

## Political Forgiveness by Pastor Marty

As Christians, it can sometimes be surprising what things we miss even though they are right in front of our eyes. No matter how extensive our knowledge of something may be, we are never exempt from the potential to overlook something important or pertinent. This is different than a blind spot because it is not that we cannot see something as much as we do not notice what it really means. If God started to communicate with us using text messages, I would not be surprised if “SMH” would be one of His more common choices. I do not know if it relates to human nature or the fall, but it seems to me that occasional cluelessness in spite of the obvious is simply part of the way it is at times. I realized this last week as I was watching the news and noticed something that was glaringly apparent, but it had never occurred to me. The only reason I noticed it this time was because one of the people used a specific phrase that connected with something I heard from someone else. I realized that the nature of the conflict currently taking place in our political system really boils down to the issue of unforgiveness.

***Many conflicts currently seen in our politics largely stems from a lack of forgiveness.***

Forgiveness is something commanded to us in Scripture in no uncertain terms. Jesus does so for a very good reason: it is absolutely vital for our psychological, emotional, and spiritual health—not to mention our social wellbeing. Without forgiveness, we become stuck in our prior negative experiences and are unable to grow or find healing. Of course, forgiveness can be viewed on a spectrum like many other things: we can forgive a person for an offense but later discover some residual issues indicating we need to go a bit deeper, or we can have major resentment or even hate and want to take revenge on the person; our condition is not always as black-and-white as some people like to describe it. It is true that forgiveness begins with a choice, but making that choice one time does not mean we never have to make it again. We may choose to forgive someone but later discover more hurt, anger, or fear, which force us to make another choice—continue the forgiveness or hold on to the newly-discovered emotions. Denying there is anything requiring our attention is actually making the latter choice while we simultaneously deceive ourselves into thinking we have not made that choice, so it is by far the worse option; however, that is precisely where many of us—Christian or not—end up getting stuck.

***Many people get stuck because they deny there is any additional need for forgiveness.***

In some ways, unforgiveness is like an allergy; we may forget it is there until we experience the symptoms of it. Just as allergies can be mild or profound, our level of emotional distress can vary from an almost imperceptible emotional snuffle to incapacitating psychological derangement. What probably leads God to smack His head is how we respond when we have one of these allergic reactions: instead of recognizing that our emotional sneezing is a clear sign that we need to detoxify our souls, we begin to adjust our lifestyles so we can avoid anything that triggers a reaction. If unforgiveness was actually like an allergy, and we had to learn to live with it, this would make sense; however, the truth is very different. This is an illness nobody needs to have. It is actually like a physical reaction due to an injury or an infection: we can heal the injury and get rid of the infection. Compared to many of the health issues we face today, the answer is somewhat simple. When I say that, I am not saying it is easy; on the contrary, it can be extremely difficult and involve a great deal of work to identify all the roots that are hiding in hard-to-reach places. However, what is simple is that we know the cure to our disease—even if we do not know exactly how to apply it. Knowing the cure is a gigantic step toward gaining freedom.

***We may not know exactly how to apply it, but at least we know the cure to our disease.***

Forgiveness is commanded by Jesus because we absolutely need it to follow God. When we do not forgive someone, it will constantly press on our conscience until we do one of two things: either we forgive the person, or we harden our hearts so we no longer experience the Holy Spirit's conviction. The former is preferable by far, for the latter deadness will spread to other areas of life. Unforgiveness also does not stay isolated in the realm of our spiritual lives; it creeps into other relationships, affects our health, and makes us foolish—in every sense of the word. Paul warns Christians that if we continue to ignore the conviction of the Spirit, our conscience can become seared; at that point, we not only will be unable to tell the difference between good and evil but also will begin to lose the ability to receive forgiveness from God. Probably all of us have experienced a burn in our lives whether it is a sunburn or a burn from a stove or a match. Burns are quickly followed by blisters that continually hurt for several days until our skin is able to completely heal. Refusing to forgive is like a burn on our conscience that is repeated so constantly over a period of time that our nerves no longer register. Any physical burn that was serious enough to permanently kill the nerves in our skin would be so serious that it would leave terrible scars, and it would kill any feeling in the area. When we choose to ignore the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we are allowing that to happen to our hearts, and it will significantly affect our whole being.

***Anything serious enough to deaden our feelings will certainly put scars on our hearts.***

This newsletter is not intended to make light of the serious wounds people have experienced that can lead them to struggle with forgiving others. Some of the things we may have experienced can be so horrendous that it takes supernatural grace and power from God to let go of them. However, it is absolutely vital that we recognize that no matter how difficult it may be to struggle with those feelings, it is much better than the alternative. When we struggle with the emotional and the psychological pain from past issues, we should recognize that our ability to feel the pain is a good sign: it confirms that our hearts have not become dead. When a person is in an accident, they can experience broken bones, pulled muscles, cuts, bruises, and even internal injuries. One good indication that an arm or a leg is still there is the fact that it hurts. If a person is brought into the emergency room and says they cannot feel an arm or a leg, there is major concern because it often means irreparable damage. It is the same with the pain we experience due to unforgiveness: the pain is a warning sign that burning is still taking place until the cause of the burn is stopped—which is done by forgiving the person or the offense. It is only then that we can see clearly how we should respond, including setting boundaries and making wise choices. We are not able to do that while we are still in emotional reaction to the person or the event.

***It is very hard to examine an issue objectively while we are experiencing it subjectively.***

As mentioned, unforgiveness will sometimes try to hide from our awareness. Symptoms can be as mild as unpleasant dreams to a lack of thoughtfulness toward others. However, there are also some very clear and present signs that indicate either we have not completely forgiven or we have not even started. The news program I watched stuck out to me because it was obvious that some of the people not only had not forgiven but probably did not realize the seriousness of their anger and resentment. For example, unforgiveness makes it impossible for us to see people as they really are; instead, we will see only exaggerated caricatures or 2-dimensional figures. It leads us to see the object of our hatred in the worst possible light so we are unable to recognize anything remotely positive; everything becomes immediately categorized in abstract and extreme terms of evil, immorality, or dishonesty. In the worst examples, we cannot even stand to hear someone else say something good about the person; it causes us to demonize or vilify anyone who does not share our opinion, and we begin to resent them as well.

***We begin to demonize or vilify anyone who does not share our own negative opinions.***

The news program I was watching perfectly reflected this concept. In this case, the hosts of the show were discussing the rhetoric and reactions of people on both political sides toward specific acts, events, and statements by our current president and comparing them to the previous president. What I noticed as glaringly obvious is that in both cases, people were largely resistant to admit anything good about those representing the opposing faction. As I thought about this, I realized that this trend began to be clearly noticeable about twenty years ago, possibly corresponding to the rise of a mob mentality through social media; however, it has grown exponentially with every new term until it is presently at its highest level. Identifying these symptoms of unforgiveness does not excuse any actual responsibility on the part of the objects themselves, but it does show the irrational and emotional basis involved. For example, there have been several instances in the last decade when journalists went out to the streets and presented quotations from one party while suggesting it was from the other party; the response to it was adamantly negative—until people learned it was actually from someone in their own party. A lack of forgiveness makes us unable to hear things objectively; the context is always interpreted as evil.

***When we do not forgive others, we always interpret things in the worst possible context.***

Another practice that was clear in the news is the tendency to vilify or demonize those we have not forgiven. The use of extreme or radical rhetoric to compare people to the worst possible examples of human depravity is a clear sign of unforgiveness. Over the last two decades, there has been a steady increase in the use of terms like rapist, warmonger, antichrist, racist, and sexist along with associations to Jezebel, Stalin, and Hitler. Objectively, no leaders of either political party have been actively involved in the imprisonment and slaughter of innocents on the scale of those historical villains. However, when we have not forgiven others and continue to hold extreme levels of hatred, anger, and resentment, it is not uncommon to associate them with the worst examples possible. Of course, demonizing opponents is a common practice in propaganda, enabling the use of extreme rhetoric when facts do not fit reality; however, it is more accurate in this case to identify it as the psychological practice of dehumanization: perceiving someone we dislike as a monster deserving of insult and injury. This is understandable when a person has been the victim of a violent crime, a betrayal, or a severe trauma, but we are now finding it increasingly common when others simply believe something different than we do. Unforgiveness has a tendency to cause us to associate every action, word, or difference of opinion with immorality or evil.

***When we do not forgive others, we associate everything about them with absolute evil.***

There is no doubt that evil does exist, and there are many people in this world who have given themselves over to it. Some people certainly have committed acts that are best defined as atrocities or said things that truly qualify as racist, sexist, or hateful. However, there are also times when we define a person in these terms based on emotion instead of reality. In the case of our political environment, it is imperative that we evaluate the cause of our reactions. Based upon what I have seen in the media, the conflict is from unforgiveness instead of reality. If this is the case, we may wonder what the offense is that we have not forgiven. The answer is actually so simple that many of us have missed it: we resent those in the other party for winning. We have begun to view opposing positions as destructive to life as we know it. Of course, this is true in many cases: we face the murder of the innocent, the forced acceptance of destructive lifestyles, the loss of our freedom, and the criminalization of our faith in God; for those who do not follow God, they view our position as based in fear, hate, and a lust for power. As Christians, our responsibility does not change simply because God's Word is true when it pertains to sin: we are required to forgive our enemies, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who harm us. Unforgiveness does not just hurt us; it also makes us into what we despise. Forgiveness starts with us.