

Reaching Across the Aisle

FORGIVENESS

Ephesians 4.31-32

It was Elizabeth O'Connor who said, "Forgiveness is a whole lot harder than any sermon makes it out to be." In his book, *Letters to Malcolm*, C.S. Lewis writes these words, "Last week in prayer, I discovered, or at least I think I did, that I suddenly was able to forgive someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years." We should take great comfort in C.S. Lewis words.

However, we must also realize that forgiveness in the life of a devoted follower of Christ is not optional, it is imperative. In life there will be those times when we are hurt by others. Sometimes people you trust let you down, betray you, abuse you, and it goes deep. Sometimes the hurt will not go away. This is the bad news.

The good news is that God has developed a way to cope with the hurt and to get over the pain. He called it *forgiving* and he invites us to do it with him.

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Ephesians 4.31-32

As we think about the subject of forgiveness, we realize that the discussion is indeed very broad. We will need to limit ourselves to a few key points.

God's Forgiveness of Us

It is God's forgiveness of us that makes possible our forgiving others. Not until we fully *accept* and *appropriate* God's infinite and complete forgiveness on our behalf can we move to the next level.

*"Praise the LORD, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits--
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us."* Psalm 103.1-5, 8-12

Our Forgiveness of One Another

It isn't long before anyone who gets serious about serving others must come to terms with forgiving others as well. There are really only two possibilities when wrong has been done against another:

When you are the Offender

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, **leave** your gift there in front of the altar. First **go** and **be reconciled** to your brother; **then come** and offer your gift." Matthew 5.23-24*

When you are the Offended

*"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, '**Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother** when he sins against me? Up to seven times?'*

Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'

*Therefore, **the kingdom of heaven is like** a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Matthew 18.21-35

How Do We Make This Happen?

First, we need to focus fully on God's forgiveness of us.

Second, we need to be honest and deal directly with our own actions and attitudes about resentment or bitterness.