



Finding Freedom in *Forgiveness*

by Rebecca Reuter, MA, LMHC

"I can forgive, but I can't forget." "It's unforgivable." "I thought I was a forgiving person."

Have you ever heard someone say things like this? Or even said it yourself? I hear them nearly every day as I counsel my clients through their struggles and suffering. And believe me, people have suffered terrible hurts and offenses that would make sense, in our natural humanity, to not forgive, and are certainly to not easily forget. Similarly, some think they're on the other end of the spectrum, often being forgiving; however, as they've reflected more deeply, they realize they in fact continue to hold on to anger and develop resentment as a result of not actually forgiving.

So what is forgiveness anyway, and is it important? And if so, why? How can it be freeing? Doesn't it actually feel better to hold onto the anger that the offense caused?

First of all, is forgiveness the same as forgetting? No, not at all. We have been gifted with memory, and it's often a more difficult experience for people to lose their memory or not remember certain events. Furthermore, it is often in our best interest to remember certain things, if anything to see how God has worked through the pain of hurt and offenses and see how He eventually uses it for our good; for "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28 ESV).

I think the best definition of forgiveness I know and use in my counseling is what I learned from Christian psychologists Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend, that forgiveness is ultimately letting go of the right to punish someone. Poignantly, this definition acknowledges the "right" to punish someone, or to seek justice, for the wrong committed. When we've been abused, deceived, betrayed, taken advantage of, and so on, we desire justice. This is not just a natural inclination but a godly one, for God is just, and we, being made in His image, value justice. However, for the Christian especially, avenging ourselves or another, even by harboring resentment and unforgiveness, is not what Jesus actually asks of His followers. Rather, His call to us is to forgive, to let go of that right to seek just punishment knowing that God the Father will ultimately exercise His justice.

"Do not say, 'I will repay evil'. Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you." (Proverbs 20:22 ESV)

"'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:19b, 21 ESV)

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But does it let the other person off the hook? Yes and no. It lets them off our hook but not off God's, as we see in Proverbs 20:22. It's difficult but possible to wait for God's justice, which will happen, in His perfect time and manner — and much more effectively than our version of vengeance.

So how and from what does forgiveness free me? Well, withholding forgiveness tends to chain and cripple us emotionally and spiritually. Over time, the unhealed hurt and preserved anger festers into recesses of resentment.

Unchecked, this resentment seeps into our hearts, hardening them, and our minds, distorting our attitudes and perceptions. When reflective, we can begin to see how this unforgiveness is now impacting our other important relationships, including our relationship with ourselves and with God. Talk to anyone who's forgiven an offense after a long time of not doing so and you will likely hear of the "weight lifted". Resentment is heavy! Sure, the anger can feel empowering at times, but over time it becomes burdensome. Furthermore, God does not call His children to be empowered by anger but rather by the Holy Spirit, who is the One who helps us forgive. So do yourself, God, and others a favor and choose forgiveness. Even one bit at a time, asking the Holy Spirit to help you.

I like to encourage my clients to envision an offense they're holding onto, clutching it in their hands, and then ask God to help you release it, slowly opening up your clutched hands and stating, even out loud, "I forgive _____ of _____." Be specific. You may not feel immediate relief and will likely need to do this exercise a number of times, but God will honor your effort, and you will eventually feel liberated from the heaviness and hardness of resentment and will be better positioned to receive – and give – the good gifts of God.

For freedom,

Rebecca Reuter, LMHC ■



Rebecca Reuter, MA, LMHC, is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and sees clients in our Schererville, IN, location.

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