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*The Stress-Buster and Women's Ministry Motivator*



## **The Gift of Forgiveness**

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.” 1 Corinthians 13: 4-5 (NIV)

Sometimes the hardest thing to say is “I’m sorry”, to admit that we have hurt someone. The only thing that can be harder is to forgive those who have hurt us. The story is told of a father and his teenage son who lived in Spain. Over the years, their relationship had become strained. In fact, the list of hurts grew so long that the son ran away from home. The father searched for him, but after months of failure, made one last desperate effort by putting an ad in the local newspaper of Madrid. “Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.” The next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, eight hundred Pacos showed up. The reality is that we all need forgiveness and we all must learn how to forgive.

I grew up in a small Texas town where we had moved the day after my father’s funeral. We were poor, living in what some would call a “shack” on the edge of town. My amazing mother worked three jobs to support three children as well as my grandmother who lived with us. Her main job was as a nurse in the hospital nursery where she took care of newborns.

As a child, I was frequently sick with a cold, ear infection or the flu. It seemed as if I was at the doctor’s office almost every week during the winter. We had very little money but we did have a family doctor who was a friend and colleague of my mother. In fact, they worked side-by-side each day at the one and only hospital in town. Knowing our financial circumstances, this doctor and his wife often asked my mom to baby-sit to earn extra money and since they had five children, I was often recruited to go with her as a backup.

Over the years, this doctor often took care of our medical needs, charging us nothing. Little did I know the high price I would have to pay. This doctor was my friend, a man I respected, and a man I trusted – until the day that he molested me. The hurt, pain and betrayal were so great that I locked it away in some dark corner of my soul, refusing to admit it had ever happened. I told no one.

Fast forward twenty years to the time when I was happily married to Dan Southerland, a pastor and my best friend, and had two wonderful children. Our church was exploding in growth. I had started traveling and speaking for women’s conferences and retreats, and loved it! Everything on the outside looked great, successful and very right but inside, the past slowly ate away at my very being until, one day, my world collapsed and I sank into a pit of clinical depression. I was paralyzed emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. The simple tasks seemed like impossible mountains to climb. Panic attacks became a daily event. I stepped out of ministry and out of life as I had known it.

I began to uncover the wounds I had so desperately tried to ignore most of my life. Instead of dealing with those wounds, I kept insanely busy in a vain attempt to earn God’s favor and the approval of others. My worth seemed to rest on the foundation of doing, instead of being. I soon discovered that one of the main reasons I had fallen into that pit was because I refused to face and deal with the pain of my past, but with the help of a loving husband, a Christian psychiatrist and a brilliant family doctor, I began to make slow but steady progress in climbing out of that dark, slimy pit. Then, I remembered.

I remembered that day in the doctor's office. I remembered it all and when that awful memory slammed into my life, I fell apart. I hated that man. I wanted him to pay for what he had done to me. I wanted him to hurt like I had been hurt. I also knew that somehow, I had to let my pain go and forgive him, or I would be trapped for the rest of my life. God and I began to work through every painful, horrifying moment of that memory.

Months passed, and the day came when Dan asked me to speak for the five worship services of our church. When I asked him what the topic was, he smiled and simply said, "Forgiveness." I knew what God was up to and being the mature and godly woman that I was, I was furious! "That man does not deserve forgiveness, Lord" I ranted. My Father whispered, "Neither do you, child." I was still angry. "Lord, he is the one that hurt me," I cried. "Just as you have hurt me," He responded. I wasn't through. "I think it is only fair for me to wait for him to make the first move. And then he needs to come crawling on his hands and knees, begging for my forgiveness!" In the silence, I heard the words of the Great Physician, a voice I have come to love so much, "Aren't you glad I didn't wait for you to come to me?"

I suddenly realized I had a choice to make. I could choose to hang on to my anger and bitterness, making him my jailer, or I could choose to forgive him and set myself free! But I just couldn't forgive him on my own, so I did what David did. I cried out to God.

Psalm 40:1-3a (NIV) "I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit; out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God."

As I wrestled with the choice to forgive, I learned several life-changing truths:

- If we make the choice to forgive, God will supply the forgiveness.
- There should be no limit to our forgiveness because there is no limit to His.
- Forgiveness is not a feeling or an emotion. Forgiveness is a deliberate choice.
- Forgiveness is our greatest need and God's greatest gift.

While we cannot change the past, we can change our response to the past and dictate the power it has over us. If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist, but because our greatest need was and is forgiveness, God sent a Savior, Jesus Christ, who is calling us all to a higher place, a place of forgiveness. The choice is ours to make. Today, we can choose freedom by choosing to forgive.