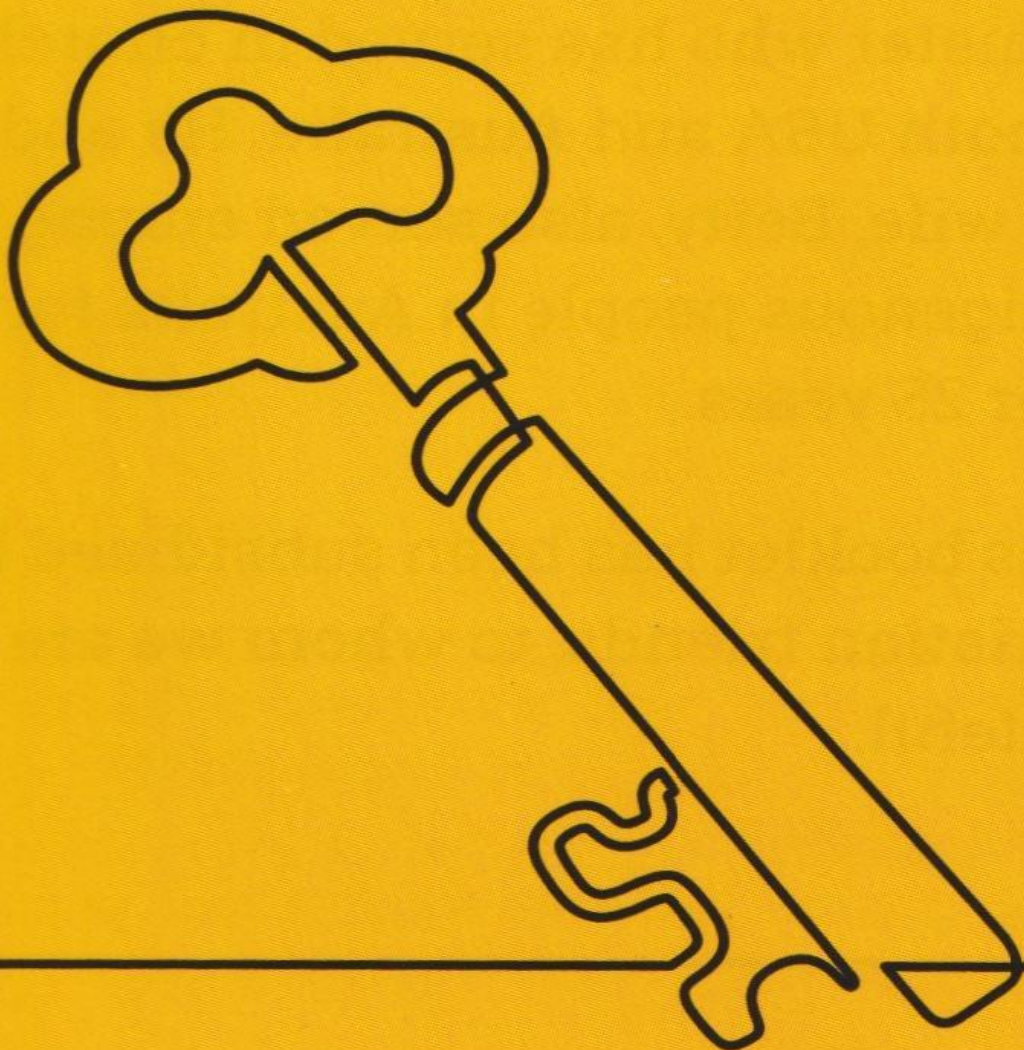


Forgiveness

The key to freedom

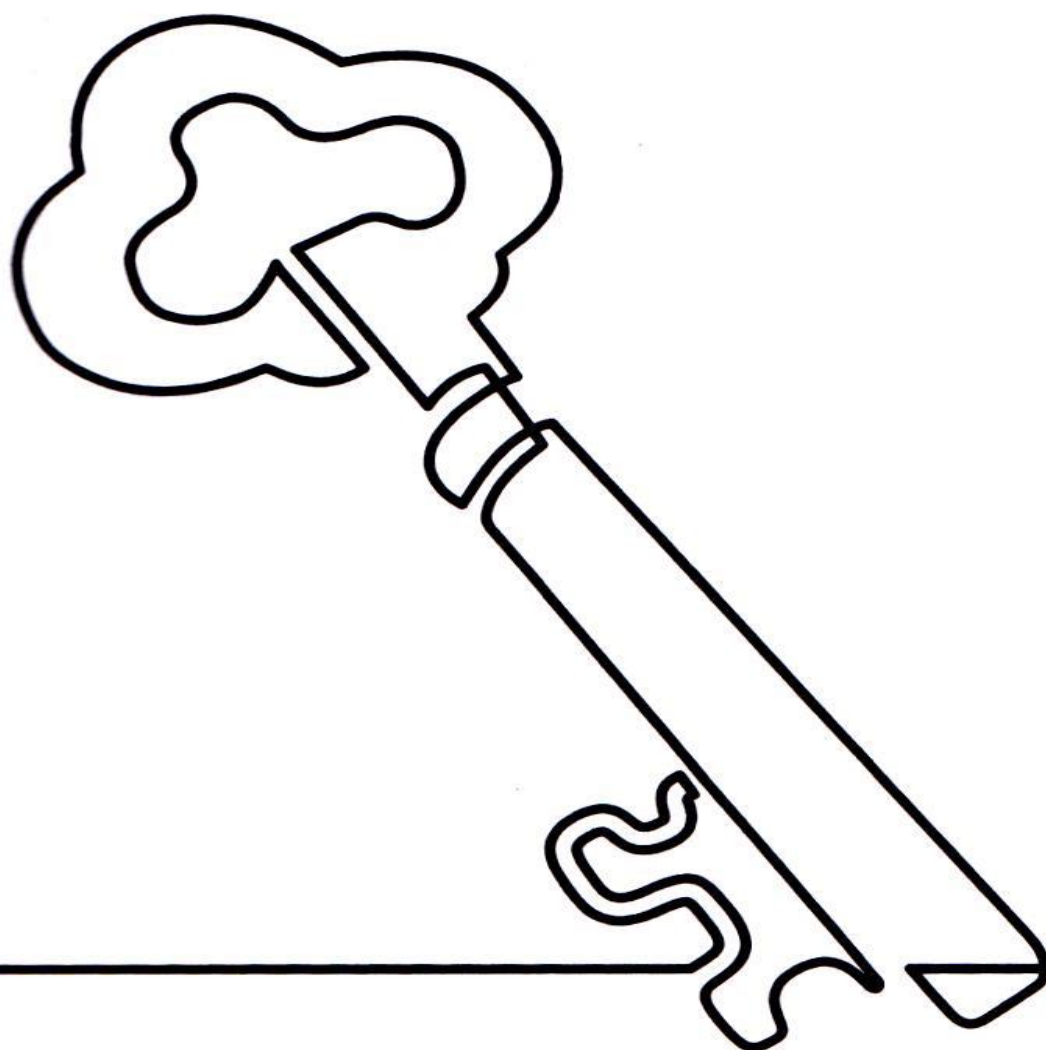
Egerton C. Long



Forgiveness

The key to freedom

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“I can never forgive you after what you’ve done to me!”

“I can never forgive myself for what I did.”

“You tell me God can forgive me but I can’t see how He could after all I’ve done.”

I’m sure you’ve heard people say such words or maybe you’ve said them yourself. I’m sure there have been times when a friend, loved one or partner has needed to forgive you for something you’ve said or done! Perhaps you want to forgive someone but are looking for an easy way out.

REAL FORGIVENESS DOESN’T COME EASILY!

Forgiving another person may be one of the hardest things we do. We also need to ask if our words of forgiveness have been really genuine! Real forgiveness does not come easily!

- If you asked a wife if she could forgive her husband who has left her with his three children who dearly loved him, she would most probably reply: “I will never forgive him.”
- A church member, who 20 years ago took a large amount of money from his boss and never repaid it, can’t forget and can’t forgive himself. He wants to know what to do since his former boss is no longer living.

The scenarios are endless. Forgiveness is never cheap. Sometimes it never seems to stop costing.

Forgetting the event often seems harder than forgiving it. People say, 'I'll forgive you but I will never forget.' That may not be real forgiveness. While we may never be able to erase the incident from our memory, real forgiveness means that we choose not to allow the memory of what happened to infect our relationship with the person or persons concerned.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY FORGIVING?

A dictionary defines the word 'forgive' by describing the actions involved: To cease to feel angry or resentful towards another person or group, to pardon an offender or an offence, to remit or let off.' This does not go far enough! Something more needs to be done more positively. The broken friendship or relationship needs restoring.

The word 'forgive' is actually two words -

to 'give for'. It means replacing the result of a wrong action or words with that which has been lost. The loss might be a friendship or a relationship or a situation which has been ruined by wrong words or actions that have been offensive, hurtful or insulting. Where someone has been truly forgiven a relationship can usually be restored. It must be admitted, however, that while it takes only one to forgive, **reconciliation always takes two.**

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN FORGIVINGS?

Dr. Charles Stanley said: “Forgiveness is the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you. Forgiveness involves three elements: an **injury**, real or imaginary; a **debt** or negative reaction resulting from the injury; and finally a **cancellation** of that debt or reaction.”

Jay Adams said, “When a person forgives another, he is promising to do three things about the intended wrongdoing: not to use it against the wrongdoer in the future; not to talk about it to others; and not to dwell on it himself.” Remember **-forgiveness is the key to real freedom.**

AN UNKNOWN WORD?

Wesley Thiessens, a Bible translator among the Bora people of Peru, tried to find a word or phrase in their language which would translate the Bible word ‘forgive’. At last he asked the tribes people: “What word would you say if a judge let you off and didn’t punish you in any way?” The people understood and gave him what was a common expression in their language: “He leaves off what he should charge us.” Wesley Thiessens knew he had his words for ‘forgiveness’.

Early translators among the Eskimos had a similar difficulty. In the end they invented a word. It took 24 letters but its meaning was clear. ‘Not being able to think about it anymore.’ In our English language we know the word - ‘forgive’- and we think we know its meaning, but are we really ready to forgive those who may act or speak against us?

THE FIRST USE OF THE WORD?

We may well wonder when and how the word entered our language. Maybe in the garden of Eden! Perhaps when Adam and Eve realised they had done wrong in eating the forbidden fruit? Was it then that they asked God to forgive them?

It could have been when God spoke to them when Adam and Eve were covered with the animal skins. Maybe God said, "What you did was wrong. But your sin is covered and I forgive you!" If so, the result would have been restored fellowship.

We could have learned this word when our mother took us in her arms after we had done something wrong and she said: "I forgive you". She gave us her love and friendship in place of punishment. Perhaps she used this wonderful word of restoration after we had said we were sorry for what we had done. It is one of the most powerful words in any language.

IS FORGIVING HARD TO DO?

Many of us find it difficult to say 'I am sorry'.

Sometimes it's even harder still to say: 'I forgive you'. A survivor of a concentration camp in World War II told how, as a boy, he watched his relatives being killed. He later wrote a shocking

book entitled - 'I cannot forgive.'

Many people would feel the same way. Which is harder:

1. Forgiving others?
2. Accepting forgiveness?
3. Asking to be forgiven?
4. Forgiving yourself?

FORGIVING CAN BE DIFFICULT!

There are times when we know we should forgive someone but we don't. One reason could be that we want the other person to take all the blame so that we appear to be the innocent one. Or perhaps we may have contributed to the incident involved but we don't want to admit it. In a husband and wife situation, for example, one person often wants to place most of the blame on the other person for what happened. It is also hard sometimes deciding if one person is the guilty one and the other entirely innocent.

There are many reasons why it is sometimes difficult to forgive another person for what has happened, or even to say, 'I am sorry.' But if we are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, who lives within us, can give us the grace, strength and power to forgive or to seek forgiveness.

FORGIVING OTHERS

According to a recent study by the University of Michigan USA, older people are more likely to say they are sorry for their mistakes than younger people. Women are more forgiving than men! Only 52% of those surveyed said they can usually forgive others. There's an old saying, 'Time heals all wounds'. Not necessarily. Some wounds never heal and are carried to the grave. Only true forgiveness guarantees healing of personal wounds.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY?

The Bible says much about forgiving others, especially in the light of how God has forgiven us. Jesus Christ spoke at length about this aspect of forgiveness. In one of His personal parables, (Matthew 18:23-35) Christ told the story of a rich king who discovered one of his servants owed him literally millions of dollars. When he found this out, he ordered that the servant and his family be sold into slavery. The servant immediately begged the king for time to pay all he owed. Graciously the king forgave him the entire debt.

The forgiven servant then found a man who owed him only a few dollars, and treated him shamefully, forgetting all the king had done for him. When the king heard this, he withdrew his royal pardon and had the ungrateful man sent to prison. We would agree he deserved it.

CHRISTS WORDS TO US ALL

Christ spoke often about our need to forgive others.

Look at this phrase in the 'Lord's Prayer' - forgive us... as we forgive those who sin against us." (Matthew 6:12) We do not earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others, but in the same generous, loving, continuing way in which God deals with us, we, as His children, must learn to forgive others. We expect God to act quickly when we ask for forgiveness. We are generally much slower to forgive those who offend us.

Christ also said, "If you forgive those who sin against your Heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, **your Heavenly Father will not forgive your sins.**" He did not mean we can earn forgiveness but rather God cannot overlook an unChristlike, unforgiving spirit. When we act in such a way, it is our **fellowship with Him which suffers** and becomes blocked. Forgiving others opens the door of intimate fellowship once again.

A WONDERFUL EXAMPLE

Perhaps one of the greatest examples Christ gave of forgiveness is in the second half of the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The younger son had left home, ignoring the love and kindness of the father. When he wasted every penny he had been given and finally finished up in a pig-pen, he decided to return home to work for his father. But his father had never stopped watching for him to return home. When the son came into sight, the waiting father ran out to him, took him in his arms and gave him a warm welcome.

There was no doubt about the father's forgiveness. A sad and tragic contrast is seen in the attitude of the older brother.

WHAT ELSE DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Our attitude and our actions must be seen in the light of God's wonderful, undeserved forgiveness offered to us and made possible through Christ's death. The Bible uses the same words for human forgiveness as it does for God's forgiveness.

There are many references in the Gospels regarding the command that we forgive others. The case of the unforgiving servant has been mentioned. That story grew out of Peter's question - "Lord, how many times do I have to forgive my brother (who has hurt me)? Don't you think, Lord, that seven times is enough?" (Matthew 18:21) We don't know why Peter asked that question nor who he was referring to as 'his brother' The term 'brother' could mean a relative, a neighbour, or a person from the same country or nationality. But it must have been a serious, continuing situation which demanded forgiveness seven times over.

Christ gave Peter an immediate, strongly worded, unexpected answer: **“Never limit your forgiveness of another person to seven times — keep on forgiving — 490 times if necessary.”**

Then Christ gave the parable already referred to about the ungrateful, unforgiving servant. The main point of that story is this: ‘as we have been forgiven, let’s make sure we are ready and willing to forgive others in the same way.’ Have we ourselves learned that lesson yet? Or are we waiting until we ‘feel like forgiving’?

When you think of the greatness of God’s forgiveness of our sins, past, present and future, simply because we asked Him to do so (on the basis of Christ’s death for us) surely we can find the grace needed to forgive whatever someone has done or said about us. If we can’t do that maybe it’s because we don’t want to!

CHRIST’S EXAMPLE

The greatest examples of forgiveness is seen at Calvary. When the soldiers started nailing Christ to the cross, He said “Father, forgive these men. They really don’t know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) Reading the text, it would seem Christ kept on saying that until the executioners had finished their terrible work. Remember, the one who spoke those words is still the one who can help us say, ‘I forgive you.’

After terrible experiences in a concentration camp in World War II, Corrie Ten Boom told how she felt she must preach everywhere the possibilities of forgiveness, even to those who had been incredibly cruel under the Nazi regime. Then one morning after a service in Munich, a man approached her and held out his hand.

Suddenly she recognised him as the worst and cruelest guard of all in the camp where she was imprisoned. He had treated the women shockingly. Her hand froze at her side. How could she forgive him and take his hand?

Standing there, Corrie prayed: “Lord I cannot forgive this man. Please forgive me.” Immediately, she said later, she felt forgiven. Then, in the power of that forgiveness, she reached out her hand and grasped the hand of her enemy of years ago and forgave him all that he had done. Corrie knew the release which comes With forgiving. It was the key to freedom from the past. Do you need to use that key? Lewis Smedes said; “We are never so free as when we reach back into our past, and forgive a person who caused us pain.”

THE TEACHING OF PAUL AND OTHERS

In several letters to the various churches, the Apostle Paul spoke plainly yet lovingly about our conduct toward fellow believers. For example, look at the beautiful words of Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you: Compassion means moving toward another with outstretched hands. Paul was writing to a church when he penned those words. A Bible believing church is the one place where we should expect to find forgiving and forgiven people. Sadly, there can be so much conflict in a local church.

Some of it can be over rather minor matters such as being ignored or overlooked.

But in more serious differences, members can be deeply hurt and often leave that church. Some may join another group, but sometimes others are lost to the cause of Christ. This is a tragedy indeed, and the outside world looks on and sees this and wonders why.

Again Christ gave explicit directions regarding such a situation. The Message' Bible of Eugene Paterson paraphrases Matthew 18:15-16 in these words: 'If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him - work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch. Confront him with the need of repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.'

THIS IS NOT EASY

You will need to spend time in prayer before taking any specific action about this kind of problem. Enlist two or three others to pray with you. Make sure those friends will keep the whole matter confidential and also will not 'take sides'. Do what you can to avoid open controversy. Nothing harms a church more than having two members out of fellowship with each other.

What can you do? Start praying now about any situation or problem like this in which you or your church may be involved.

Richard Foster said it well: “Forgiveness means that the power of love that holds us together is greater than the power of the offense which separates us.”

FORGIVING AND FORGETTING

Often a person may sincerely forgive another person for what they may have done or said and may have even said; “Let’s forget about it and go on with our lives.” But is it easy to forget some deep wrong that has hurt you very much? To erase that wrong completely from your mind will never be easy, but try honestly to put it behind you. Then whenever a thought of that incident comes to your mind, you should quickly say to yourself – ‘that’s in the past and I’m not going to bring it up again. I am not going to think about it after all this time.’ Ask God to help you put it behind you and to keep it there. He will help you if you ask Him. He said that about our sins which He has forgiven: “Your sins I remember no more.” (Hebrews 8:12) By that He means He will not hold those sins against you ever again. Isn’t that what we need to do also?

FORGIVING OURSELVES

Many of us have said “I will never forgive myself” because of guilty feelings. Often after a loved one dies, the remaining partner or friend has expressed a nagging, continuing feeling of guilt over the possible neglect of the loved one. Again this kind of ‘self-guilt’ must be dealt with or it can become devastating to the one concerned.

Self-forgiveness begins with the mental or spoken acknowledgement that you may possibly have done wrong or offended someone. You may call it 'appropriate guilt' but remember it may be unjustified. Look at the matter squarely or seek professional help immediately. You may not be at fault in any way. There could be serious physical or mental consequences of not dealing with this type of feelings.

Left untreated, this could also lead to 'spiralling guilt'. Feelings can deepen and multiply and even cause what is called the 'paralysis of guilt'. The person concerned seems unable to act in a normal way. Again, professional help is needed to enable him/her to face the reality of life and come to the place of forgiving themselves and others. Only then can they get on with living.

Talk to the Lord about this burden. Ask for **His forgiveness and believe you have it**. By faith say: "I believe God has forgiven me. I can't go back on the past but I am going to go forward with Christ." **Remember - forgiveness is the key to freedom.**

How thrilling to see someone released from a burden of guilt. Forgiving yourself for past actions or words is enormously important for your own well-being. **Don't let the wrong actions of yesterday rule and ruin your life today.**

LET'S REVIEW THIS ASPECT AGAIN

Maybe you've said, 'I know that God has forgiven me and I am sure I have forgiven those who may have hurt me or blamed me for something. **But I can't forgive myself.** I just don't have any peace in my heart.' Many struggle with this problem. Sins - serious sins - committed years and years ago keep coming back to them, robbing them of true peace of heart.

The apostle Paul could have known this problem but refused to allow it to occupy his mind. He told of his past - even called himself a blasphemer - but said, 'Forgetting those things which are behind, I press on.' (Philippians 3:13) Don't let Satan keep bringing up to you what happened in the past. Satan's voice is always one to condemn. When the Holy Spirit speaks to you, His voice will be one of conviction but He will not leave it there. He will point you to Christ and to the cross where your sins were dealt with and cleared away. If you feel you need to do so, ask God to forgive whatever it was. Remember you don't need to keep on asking Him to forgive you. A child does not keep on asking a parent to forgive! Then believe what His Word says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins - all of them, in the past and even the present - and to cleanse us." Read again 1 John 1:9. Ask God to give you a fresh gift of faith and peace. He can do it and will do it if you take Him at His Word.

A WONDERFUL RELEASE

A husband could not forgive himself for an incident in which his wife suffered a heart attack and died suddenly. In seeking to help him, I suggested there were three people involved. First, God, second, his wife, and third, himself.

I asked him; “You believe God has forgiven you if (and that is the word - “if”) you were possibly involved in any way. Right?” He agreed he had asked God to forgive him. He believed God had done so. Next I asked him about his wife - safe home in Heaven – “Do you think she blames you in any way?” He said no. He was sure she was happy in Heaven. I said, “Then only you remain. You have asked God to forgive you if you were involved in any way. Your wife is safe home in Heaven. You need to accept what God has done. Forget about blaming yourself.” When he saw that position, it changed his whole attitude. Praise God the change was quickly seen in his life.

THE CERTAINTY OF GOD’S FORGIVING POWER

The need to forgive ourselves is absolutely essential if we are to show the reality of Christ and God's forgiveness in our lives. The Psalmist said, “He does not treat us as our sins deserve. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from, us.” (Psalms 103:10, 12) Another passage says that “He has buried our sins in the depth of the sea” (Micah 7:19). Someone said “He erected a sign which said NO FISHING.”

If that is how God has dealt with our sins why do we go on looking inward and focus only on what we may have done or not done in the past? Let's return to 1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” **Believe those words** - if you find difficulty in doing so, ask the Lord to help you believe them and He will.

REMEMBER: BEING FORGIVEN IS THE KEY TO FREEDOM

1. Being forgiven can be a wonderful joy.
2. Forgiving others is a blessing and a release.
3. Not to forgive can bring disaster.
4. God's forgiveness is there for the asking.

Have you seriously asked God for forgiveness of your sin? If not — it is so simple. Here is how:

1. Confess you are a sinner, needing forgiveness. (Again 1 John 1:9)
2. Ask God to forgive you - if you are sincere God will forgive you immediately.
3. Believe God has forgiven you and received you into His family (John 1:12)

Read the words of 1 John 1:9 again: “If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” You do your part and God will do His. Start reading your Bible, believing what you read.

It will bring you peace as you believe what God has said in His Word. Go and talk to your pastor or minister at your local church and tell him your story. Most of all believe what God has said and trust Him for each day for the rest of your life here on earth.

Remember, forgive those you need to forgive.

Forgive yourself for past events Trust God for forgiveness and for the future.

Never forget - FORGIVENESS IS THE KEY TO FREEDOM.