

Unforgiveness- the Penalty

It doesn't take long in life before someone has embarrassed you, lied or deceived you and maybe even betrayed you. This pain is always greatest when the hurt comes from those whom we have loved or trusted the most.

When these types of situations arise, we have the choice of acting or reacting. To react is instinctive- it is fueled by emotion and often works in concert with anger or revenge. The problem is when we are upset and react to a situation or person and do not think through our strategy or consequences- and just react. Most of what we say or do during these times we will regret later.

To 'act' is to respond properly to a person or situation. I have discovered that the best way to not react to a situation is to not say anything right away, but to pause; forgive the offender and then ask the Lord for a proper response. Without that 'divine pause' our reactions very well could be inappropriate and a cause of embarrassment and regret later.

Remember when Jesus told us if someone slaps us on the left cheek to turn our right cheek also and if they compel us to walk a mile with them, walk two miles. (Matt.5:39, 41) This type of spiritual response is not natural, not even possible unless we have committed to a life and attitude of forgiveness. Forgiveness is what Jesus role modeled for us- and expects from us! Forgiveness releases in us the ability to deal scripturally with the situation.

It's A Spiritual law

Just as there are physical laws that govern the natural world, there are spiritual laws that govern the spiritual realm. As spiritual beings, if we understand and accept these laws, our lives become more fruitful and productive. Likewise if we ignore or disregard these laws, our lives often become filled with disappointment and despair.

When I forgive someone for what they have done (even before they may ask for any forgiveness) that act of faith releases in me the ability to hear more clearly from the Lord. Some insist that they will not forgive until the person apologizes, but the truth is in some situations that may never happen. If you take that position, you end up carrying around the hurt, resentment and anxiety that their act did to you. It's like drinking poison and hoping it will have a negative or fatal affect on the offender.

What about consequences?

Others erroneously feel that if they forgive someone before they ask for forgiveness, it would be like 'letting them off the hook'- with no consequences to be paid. Nothing could be further from the truth. Some consequences for the offender are: a strained relationship with God; a broken relationship with you and a nagging sense that something is wrong in their soul.

Stephen and Forgiveness

Acts 6

The Scriptures teach us that besides being one of the original seven deacons in the Jerusalem church, Stephen gave a powerful and vigorous defense of the Gospel. It was said of Stephen that he was, "Full of faith and power and did great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)

Because of his bold declarations and miracles performed, he was called before the Jewish leaders to give account. His brilliant recounting of Jewish history climaxed with his accusation that the current leadership not only ignored the prophets of old, but were betrayers and murderers of God's only son. Their response was immediate and furious; they cried out, stopped their ears, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death.

Stephen's last days had many similarities with the last days of Jesus. Both were falsely accused, arrested, had no legitimate hearing and then were brutally murdered. It is of great value to note that Stephen, like his Lord, forgave those responsible for his death. After Stephen called out to God, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit," with his last breath he also prayed, "Lord do not charge them with this sin." (Acts 7:60) Saul of Tarsus, who was to become the apostle Paul- was with the religious leaders that day and was a beneficiary of the forgiveness Stephen prayed for. Paul's life and ministry went on to help change the known world of his day and write almost half of the New Testament. Forgiveness releases us- and consequently often empowers others- to press into the very purposes of God.