

Release the Burden!



By Lisa Duffy

I will never forget this story my friend Laurie told me about her divorce experience:

I actually began going to a divorce support group a month before my husband left me. I knew he would soon announce his decision to leave and I wanted to see what I had to look forward to, so I found a support group at a local church and began attending.

There was this one woman who spoke each week, and she was very angry. Her comments were terribly bitter, but what I remember most about her was her face. She had so many wrinkles and her features were pinched with tension. Her small eyes constantly squinted with pain and resentment. I remember observing her closely, thinking to myself, "I don't ever want to look like that!" And so after my husband finally left me I had to find a way to suffer the loss of my marriage without carrying that burden of bitterness on my shoulder. This was no easy task, for my husband had been having an affair and in the end, he left me for that woman. The pit of my anger seemed to have no bottom. But it was my faith that carried me through that terrible time, and I believed that God would help me if I stayed as close to Him as I could. So I did, and through it all I realized that forgiving my husband was going to be a major key to my being able to get through this terrible pain. That became a turning point for me, and I worked on forgiveness throughout the next several years.

One evening, I had the opportunity to meet his new "wife" when he and I met to sign the papers for the sale of our house. I can't say I was happy about this or in the slightest way comfortable, but I had worked so hard to forgive them both that I was able to be pleasant and conversational. I wasn't filled with rage, nor was I biting my tongue to avoid rude remarks. I was painfully sad, but even in that moment, I was forgiving them.

Toward the end of our meeting, my ex-husband left the room and "she" and I were alone. As I began to talk, she actually started to cry. As she dabbed her eyes with a tissue, she told me how surprised she was that I could treat her so charitably after all that had happened. She said she was truly touched by my friendliness. She cried! How many tears I, myself, had cried over the two of them, but in the end, forgiving them was what healed me, and God had given me the grace to forgive this terribly unjust hurt. I am so grateful for that and for all the other ways He has helped me heal.

"Forgiveness" is a powerful word and one such that in the height of anger, many people choke on it. Why? Because the crime deserves a punishment! Well, yes, but primarily because forgiveness is hard. We don't want to let the offender off the hook! We want justice! Make them pay!! Forgiveness doesn't feel good. Making the offender pay feels good! Well, maybe only momentarily...

And there are so many people to forgive throughout the course of our lives, heck, even throughout the course of our day. There's the driver that won't let us change lanes even though he's seen the blinker blinking for two miles. There's the child who has taken a permanent ink pen to a piece of furniture. A nice piece of furniture. There's the family member who criticizes us endlessly. There's the one who stole your wallet. There are many people who have hurt us so terribly, and yes, there are many opportunities to forgive each day. But some days, we feel so beaten down, we just want justice... we just want someone to say, "I'm sorry." But no one does, and forgiveness becomes even harder.

Anger takes a physical and emotional toll. When I went through my divorce in 1993, I dropped 13 pounds in a matter of two or three weeks. I was consumed with rage over what was happening. My anger burned

night and day, and it clouded my perspective and my ability to think straight. I had trouble sleeping and eating. I was filled with resentment and held tightly to these emotions as if they were precious gems. I was so wound up with anger that I couldn't see that by holding tight to unforgiveness I was only prolonging my pain. It wasn't until I learned how to forgive that I began to heal. It wasn't just my ex-husband that needed forgiveness, either. I needed to forgive his family, the other women, the friends who protected him in his infidelity, and myself, for reasons I knew of deep in my heart.

So many people hold on to the resentment day after day. We replay scenes of hurts occurring in our heads, wishing we had reacted differently. We may have hurts that occurred years ago that we are still acting out in our memories. This means our hearts are in battle each day, maybe even all day. We get no satisfaction from it whatsoever, and we expend huge amounts of energy on feeling lousy.

There are many reasons why taking the high road and relaxing our grip on our need for justice is the good thing to do, the right thing. First and most importantly is because Jesus asks us to forgive. He tells us in the gospel of Matthew that, "unless you forgive your brother from your heart" God will treat us with the same justice (cf. Matthew 18: 21 - 35). Yikes! But there are many other reasons, as well. Let's focus on one: our own physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

A priest once asked me in confession if I loved my children and of course, I said yes. He then asked me how I could say that I "love" my children if my heart was so full of anger and resentment toward those who had hurt me in the past? How could I love when my heart was full of anger? I saw his point and I knew he was right. But recognizing it was one thing and actually curing the disease was something different. How could I forgive my offenders of the hurts they have caused? How could I let them off the hook? Why would I let them off the hook?

The answers are simple, but they take our resolve and God's grace. We must resolve to forgive which means we need to set aside our pride and our desire for justice. We need to let go of the "rights" and "wrongs", the "deserves" and "don't deserves" and think of Christ with the little children on his knee and all around Him saying, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18: 3). Wow. That's powerful. Becoming childlike certainly means forgiving.

Then, we must acknowledge there will be times when we don't want to forgive. That's when God's grace takes over. God will fill in what we are lacking. He loves to do this for us, He waits for the opportunity to help. We simply need to give Him the authority to take over our hearts.

Forgiveness is a process. It happens gradually, just like most of the healing process. It's amazing how God's grace can free us of the most terrible hurts and fill us with love so we never need to cling to the hurts again. All He needs to heal us is our open hearts. My prayer for you is an open heart and freedom from the past.

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