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WHY SHOULD I FORGIVE PEOPLE WHO HURT ME?

We all have something in common, we all have been hurt at some time in our lives.

I am not talking about the broken arms or the strained ankles. I am speaking of emotional hurt that can range from the trivial, "I don't love you any more, Mummy" to the mind blowing, "You need to know that there is someone else in my life."

Think of the varieties of hurt. There are some here who may be carrying the legacy of inadequate parenting and in some ways feel their parents have left them with a permanent scar. Some may have been hurt at work. After years of hard work, enterprising initiatives, strong ownership of the job, you discover that the firm has brought in somebody from the outside for the promotion that you had set your heart on.

You may find that your best friend has misrepresented you or that your doctor dismissed as trivial some emotion that you were feeling. You may be a public figure who has had the indignity of people assuming something negative about your integrity. Some may have had relatives who were victims of some type of genocide and they still feel bitter about that injustice. As mentioned, the hurt may also have been from our spouse or our children.

We have heard of the life story of a woman who was raped and bashed. She got over the physical scars very quickly but carried the emotional scars for years. We heard her mother say, "She was robbed of her youth." In other examples it could have been, "She was robbed of marriage." Or "robbed of the results of years of hard work." Or "robbed of dignity," or "robbed of reputation."

The hurt that has the potential to cripple is also associated with loss in some form or another. Some of you reading this today have worked your way through that hurt and others here are feeling it intensely.

Probably the most difficult hurt to handle comes under the heading of rejection. When somebody close to us has deliberately chosen some one else, or when we have been left out, or overlooked, the personal hurt is even more intense.

SOME APPROACHES THAT MAY NOT WORK

What we want is justice! We want the one who caused the hurt to be punished in some way or another. That person who has hurt you deserves the worst! But the Lord tells us that it is not going to happen that way.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21 NRSV).

This doesn't seem to make sense. In the to the great film, "Dead Man Walking." Sister Helen Prejean works with a man, Matthew Poncelet, who is condemned to die because of rape and murder. She wants to bring about healing in his life by leading him to seek forgiveness from God and from others before he dies. She finds that people struggle with that concept including the parents of the child that he had murdered.

They attend the execution and think that peace will be felt because they have had their justice. Sadly, it doesn't work. Their feelings of bitterness and loss are just as intense after the execution as before. In the movie we also heard another victim of the same man saying that the criminal could have been executed 100 times but it wouldn't have made any difference to the way that she felt.

Now relate that passage from Romans 12 to our world. We still want justice. In the separation processes we want the other one punished and will use the property settlement and access arrangements to work out our desires for vengeance. But it doesn't seem to solve the problem. Take the young person who has sailed past us in the promotion stakes for example. We want to see them fail and when they do, we don't really feel any better. Sometimes hurts linger on despite the best of the justice processes.

Retaliation is another way of attempting to cope with hurts. It occurred when a suicide bomber attacked Israel and immediately there was a form of retaliation, culminating in the blowing up of the home of the suicide bomber. We do it in our lives. "He hurt me. I will hurt him." "He uses a lawyer. I will go to a lawyer." "She says things about my family. I can say some things about her family." When you see the retaliation process and see the outcomes it seems as if it is not working! It does not solve problems with nations like Israel and Palestine and it does not solve problems in our lives either. The Old Testament has some interesting things to say about retaliation.

If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (Exodus 21:23-25 NRSV).

That was not an encouragement to go on a retaliation spree, but rather to limit the level of retaliation. But Christ goes one step further. Rather than deal with your hurt by striking back, he has this to say.

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matthew 5:38-41, NRSV).

Another approach is to repress the hurt and pretend it did not happen. But then the psychologists tell us that it is not too bright because that hurt will pop up and say hello when something comes along and reopens the wounds. You see a film that causes you to relive the event, or you see the person who has hurt you or you visit the place where the abuse took place, and it is almost like it is happening all over again. Repression doesn't work!

HOW CAN I MOVE ON?

God wants us to move on. He wants us to be His effective people. He does not want us to be paralyzed by the hurts of the past. Perhaps one of the following points could help you to be free from the hurt that may be plaguing you today.

1. **See your role in the conflict.** Perhaps one of the helpful signs is when we appreciate that we may have contributed to the issue. It seems to me that there are extremes in our reactions to hurts. One is that we totally blame the other person or situation and we don't see how we may have contributed to it. The other is to totally blame ourselves and to be so overcome by guilt that we are no good to ourselves or to any one else. I have seen both extremes, but let us address the one who is totally defeated by the hurts of some one else.

There comes a point in the healing when we start to understand that we may have contributed to the problem and we can pray with the Psalmist,

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me (Psalm 51:1-3, NRSV).*

Even if we are not sure if we have contributed to the problem we can still pray that prayer, for the other person may have a different perception. It may be that our sin has been feeding the hurt and keeping it alive. As we have rehearsed the hurts and have retold the stories we may have conveniently overlooked our personal contributions to the problem.

2. **A Closing Ceremony.** All forms of grief need a funeral of some description. A significant step forward for some is when they do something that symbolically closes the chapter on their grief that says they are ready to move on.

For you it may be the removal of the wedding ring, or changing your name, or writing a letter to the person that has hurt you telling them that you are forgiving them, or burning letters. Whatever, sometimes if we can see our hurt being taken away in some form of ceremony, it can help.

3. **Appreciate that your present approach is not working.** There may come a point of rationality when we see that the only person we are hurting is ourselves. The restless nights, the headaches and the stomach pains are not making any difference to Blue Scope Steel, or your football team, or your church, or your spouse, or your children, or whoever may have hurt you. It is only making a difference to yourself, and it is not a positive difference.

That is the issue about recovering from hurts. We spoke earlier about a young woman who was bashed and raped. It took her months to get over the physical injuries, but years to recover from the emotional bruises. At some stage we need to make the conscious decision that this person, or this situation, will hurt us no more. We need to ask the question, "Why put myself through that torture?"

Instead, some people ask, "Why should I forgive? You have no idea what those people did to me? It was unjust and has taken a huge part out of my life. I have every right to be angry."

I understand that. People in my profession are not exempt from hurts. But then we have to think about our responsibilities to our own health, to our family and to those who are closest to us. When we are messed up we impact those closest to us and sometimes the fact that we are emotionally bruised means that we might be emotionally bruising our friends and family as well.

4. **Understand that nobody is asking you to forget what has happened.** That would be foolish because that would mean you could place yourself right back into another harmful situation where you could be hurt again. Learn from the bad experience, forgive the person and avoid it occurring again.

5. **See the Hurt as an Opportunity for Growth.** While Jesus wants us to continually forgive the person who has hurt us (Luke 17:3-4) he also wants us to grow out of the experience and if possible, for the person who has hurt us to grow as well. If it is possible to explain to that person that you have been hurt and why you have been hurt, you may find that it is possible for growth to occur on both sides of the issue.

6. **Ask yourself, “Do I Collect Hurts?”** In the spirit of the psalm that we looked at before, ask yourself the honest question as to whether you are a person who is easily hurt. Do you have a long history of hurts, and do you have to start thinking about your personal self-esteem and sensitivity? Is your lack of self esteem causing you to over emphasize the hurts in your life?

7. **Dead People Can be Forgiven.** It may not be possible to be reconciled with the person who has hurt you. They may be hostile, they may even be dead. Many abuse victims, for example, still harbor hostility to some relative who has harmed them even though that relative is long dead. Forgiveness in that case may be coming to the realization that God doesn't want you to allow that person to determine the way that you feel any more.

8. **See that the Hurt Can Affect your Faith** There's another reason for moving on. One of the sad things that happens to us when people hurt us is that it affects our relationship with God. Hurt produces grief, which produces depression, which can cloud the relationship with God. I think this is one of the reasons behind the teaching of Jesus about forgiving others.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:21-24, NRSV).

This is not only about lifting the commandments to a new level. This is not only because it is theologically incompatible to be worshipping God (whose essence is forgiveness) when we cannot forgive others. (More about that in a moment) It is also about our ability to reach out to God. God knows his psychology. When we are gripped by sustained anger we find it is much more difficult to know God's presence. Our mind starts to drift onto the hurts. The hurt becomes an idol that distracts us from the entering the presence of God.

Psalm 139 is an interesting Psalm. It seems so beautiful and spiritual. Listen to its opening words.

*O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.*

God knows what we are thinking! That could be good news or bad news. But it also means that God knows if our mind is captured by the hurts of the past. Even more than that it means that God understands the fact that you have been hurt. He is not saying that you need to build a bridge and get over it.

And towards the end of the Psalm there is a beautiful prayer that is heart warming.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

I dare myself to pray that prayer because I might be very surprised as to how God would answer it. I dare you to pray that prayer because you might be surprised as to how God would answer it.

But how would he answer the Psalmist who seems to be so in touch with God and seems to be in an inspiring mode of mediation? Listen to these lofty words.

*You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

But this spiritually mature person has a problem, a massive problem. He is carrying a deep hurt. Listen to what he says next.

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me --
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.*

So when he prays,

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting*

he might be surprised at the answer.

He might find God saying to him, and we might find God saying to us, “You have a massive issue that is preventing you from being the effective person you are meant to be. Your life is dominated by anger and hurt! You have to deal with that hurt and do something about moving on!”

9. **Understand that God can help you move on.** Here we are dwelling in the area of miracles. This is a ministry of the Holy Spirit. At times the arena of forgiveness is impossible from a human point of view. The person has robbed you of your reputation. The person robbed you of years of an investment you placed in them. Or in the case of the story we heard this week, the person has robbed you of your youth.

This is too much for us. This is more than we can handle or achieve. This is more than can be achieved through mental gymnastics. We need God’s help in this area.

Understand that he is a specialist in this area. Right through from the history of Israel through the ministry of Christ, even to the words of those who crucified the Son of God, God forgives and forgives. We would not be here if that were not the case. It all starts with God. It is centered on Jesus.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32, NRSV).

Today, make a step towards Christ-likeness and be released from the hurts that are haunting you right now.

STUDY 1. EXTRA QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO PONDER

Some leaders may want to use Biblical material in addition to, or instead of the material in the booklet so the following questions are suggested.

1. **Read Luke 15:11-32.** Consider the older son in the story of the prodigal son.
 - a. What are the hurts that are implicit in this story?

The father - is hurt that his son rejected the values of the home (and implicitly the faith) and his oversight, and that his son preferred life in a far country.

The older son - is hurt that he is expected to carry the load and that there is a celebration on the prodigal son's return. There is no acknowledgement of his faithfulness and loyalty.

The son - is perhaps hurt when he finds that he is in solitude and that his decisions have hurt no one but himself. Or he may be thinking that his family should have stopped him from leaving home.

- b. How did they deal with their hurts?

The father let him go and coped with the implicit rejection. The elder son needed to be confronted with his hurts and told that they were unreasonable. The younger son made a decision to get over his hurts.

- c. Do those hurts parallel any hurts you may have felt?

2. **Read Luke 17:3-4**

- a. How can one continually forgive? Isn't this dangerous advice to both the victim and the perpetrator?
 - b. If you continually forgive, what does the other person learn? Aren't you putting yourself in a place of being angry and setting yourself up for rejection?
 - c. How does this passage relate to those who are parents?

This passage contains an assertive element in that the fault needs to be pointed out. This passage is a parallel to Matthew 18:21-22. "7 times" is not a literal boundary on forgiveness but carries the aspect of limitless forgiveness. It speaks of a general attitude that needs to be maintained when we are the "victim" but does not imply that should not set boundaries. However, as the sermon implies, there are times when you need to distance yourself either emotionally or physically from a situation where you are continually being confronted with the failings of another person.

3. **Read Matthew 6:14-15**

Does this mean that God cannot forgive us unless we forgive others?

Probably, but it also carries the implied idea that if we do not forgive others, it is an indication that we have not fully appreciated the extent of God's forgiveness. The same principle is found in the parable in Matthew 18:23-35.