The Lies We Believe About Forgiveness

By

Dr. Darrell Puls

The most believable lies have a kernel of truth within them. They seem logical, even rational, even though in believing them we often sense that something about them is not quite right. We create our own meanings, and within these ad hoc meanings, we find the lies. The gateway to freedom lies in knowing the truth: “Then you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32).

Lie: I should not forgive because then the offender “gets away with it.”

Truth: Every time I encounter this lie I ask, “What, exactly, are they NOT getting away with now?” The response is usually startled confusion. I then ask, “How does hanging on to your anger and pain harm them or get even? Does it have any effect on them at all?” The response is usually a stunned silence, followed by the admission that their anger harms only themselves and those around them.

What this lie actually does is allow us justification to hang on to our anger in the mistaken belief that letting it go will benefit the offender. When examined closely, however, it is apparent that hanging on to rage hurts only that person and has no effect of any kind on the offender. Only the angry person is punished – and the punishment is self-inflicted.

They then argue that giving up their anger and forgiving somehow abolishes the possibility of justice. However, this is only half of the equation. There is still justice. For example, God’s forgiveness does not remove the temporal penalty. God will forgive me for robbing a bank but the law will not. God will forgive me for abusing my body with drugs and alcohol, but my body still pays the price. God will forgive our hidden sins, but we must still pay the price of changing our behaviors.

Instead, God calls us to lives of forgiveness, justice AND mercy. We will look at this more deeply later.

Lie: We must forgive and forget, and if we cannot forget, we cannot forgive.

Truth: This is one of the most prevalent lies, and I have heard preachers argue for it. No one can forgive and forget and scripture does not demand it. Instead, forgiving
requires that we remember what happened. While some argue that scripture says God forgives and forgets, that seems more metaphorical in describing how our sins are no longer held against us as they impact eternity – God is also a God of justice (Rom. 2:2), and there is no need for justice if there is no offense to put right. I do not believe that God gets holy amnesia, and we as humans simply do not have the ability to forget wrongs against us; if we did, there would be nothing to forgive!

Some then argue that forgetting comes after forgiving, but the reality is that the memory remains, but the pain is gradually removed by the act of forgiving so that every time the memory resurfaces there is less pain. Eventually, the memory, while always accessible, fades into the background. The challenge then is not to forgive and forget, but to remember and change. We don’t want to remember because we fear the resurrection of buried pain, but the pain is the portal through which we must pass in order to forgive.

**Lie: Forgiving shows weakness.**

Truth: If we have something to forgive, we must be victims. We fear being seen as weak and victimized, and so we brandish our rage like a sword to threaten anyone who dares come too close. It is bravado, however, and is designed to protect us and keep our focus outward. Forgiveness requires the forgiver to go inward to examine him or herself for anger and then let it go, taking ownership and control of one’s emotions rather than blaming them on someone else. Thus, forgiving actually shows God’s strength rather than weakness, and His strength becomes ours.

**Lie: Forgiveness must be earned, what some term “repentance.”**

Truth: Forgiveness from God is a grace-full gift that we cannot earn. Likewise, human forgiveness is rarely earned. Instead, this demand for “repentance,” however it is conceived, is usually an anger-derived desire to see the offender grovel in humiliation, which is a form of revenge. However, what if the offender does not even know she has offended? Should you always carry the burden of your pain and anger because they do not repent? Worse yet, what of the offender who does not care about your forgiveness and does not care that she offended? Should you carry your pain and humiliation around your neck for the rest of your life simply because she does not repent? Of course not! Instead, forgiveness is a gift that you give to yourself by letting all of the internalized hatred drain off in what several prominent Christian and secular writers have described
simply as “freedom.” We will examine the biblical connections regarding repentance and forgiveness later, but don’t expect much biblical support for demanding repentance prior to forgiving.

**Lie: Forgiving is a religious “thing.”**

Truth: This is an interesting but circular and self-fulfilling argument, for it says in essence that if forgiving is a religious “thing” and I am not religious, then only religious people need to forgive, which does not include me and so I have no need to forgive. In reality, and though forgiveness is foundational to Christian theology, the benefits of forgiveness to both believers and unbelievers are well documented. Religious belief may make some more aware of the issue of forgiving, but religious belief is not required and the practical benefits that come with forgiving are universal. In fact, some studies suggest that religious people have as much difficulty forgiving as do nonreligious people. The problem with these studies, however, is that they tend to clump all religious beliefs into one big mud ball and do not differentiate between Holy Spirit-filled belief and general religious belief – whether or not there are marked differences has not yet been measured.

**Lie: Seeing the offender punished (seeing justice served) makes it easier to forgive.**

Truth: Punishment / justice has little connection to forgiveness. There is a place for punishment, but do not expect lasting satisfaction from it. In a recent case, a Lutheran minister was found guilty of vehicular homicide for accidentally killing a 19-year old bicyclist. The young woman’s mother remarked after the verdict, “I thought I would be happy, but I’m not. I’m sad. This is a sad day.” Punishment does not satisfy. “Justice” by itself does not bring permanent peace, or even “closure,” however one defines it, unless it is intermixed with mercy and forgiveness.

**Lie: Forgiving requires reconciliation.**

Truth: Forgiveness and reconciliation are separate actions. One can forgive and reconcile or forgive and end the relationship. There are relationships that probably should not be reconciled; particularly if they have been marked by abuse and the abusive behaviors have not changed (this is where offender repentance comes in). Lasting reconciliation is not likely to happen until after forgiveness has occurred, while reconciliation without forgiveness usually dooms the relationship—harbored
unforgiveness refuses to let us to trust again. Christians are commanded to forgive unilaterally, but reconciliation requires full commitment of everyone involved.

**Lie: I have not forgiven if I do not feel strong emotion.**

Truth: Many argue that, since they experience intense feelings when forgiving, forgiveness itself must be an emotion. It isn’t. Even though many find cathartic release from the fear, anger and anxiety that erupted in the conflict, the intense feelings brought out during the process are a byproduct of forgiving.¹ Most of us equate forgiveness with feelings, but forgiveness and feelings, while often connected, are not the same and certainly not interchangeable. Decisions and emotions operate out of different sections of the brain. One may influence the other, but they are still separate. It is completely possible to forgive without experiencing any strong emotion, and experience strong emotion but not forgive. The most common progression starts with the decision to forgive, which is followed by emotional forgiveness and release.

**Partial Lie: Revenge is sweet.**

Truth: Revenge IS sweet – for a moment. Thoughts of revenge light up the same part of the brain as does thinking about sex or chocolate (yes, believers think about sex and chocolate!).² Like both of these, they may feel wonderful for the moment, but the satisfaction does not last and the desire for more always returns. The problem is that thinking about revenge and experiencing the hormone-induced pleasure it brings can be addicting, with a result that some become trapped in dreaming of revenge.

**Lie: I can forgive myself.**

Truth: Self-forgiveness is popular in therapeutic circles but largely without a clear understanding as to what it is and is not. If it means that I as the offender can simply let go of my guilt without any obligation to my victim, then it violates every moral and biblical mandate by proclaiming I have no obligation to those I have hurt. There is no research or scriptural foundation to support this understanding of self-forgiveness. A more accurate framework for understanding self-forgiveness is in the context of having been forgiven but still finding oneself weighed down by guilt, including some poor souls who seek godly forgiveness but refuse to believe God has forgiven them. If I have sought and received forgiveness and changed my ways, then I have permission to release my
guilt – but the decision to release or hold on is mine. Conversely, if I refuse to release my guilt, I am in essence saying that God is too weak or simply wrong to forgive me.

More often, however, those proclaiming the need for self-forgiveness may be facing deeply entrenched shame, which is not about what they have done so much as it is about who believe they are at the core – so broken and unredeemable that even God cannot heal them. This is wrong, of course. We will discuss the differences between guilt and shame in greater depth later.

The best rejoinder I can give to counter these myths is this: forgiveness is the freedom of being released from the prison of past pain and anger into a brighter future. Coupled with the amazing freedom we encounter in the living Jesus, it becomes something deeper, richer, and even profound – a new way of living and a new intimacy with God..

**Defining Forgiveness**

I recently attended an interfaith forgiveness seminar, mostly out of curiosity to learn how the various religious leaders framed forgiveness. It quickly became clear that they did not share a common understanding of forgiveness, even though they held many of its elements in their common understanding, and so their answers were in conflict. Without definitions, we fill in the blanks with the lies we went through above.

So what is forgiveness? The most widely used definition is clinical and dry, but instructive: “Forgiveness is the overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such affect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with benevolence, compassion, and even love, while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to them.” Confused? Translated, it means that you decide to let go of your anger and right to revenge against someone who has done you wrong. It means also that you 1) have suffered a deep hurt which has fomented resentment and a desire to get even within you, 2) that the offensive act has given you the moral high ground which you voluntarily relinquish through forgiving, and 3) that you replace anger and vengefulness with at least neutrality, and possibly love and compassion for the offender even when you feel that you have no obligation to do so.
Forgiving is a unilateral, one-sided decision that each person makes within a highly flexible process; it is not something that “just happens.” You decide: yes, no, maybe. It is an internal choice that no one can force upon you. Even though there are many things that can push and pull you towards forgiveness, the ultimate decision is yours and yours alone. However, the greatest benefit goes to you, the forgiver.

For more information, please contact:

Dr. Darrell Puls
Peacebridge
8514 Gage Blvd., F-29
Kennewick, WA 99336
United States
Telephone: 509.308.2737
Darrell@conflictopeace.com
http://conflictopeace.com


