

GTO Seeds for Growth

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.*

Growing Toward Oneness Marriage Ministries provides books, CD's and other marriage resources and services to enrich your marriage.

Please visit their website at www.marriages.net

If you would like to order the above resources or receive more information contact:

GTO Marriage Ministries, 2436 Haskell Drive, Antioch, TN 37013

TOLL-FREE order line: **1-800-546-5486** or order online at www.marriages.net

Email: gtocentral@marriages.net

This is a publication of **GTO Marriages Ministries** and may be copied and distributed without permission.

GTO Marriage Ministries is a non-profit ministry supported by charitable donations from individuals and churches.

If you would like to contribute to this marriage ministry, got to www.marriages.net and click the "**Donate Now**" button.