

Overcoming through Forgiveness

Rich Nathan

May 4 & 5, 2019

Overcomers interview with Bill Pelke

Matthew 18

If there's one thing that is true about life in this world, it is that we cannot go through life without being hurt. A few weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, worshipers were gathered in churches around the capital city of Sri Lanka when a series of bombs went off murdering over 250 people.

Every day in the newspaper, there are stories of violence perpetrated against members of our community here in Central Ohio. And we know there's a great deal of violence that is never reported.

Of course, the hurt we experience in this world is not only from violence, nor is it always intentional. Sometimes we cause hurt unintentionally. For example, husbands and wives may decide to divorce, and even though they love their children and don't want to hurt them, effects of divorce can cause an emotional scar in their children's lives that can last for decades.

A lawyer may bungle our case or fail to give it the attention it deserves. A church may fail to act wisely or quickly regarding a pastoral problem. A counselor can give us really bad advice. A builder can do a shoddy job.

We can be hurt by other people's addictions. Some of us have grown up in homes with alcoholic parents. Some of us have been hurt by a family member's gambling addiction or drug addiction. Certainly, a number of you have been hurt by your spouse's sexual addictions. And, sadly, some of us have caused hurt to another person through our addictions.

We can be hurt by being overlooked. A contribution at church or at work can go unacknowledged. Someone might steal the credit that was due us. We may be overlooked in a bride's choice of her bridesmaids or a groom's choice of his groomsmen. Or you may have grown up in a home where you were regularly unfavorably compared to a sibling. No matter what you did, you were always in the shadow. And your sibling was always in the spotlight.

What do we do with the variety of hurts we experience – intentional or unintentional hurts, negligent hurts, hurts that result from omissions? There's no delete key or rewind button for reality. We can't take a mulligan in life. We can't take a do over shot that doesn't count with all of life's hurts. What are we supposed to do with all the

garbage that happens to us over the course of our lives? What are we supposed to do with all the pain and garbage we caused to others and to God?

You cannot open the Bible without discovering that forgiveness is the heart of all that Jesus came to accomplish. As one author wrote:

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If Christianity is about anything, it is about forgiveness.

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The message of forgiveness

Indeed, forgiveness is so central to the biblical message that the word shows up in some form 143 times in the Bible. Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's prayer,

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Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

When Jesus hung on the cross, he said:

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Father, forgive them

In his first resurrection appearance, Jesus said:

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If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven...

In the Apostles' Creed, we're taught to confess:

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I believe in the forgiveness of sins...

If Christianity is about anything, it is about forgiveness! But how far do we push this forgiveness thing?

We all love forgiveness in the abstract. We all know that holding grudges and eating yourself up inside with bitterness is a bad way to live. Healthy people do think that letting go of past hurts and past wounds is the best way to live. We all love forgiveness in the abstract. The problem is when we have to forgive someone in this particular case. When we have to forgive this particular ex-spouse, this particular sibling, this particular person. When we have to let go of this particular hurt. That's when forgiveness gets tough!

And forgiveness is doubly hard when the hurt is not caused to us, but to someone we love. We sometimes say if that hurt had been against me, I think I could forgive. But it was done to someone I love. It was done to my child. It was done to my spouse. It was done to my little sister. When I think about the way someone I love suffered, I can't imagine forgiving that particular offense.

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The method of forgiveness

So what do you actually do when you forgive someone? You know, I've talked with people who I would consider to be mature Christians and they describe some hurt that they experienced in the past. I will say, "What did you do with that? That's must have been terrible for you!" They say, "Oh, I forgave them." And then they go on and they describe the situation with some emotion. I've often said to people, "Slow down here. Tell me exactly what you did when you forgave. What exactly did you do?" And I've discovered that even mature Christians don't really understand the method of forgiveness. What exactly do we need to do to forgive someone?

Forgiveness is not another way of saying that it's no big deal or I'm just trying to put this out of my mind. If it's no big deal then you probably don't really need to forgive. If you can put it out of your mind, put it out of your mind. Forgiveness is not another way of minimizing what happened or sweeping something under a rug. To forgive you have to be as honest with God as you have ever been.

Honesty demands that the first thing you need to do is label what this other person did as sin. The forgiver must put the label sin on the hurt. We say, "Lord, my husband or wife, when they said that or when they did this, they sinned against me." We put a label on the hurt. We say this divorce, this addiction, this slander, this car accident from drunken driving, this slander, this horrible email, whatever it was that caused the hurt – it was sin. It was not just a mistake or the result of bad genes or a bad home life. The first thing you must do to forgive is to label the thing you are forgiving as sin, because only sin can be forgiven. Mistakes aren't forgiven. They are understood as part of the human condition. The same is true with annoyances or unintentional accidents.

The second thing we need to do to forgive is we need to name the person responsible for the sin. We label the activity and we name the person. We say to God, "I was gossiped about and that was sin. And I was gossiped about by my good friend, Sarah. I was robbed of the credit that was due at my job and the person who stole the credit from me was my boss, Leon." Forgiveness pulls the cover back on sin. It exposes the sin before God and exposes the offender before God.

Here's the third thing. Jesus says in a text in Matthew 18

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³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Forgiveness is not a cheap or easy thing. When we've been wounded or when someone we love has really been wounded, forgiveness is not just words that we quickly say, "Oh, I forgive you. I forgive you in the name of Jesus." So often that is what I see in myself and in others who have talked with me. Quick easy words of "I forgive you" is really like cutting a dandelion down at the stem. Quick forgiveness is just the surface removal of the problem. It's a "words only" forgiveness. If you haven't taken the time to dig out the roots of this offense, the weed will grow back.

Jesus says that you need to forgive from the heart. It's down in our hearts that we have all these fantasies of revenge. It's down in our hearts that we still have all this anger, all this hurt. It's down in our hearts that we keep recalling the hurt over and over again. It's down in our hearts that we secretly rejoice when we hear bad news about this person who hurt us or when others criticize them.

Jesus says, "I've got a different way for you to live. It's a kingdom way." In this world, you're going to be hurt. But you can dig out the roots of the hurt. Go all the way down in the heart. Tell God that what was done to you was sin. Name the person who did it. And here's the third thing: tell God all the consequences that happened as a result of their sin. All the consequences. Lord, as a result of my mother's neglect, I have spent years looking for love in all the wrong places. Here's all the ripple effects, Lord, of my father's abuse. At my spouse's addiction. If you don't name all the consequences, you're not digging out all the roots.

Today, I want to interview Bill Pelke, a man whose family experienced an unspeakably horrible trauma. Hurt not done to Bill, but to a family member who was dearly loved. I've called today's talk "Overcoming through Forgiveness". Let's pray.

Questions:

1. Where did you grow up? Tell me a little bit of your background.

2. What kind of church background did you have? Had religious training, but stopped going to church.

3. You and your family went through a terrible trauma – Bill, tell us about your grandmother.
 - a. But something terrible happened on May 14, 1985.
 - b. 4 girls were involved.

4. Who were these girls and what happened to them?
 - a. One girl – Paula Cooper – was sentenced to death on July 11, 1986.
 - b. The 3 other girls had various sentences.

5. Were you or your family at the hearings?
 - a. Trauma of listening and seeing all the pictures
 - b. Dad in court asked for the death penalty

6. You went through a transformative event on November 2, 1986. Tell us about that.
 - a. In crane cab, all these scriptures
 - b. Prayed for love and compassion

7. Bill, what did forgiveness feel like to you? What did forgiveness do for your own soul?

8. How was that prayer answered for you? Any changes: two promises he made to God:
 - a. Anything happened give God honor and glory

- b. Any door that opens
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- 9. Bill, you wrote Paula a letter?
 - a. Wanted to visit with her – 8 years to get to see her
 - b. Wanted to visit with her grandfather
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- 10. How did your parents respond?
 - a. Initially wouldn't understand
 - b. Father eventually forgave Bill for forgiving Paula
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- 11. Following this Bill, you began to advocate for Paula to get her off of death row. You also began to pray for others on death row.
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- 12. Bill, God opened an opportunity for you to get involved with an international crusade to get Paula Cooper off death row.
 - a. Italy – May 14, 1987 (same date, not a coincidence)
 - b. Spoke on Vatican radio – raised Baptist
 - c. 2 million signatures
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- 13. What happened to Paula? (she was 15 at the time of the murder)
 - a. Legislators embarrassed by international attention – raised the age to 16.
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- 14. Bill, your choice to forgive opened up a very different path for your life.
 - a. You started an organization for murder victims moving from trauma to healing – Journey of Hope

- b. 20 countries, 40 states
15. Did you ever have any idea when you said yes to forgiveness what God would do with your choice to forgive?

If you're interested in follow-up

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Follow up event on Sunday at 4:00pm in the Chapel

The Bible, Forgiveness and the Death Penalty

Meet Bill, with

- Exonerated Ohio Death Row Survivor [Kwame Ajamu](#)
- Ohio Council of Churches Director [Rev. Dr. Jack Sullivan Jr.](#)
- Death Penalty Action Co-Director [Abraham Bonowitz](#)

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Book-signing after all services in the bookstore

Events in October (not sure about this, will verify tomorrow)

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The motive of forgiveness

We all need a push, a prod to let go of our right to avenge ourselves. We all need to let go of our anger, to let go of our hurt, to let go of our judgement before God. What is the push? What's the prod that should cause everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ to forgive every other person and every other offense?

Forgiveness is passing on a drop of water from the ocean of forgiveness the Lord has given you. Has a person betrayed you? You have been a traitor to God more often and in worse ways than this person has. Has a person physically abused you? Or hurt a loved one? What do you believe your sins and my sins did to the Son of God? The Son of God had spikes pounded into his wrists and ankles, and a spear run through his side. The Son of God was crucified because of your sins and my sins. Has the person lied, cheated, stolen? What have you and I done? What is the list of our sins? Forgiveness does not first spring from us, but it comes from a higher source. It comes from our experience of forgiveness.

It's only when our eyes are opened to see the enormity of our own sin against God, the injuries we've cost others, that we can forgive anyone for anything they've done to us.

Let me ask you a question: Are you a person who has experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ? I don't mean that you believe that Christ died for the sins of the world. That's important. But I'm not asking that. And I don't mean that you believe God is a forgiving God. That's also important. I mean have you ever personally experienced the forgiveness of your sins? Have you ever knelt before God, recognized the awfulness of your own sins, how much you have grieved God and been forgiven? Have you ever come before God where you know that you know that God your Father receives you and welcomes you the way the Father welcomed the prodigal son in Jesus' story of the prodigal?

If you are a person that says, "I don't know that I've ever really received God's forgiveness for me." Forget about forgiving other people for just a moment. If you're a person who says, "I don't know that I've ever personally experienced God's forgiveness of me and my own sins." In a moment I'm going to ask you to stand. When you stand, we're going to acknowledge before God that we're sinners. Our thoughts and our words, our actions and what we fail to do, we're going to quietly ask God to forgive us based upon his promises and the death of Son, Jesus, as full payment for our sins. It's from this place of being forgiven sinners that we then can extend forgiveness to others who have hurt us.

So, around the room, if you say, "Rich, I don't think that I've ever personally really experienced God's forgiveness of me." I want you to stand. And if you say, "I've come to church today but I'm really far from God, I need to come back to him and receive his forgiveness." I want you also to stand.

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- II. The method of forgiveness
- III. The motive of forgiveness