

# *GTO Seeds for Growth, Volume #45*

## *The Faces of Forgiveness (Part 2 of 2)*

By Harold & Bette Gillogly

Forgiveness. A subject so deep and wide, most of us flounder around in it, struggling just to stay afloat. To be honest, we're in way over our heads, like ducks that haven't quite gotten the hang of swimming. To make things worse, the people we rub against every day have a way of ruffling our feathers, and whether the pain goes deep or runs shallow, we have trouble smoothing those feathers by forbearing and forgiving.

We discovered in the last *Seeds for Growth* that forgiveness has two faces: first, to cancel the debt and pardon our debtor and secondly, to relinquish or release resentment against our debtor. Neither face is easy to look at, for they both demand unselfishness from us. Last time we talked mostly about forgiveness' first face – canceling the debt and setting the debtor free from the penalty of the offense. This time we are going to look closely into the second face of forgiveness – releasing our resentment and bitterness against our debtors. Not making a debtor pay for his offense is one thing, but actually giving up our **right to feel wronged**? Much harder! This takes a lot of grace.

### **The second face of forgiveness**

Speaking of grace, that is what the second word translated in the New Testament as “forgive” actually means – “to grace.” *Charizomai* means to grace with the free gift of forgiveness, to bestow the favor of forgiveness unconditionally. God calls us to give this kind of grace in Ephesians 4:32. *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other [releasing our bitterness and gracing them freely with forgiveness], just as in Christ God forgave you [giving you His free, undeserved gift of forgiveness].*

God calls us to do the same kind of forgiving He does, the unconditional kind, the undeserved kind. Don't we usually hold on to our unforgiveness – our resentment and bitterness – because we feel our debtor just does not *deserve* our forgiveness? But does God forgive you and me because we deserve His forgive-ness? You know the answer to that one, don't you? We could **never** be

worthy of God's forgiveness. Our only hope is for Him to grace us with His free gift of forgiveness. And *He calls us to give the same free gift.*

### **A parable about forgiveness**

Jesus tells a thought-provoking parable in Matthew 18:23-35, about a servant who owes his master millions of dollars. The servant can't pay the debt, so he falls on his knees before his master and begs for mercy. His master cancels his debt and flat out forgives him. The servant says, “Thanks,” and gets up and leaves. On his way out he meets a fellow servant who owes him a couple of bucks. This fellow begs the servant for mercy, but the servant who was forgiven so much will not forgive even a little. What an ungrateful jerk! Who does he think he is? Well, when the master hears about this, he calls the servant back in and asks, “Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” And then he reinstates the servant's debt and has him thrown in jail.

**God calls us to do the same kind of forgiving He does.**

Jesus wraps up this parable with one comment: *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.* You and I come to God with a debt of sin so big **we could never pay it.** We could never suffer enough or do enough or say enough to pay for our debt of sin. So we ask for mercy. And lo and behold, God gives it to us – freely. We say “Thanks” and get up and leave. Then our mate says something that hurts our feelings, or they don't do or say what we want them to. Let's face it, they just don't treat us like we deserve to be treated. Forgive them? Not on your life! They don't deserve it. And so we lock a fist full of resentment in our heart, and hold it there because we don't think our mate deserves our forgiveness.

Who do we think we are? We who have been forgiven millions of dollars

worth of debt – we can't forgive a few lousy bucks? Even if you say, “But my mate has hurt me deeply,” you must still look at the comparison. No sin against us can *ever compare* with our debt of sin against God. And so *no sin is ever too big to forgive.*

### **Bitterness eats us up**

The world is full of wounded husbands and wives, wounded moms and dads, and wounded brothers, sisters and friends who refuse to let the guilty person go. They will not relinquish their bitterness and resentment, and the unforgiveness eats away at their souls. Frederick Buechner writes “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.” ([Wishful Thinking](#), Harper)

Have you noticed that when you are **full** of resentment, that is the very time you feel the **emptiest**? Now you know why.

### **Appropriate and Inappropriate feelings**

When it comes to forgiveness, sorting out our feelings is hard to do. That is what makes this face of forgiveness so tricky. Some of our feelings may be perfectly appropriate, and some are not. Suppose you were mugged by a drug addict. He left you badly beaten with broken ribs, a concussion and two black eyes. He was caught, tried and convicted, and is serving a two year prison sentence. You have pardoned him; you have canceled his debt. He still has a debt to society, but no longer has a personal debt to you. You may even have chosen to release your resentment toward him, and no longer hold any bitter feelings against him. One day there is a knock at your door. When you open your front door, there he is, bigger than life. How do you

## Faces of Forgiveness (cont')

feel? Apprehensive...fearful...cautious ... mistrusting...help, call 911? All appropriate feelings.

Forgiving someone does not mean you get stupid! You don't immediately pour all your trust back into someone who has deeply wounded you. But if you release your resentment toward them, you can grace them with the opportunity to *earn back your trust*. Remember Susan and Ken, the couple we told you about in the last *Seeds*? Susan slashed Ken's heart open with her unfaithfulness. The wound was deep and painful. But when he gave up his need to see her punished and released his resentment against her, he also graced her with a **second chance**. Susan grabbed that second chance, and she and Ken are restored and happily married today. But restoration took time and patience and humility, and during that time Ken had to often reaffirm his commitment to forgive – to let go of all bitterness.

So when it comes to the feelings wrapped up in our process of forgiveness, apprehension, caution, and even mistrust might be perfectly **appropriate**. But bitterness and resentment are always **inappropriate**, because they keep the wounds from healing.

### How do we get those forgiving feelings?

Feelings of forgiveness do not happen in a vacuum. We don't wake up one morning and say, "I'm not going to feel

resentment toward a certain person anymore. Presto – chango!" Nope, doesn't happen that way. Our emotions change as we change our behavior. We can't just *say*, we have to *do*. Jesus tells us the secret of *feeling* forgiveness. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you* (Luke 6:27-28). Whoa! You mean we have to **learn to love the people who offend us**? 'Fraid so. How can we possibly do that? We change our behavior toward them. When we feel like spitting in their face, we are **kind and good to them** instead. When we feel like cursing them and telling everybody how terrible they are, we **bless them and speak well of them** instead. When we wish them a little fire and brimstone, we **pray for them** – not for our sake but for theirs. And eventually **our feelings toward them will change**. The bitterness and resentment will seep away. We'll start to *feel* like we really do forgive them.

**Forgiving does not mean you get stupid.**

Jesus said if you treat those who offend you in this way, *...then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*

(Luke 6:35-36). When we choose to be merciful and forgive like the Father, the Holy Spirit will enable us to follow through on that choice. And Jesus Himself promises that when we give up our feelings of resentment and forgive from the heart, we will reap a great reward. Our hard old hearts will soften, and peace will permeate our soul (Colossians 3:15). **Forgiveness is the key to peace** – peace in our hearts and peace in our homes. And what's more, we will inherit a blessing, not only for ourselves, but for our whole family (1Peter 3:9).

### Now what?

We have looked into the two faces of forgiveness: first to cancel the debt and set the debtor free from the penalty of the offense, and secondly, to release our resentment and bitterness against the debtor. Now, what are you going to do? Maybe you don't need to do anything. Perhaps you've already got forgiveness down pat. You harbor no resentment toward anyone. Great! But on the other hand, maybe you do need to do something. Perhaps you realize you **are** clinging to some bitterness – maybe even some very old bitterness. It's time to let it go. It's time to do good to them, to bless them, to pray for them. It's time to know real peace – without regrets. *We are never more like God than when we forgive.*

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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 us 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

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

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** disowned the Holy and Righteous One (verse 14).

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

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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 **Faces of Forgiveness** (cont’)

*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 5:23-24, 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 God and repented

in prison. As her execution date drew near, some Christian leaders called for her life to be spared. However, the consequences for her behavior were not in their hands, they were in the hands of the state of Texas which held her accountable and executed her on the appointed day.

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

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

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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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