Peter 3:9 says, *...He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Throughout Scripture it is clear that if we repent, God cancels our debt and pardons us; if we do not repent, He does not pardon. His righteousness demands repentance and cleansing before restoration. So God does not always forgive according to the first definition of forgiveness. He forgives only those who repent.

But what about the second definition, the part about relinquishing resentment? God always forgives in this way. He never holds resentment or bitterness against anyone, whether they repent or not. Some take Jesus’ words from the cross, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34), as a blanket kind of forgiveness for all people. But the forgiveness the Father extended to those mocking and jeering beneath the cross could not have been pardon for their sin in crucifying Jesus, for later in Acts 3 they are still held accountable. **You handed him over to be killed** (verse 13). **You disinOwn the Holy and Righteous One** (verse 14).

**He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**

As Jesus, suffering incredibly, looked down upon His tormentors, He refused to hold resentment against them. Can you picture the Father watching these same people crying out for His Son’s blood? Yet He held no bitterness toward them. Can you imagine that kind of forgiveness?

**What do these two faces of forgiveness mean to us in our struggle to forgive?**

Let’s go back to the first definition: to pardon or cancel the debt of the offender. There are two Greek words used in Scripture translated as “forgive.” The first word is *Aphiemi* — to let off; to cancel the debt; to set free from the penalty of sin. God canceled my debt of sin that long ago day when I turned to Him, confessed and repented of my sins. And ever since, each time I ask Him to forgive me when I am selfish or proud, He pardons me and restores me to fellowship with Him.

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:8-12).**

**Forgiving Others**

God has forgiven us of so much; He has canceled our debt of sin. Now we must be ready to pardon others. If someone who has wounded us comes and asks our forgiveness, we have only one option — to cancel their debt. From Jesus’s own lips: *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins* (Matthew 6:14-15). When Jesus speaks again of forgiveness later in chapter 18, He adds the phrase *...forgive your brother from your heart* (verse 35).

At a spiritually low point in her life, Susan made a reckless choice to have an affair with a co-worker in her office. When she confessed her sin and betrayal to her husband Ken, he was so deeply hurt he declared he could never forgive her. Later, he told her he might forgive her if she proved to him over a period of time that she was truly sorry. Susan was repentant and gladly received even his tentative forgiveness. Months later, Ken confessed to Susan that he had not really forgiven her, for he had not been willing to set aside his claim to justice — to see her punished for hurting him. It took much more time, but finally Ken was able to forgive Susan from his heart.

When people say, “I forgive, but I just can’t forget,” what they usually mean is, “I can’t let it go. I won’t forgive.” That is what Ken was saying until he learned how to forgive like God forgives... completely, unconditionally, without grudging. Scripture describes in a picturesque way how God chooses to
forgive and forget. Micah 7:19 says
You...hurl all our iniquities into the
depths of the sea. Ker-plunk! There
they go! Corrie Ten Boom used to add,
“And then, Beloved, He puts up a no-
fishing sign.” We, as human beings
can not choose to forever put the hurt
out of our minds, but we can choose to
never dredge it up again. We can
choose to not hold it over the
offender’s head.

Reconciliation
Because God has forgiven and keeps
on forgiving us, He commands His
children to be reconciled to each
other. Whether we have wronged
someone as in Matthew 5:22-24, or
have been wronged as in Matthew
18:15, we are responsible to seek
reconciliation. That’s right – no matter
who started it, we are responsible to try
to end it. So when you and your mate
quarrel, no matter who hurt who first,
you each have the responsibility to
make the first move to reconcile.

Forgiveness and Consequences
When we cancel the debt of the
person who has wounded us, it
does not necessarily mean we can
cancel their consequences. Remember the
young woman who earlier this year
(1998) was on death row in
Texas? She had brutally murdered a
family, but turned to Go
in prison.

Texas? was on death row in
young woman who earlier this year
their consequences.

Whether you agree with that
decision or not, it illustrates the reality
that even when we repent and are
forgiven, we may still have to face the
consequences of our sin. Joe was an
alcoholic, and when he was drunk, he
was verbally and physically
abusive. He always felt sorry for what
he had done after he sobered up, and
for years Karen accepted his apologies
and canceled his debt to her over and
over again. Finally, Karen realized that
sometimes the most loving thing you
can do for someone is to hold them
accountable. Instead of continuing to
accept Joe’s apologies, she confronted
him with the reality of their
situation. She told him that because
she loved him deeply, the free ride was
over. He had to get serious help or
leave. That was Joe’s wake up call,
and with professional help he started to
change his behavior instead of merely
feeling sorry about it. Having to accept
the consequences for his behavior was
the best and most loving thing for Joe.

Sometimes, forgiving in the sense of
canceling the debt is not in our hands,
especially when the offender does not
seek our forgiveness. Tom and Darcy
fight a continual fight for the welfare of
Tom’s children by his first
marriage. His former wife Connie on
one hand bribes the children with
tangible “things” and intangible
promises of “no rules” if they will
come and live with her, while on the
other hand, telling them they are no
good and unworthy of her love. To
protect the children from this is
impossible even though Tom and
Darcy make herculean efforts to do
so. Must they cancel Connie’s debt of
offense and pardon her? No. She has
not repented and asked their
forgiveness. But they must relinquish
their resentment and bitterness against
her or it will eat them alive. Practicing
the second side of forgiveness will
keep them sane and balanced and help
them have peace amidst the turmoil.

We’ll talk more about the second
side of forgiveness in the next Seeds
for Growth. How do we relinquish
resentment against someone who has
wounded us? That’s what most of us
struggle with, isn’t it? In the
meantime, we hope these few thoughts
about forgiveness have given you
something to think about. We
welcome your thoughts and comments
on the subject. We’d like to hear your
stories about how God has worked
forgiveness in your life.

Note: All names have been changed and
details omitted for the sake of confidentiality.

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