

# **Somebody Help Me Forgive!**

When Debts Are Owed and Justice Unmet

*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* Matthew 6:12

I hesitate to begin any discussion about forgiving others because that aspect of our Christian faith has been taught in so many ways throughout the centuries that you might be wondering what more could possibly be said?

Before I answer that question, let me tell you a story. I recently attended a small-group class called Freedom. It's a foundational class that teaches some of the basics of Christian faith. One evening, forgiveness was the topic. I had carpooled with several other people to the meeting place. After the forgiveness class, while we drove together, one woman confessed that she still struggled with forgiveness after she had tried everything she was told to try. In a later class, another woman confided that she was unable to recover from a childhood trauma. The response of her fellow classmates was loud and immediate. She was instructed to forgive, to bless the offender, to replace her hurt with a scripture, and on it went. She was crushed before she told us about her struggle and more crushed afterwards. It was painful to watch.

Apparently, something more needs to be said about WHAT forgiveness is and HOW to forgive. I do not think I need to sell you on the idea that forgiveness is an essential aspect of our faith. You have probably been sold that more than enough. Let's get down to the what and how of forgiveness.

## **What Forgiveness Is**

Forgiveness means to stop requiring payment of a debt that is owed to you. That is it. What kind of debt am I talking about? This kind: Someone harms you in any way. Now they owe you a debt. Sounds simple, right? Just get paid back! Except whoever owes the debt is pretty much unable to repay it.

Here is how the Lord explained it to me. I had a catastrophic church experience in which the pastor, whom I loved, betrayed me. I was devastated to the point of feeling like I could not recover. I so wanted him to realize how badly he had hurt me. I wanted an apology. Something other than silence and a closed door. During that difficult time, I dreamed that I saw the pastor in a coffee shop. He reached into his wallet and handed me a five-dollar bill. I felt so disappointed. That was it? Five bucks? No way did five bucks come close to paying the debt I felt he owed me. When I woke up, the Lord said that the five dollars represented that man's best attempt to make right what had been made wrong. His BEST! In other words, the people who have hurt us are pretty much powerless to pay the debts they owe.

So, what do we do? We are owed debts that cannot be paid. Usually, we are told to just FORGIVE! Then, when we struggle to *just forgive* (and we all do), we feel like failures—often resentful failures.

### **The Speed Bump on the Way to Forgiveness**

Here is the problem. We are constitutionally unable to stop requiring payment of debt when a debt is owed. We can deny, minimize, pretend, and bury our unforgiveness, but we cannot *just forgive* by deciding to get over it, let it go, forget it, make excuses, understand why they did it, faith it or confess it away. The reason we are unable to *just forgive* is because we are made in the image of God.

God is a just God. Let me repeat. God is a God of justice. As His image, our need for justice is as essential to our well-being as breathing clean air. Take a look at the scriptures I have listed about God's attitude towards justice. And I culled the list considerably. You cannot separate God from justice, so our insistence that debt be paid is not a flaw or failing in our character. It is acting like God.

Here are the scriptures.

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne ... Psalm 89:14*

*To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord more than sacrifice. Proverbs 21:3*

*Learn to do good; Seek justice ... Isaiah 1:17*

*For the Lord is a God of justice ... Isaiah 30:18*

*A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. Isaiah 42:3*

*For I, the Lord, love justice ... Isaiah 61:8*

*A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory. Matthew 12:20*

So, our struggle with forgiving is NOT because we are bad people. In the same way that God cannot turn a blind eye to debts owed, we cannot turn a blind eye. Justice must be served and debts must be paid. Yet in most cases, our debtors cannot pay what is owed. Nonetheless, God requires us to forgive the debts owed to us.

## **How To Forgive**

Now that you understand that forgiveness is about debt, let's move on to HOW to forgive that debt. And there is only one way to satisfy justice: the debt must be paid. Here is how we do that.

**Step 1:** *Accept that Jesus has taken responsibility for everyone's debt.*

Once we know that the debt is paid, we can release those who hurt us. But, let's face it. The people who have hurt us are not capable of making right what they did wrong. Well aware of our dilemma, the Lord made provision for this with the cross. As part of our salvation, Jesus assumed responsibility for everyone's debts.

*He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14 (NIV)*

This is excellent news, because it means you can get full payment for all debts that are owed to you. It also means that any debt *you* owe can be paid.

**Step 2:** *Approach the cross.*

Whenever you are struggling with forgiving someone, or wondering if you have forgiven successfully, ask the Lord Jesus to take responsibility for that person's debts. I do this by visualizing the cross and asking the Lord to meet me there. At the cross, I explain to Him what has happened and how I feel about it. I take as much time as I need to talk things over. Then, I ask Him to pay the debt that I am owed. I also ask Him to pay any debts that I might owe.

**Step 3:** *Let the person go.*

The one thing that the Lord requires from us in order for Him to pay the debts of our debtors is this: We must be willing to let the person go. We cannot expect the Lord to pay their debts AND expect the person to pay the debt too. As you let that person go, turning to the Lord for justice and payment, you are accomplishing forgiveness. How does following these steps make forgiveness possible? It is because our sense of justice is satisfied when we are confident that debt will be paid. You have released the person. From now on, the Lord Himself repays their debt.

***Let's pray:*** *Lord God, I admit that I have clung to the people who have hurt me in the hopes that they would, in some way, realize what they have done and be sorry and make it up to me. I have even prayed that You would show them what they have done and that You would make them sorry. Lord, there is no way that people can ever make it right for me. There is only one way that I am going to*

*receive recompense and that is by releasing these people who HAVE hurt me and turning to You for justice, payment, healing, and restoration. For this reason, Your glorious Son went to the cross. So that You could do this for me. I choose to release the people who I believe owe me debts. Would You take responsibility for their debts? And would You hold them accountable according to Your will? Please satisfy my God-given need for justice, restore what has been broken, and fill me up with all the good things You desire for me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.*

God bless you!

Susan

Struggling to forgive yourself? See the article: *I Can't Stop Hating Myself*