

Introduction:

My 20th anniversary is coming up in a couple of weeks. Can you imagine if I put a shiny silver package with a bow on the table and told Marita not to open it until the big day? For the next few weeks she sees it and wonders what is in it. She lifts it. She shakes it. She tries to peek through the creases in the paper. Finally, the big day arrives. She opens it and finds the box is empty except for the decorative tissue paper. How upsetting would that be? Yet many, even Christians, give such empty gifts to their family far more often than they realize. Usually, it is not the kind of gift that is wrapped up in a box; it is an empty gift of forgiveness. As often happens in families, someone sins and hurts their loved one. Their conscience bothers them; they fret and worry until finally they can't deal with it anymore. So they apologize and ask for forgiveness. Then we tell them, "I accept your apology. I forgive you." But we hang on to the resentment, give them the cold shoulder for days, bring it up in the next argument, and hold them at arm's length until they prove they are going to be perfect in our relationship. Think about this. What if you confessed a sin to God and He responded, "I forgive you." Ah, sweet relief. "But I'm going to hold it against you for a while and monitor your behavior. If you're not perfect from here on out, I'm going to bring this back up and beat you over the head with it." What!?! "That's empty forgiveness," we cry. None of us would want that from God. And yet, do we offer that same kind of empty forgiveness in our families? "I'll forgive you, but things will never be the same." "I'll forgive you, but it will take me a long time to forget this." "I forgive you, but I'm going to hang on to this and use it against you." Paul tells us we need to offer the same forgiveness to each other that we have received from God (**Ephesians 4:32**). In fact, according to Jesus, God will forgive us the same way we forgive each other (**Matthew 6:14**). Do we want empty forgiveness from God? Then let's make sure to give full forgiveness to others especially our families. But what is that going to look like? **Psalms 103:3, 8-12** provides us some great insight into full forgiveness.

Discussion:

I. What forgiveness is not.

- A. Before we examine the five aspects of the full gift of forgiveness exposed in **Psalms 103**, let's be clear on what forgiveness is not. Many of us struggle with forgiving because we have confusion about it.
- B. *Forgiveness is not forgetting.* We hear the phrase "forgive and forget" and make the mistake of thinking that a forgotten sin is a forgiven sin. That is simply not the case. Forgetting is a passive activity that happens due to the passing of time. Forgiveness is actively dealing with a sin. We will note as we examine a full forgiveness that there is an issue about our remembering, but forgetting a sin is not the same as forgiving a sin. Here is the problem with simple forgetting. These events are locked away in our subconscious. If you don't actively deal with the sin properly, but just let it slip your mind over time, when some event happens that brings it back to your mind, there is no forgiveness. There is just the anger and relationship hindrance caused by the initial sin. Further, if you do not actively deal with the sin, the person who committed the sin is never allowed the freedom that comes with forgiveness.
- C. *Forgiveness is not a feeling.* In fact, sometimes our feelings may not measure up to the action of forgiving. We may not feel like forgiving at the moment. We may feel the exact opposite. God did not forgive us because He was feeling like it on the day we asked for forgiveness. God makes an active choice to forgive us. The problem with basing this all on a feeling is that forgiveness is hard. Rarely do we feel like forgiving. The other problem is that sometimes we love someone so much we have a huge feeling of forgiveness. So much that we just overlook it. But that is not God's forgiveness. That leaves someone lingering in sin and does not help them overcome. God chooses to forgive those who repent. He doesn't just give a blanket forgiveness because He feels like it or refuse it to the penitent because He doesn't. Forgiveness is not a feeling.
- D. *Forgiveness is not excusing.* So often we refrain from giving full forgiveness because we see forgiveness as letting someone get away with something. And that just burns us up. How dare they treat us like that? How dare they ask for forgiveness like they can just say that and then get away with whatever they did? But is that really how God forgave us? Did God just excuse our sins like they didn't matter? Of course not. God looked directly at our sins. He didn't look the other way. He didn't turn a blind eye to them. He didn't ignore them. He paid for them. He dealt with them. Forgiveness is not acting like sins don't matter. They are acting like they matter very much, but then paying the price to deal with them. That is what God did for us.

II. 5 Keys of Full Forgiveness (**Psalm 103:8-12**)

A. I will not dwell on this incident.

1. In **Psalm 103:9**, the text says God will not “keep his anger forever.” That is, He will not dwell on His anger. He doesn’t nurse the anger or rehearse the anger. How many times do we do this? Someone does something against us and we play it over and over and over again in our minds. We rehearse it, going through it again and again, thinking about how we should have responded and how we will respond if it ever happens again. We dwell on it.
2. In **Jeremiah 31:34**, God talks about how He will deal with our sins under the New Covenant saying, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (ESV). This is where people make the mistake of thinking forgiveness equals forgetting. God is not saying that He will passively forget the sins, that they will just slip His mind. Nor is He describing a scenario like the popular conversation that is often used to improperly explain this concept. “Dear God, will You forgive me for this sin?” “Of course.” “Thank You.” A couple of minutes later. “Hey God, You know that sin I confessed a few minutes ago?” “What sin? I don’t remember any sin.” That is not how it works. The all-knowing God doesn’t have holes in His memory. **Jeremiah 31:34** is a promise of an active choice not to dwell on the sins, not to focus on them. Not to bring them up into memory. Obviously, the all-powerful, all-knowing God, if He so chooses can call to mind any and every sin we have ever committed with better memory than we can. But that is the point. He chooses not to bring it to mind.
3. That is the choice we need to make. Giving the gift of full forgiveness means actively choosing not dwell on and bring to mind the sin. The best way to do this is to program our mind to focus on the positive. As Paul advised Euodia and Syntyche in **Philippians 4:8** to think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise to help overcome their conflict, that is what we must do to give the gift of full forgiveness. Choose to focus on the positive, not the sin.

B. I will not bring this incident up again to use it against you.

1. In **Psalm 103:9**, the text tells us God “will not always chide” us for our sin. Some translations say “strive.” The word is talking about quarreling or bringing a complaint against. Since God is not bringing up our sins in His memory, He is not going to bring it up to our memory either. He doesn’t feel the need to remind us of all those things we did in the past. He won’t use them against us. He won’t pick a fight with us based on this forgiven sin, nor will He bring this forgiven sin into some new discussion.
2. Consider the example of Joseph in **Genesis 50:15-21**. His brothers were afraid that he was going to use their past sins against them. But Joseph had forgiven them. He didn’t bring it up. He didn’t call it to his mind or theirs. He wasn’t going to use it to manipulate them into doing his will. He wasn’t going to bring it up to shame them. When we give the gift of full forgiveness we do the same. We don’t hold the sin over their head to shame them into any kind of behavior. We don’t use it as our ammunition in the next fight we have. We don’t use it to make a case against them about some new sin.
3. Certainly, there is a place to bring up a forgiven sin if we are dealing with a pattern of repetitious behavior. We may forgive someone of an incident of explosive anger. But then see it again and again and again. We see it in their interactions with us and their interactions with others. At some point, we need to talk to them about their habit and pattern and not just individual infractions because this is more than a slip, this is ongoing evidence of a heart problem that needs to be worked on. The necessary key here is full forgiveness says we are not going to bring the incident up to use against them. When we talk to them about this recurring behavior, we are actually trying to help them.

C. I will not talk to others about this incident.

1. A secondary aspect of not chiding us is recognized by the fact that this word can refer to contending against as in a court of law. It can refer to making a public case against someone. So, when **Psalm 103:9** says God won’t chide or strive with us, it means He won’t bring our sins up to other people. He is not going to take our sins into the court of other people so they can preside over our innocence or guilt.
2. When we give the gift of full forgiveness, we are saying that we won’t slander and gossip by sharing this sin with other people. We won’t take it upon ourselves to make “prayer requests” on their behalf with other folks. We won’t get together in enclaves of the mutually wronged who bad mouth the family member we have forgiven. We won’t hang on to the wrong and bring it up in a situation that will give us some kind of advantage over the person.
3. When we offer the gift of full forgiveness, we are committing to drop it in our conversations with ourselves, with them, and with others.

D. I will not punish you over this incident.

1. In **Psalm 103:10**, the text says God “does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” Sin deserves punishment. Sin incurs a debt. It incurs a debt that must be paid. In fact, in **Matthew 6:12**, when Jesus models asking for forgiveness, He says, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (ESV). When God forgives us, He agrees not to make us pay the debt. But He did not ignore the debt. He paid the debt with the blood of Jesus Christ. **I Peter 3:18-19** says that God ransomed us with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. God did not ignore our debts. He paid them.
 2. When someone sins against us, they have incurred a debt. They have hurt us emotionally, spiritually, mentally, or physically. They have done damage and we deserve restitution. Their sin demands punishment. Their debt demands repayment. Forgiveness means eating that cost. In essence, giving the gift of full forgiveness means paying that cost ourselves. It means saying we will not try to make them pay the cost by giving them the cold shoulder. We don’t punish them by demanding restitution, gossiping, slandering, getting even or getting vengeance. We bear the brunt of the cost. As **I Corinthians 6:7** says we suffer wrong and get defrauded. We pay the cost.
 3. In **Matthew 18:23-35**, Jesus tells the story of the unforgiving servant. He owed the king something like 200,000 years of salary. But the king forgave him. Have you thought about who actually paid the ten thousand talents? The king was agreeing that he would just make that payment. He ate the cost. But then the servant would not turn around and bear the cost of a hundred denarii. When we give the gift of full forgiveness, we are committing not to punish the person. And perhaps I should add something in here. Sometimes, I think the unforgiving like to look at this story and say, “See, the one who represents God withdrew his forgiveness when the servant sinned again.” May I point out that is not the point of this parable. The point of this parable is not when someone sins again you can withdraw your forgiveness of them. The point is if you expect forgiveness from God against your tremendously egregious sins against Him, you must forgive others. Interestingly, if you use this parable as an excuse not to forgive others, you are actually committing the very sin the unforgiving servant did that cost him his forgiveness.
- E. I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.
1. In **Psalm 103:11-12**, the text says God removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west and as far as the heavens are from the earth. First, notice that God doesn’t simply cover up our sins seeing His own righteousness instead of our unrighteousness. No, He removes our sin. When He looks at us, He sees us, but without our sins because He has taken them away. This is a relational point. Remember what God said in **Isaiah 59:1-2**. Sin separates us from God. When God sees our sins, He hides His face from us. But when He removes our sins, He removes the separation.
 2. When we give the gift of full forgiveness, we are removing the barriers to our relationship. We are saying that when we look at them, we see the same person we saw before they committed the sin and we will respond to them in the same ways we did before that. Before we balk at this, consider how we want God to forgive our sins. Do we want Him to say to us, “I’ll forgive you, but we’re through”? Of course not. When we are forgiving others, we must not say the same.
 3. This doesn’t mean you have to become best friends with everyone you have forgiven for something. The general rule is that this means when we have forgiven someone our relationship goes back to where it was before they committed the sin. I recognize some exceptions to this. If your business partner embezzles and asks for forgiveness, forgiving does not require that you get back into another business with him. If your spouse commits adultery, forgiveness does not require you stay married. If someone has demonstrated greed and theft is a weakness and we have forgiven them for an instance of theft, we don’t have to give them the key to our house. If someone has demonstrated a weakness for lust and pornography and we have forgiven them for some particular infraction, we don’t have to give them unrestricted access to our computer. In fact, in these last two cases, if they have repented, they will appreciate our support as we help them have healthy boundaries to protect them from temptation. But in general, forgiving others as God has forgiven us means the relationship goes back to where it was before the sin.

Conclusion:

None of us wants to open any empty gifts. Let’s not give to anyone an empty gift of forgiveness. Let’s give the gift of full forgiveness in our families.