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Understanding Forgiveness

"If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive." - Mother Theresa

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." -Mahatma Gandhi

What better time of the year than the Christmas season to ponder forgiveness? After all, humanity's forgiveness is the reason or result for the coming of Christ. Unfortunately, many coming together with family or in a business setting will have great difficulty attempting to portray the spirit of the holidays to those with which they have been at odds all year long. Why should I forgive when the other person is the one who has inflicted pain and hurt on me? *Failure to forgive* leads to feelings and emotions of a combination of anger, resentment, bitterness, hatred, fear and hostility. It only hurts me; and who wants to live like that?

What is it?

Webster's defines forgiveness as: to give up resentment; stop being angry with; pardon; give up all claim to punish; overlook; cancel a debt. Many think of forgiveness as something someone else should initiate-the one who has done the harm. In reality, taking the step to forgive those who have harmed us puts us in the position to choose to control our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors. When we forgive, we do it for ourselves, not necessarily the other person (although when we forgive others it many times makes a dramatic effect on them too). It frees us to live a fulfilled, unrestricted life! Larry James says that not forgiving someone is like taking poison ourselves (continuing to suffer for what they did or did not do to you) and expecting *them* to die! He says forgiving is a gift you give yourself, dares you to imagine a better future and gives you the confidence to survive pain and even grow personally from it. Our pain, rejection and hurt will only begin to heal when we begin to forgive. Peace of mind and forgiveness go together!

What it is not!

Forgiveness is not condoning the wrong or hurtful act. We do not approve, excuse or justify what has happened. It is not denying it happened or pretending it never happened, nor forgetting about it. It also does not mean the pain has gone away. We don't have to pretend we are not hurt or that we are not taking the offense seriously. Anne Bercht says "to truly forgive we must be aware of an important distinction: Forgiveness is not reconciliation with the person. Reconciliation is different. Forgiveness is one person's *moral response* to another person's injustice."

Healthy Relationships

In his book *Forgiving the Devil*, Terry Hargrave attributes the work of forgiveness as one of salvage and restoration. He says pain comes from a violation of love and trust, and forgiveness is about reestablishing that love and trust in a relationship. *Salvage* is the use of forgiveness *to gain insight* into how to keep the damage done in the past from continuing to affect one's life, now and in the future. It means understanding the circumstances of the abused, and abuser, so that one does not carry the burden of pain alone. Salvage can also help us to learn how to make future relationships more loving and trustworthy. Salvage does not restore love and trust to a damaged relationship, but helps us to recognize the interactions that were damaging and preventing them from happening again. *Restoration*, as opposed to salvage, requires the person who has been wronged in the relationship to put themselves in a position where love and trust can be rebuilt again by the person who perpetuated the hurt. In this, the victim and victimizer work together to restore love and trust and make the relationship functional again. The victimizer takes responsibility for their actions; the victim gives them the opportunity to compensate them, and actively forgives.

How do I go about forgiving?

There are two types of forgiveness according to Everett Worthington. *Decisional Forgiveness* is where a person simply chooses to forgive. Forgiveness involves declaring that one is not going to seek revenge or avoid the other person, but will do his or her best to get along in the future. *Emotional Forgiveness* moves positive emotions toward the offender such as empathy, sympathy, compassion, agape love etc. It involves a change of heart in which one replaces negative emotions of resentment, bitterness, hostility, anger, hatred and fear with more positive emotions toward the person.

Removing barriers in our own thoughts and emotions can sometimes be helpful to begin forgiveness work. Refusing to deal with our own emotions, not trying to trust again, not wanting to feel pain any more, not putting effort into forgiveness, and letting shame, guilt or fear get in the way, are all obstacles to the process of forgiveness. What would it take to remove those barriers? Try writing down the person's name that has hurt you and then describe the experience, the pain, and emotions you have gone through or are currently experiencing. Don't deny or minimize pain, but accept it and commit to dealing with it. Sometimes revealing the extent of the hurt and emotional feelings to the person who has offended you and verbalizing aloud that you forgive them can have a healing effect. For couples, remember the goal is for restoration of the relationship. Try to empathize with each other; reflect on your own capability to inflict hurt, recall times you have been forgiven. Take responsibility for your contributions to the problems in the relationship. These things help us to heal, find peace and anticipate positive results for future experiences together.

Forgiveness can be an ongoing process. We have a tendency to remember past offenses and take back up the hurt, pain and feelings of anger, bitterness or fear. Commit to renewing the process again as needed. When we initiate forgiveness, we are making a determined decision toward: our own health and well being; releasing feelings that hold us back from growing personally; healing, reconciliation, restoration and peace!

Mike