

## Introduction

Several years ago, the *Journal of Adult Development* conducted a survey about forgiveness, with these results. 52% of the people surveyed said that they've forgiven all those who have wronged them. 48% said they have not. Well, that 48% need to hear what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:5. I'm continuing a series of sermons from that chapter titled *Be a Star*. We're working our way through verses 4-7 and the 15 ways that agape love manifests itself in our everyday lives. I'm going to preach about the ninth of those ways today, in verse 5.

## Take into Account a Wrong Suffered

Notice what Paul tells us about love in the last line of that verse. It **"does not take into account a wrong suffered."**

Let's start with the words "wrong suffered." They refer to someone doing something bad that injures us. Someone speaks or acts immorally and harms us in some way big or small.

A professor at Malone College, for instance, gave my wife a B+. She averaged 96 for the semester, 94 and above being an A. But he gave her the B+ because and I quote him, **"I don't think you know the material."** She still to this day doesn't know why he thought that. That little anecdote teaches us what it means to suffer wrong. Someone does something bad that injures us. It also teaches us that is unavoidable and frequent in a fallen world inhabited by fallen people.

Most people though never get used to it. We can tell that by the way they respond to it, which Paul reveals here. They **"take into account"** the wrong done to them. The Greek word translated **"take into account"** is an accountant's word. It refers to putting a person's debt into a ledger so that it won't be forgotten. That, by way of analogy, is how most people respond to wrongdoers. They take into account the wrong they've suffered.

They take it into account in two ways. The first is inwardly,

psychologically. They resent the wrongdoer. They're angry or bitter with him. The second is outwardly, physically. They retaliate against him. They make him pay. They do to him as much if not more than he did to them. I saw a bumper sticker that said, "**I don't get mad; I get even.**" In reality, most people get mad and even.

A man named Dave Hagler umpires in a recreational baseball league. One snowy day in February, a policeman stopped him and gave him a speeding ticket. Dave tried his best to talk him out of it, for insurance purposes, but the policeman wouldn't relent. He told him that if he didn't like it, he could contest it in court. That spring Dave umpired the very first baseball game of the season. Ironically enough, when the first batter stepped to the plate, guess who it was? It was the policeman who had given him the ticket. They immediately recognized each other whereupon the policeman asked, "**So how did the ticket thing go?**" To which Dave replied, "**You had better swing at everything.**"

While the policeman wasn't wrong in giving him the ticket, it does illustrate what it means to take into account a wrong suffered. We resent the wrongdoer and retaliate against him.

## **Forgive**

But we shouldn't. Paul makes it perfectly clear in verse 5. Agape love doesn't take into account a wrong suffered. It doesn't resent and retaliate. What does it do? It forgives. If we love people, we always forgive them for doing bad things that injure us. In order to do that though, we have to grasp what forgiving is and is not.

First, forgiving isn't forgetting. I have brain damage and I mean that. I forget the details of what I've experienced and done far more than most people do. My wife Jill teases me about it and says that's why I don't hold grudges. I don't even remember that people have wronged me and she's right. My point is that the only thing forgetting takes is a bad memory. It doesn't mean I'm spiritually advanced. It just means that I don't have a lot of kilowatts upstairs here.

It's true the Bible talks about God forgetting our sins. But believing He's all knowing, we don't interpret that literally. It doesn't mean He has a memory retrieval problem. It just means our sins are irrelevant to Him because we've repented and thus He doesn't make us pay.

I once counseled a wife whose husband had an affair with a younger woman. She complained to me that she couldn't forgive him because she couldn't forget. I replied that forgetting is irrelevant to forgiving. It's precisely because we can't forget in fact that we need to forgive.

There's a second thing that forgiving isn't. It isn't reconciling. Please understand that. Don't equate forgiving with reconciling because they're different things. Forgiveness is something that takes place in the mind and heart of one human being. The person who is wronged gives it even if the person who wrongs doesn't ask for or deserve it. But reconciliation is something that takes place in the minds and hearts of two human beings. The person who wrongs must be sorry and repentant that he did and the person who is wronged must forgive.

That's a critical distinction. Thus, I forgive my dishonest and unrepentant business partner - but break off the partnership. Or I forgive my adulterous and unrepentant spouse - but don't stay married to her. Or I forgive my sexually abusive and unrepentant parent - but don't have a parent-child bond with him. Reconciling should always be our goal. But at the same time, we understand that forgiving and reconciling are two different things.

So that's what forgiving is not – forgetting and reconciling. Now let's examine what it is. It has two components.

The first is an inner psychological component. On the negative side, we don't desire bad things for wrongdoers. On the positive side, we do desire good things. We actually wish them well not ill. We're glad to hear that they're happy, healthy, and prosperous.

The second component is an outer physical one. On the negative side, we don't do bad things to wrongdoers to make them pay. On the positive side, we do do good things to them. We pursue their well-being

and joy. We act so that they'll be happy, healthy, and prosperous.

I knew a Christian whose sister stole part of their mother's inheritance from her. But she didn't resent her sister or retaliate against her. She continued to maintain contact with her instead and even lent her money when she needed it. She forgave her.

### Why Forgive

Well, we need to do the same. We need to forgive wrongdoers – for our sake as much as theirs.

Author Ann Lamott explains, with a vivid simile, why I say that. She writes, **“Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”** That's worth remembering. Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. I want to hurt the rat that hurt me by resenting and retaliating. But resenting and retaliating hurt me far more than they do the rat. They do so in three ways.

The first two ways are physiologically and psychologically. Charlotte Witvliet is a Ph.D. and associate professor of psychology at Hope College. In 2001, she conducted a study that monitored the responses of 71 college students as they did two things: (1) dwelled on wrongs done to them and (2) imagined themselves forgiving the offenders. Here are the results: **“When focused on unforgiving responses, their blood pressure surged, their heart rates increased, brow muscles tensed, and negative feelings escalated. By contrast forgiving responses induced calmer feelings and physical responses.”** She went on to conclude that **“harboring unforgiveness comes at an emotional and physiological cost.”** She's right and that cost is high. The simple fact is that no human beings are more miserable than the unforgiving.

Resenting and retaliating harm us in a third way, spiritually. Agape love, according to verse 5, doesn't take into account a wrong suffered. That clearly implies this. When we resent or retaliate, we aren't loving wrongdoers. And because we aren't loving them, we're sinning. And because we're sinning, we're diminishing our life with God.

We see that in the other text I read, Mark 11:24-26. Jesus talks about two things: God answering our prayers and forgiving our sins. Notice something. Taking into account a wrong suffered dramatically impacts both of those. It hinders God in answering our prayers. It also thwart Him in forgiving our sins. Verse 26 makes a startling statement about the second of those. If we take the wrongs of others into account, God will take ours into account. He'll give us a dose of our own medicine in other words. He'll make us pay for our wrongs in the same manner and to the same degree that we make others pay for theirs.

You can see then that forgiving others is simply the best way to live. It's best for the wrongdoers who harm us and for us. It enlivens us physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually. It also enlivens us relationally. It's at the very heart of our communion with others.

### **How to Forgive**

But how do we do that? C.S. Lewis once said, "**Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.**" He's right. Nothing is more difficult than forgiving wrongdoers who harm us. So how do we, as disciples of Jesus, forgive? We do four things.

First, resolve to forgive. By "resolve" I mean, "intend." Whenever we forgive, it's because we intend to. The fact is it's up to us to forgive. So, we make and carry out the decision to do the next three things.

Second, ask God to help us. There's a reason we do that. Remember what I said. It's up to us to forgive. That's true. But it's also true, especially if the wound is great, that we can't do that without divine help. But we can expect that help when we ask for it and so that's what we do. We pray and ask God, through the Holy Spirit, to help us.

Third, develop a larger view of things. First, we develop a larger view of our self in God's kingdom. We see Him and our self in His hands. Second, we develop a larger view of the wrongdoer. We see him as more than merely a person who has harmed us. We recognize his humanity, his pitiful fallenness, and his place under God. This larger view puts the

wrong done to us in its place. It keeps it from becoming so big that we're preoccupied with it. It keeps it from becoming our world.

Fourth, we pray for the wrongdoer. Intercessory prayer, as you know, is a central activity in our life with God and people. But in this case, it's something else, a spiritual discipline. We do it so that the Holy Spirit will transform us. When I say pray for the wrongdoer, I don't mean cursory hasty prayers. I mean thoughtful concentrated prayers. We think about the particulars of his person and life, what is best for him. We then intently and repeatedly ask God to give or do that.

Some years ago, I did free legal work for a couple in our church that saved them several thousand dollars. Shortly thereafter, they left and went to another church. I felt used, I admit, and resented both of them. So I practiced what I just preached. First, I resolved to forgive. I actually promised God that I would, to the best of my ability, forgive them. Second, I asked Him to help me. I asked him to change my mental, emotional, and volitional processes so that I'd be able to forgive. Third, I developed a larger view of things. I prayerfully meditated on Romans 8:28-32, which helped me see my place in God's kingdom. I also prayerfully meditated on Psalm 139:13-16 as it related to the wrongdoers, which helped me to see their place under God. And fourth, I prayed for them, in detail, every night.

I've learned a lesson from experiences like that one. In the context of discipleship to Jesus, those four activities are powerful spiritual exercises. Doing them accesses the kingdom at hand and the powers of the age to come. If we do them faithfully, on a case by case basis, the Holy Spirit will transform us. We'll eventually come to the point that forgiving is an easy and even natural thing to do.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to close with a question. Is there anyone in your life that you haven't forgiven? If so, according to verse 5, you don't love them. So begin to love them. Resolve to forgive them today!