

# What Forgiveness *Isn't*

**6 myths that may be keeping you from letting go.**

by Denise George

I listened quietly as my friend Jamie told me the frank details of the sexual abuse she'd suffered as a child.

"I hate my father!" she blurted out. "He abused me for more than a decade!" Jamie cried. "But my pastor said if I want to heal from my childhood pain, I have to forgive."

"What did you tell your pastor?" I asked.

"I told him I could *never* forgive my father, that I didn't *want* to forgive him, that no one—not even God—would *expect* me to forgive him!"

Jamie told me all the reasons that kept her from forgiving her abusive father. I'd heard many of them before. In fact, I'd used some of them two years earlier, when a friend I'd trusted to keep a confidence told several women in my Sunday school class about a painful circumstance I was going through. I felt betrayed by my friend—as I should have. But *forgive* her? That was the last thing I wanted to do! I dropped out of the Sunday school class and avoided her at church. But a year later, when I reread what the apostle Paul said about forgiveness, his familiar words touched my heart in a special way: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, *forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:32, my emphasis).

As I meditated on that verse, I knew I'd been forgiven much. I needed to forgive my friend, even if I didn't feel like it. I decided to do so. Later, when I met her and told her I'd forgiven her, she apologized, and we both cried. I wish I could say she and I became good friends again—but I can't. Her betrayal deeply hurt our friendship, and I was careful never to share another confidence with her. But God's Word and my decision to forgive set me free from bitterness.

## **Facing the Challenge**

Jamie and I are just two of a legion of Christian women who've struggled with forgiveness because it's difficult—almost impossible—to do. Yet in Luke 6:37, Jesus says, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." He elaborates in Matthew 6:14-15: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." The apostle Paul repeats Jesus' command: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). Surely Paul's "whatever grievances" covers any kind of hurt, betrayal, or injury another person could inflict!

In talking with hundreds of women about forgiveness, I've discovered six myths that keep us from the healing and freedom God desires for you and me.

**Myth 1: *Forgiving means the offender didn't really hurt you.*** Jamie thought if she forgave her father, it lessened the severity of his abuse. Yet Jamie's forgiveness doesn't deny her father hurt her. In fact, it clearly recognizes the enormity of his evil—if Jamie's dad hadn't deliberately

caused her pain, she'd have no reason to forgive him.

"Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded," wrote author Lewis B. Smedes. "Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure us accidentally, we excuse them. We only forgive the ones we blame." Choosing to forgive her father acknowledges the pain Jamie endured at his hands. It also begins her healing.

**Myth 2: *Forgiving means you excuse the offender's hurtful act.*** When I chose to forgive my friend, I didn't condone her cruel behavior. Forgiveness, I've discovered, is a response that seeks to redeem the hurt, not brush it off. An accidental "slip of the tongue" needs no forgiveness because it isn't deliberately caused. Intentional hurts—like my friend's betrayal—need forgiveness. When I forgave my friend, my forgiveness didn't lessen the impact of her painful action. But forgiveness unlocked my own "prison" of bitterness.

**Myth 3: *Before forgiving, you must first understand why the offender hurt you.*** On December 1, 1997, Missy Jenkins, a sophomore at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, stood with her classmates and prayed before school started. Before they said their final "amen," 14-year-old Michael Carneal pulled out a pistol and fired 11 shots into the student prayer group. One bullet severely damaged Missy's spinal cord. Paralyzed from the waist down, Missy will spend her life in a wheelchair.

Missy doesn't know the reason her classmate deliberately hurt her. Michael may not understand his reasons. But that didn't keep Missy from choosing to forgive him.

"I believe hating him is wasted emotion," Missy says. "Hating Michael won't make me walk again. Besides, I know it isn't what Jesus would do."

Our human mind yearns to make all the confusing puzzle pieces fit together neatly before we forgive. However, the truth is we can forgive an offender even if we never discover the reasons for the inflicted pain. Author Philip Yancey writes in [What's So Amazing About Grace](#), "Not to forgive imprisons me in the past and locks out all potential for change. I thus yield control to another, my enemy, and doom myself to suffer the consequences of the wrong."

**Myth 4: *Before forgiving the offender, you must feel forgiving.*** Forgiveness has nothing to do with how you feel. You can feel hurt, betrayed, and angry, and still completely forgive the one who wounded you. Biblical forgiveness is an act of the will. It's a choice you make.

Can you still feel angry after you forgive? Yes! Anger means you're in touch with reality—it's part of being human. But be careful to aim that anger at what your offender did, not at the offender herself. Then let your anger push you toward justice.

**Myth 5: *Forgiving means the offender will face no consequences.*** When we choose to forgive someone, our forgiveness doesn't "let him off the hook." Forgiveness also doesn't mean justice shouldn't be served.

In December 1983, Pope John Paul II visited a prisoner, Mehmet Ali Agca, at the Rebibbia prison in Rome. In May 1981, Agca had aimed a pistol at the pope and shot him in the chest.

After much pain and agony, John Paul recovered, and now he looked Agca in the eye, extended his hand, and said, "I forgive you."

Even though the pope forgave him, Agca still faced the consequences of his crime. He served a lengthy prison sentence until he finally was released last January.

**Myth 6: *When your offender is punished, you'll find closure.*** On June 13, 1990, Linda Purnhagen saw her two daughters, Gracie, 16, and Tiffany, 9, for the last time. Dennis Dowthitt, a dangerously sick psychopath, strangled Tiffany to death, then raped Gracie and slit her throat. When authorities discovered the girls' bodies, they arrested and convicted Dowthitt, and scheduled his execution.

A decade later, as executioners strapped him to his death gurney, Dowthitt apologized for the savage killings. But not even his confession, apology, and execution brought closure for Linda. She was disappointed after the execution, not relieved.

We think we can more easily forgive others if they confess the crime and apologize for the pain they caused. But don't look to justice, imprisonment, or execution to bring needed closure and healing. Only forgiveness will do that.

### **The Choice to Forgive**

The decision to forgive an offender is probably the hardest choice we can ever make. Some crimes seem too horrible to forgive. Our instincts tell us to avenge the person who caused us pain, not to release him from the debt he owes us. But as Christians, we can't afford to have unforgiving hearts, for we have been greatly forgiven by God in Christ (Ephesians 4:32).

Only forgiveness can release us from a life of hatred and bitterness. "Forgiving is a journey, sometimes a long one," wrote Lewis B. Smedes in *Shame and Grace*. "We may need some time before we get to the station of complete healing, but the nice thing is that we are being healed en route. When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover the prisoner we set free was us."

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### **\*\* Attention All Pastors\*\***

**Denise George is currently conducting research for a new book to be entitled 'What Pastors Wish Church People Knew'. She is inviting pastors to fill out a simple and anonymous survey which can be found at [www.authordenisegeorge.com](http://www.authordenisegeorge.com) Ms. George can also be contacted at her email address [cdwg@aol.com](mailto:cdwg@aol.com).**