

# How Forgiveness Works

*an article by Mel Lawrenz*

There was a single word headlined in the news coming out of the Amish community of West Nickels Mines after a young husband and father shot five young girls dead: forgiveness.

That word got the attention of the media, but what does it mean—“forgive”? What did it mean for people from the Amish community to go to the wife of the killer and say that they would forgive her and her family in this unbelievably traumatic incident? Did they mean that they forgave the murderer? Does this make any sense? How does righteous indignation figure into the crimes of humanity? How can we have justice and forgiveness at the same time? Accountability for violation of the laws of God and application of the mercy of God?

Every single one of us needs to understand and come to terms with the issue of forgiveness. Because forgiveness is part of God’s plan, it will not, when properly understood, ever contradict God’s justice.

I. Forgiveness is...

But before we go any further, we need to define what forgiveness is. Or, let’s start with what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness is not a compromise of morality. Don’t ever think that God would confuse moral clarity and moral responsibility with grace and forgiveness. God’s justice ensures that the murderer will not get away with murder, and the sex offender will not get away with molestation. Forgiveness is not a violation of justice. God will never compromise his justice.

Forgiveness is not merely the avoidance of conflict. There are a lot of us who do not like conflict. And since we don’t want to have hard feelings or hard words with someone else, we skirt around issues of conflict. Sometimes forbearance is the right thing to do, but simple avoidance of conflict is not the same thing as forgiveness.

A. Release (Matt. 18:27, 32)

So, then, what really is the meaning of forgiveness? Try to forget for a moment everything you have ever heard or assumed about forgiveness. Let a single word impress itself on your mind, the biblical word, the new covenant word. In Greek it is *aphesis*, in English, release.

Now just for a moment, don’t make it any more complicated than that. Release. To forgive means to choose someone whom you have been holding in your debt, holding in resentment and bitterness, and release him or her.

Forgiveness is not calling something that someone else did that was immoral or destructive okay. It is not turning a blind eye toward injustice. Forgiveness simply means that you choose to

release somebody from personal obligation to you—even though that person will have to face the justice of God.

In Matthew 18, Jesus' disciple Peter asks Jesus: "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answers in a parable in which a man owed a king ten thousand talents (today's equivalent? Millions of dollars) and was on the brink of having to sell his wife and children into slavery to pay the debt. But the pleas of the man to the king resulted in a canceling of the debt. Forgiveness. Release. But the same man turns on a man who owes him merely a hundred denarii (for us \$20 or so). And when the king hears of it, he is incensed, saying, "You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant?" The king rescinds his forgiveness. And Jesus closing words are these: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Forgiveness is release. Being released by God, and then we are able to release other people in our lives.

#### B. The application of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14)

Another way to understand forgiveness is that it is the application of grace and truth. I reference John 1:14 here, which says that Jesus came to us "full of grace and truth." That is how we know that the mercy of forgiveness is not a compromise of the firmness of justice. Grace and truth coexist. Forgiveness never means calling something that was very wrong, just okay.

How can people in an Amish community start to talk about forgiveness within a day or two of a murderer having cut down their children? Is it that they don't care about their children? Hardly. Is it that they don't have it in them to be indignant over an act of unspeakable cruelty? No.

What happens to people whose lives are deeply deeply rooted in the grace and the truth of God is that when a tornado of evil rips through their lives, they are left standing. They don't let evil turn them evil.

The Amish have a deep faith in the providence of God—a knowledge that God is still there even when tragedy strikes. They have seen evil before. Their European ancestors were sometimes mercilessly persecuted for their faith—burned at the stake or drowned in rivers. They have seen evil raise its ugly face before. And the Amish have a strong bond of community. That makes all the difference in the world. When tragedy hits, and you know you are not alone, you have the moral strength to be able to stand up in the face of evil.

#### C. A new way of looking at others

Forgiveness is a new way of looking at others. It's a radical and counter-cultural perspective on life. If you believe in forgiveness—that God forgives, even though he is not obligated to, and that we'll have the best kind of life if we hold other people in our lives with a loose grip—then here's how you'll view other people. You will see people for what they can be and what they were

intended to be, rather than simply as they are. You'll learn to not focus on people who simply irritate you. You can focus on them, of course, if you choose to, and keep yourself in a continual state of irritation, and you end up irritating the living daylights out of other people around you. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Forgiveness means looking at people who really have wronged you and deciding that you'd like to set things right—but in the end, you're not going to play God. And forgiveness means that you view the deranged people who shoot up school rooms and then turn the gun on themselves as people who are going to be standing before the judgment seat of God. They will answer to God.

#### D. A decision and a process

Finally, forgiveness is a decision and a process. You can release someone from obligation to you personally, even though the smoldering fires of resentment keep burning in you for some time to come.

## II. How Forgiveness Works

So, how does forgiveness work? We would be terribly mistaken if we thought that forgiveness was a kind of soft feeling certain soft-hearted people are capable of and they cushion the blow that others of us with a harder edge aren't good at.

Remember—the boldest act of forgiveness the world has ever seen was in the bloodied and beaten and torn body of Jesus Christ. To forgive is the gutsiest thing you can do in life. Forgiveness is not for the faint-hearted. Forgiveness is the mark of the true man and the true woman of God.

#### A. The responsibility of the person seeking forgiveness (Ps. 32:1-5)

Psalms 32 is a landmark passage about the way forgiveness works:

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’ — and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

First, to be forgiven is to be blessed beyond your wildest dreams knowing that your Creator, the gracious Father above, is willing to forgive your mistakes and offenses. God is willing to not hold our sins against us. One's record is wiped clean. No debt owed. Account settled. We've got to comprehend the blessing of forgiveness, because if we take God's forgiveness for granted with an attitude that says: “Well, what else is God going to do? Isn't that his job?” then we'll never understand or appropriate the forgiveness of God, and there is not a chance we'll be forgiving of others.

Notice the progression of the person's heart in this passage: "my bones wasted away... my strength was sapped." This is a person being "eaten up on the inside" as we sometimes say. Guilt will do that. And though it is hard to believe, the tortured conscience is a gift. Look at the psychopaths and charlatans in our society. Look at the terrorist, the spouse-abuser, the chat room predator, and you'll be frightened by the image of the dead conscience and glad if your conscience is alive and vocal.

What's the responsibility of the person seeking forgiveness? Verse 5. "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'—and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

When was the last time you tried to cover up your transgressions? We all know cover-ups aren't limited to Washington, D.C. Covering up is the unfortunate instinct of fallen human nature. Denying our faults and mess-ups seem to be the way of least pain, but it only adds pain to pain.

We are supposed to confess our wrongdoings. But to whom? The simple answer is: the person or persons whom we've wronged. Now in every instance, that is God. In Psalm 51, David's heart-rending confession of his adultery with Bathsheba and arranging the death of her husband says: "against you, you only, have I sinned." Of course, he had sinned against people—but the epicenter of the earthquake of our sins is always our detachment from God himself. And so we confess to God.

We're also supposed to confess our wrongdoings to the people we've wronged in many but not all circumstances. You have to judge the outcome. To say to your sister-in-law: "You know, I used to resent you all the time because I thought you were arrogant, but I've really learned how to tolerate you and to forgive your many shortcomings"—may not be the most constructive thing to do. To confess to someone in your office that you've been attracted to him or her even though he or she is married is a confession best made between you and God.

But there are many times when a flat-out humble pie heart-felt apology is the the right thing to do. And if you know its right—don't hold back.

## B. The responsibility of the forgiver

Now, let's turn the tables. What about when you are the forgiver?

### 1. Analyze the problem: when to forbear and when to forgive (Col. 3:13)

The first thing to do when you think you should forgive someone who has wronged you is to make sure that it really rises to the level of forgiveness. Colossians 3:13 says:

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

There is forgiveness and there is forbearance. You can think of forbearance as a kind of low-level forgiveness, or more simply as exercising patience and tolerance in the face of the idiosyncrasies of the people in your life.

For example, if your spouse is chronically late in getting ready to leave the house for an engagement, that doesn't really rise to the level of mortal sin. It may be irritating, but it just doesn't say in the 10 commandments "Thou shalt not wait until the last minute to put thy makeup on." And it doesn't say in the 10 commandments that table manners are a matter of spiritual life and death..

You may have to forbear someone who talks too much, someone who wears really pungent perfume, someone in your house who chews with his or her mouth open or who leaves towels on the floor, someone who seems incapable of replacing the toilet paper roll. You may need to smile and tolerate some of the weird opinions of others or if they have no opinions or are opinionated about everything—but that probably is more about forbearance than forgiveness.

If you don't see the necessity to forbear, then you may be living a narcissistic life, as if your way of living and thinking is superior in every way to that of others.

No, we have to live with the assumption that we live in an imperfect world surrounded by imperfect people, and not every bumping of heads means someone has sinned.

None of this is to say that we should take our sins against each other and minimize them, expecting others to just put up with our major mess-ups just because "none of us is perfect."

I'll say it again. Forgiveness is the gutsiest thing a human being can do. Because real people do real damage to each other all the time—but it can be solved.

And so here are our marching orders: "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

But how do you do that?

2. Be willing to forgive: striving for grace (Mic. 7:18; Lk. 6:27-37; 15:11-32)

First, we have to be willing to forgive and willing to strive for grace. Micah 7:18 gives us a statement on why God forgives.

"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."

God forgives because he delights in showing mercy. God does get angry. He does have wrath. But that is not the way he wants things to be. God delights in showing mercy.

Do we?

Let me ask you to be honest with yourself and honest with God: when you release somebody, when you tell him or her that you forgive—do you walk away with steam coming out of your ears, or do you yourself feel released? If we really have forgiven, we will feel released as well. Now that may take time—but the decision to forgive will set us on the right path.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus sets the high standard of kingdom living:

“Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. 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. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

Being willing to forgive, in the end, is not grudging obedience to a God who is saying: “Can’t we all just get along?” Being merciful happens—really happens—only when God’s character is impressed on the crookedness and hardness of our character.

3. Confront the problem: striving for truth (Lk. 17:3-4)

Now oftentimes the letting go of forgiveness happens only after the truth of a problem has been confronted and put squarely on the table. Confronting someone may not come easy for you, but it may be the most merciful thing you do for someone you care about. Jesus said in Luke 17: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”

Now that’s the ideal situation we’d all hope for. A mistake, a confrontation, an apology, and forgiveness. And we should hope for the ideal, while realizing sometimes we’ll have to let go of someone even if he or she isn’t convinced he or she has done anything wrong.

C. The ministry of forgiveness (Mt. 18:15-18; Jn. 20:23; 2 Cor. 2:6-10)

Forgiveness is a ministry. Jesus set out a protocol for forgiveness when, in Matthew 18, he said, if you have something serious against someone, something dangerous or scandalous, first of all go to him. Then, after that, you may need to draw other people into a process of confrontation. But you don’t begin there.

Forgiveness is a ministry—not just to the people you forgive, but as an example to a world that easily lives resentment and revenge, that there is a better way.

So this is how forgiveness works. When you need to be forgiven, and you know it because you’re being eaten up on the inside—you come clean—with God, with yourself, and in some cases, with someone you have offended. If you need to forgive someone else, you draw on the deep well of mercy, you confront the problem, you let go, and then you let the process of release begin.

III. Complications with Forgiveness

Sounds easy, right? Sometimes forgiveness is amazingly easy, and sometimes there are huge roadblocks.

#### A. Roadblocks to Forgiveness

Let's say you know right now, today, that you need to forgive someone. Maybe it's a parent, a friend, a neighbor, a grown-up kid. Forgiveness means release, but there may be roadblocks. Bitterness can hold you back from forgiveness. We have to view bitterness as a toxin in our spirits. Talking to God about what went wrong or a confidant who can sympathize may help us let go of bitterness.

Vindictiveness can be another roadblock. If you say you're willing to forgive, but only after you get revenge, then there isn't much chance you'll forgive.

In his book *Freedom of Forgiveness*, David Augsburger says:

“Revenge is the most worthless weapon in the world. It ruins the avenger while more firmly confirming the enemy in his wrong. It initiates an endless flight down a bottomless stairway of rancor, reprisals, and ruthless retaliation.” (p.9)

B. Are There Limits to Forgiveness? Are there limits to forgiveness? Jesus' disciple Peter asked Jesus one day (Matthew 18:21-22) whether there was a maximum number of instances of forgiveness: maybe seven times? Jesus' famous reply: no, not seven times, but seven times seventy, let us know that there is no three strikes and you're out policy, or seven strikes. If that were the case, none of us could be forgiven by God.

There are limits to forgiveness if the offender does not admit an offense. Let's say you come to the point of wanting to forgive your brother for having been cruel to you when you were growing up. You've resented him for years, but now you're an adult, you've got your own kids, and you just want to let the past go. You can do that. You can let him go, and you can tell him that you've been bitter about the past and you've decided to let the matter go. Now if your brother recognizes that he did damage, and apologizes—that's the best possible scenario. But maybe he won't. What if his response is: I don't have a clue what you're talking about, and anything I dished up for you years ago, little brother, you probably deserved? Well, that certainly takes the joy out of forgiveness, but it does not prevent you from letting him go.

Another limitation to forgiveness is when the offense is ongoing. An alcoholic may become remorseful and loathe himself when he gets sober. He may apologize profusely, and swear he'll never get drunk again. But if family members cannot forgive because the same ugly cycle plays itself out week after week, then the limitation of forgiveness is not coming from unforgiving hearts.

Another limitation to forgiveness is that you cannot forgive someone for an offense against someone else. A woman cannot forgive her husband for abusing their children, for instance.

#### IV. The Liberating Power of Forgiveness

It's not an exaggeration to say that if you don't know how to forgive, you don't know how to live. Making it real, means unleashing the liberating power of forgiveness.

#### A. Restored record (Jer. 31:34)

In Jeremiah's prophecy about the new covenant, God says: "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

It is not that God becomes unaware of history. God does not remember our sins in the sense that he doesn't hold them against us. God wants us to move, with him, in a completely restored relationship into the future. (And, if you have ever worried that you haven't forgiven because you haven't forgotten, remember that "forgetting" means the matter moves to the back file drawer of your mind—not that you become amnesic.)

#### B. Restored love (Lk. 7:47)

Making forgiveness real happens when love is restored. One day at a Pharisee's house, a woman with a bad moral reputation approached Jesus, crying. Her tears wet his feet, which she wiped with her long hair. Then she poured expensive perfume on his feet. Witnesses were offended—how dare she approach so closely, how dare she show such unrestrained adulation. But Jesus confronted his offended host: you didn't show any such respect for me. "Her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

#### C. Restored health (2 Chron. 7:14)

2 Chronicles 7:14 says:

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Forgiveness is linked to health. Health in the life of the individual, and health in the life of the church. The people "who are called by [God's] name," the church, have to be ready at any time to repent and turn toward God. And then health will come.

#### D. Restored relationship (Ps. 32:1-5; Gen. 50:17)

The widow of the man who shot the children in the one-room Amish school wrote a letter to the Amish community, and it was released to the press. It is a powerful letter. One you wouldn't expect. One paragraph says this:

"Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need," she wrote. "Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. ... Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Forgiveness is not just what the world needs; forgiveness is what changes the world.