

FORGIVENESS

Compiled by Bob Young

A simple and memorable way to think about forgiveness from a biblical perspective is to consider three progressive stages of forgiveness.¹

- First, recognize the worth of the person you are forgiving
- Second, surrender the right to get even
- Third, put yourself on the same side as the one who wronged you

You have probably wished at one time or another that you could reach back into a painful moment and cut that moment out of your life. Forgiveness is one way to do just that. What is forgiving? What do you do when you forgive someone who hurt you? What happens when one person forgives another? The act of forgiving, by itself, is a wonderfully simple act; but it usually happens in the context of a storm of complex emotions. It may be the hardest thing we do in the arena of interpersonal relationships.

Forgiveness can be described from the vantage point of four emotional stages in forgiving.² If you can negotiate these four steps, you can achieve the goal of reconciliation. Because of the range of human emotion, it may appear that the stages are over-simplistic. Take time to view these stages through the lens of your own experience. Be open to seeing how these stages can help you move through the hurts that lie deep within.

- The first stage is hurt. When somebody causes you pain so deep and unfair that you cannot forget it, you are pushed into the first stage of forgiving.
- The second stage is hate. You know you are in this stage when you cannot shake the memory of how much you were hurt, and you cannot wish your "enemy" well. You sometimes want the person who hurt you to suffer as you are suffering.
- The third stage is healing. This is the stage when you begin to see the person who hurt you in a new light. Your memory is healed, your turn back the flow of pain and are free again.
- And the last stage is coming together. You invite this person back into your life. Love can move you both toward a new and healed relationship. This stage depends on the person you forgive as much as it depends on you; sometimes, the other person doesn't come back and you have to be healed alone.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross popularized the stages of healing when she wrote about handling life's hurts related to death and dying. While her work dealt specifically with death and the loss of a loved one, the stages she outlined apply to other difficulties and challenges as well, including the healing process of forgiveness.

- In the Denial stage, the victim does not admit that she or he was hurt. This actually allows the victim the space to be loved until he or she is ready to face the pain in a more constructive manner.

¹ These come from Lewis Smedes and are reflected also in the writings of others (original source unknown).

² These four stages come from Smedes.

- In the Anger stage, the victim declares "It's their fault I was hurt." Eventually, the victim gains a perspective over the oppressor-victim stance.
- In the Bargaining stage, the victim sets up conditions to be fulfilled before he/she is ready to forgive. The victim either consciously or subconsciously discovers what is needed to break the oppressor-victim cycle.
- In the Depression stage, the victim initially takes it upon themselves that it's their own fault they were hurt. Over time, the healing of guilt and shame takes place and the victim no longer sees himself or herself as the helpless victim.
- The Acceptance stage seems to be the most positive and optimistic approach; in that, the victim actually looks forward to growth from the hurt. The victim actively searches and discovers solutions for a win-win situation.

Perhaps one of these three progressions can help you address a specific situation or need in your life. All can easily be memorized and kept at hand mentally to help analyze the stress and tension points of life's relationships.