

Excerpt

## ***A Devotional Walk with Forgiveness***

**By Judith Ingram**

Week One, Day 1: ***What Is Forgiveness?***

*But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. (Luke 6:27-33, NRSV)*

To forgive is to act on the decision to bless and not curse your offender.

In becoming a student of forgiveness, you have taken on a significant task. One can make the case that the entire Bible is about forgiveness—God’s plan from the beginning to love and redeem all of His creation. Through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross, God forgives our sins and calls us back into relationship with Him. Furthermore, He makes it clear that we are to follow His example and forgive one another: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a tall order. And if we are to obey this command, we must first understand what forgiveness means.

Our definition of forgiveness identifies its five parts: *acting* on the *decision* to *bless* and *not curse* your *offender*. Each part is described below and discussed further in the next few chapters.

**Forgiveness is a call to action.** Forgiveness without observable action is incomplete. We

must find ways to demonstrate to our offender as well as to others that we have cast off malice and adopted an attitude of goodwill toward the person who hurt us. We make forgiveness *visible*.

**Forgiveness is a decision.** Feelings are important, but we can't rely on them to get us through the forgiveness process. Wounded feelings are often unpredictable and difficult to control. To obey God and forgive the person who hurt us, despite how we may sometimes feel about it, requires a conscious decision to change. We *choose* to forgive.

**Forgiveness is blessing the wrongdoer.** In forgiving, we endorse whatever is in our offender's best interests. To bless is not merely to let go of negativity but to deliberately cultivate benevolence toward the other person. We adopt *goodwill intentions*.

**Forgiveness is giving up malice.** Most people rightly associate forgiveness with letting go of bitterness, resentment, and hatred. We instinctively know that cursing others is neither healthy nor productive, and in forgiving, we take back our curses. We let go of *malicious intentions*.

**Forgiveness is acknowledging that harm was done because someone acted unjustly.** A first step in forgiving is to identify the offense and the offender. It's important to understand that God does not ask us to forgive the terrible things that people do to us, but He does ask us to forgive the people who do them. Adultery, rape, and murder are not redeemable, but in God's kingdom adulterers, rapists, and murderers are. We forgive a *person*.

Although we want to obey God's call to forgive others, our efforts can be hampered by confusion and misconceptions about forgiveness. Often people are reluctant to forgive because their assumptions about forgiveness make it unpalatable. Forgiving may seem like ignoring, excusing, or even condoning a wrongful action that should be exposed and punished. A common misconception is that only weak or passive people forgive. Some victims fear that forgiving will make them vulnerable to further hurt or allow others to be hurt. Forgiving may seem like admitting defeat and letting the perpetrator win.

Identifying misconceptions about forgiveness helps us to clarify what it truly means:

**Forgiveness does not deny what happened.** When we forgive, we acknowledge a wrongful act, identify the wrongdoer, and choose to extend mercy anyway.

**Forgiveness does not justify or excuse the offense.** Although we may understand the circumstances and why the offender acted wrongfully, we acknowledge that the act was nevertheless wrong.

**Forgiveness does not pardon the offender.** Judges and those in authority can grant mercy

and release the guilty from punishment; in contrast, forgiveness extends mercy from one sinner to another, acknowledging our equality before God.

**Forgiveness does not condone what happened.** We disapprove of the offending behavior, yet we choose to release the offender from our censure.

**Forgiveness does not sanction unrepentant behavior.** Although we release the offender from personal penalty for past offenses, we are sensible about protecting ourselves and others from further hurtful acts; we support legal and moral authorities' efforts to uphold justice.

**Forgiveness does not trust blindly.** Even if we forgive, it may take time to rebuild trust; if the offender does not demonstrate efforts to change, trust may never be reestablished.

**Forgiveness does not necessarily lead to reconciliation.** Although our forgiveness may open the door to rebuilding a damaged relationship, reconciliation requires the efforts of both the offender and the forgiver.

The passage from Luke that introduces this chapter begins with these words: "But I say to you that listen..." *The Message* translates it, "To you who are ready for the truth, I say this..." Not everyone wants to hear what Jesus had to say about loving our enemies. His ideas run counter to our worldly wisdom and natural inclinations. However, if you picked up this book because you want to learn more about forgiving, and if you've made it this far into the text, then Jesus is speaking to *you*. Take heart! Not only have you decided to take that spiritual walk with forgiveness, but you are already traveling the path. And God will reward you by working a holy miracle in you—He will reshape your heart until it is a perfect reflection of His loving and forgiving nature: "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."<sup>2</sup>