



The Chains of Unforgiveness

by
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Picture with me, a long unyielding chain that keeps you hopelessly bound to the thing you most want to escape. I'm not talking about a physical chain; something you can purchase at your local hardware store—but one that is often found securely anchored to the human heart.

It is called unforgiveness.

Unforgiveness is the elixir of the wounded heart; a bewitching balm that only appears to soothe our pain. But in truth—it is a deadly poison that corrodes the vessel containing it from the inside out.

Some wounds can be so deep and so profound that the heart rises up in defense of itself and screams “I have a RIGHT to hate my offender—I will NEVER forgive what he did to me!” When, in fact, it is this perceived right to withhold forgiveness that fastens us so securely to the memory we most want to be free of. Nevertheless, the heart continues in its role as defense lawyer, giving itself reason after reason why unforgiveness is justifiable. The offense was too great, the person does not deserve to be forgiven, they aren't sorry for what they did— and on and on it goes. The list can be as creative and diverse as the person making it. But as long as the unforgiveness chain exists, there will always be something or someone to give it a tug that will pull you back to revisit once again every horrible thing that has happened to you; to help you reclaim over and over your victim status and be swallowed up in anger or bitterness or self-pity. This is the power of unforgiveness.

Unforgiveness deals with offences in its own way—not God's way.

Below are just some of the alternatives to forgiving. It is these kinds of responses that keep the chain of unforgiveness strong and unrelenting.

- **WE BLAME OTHERS:** Cemented deeply in human nature is the tendency to shift the blame for wrongs committed. Just a few pages into the first book of the Bible, we see the

blame game in action. After Adam eats the forbidden fruit, God confronts him. Listen to his response: “The woman who thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” [vs.12] When God’s attention then turns to Eve, her instinct is also to shift the blame: “The serpent beguiled me and I did eat.” [vs.13] The sinful nature we inherited in the Fall makes it easy for us to blame our offender for our resentment and bitterness rather than forgive. Blaming relieves us of the difficult, self—sacrificing act of mercy that God demands of His children. But when blame is transferred to someone else, sin prevails in our lives, and the chain remains in tact.

- **WE BURY OUR FEELINGS:** Things that are buried are forgotten. And things that are forgotten are never dealt with. People will go to great lengths to suppress their hurt or cover it up. It is sometimes easier to deny feelings than to face or deal with the pain. The thought of confrontation may be terrifying because it usually means experiencing more conflict, more rejection, and more disappointment. Keeping silent, and withholding forgiveness can be an agonizing experiencing. King David expressed it this way, “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.” (Psalm 32:3-4)

- **WE ACT ON OUR BAD FEELINGS:** Instead of submitting to God and trusting Him to work things out, we take matters into our own hands by seeking revenge against our offender. Only God is able to judge fairly the offences of men; nevertheless, the instinct for revenge can be so powerful that we make the wrong choice to return evil for evil. This only serves to circumvent the more perfect recompense of God. The Scripture clearly instructs us to “Recompense to no man evil for evil.” Rom 12:17

- **WE BUILD WALLS:** Unforgiveness causes us to withdraw from others in an effort to protect ourselves from further hurt and disappointment. Walls of hardness go up to prevent anyone from getting close enough to see our vulnerability. These walls can become so thick there is no opening in our heart to allow us to give or receive love. Forgiveness and love are like Siamese twins. They can never be separated. Loving someone you have forgiven may be difficult, but true forgiveness will make such a sacrifice. Jesus did not forgive us and then refuse to love us. He forgives us and then treats us as though we had never sinned against Him. True forgiveness breaks down walls and ushers love into our hearts; it builds bridges, not walls. Jesus commands us, “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. Eph 4:32

- **WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES AS VICTIMS:** Although we may be genuine victims of a serious offence, developing a victim mentality effectively prevents the renewing of our mind which leads to forgiveness. Seeing ourselves as a victim spawns feelings of fragility and an inability to cope. Our emotions become like an “eggshell” so that the very least offence will crush us and cause us to retreat into ourselves, or to react explosively.

- **WE REVISIT THE OFFENCE:** When offences are buried or hidden in the closet of our heart, it is much easier to revisit that hurtful event; to go back and rehearse over and over

again what happened to you. Rehearsing an offence feeds and strengthens bitterness and self-pity and perpetuates the “victim” mentality. The Apostle Paul shared words of eternal wisdom when he wrote, “But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.” Philippians 3:13

- **WE BECOME OFFENSIVE OURSELVES:** Have you heard the old saying, “misery loves company.”? Unforgiveness keeps our pain alive to the point that we may find ourselves wanting to inflict that same hurt on others. It requires a great deal more energy to manipulate pain in someone else than to actually forgive the original offence.

If any of these behaviors describe the way you have been feeling or acting, I invite you to revisit another event in the past. No offence before or since could possibly match the pain and agony suffered on this day— by this Person. Like you, He was innocent. Like you, He didn’t deserve what they did to Him. But here’s the difference. He didn’t have to experience the pain. With one Word He could have spared Himself the agony and escaped the horrific suffering that loomed ahead. But He didn’t. This God-Man, Jesus Christ knew that His rejection and His suffering would free humanity from the power of every sin known to mankind; those we have committed as well as those committed against us. More specifically, when Jesus, the spotless lamb of God, hung on that cross He did it to break the power of every abuse whether physical, emotional or sexual—of every unkind word that ripped away at your self worth—of every rejection and every cruelty in every shape and every form. It doesn’t matter. Calvary broke the chain!

The stripes Jesus bore in His body without retaliation, every mocking He silently endured— and ultimately the pain of the nails being driven into his hands and feet as they lifted him up on the cross—carried this message straight to every human heart— “I love you so much I am willing to die so that you might live.” And that is the power of forgiveness.

I don’t know about you, but when I pause to consider that without the cross and the shedding of Jesus blood, I would live for eternity unforgiven and without hope—that does something to me!

If He never did another thing for us, Calvary was enough.

In fact, it was more than enough. It was everything we’ll ever need! Not a day goes by that we don’t need His forgiveness, that we don’t require His mercy in some measure. How then, could we dare to withhold that same forgiveness from anyone else—regardless of what they have done to us? On Calvary, Jesus not only forgave—He was modeling forgiveness –giving us an example that we should follow to the same extreme that He did—death to our own self and our perceived rights.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus is clearly telling us that withholding forgiveness cuts off that relational flow of God's mercy that we all so desperately need. We become like a ship cut loose from its anchor—drifting aimlessly and without hope on a sea of bitterness and anger.

Peter asked one of the most important questions in Scripture when He inquired.

Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?
(Matthew 18:21)

And what was the Lord's response?

Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:22)

Simply put, as many times as you need His forgiveness, He will give it to you. How can we do any less?

Perhaps you believe that withholding forgiveness gives you control over your offender, but nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, it is the highest form of slavery holding you under the power of your offender and causing you to relive over and over again the abuse, the words, the pain the rejection.

Are you hurting right now? Is the pain sometimes more than you can bear? I encourage you to go to the cross and sit awhile. In light of what Jesus has done, ask yourself who is the unforgivable person and consider the following:

HE IS A HUMAN BEING: Nothing in the universe is as valuable as a human soul. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. (Luke 15:7)

HE IS A PERSON FOR WHOM CHRIST DIED: No one for whom Christ died can be an enemy, or an object of hate or scorn. God valued each person more highly than He valued his own life. If I love God, how can I keep from loving my enemy—the one who has wounded me? Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?(Matthew 5:43 -46)

HE IS SOMEONE MEANT TO BE A CHILD OF GOD: Jesus died for ALL people. Consider for a moment that if the person who hurt you so badly knew Jesus as you do—they would never have done what they did. For that individual—there is still the hope of one day becoming a child of God. .“He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)He could be right with God and man if not for

the wrong decisions that were made, the wrong circumstances that supported them, and the wrong actions that followed.

No person, regardless of how irresponsible he has been is too low to be an object of God's love. "Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons". (Acts 10:34)

There are no degrees of sin or evil in God's eyes. No person, regardless of his evil actions is excluded from God's forgiveness— except the one who excludes himself by refusing to repent. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1John 1:9)

No person is unlovable. If God loves him, then God can love him through me. "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you." (John 15:12)

True forgiveness distinguishes between what the person did, and who the person is. Although an individual's background does not excuse sin, knowing their behavior may have its roots in some kind of inner pain helps us to be more understanding. A person can do something that is terribly wrong— but there is more to that individual than their misdeeds. Our offender, no matter the offence—deserves the gift of understanding. Again, remember Calvary. God understands our sinful nature and forgives: "Like as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For he knoweth our frame [understands our constitution]; he remembereth that we are dust." (Psalm 103:13-14) Your heart may be screaming, "I can't!"—but if you will tell God you are willing—you are opening the door to His grace—and He will come in, and do "exceeding abundantly above all that you ask or think, according to the power that worketh in you." (Ephesians 3:20)

When you say "Yes, I will choose to forgive"—even though nothing in you feels like doing it—your obedience will usher in the supernatural, heart-changing power of God!

Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established. (Proverbs 16:3)

Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass. (Psalm 37:5)

Pray right now to "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5) so that you will humble yourself and die to your unforgiving spirit. And when you do, you will feel the weight of that chain fall away and discover for yourself that "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed!" (John 8:36)