

The Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Christian faith.

Many people think forgiveness is about letting someone off the hook. Others believe it means pretending the offense never happened. Some think forgiveness requires reconciliation, trust, or even friendship.

But true forgiveness is something much deeper.

Forgiveness is freedom.

I learned that lesson while standing at the bedside of my dying stepfather.

As I looked at the frail man lying before me, my mind was flooded with memories. Memories of every kind of abuse I had suffered at his hands. The fear. The pain. The wounds that had shaped much of my childhood.

This man who now lay before me was almost unrecognizable. Cancer had taken nearly everything. The once-handsome man who stood six feet three inches tall and weighed 250 pounds had been reduced to skin and bones. His hair was gone. His teeth were gone. His skin hung loosely from his frame like crepe paper. Frail and weak, he could barely speak above a whisper.

What made the contrast even more startling was that he was only in his early forties. Not long before, he had been strong, broad-shouldered, physically imposing, and full of life. To a child, he had seemed larger than life. Yet now, cancer had stripped away every trace of the strength that once defined him.

As I stood beside his bed, I was reminded of a truth we often forget: beneath every hardened exterior is a human being carrying wounds of their own. The man who had caused so much pain throughout my childhood was himself a deeply broken soul whose unresolved hurt often manifested itself as anger and abuse.

Three days before his death, he asked everyone to leave the room except for me.

I must admit, I felt anxious.

Even after all those years, being alone in a room with my offender stirred emotions I thought I had long conquered.

The door closed.

The room became quiet.

And for the first time in my life, I saw something I had never seen before.

Remorse.

He began speaking about the ways he had hurt me. He acknowledged the pain he had inflicted.

There were no excuses.

No attempts to justify his behavior.

No shifting of blame.

Then he looked at me and asked a question I never expected to hear.

"Will you forgive me?"

I paused for only a moment.

Then I replied,

"I can't... because I already did a long time ago."

The look on his face is something I will never forget.

Relief washed over him.

Tears filled his eyes and streamed down his cheeks.

For the first time, I witnessed the weight he had been carrying begin to lift.

He found peace in knowing that grace had been extended to him. What he did not realize was that the forgiveness he was asking for had never been about him.

It had been about me.

Years before that conversation ever took place, I had made the decision to forgive him.

Not because he deserved it.

Not because he had apologized.

Not because he had changed.

And certainly not because what happened was acceptable.

I forgave because I understood something that many people never fully grasp.

Unforgiveness creates a prison.

The person who hurt us may move on with their life while we continue reliving the offense. Bitterness keeps the wound alive. Resentment keeps us chained to the past. Anger continually reopens what God wants to heal.

Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the prison door.

When we forgive, we are not saying the offense was right.

We are saying that we refuse to allow the offense to continue controlling our lives.

Jesus did not suggest forgiveness as a good idea.

He commanded it.

Throughout Scripture, we are instructed to forgive because we have been forgiven. God's command is not intended to burden us; it is intended to free us.

Forgiveness releases us from carrying a debt that God never intended for us to collect.

Many people hesitate to forgive because they believe it means reconciliation.

It doesn't.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing.

You can forgive someone and never become friends.

You can forgive someone and maintain healthy boundaries.

You can forgive someone and never see that person again.

Forgiveness is not about granting someone unlimited access to your life.

It is about removing their power over your heart.

***“Forgiveness can’t change your past,
but it sure can change your future!” –Vaddress***

That day in the hospital room, I realized something profound.

I had not forgiven my stepfather so that he could die in peace.

I had forgiven him so that I could live in peace.

The peace he experienced in those final days was simply a byproduct of the grace that had already transformed my own life.

Looking back, I am grateful that I chose forgiveness long before he ever asked for it.

I am grateful that our story did not end with bitterness.

I am grateful that he was able to meet God knowing there was resolution between us.

Most of all, I am grateful that I learned the freedom that forgiveness brings.

Forgiveness does not erase the past.

It does not remove the scars.

It does not change what happened.

But it does change what happens next.

“Forgiveness always wins...it’s free, liberating.” –Vaddress

It allows healing to begin.

It allows peace to take root.

It allows God to restore what bitterness would otherwise destroy.

The greatest gift I gave my stepfather was forgiveness.

But the greatest gift forgiveness gave to me was freedom.