

## I WANT TO BE FORGIVEN

When Wyoming highway patrolman Steven Watt signaled Mark Farnham to pull his car over he did not realize that Farnham had just robbed a Wyoming bank. Farnham pulled out a gun and shot at the police officer. The bullet went through the officer's windshield and sunglasses and into his left eye blinding him for life. Then Farnham walked to the police cruiser, opened the door and shot four more bullets into the police officer. Watt still has pain from one of the bullets that lodged next to his spine.

Mark Farnham was stopped at a police roadblock, was captured, arrested, tried, convicted and was sentenced to 55 to 75 years in the Wyoming State Penitentiary.

Although Officer Watt survived, he was injured emotionally and psychologically as well as physically. He went to counseling—it didn't help. He quit his job as a state patrolman and drifted from one security job to another. Through the years that followed his anger grew until his wife, Marian, also a police officer, finally said to her husband, "You can't go on like this any longer. The only thing that will make any difference and will demonstrate that you are a true Christian is to forgive the man who did this to you."

So four years after the attack Steven Watt went to the Wyoming State Penitentiary, met Mark Farnham and forgave him. Amazingly they actually became friends. And Steven Watt went on to become a deputy sheriff and state legislator.

Mark Farnham had 35 years to go before he was eligible for parole. His only hope of release was a pardon from the governor, and the last two governors had refused his requests. In 2002 Steven Watt announced he was a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor of Wyoming, and one of the planks in his personal platform, if elected, was to pardon Mark Farnham, the man who shot and blinded him and left him in pain for the rest of his life.

**Forgiveness is powerful stuff. And we all need it.** Not because we're in prison for attempted murder but simply because we all have past sins that need to be pardoned. Every one of us has a tainted past. In theological terms, we were born in sin and we have chosen to sin since we were born. In practical terms, we have all thought, said and done things we regret.

When I was growing up my schoolteachers had an ominous threat that at the time I didn't understand but which frightened me every time. They said that what I did would go on my

“permanent record”. If I was late it went on my permanent record. If I misbehaved on the playground it went on my permanent record. I’ve actually thought about returning to the town where I grew up, going to the old school and asking to see my permanent record. It must still be there. They must still have it. After all, it *is* a *permanent* record!

We cannot change the past. All of our lives are on the permanent record of our personal memory. Not even God can change the past. What has happened has happened. What we have done we have done. There is no such thing as time travel. There is no way that we can go back and change anything about the past.

All of this creates an enormous dilemma in our lives. We all have memories we wish we could change because our past sins impact our present and our future.

That raises a question: Is there anything we can do to get beyond the mistakes of yesterday and into a better today and tomorrow? The answer is forgiveness. The only way we can deal with the past is through forgiveness. Our choice is to either live in misery over our past mistakes and failures and sins or to forgive and be forgiven.

Forgiveness doesn’t change what has happened but it fixes what happened. Forgiveness releases us from the consequences of our permanent record. Forgiveness does not mean forgotten, but it is as if it is forgotten.

Before dealing with three different types of forgiveness some important distinctions need to be made. The first is that there is a difference between what we regret about the past and what needs to be forgiven. We may regret that we were born into a dysfunctional family, that we come from a gene pool with less than athletic and beautiful chromosomes, that we were sent to an inferior school, that we were assaulted by a vicious rapist, that we were hit by a drunken driver who left permanent scars or that something else we could not control has had such huge impact on our lives. In some of those cases we need to forgive. In other cases we need to ask God for help to rise above difficult circumstances. However, we do not need to be forgiven for matters where we were not responsible. Forgiveness is connected to responsibility. And we all need a ton of forgiveness.

We also need to understand that to forgive is not to forget. It is quite the contrary. We really don’t need to forgive what we have forgotten. The whole point of forgiveness is that we remember the wrongs we have committed and the wrongs that have been committed against us.

Forgiveness does not deny the reality of pain and suffering. Forgiveness lets go of getting even.

It is to choose attitudes and actions toward someone else as if the offense were forgotten.

First and most important of all, we all need to be forgiven by God. The most important relationship of our lives is our relationship to God. **If we are alienated from God life is defective to the core; if we are right with God everything else will ultimately come together for good.**

King David had everything going for him and blew it. He was popular, wealthy, athletic, powerful and loved. He was so loved by his military leaders that they insisted he stay in his palace rather than go to battle. They were willing to risk their lives and die for him but did not want to put him in danger. While they were fighting David lusted for the wife of one of his top officers. He seduced her and she became pregnant. To cover his adultery he ordered that her husband be sent to the front lines and abandoned to fight alone. He was killed in battle. David sinned, committed adultery, murdered his lover's husband and betrayed the people of Israel.

Here's what David wrote in his journal when he faced his guilt:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight . . . . (Psalm 51:1-4)

What's he thinking - - - "Against you and you only"? As if this only has to do with God! What about the woman he seduced? What about the husband he murdered? What about the officers and army he betrayed? What about the nation that believed in him and trusted him? David had sinned against a million people and he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned"!

While David's behavior was reprehensible, his theology was pretty good. He realized that when we sin we mostly sin against God. Our lies and lusts, our anger and arrogance, our vices and violence offend God even more than they hurt our families and friends.

More than anyone or anything else, we need the forgiveness of God. God has been good to us, and we have been bad to him. That is at the center of our human need. Even if we do not realize it or recognize it, we need the forgiveness of God.

David picked up a pen for his journal another day and wrote in Psalm 32:1-5:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

When David ignored the need for God’s forgiveness and kept silent he was miserable. But when he confessed his sin to God and received forgiveness his whole life changed. The same goes for us. Life at its core is miserable; our souls ache even though we don’t quite know why. The problem is that we need for God to forgive our sins.

The question is—how do we get the forgiveness we need from God? On God’s side, he gave his Son to die on the cross for our sins. God couldn’t just say, “Skip it; you’re forgiven!” because that wouldn’t be fair (and God is always fair!). So God sent Jesus to take the consequences of all our sins. That’s why and what happened when Jesus died on the cross. It is the basis for God’s offer to forgive all our sins.

On our side, we confess our sin and trust God to forgive us. I John 1:8-9 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” To confess sin is to agree with God about what we have done wrong.

Let’s try it. Think of two specific sins you have committed that you would like to get rid of. Tell God that you agree with him that these two sins are really sins. Tell him you are sorry. Ask him to forgive you.

Are your sins now forgiven? Probably. You see, we have done what God says needs to be done. God promises he will forgive us. And God keeps his promises. However, I say “probably” because I fully recognize that some sins take more than a minute to confess. Some sins require longer conversations with God. Some require tears of regret. All require repentance and the genuine desire not to commit the same sins again. It’s not that God is trying to make it hard but that we need to be sure we really do confess, believe and accept forgiveness—not just go through a quick religious ritual and perhaps casually repeat that sin again later. When we

confess our sins we should have a resolve that we are finished with whatever we have done that is unacceptable to God.

A second need to be forgiven is by others. That may be a whole lot harder to get than the forgiveness of God. Others are not as anxious as God to forgive and often have strings attached. We must do what is right and then leave the final decision of giving forgiveness up to them.

Jesus describes a situation where we go to worship God and realize that we have sinned against someone else. Jesus says we should stop our worship and go to that person and ask for forgiveness. The illustration appears in Matthew 5:23 in the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

The principle is a simple one: if we have sinned against someone else, we should go to that person and ask that person for forgiveness. The actual asking may get complicated because relationships are often complicated. It may require repayment of money that was borrowed. It may require making some promises. It may mean that we have to humble ourselves. It could be hard. It may even be embarrassing.

And it may take some forgiving by us. Jesus taught us to pray that God “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” In other words, relationships get very mixed up. In business, marriage, family and most relationships there are offenses flying in both directions. Don’t wait for the other person. Forgive whether you have been asked to or not.

David Augsburger is a counselor and author. He tells the story of a client who yearned for relief from guilt over an extra-marital affair with his wife’s best friend. He said he couldn’t tell his wife because she would never forgive him or trust him again; she would slap him and he would lose his temper and it would lead to the end of their marriage.

Augsburger said that maybe he could accept God’s forgiveness and promise to never be unfaithful again and somehow he could get relief from his guilt. He accepted God’s forgiveness and went home thinking that it was best not to put his wife through unnecessary pain.

The next day his client was back and Augsburger knew immediately that he had told his wife and that somehow everything was all right.

“It was after dinner,” he said, “when she asked me point blank, ‘What is it about you tonight? You’re like you haven’t been for years.’ What was I to say? I was, well, speechless. And before I knew what I was doing, I blurted it out. I told what I’d done to her and to the kids. Told her it’s all over between me and her best friend.”

“She sat, head in hands, until it was all out. Then she asked, ‘Is it really true?’ ‘Yes’, I said. ‘And is that all?’ ‘Yes.’ The silence flowed by.”

“Then she stood, stepped over behind me, and touched my hair. I looked up to see her eyes all tear-shiny.”

“‘I forgive you,’ she said. ‘Let’s start over from here; let’s go on with life together.’”

“It was too much for me to take. Then—then I saw that I was trembling; my teeth clicked for a moment before I caught them; everything blurred.”

“‘Why,’ she said in surprise, ‘why, you’re angry.’ I nodded my admission. ‘You wanted me to hit you, didn’t you?’ Slowly I admitted the truth.”

“‘No,’ she said, ‘I wouldn’t hit you; that would only have justified everything you did. And it might have touched off both our tempers for the last time. No, no, I forgive you. That’s our only hope if we’re ever going to live together again.’”

“That’s when the healing happened,” the man told (Dr. Augsburger). “Her forgiving me like that, well, it broke my heart, or it broke down my last resistance, my last self-justification. You see, I was still blaming her and her work and busy schedule for my unfaithfulness. And her forgiveness was so unexpected, it was like she reached into resources I didn’t know she had and forgave me. She gave me back my life.”

Let me add a warning to that story. Not everyone against whom we have sinned will forgive us. That’s their choice, not ours. Sometimes we may not be able to seek the forgiveness of someone we have harmed because they have died or will not listen to us or because going to that person may cause even greater harm.

The lesson here is that we need forgiveness. **We need to do everything within our power to confess our sins and to seek the forgiveness of others regardless of whether or not they choose to forgive. And, if they do not forgive, let us decide in advance that we will forgive their lack of forgiveness toward us.**

Our third need is to be forgiven by ourselves. Amazingly, we may seek and receive the forgiveness of God and of our neighbor but refuse to forgive ourselves for what we have done. Eighty-six percent of Americans pray to forgive others. Ninety-two percent of Americans pray for forgiveness for themselves. Let's be sure to get the order straight. It is self-deception and cheap forgiveness for us to start with ourselves and skip God and others. Forgiveness of ourselves will never be real unless we put God and others first in the forgiveness process.

To forgive ourselves is to admit and regret what we did wrong. It is to acknowledge that we are willing to do whatever needs to be done to make the wrong right again. It is to then let go of the consequences against us just as we would let go of the consequences against someone who had sinned against us. It is an agreement we make with ourselves to move on to a better future rather than continue to dwell in a past failure.

St. Paul was a man who had a lot to regret. He was a troublemaker, a persecutor of Christians and a murderer. Even after he became a believer he didn't always treat others well. He was a sinner against God and against his neighbors—and he knew it. In his own words he considered himself the chief of all sinners.

Paul had to decide if he was going to beat himself up for his past sins or move ahead in God's forgiveness and grace. After God and others had forgiven him, would he forgive himself? He wrote what he decided in Philippians 3:12-16:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Every Christian who asks for the forgiveness of God has attained it. God “is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Now, let us live up to that forgiveness from God by forgiving ourselves. As God has forgiven you, forgive yourself!

We all need forgiveness. It is just too hard, too painful, to live with sinful and unforgiven souls. So seek and receive the forgiveness that we need—from God, from others and from ourselves. And then, having received that forgiveness, may we live joyfully in the freedom of the forgiveness that is ours in Jesus Christ.