“Forgiveness”

Thesis Paper

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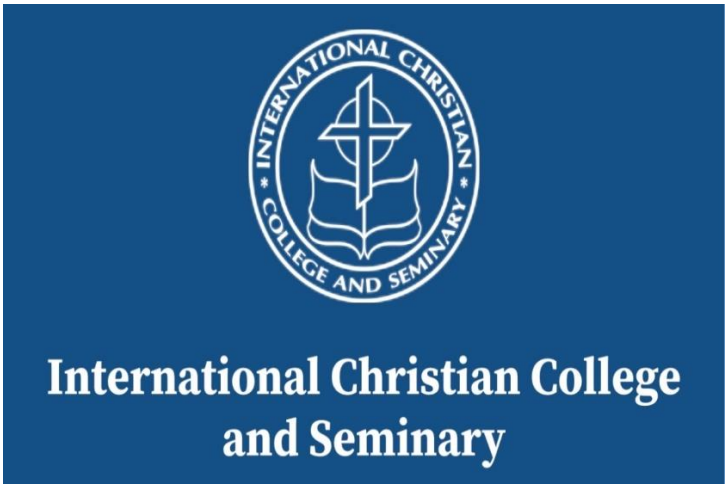

Forgiveness should be a core value and path we choose in our Christian Walk since Christ gave His life, so we are forgiven. Yet, do we know, understand, practice, or even give thanks for such a gift as forgiveness?

There are many ways to look at forgiveness. As a Christian, I know several Bible verses that speak about forgiveness. I will share some of these verses and share how they convey the doctrine and practice of forgiveness. Some of these verses were explored in Celebrate Recovery and in a study by Pastor John Piper. Another avenue to look at forgiveness is a research project at Stanford University by Fred Luskin.

A second way I want to address the important choice of forgiveness is by sharing some survey research I conducted myself. I sent out thirty (30) surveys/questionnaires. These were given to people both in the community and incarcerated with me. I will reveal the twenty-one (21) surveys that were returned to me.

The last way in which I will explore and share as foundation for my thesis on forgiveness is through two books I have read on the subject. These books differ in the direction they approach forgiveness. While some revealed personal stories and testimonies, others come from Christian authors a little more peripherally.

Forgiveness is essential to keeping a life journey on a positive, forward, Christ-image path. My prayer is that this paper will reveal many faces of forgiveness and steps that are involved in the act, gesture, and moral decision of forgiveness. The grace of God comes as a result of forgiveness because of the foundation of Jesus Christ. We cannot, or at least should not, call ourselves a Christian if we cannot practice forgiveness or at least give a true effort to do so. The best reasons to forgive someone is to glorify God, release burdens, and allow others to see Christ's character through us. Whether we are on the receiving or giving end of hurt, we know deep down the difference forgiveness can make. However, forgiveness is not a way to instantly restore trust. The decision to forgive may clear the offenses but does not eliminate the consequences. I once heard Joyce Meyer say, "Staying angry at someone who has hurt you is like taking poison yourself and hoping that your enemy will die. Our unforgiveness hurts us more than it does anyone else." Making the choice to forgive can bring us into a better life of freedom and inner peace. You will see evidence of this in the Bible verses, personal testimonies, and books I have chosen to use as proof of this theses. My prayer is that we will learn what forgiveness is and what it is not through this sharing, unraveling, and unwrapping the physical, spiritual, and emotional consequences of unforgiveness which can push us toward forgiveness. Taking a closer look at the following verses will open our hearts. Psalm 32:1-2 is a Davidic psalm. There are key words-sin, transgression, iniquity-forgiven are these. David says we are blessed by forgiveness from God. Psalm 51 is David's plea for forgiveness. This is a well-read passage on repentance and God's forgiveness of sin. Along with Psalm

32, it is written by David after his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. David recognizes his horrendous sins and begs for God's forgiveness. Psalm 103:2-5 speaks on the earthly gifts from God which include forgiveness of sin, mercy, and more. Verses 10-12 speak about how God's mercy and irreversible, complete justification were accomplished for us by the death of Christ and did what we cannot do-cover our sins. This is the example we are to follow even as exampled here.

Looking at the book of Proverbs, which is a book of comparisons between common, concrete images and life's most profound truths, I found two verses which stand out to me. Proverbs 25:21-22 speak on how to treat an enemy but really tells us how to forgive also. However, Proverbs 28:13 touches me because I learn that I find compassion (forgiveness) if I confess. I must make amends to my brother and God by confession. If my brother confesses or apologizes to me, I need to show the same compassion.

The highlight of grace in the Old Testament is probably Isaiah 43:25. In spite of Israel's unworthiness, the Lord in His grace has devised a way that He can forgive their sins and grant righteousness without compromising His holiness. This would be accomplished through the servant Jesus Christ (Is. 53:6). Another example of the Lord's compassion is shared in Is. 55:7. God pardons our sins if we turn from them. I believe if a brother does a turn in his life and especially asks for our forgiveness, we should follow God's examples. However, our human nature does not find that easy to do.

Most people today use the New Testament or New Covenant as their moral register when they identify as Christian. Let us take a look at some verses in the New Testament, which describes forgiveness, especially from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke first. The most powerful, straight to the heart of the matter verses are in Matthew 6:14-15 in my opinion. Christ is just finishing the Lord's prayer as an example of how to pray. Verse 12 "Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors," is not just some liturgy of words to be repeated. This request is the heart of the prayer. It is what Jesus again pointed out in the words that immediately follow the prayer in verses 14-15, "For if you forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." This is powerful language! This does not say God will take back justification from those who already received the free pardon He extends to all believers. Forgiveness in that sense is a complete pardon from guilt and penalty of death that belongs to all who are in Christ (Jn. 5:24, Ro. 8:1, Eph. 1:7). I sometimes feel we have to ask daily for forgiveness to cleanse ourselves (1 Jn. 1:9). The act of forgiveness in verses 14 and 15 here is boldly saying God will withhold from Christians who refuse to forgive others. Forgiveness is a serious matter in our lives. The blood of New Covenant is not the same blood from the Old Testament animal sacrifices, but rather Christ's own blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Mark 11:25-26 is basically a repeat of Mt. 6:14-15…"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." I feel that "anything against anyone" is an all-inclusive statement that encompasses anything we hold against each other. Again, Jesus is directly telling us an ongoing duty to have a forgiving heart and attitude. Maybe effective prayer and faith are both dependent on forgiveness!

The gospel of Luke has a couple of places that highlight forgiveness in my walk. These scriptures also corroborate the verses in Matthew and Mark. Luke 6:37b…"pardon, and you will be pardoned." This verse is Jesus sharing His expectation of obedience in rules of our Kingdom Walk. Luke 11:4…"Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.." Along with Matthew 6:12, the emphasis of forgiveness in the Lord's prayer makes this doctrine important in our life's journey

Apart from the gospels, there are also other New Testament scriptures which reach our souls on forgiveness. 2 Cor. 2:7-10…"so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him (offender); otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow…but one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also in the presence of Christ…"Here the Apostle Paul shares there is no limit on God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness toward repentant sinners. He says basically that such restrictions would harm the unity to be had among Christians.

Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." This passage of scripture boldly tells us that the basis of believers forgiving others is the fact that they themselves have been graciously forgiven by God and released from any obligation to make restitution. Those who have been forgiven so much by God should, of all people, forgive the relatively small offenses and even larger ones by others. Scriptures relating to forgiveness are throughout the Bible at least 123 times. This in itself can signify the importance of the decision to forgive our brothers and sisters if we are in Christ and He is in us.

The following is a blog post I wrote for "Ladies of Grace" ministry.

"Forgiveness-Living with it!"

"Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice

Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Ps. 51:7-10

Reading David's psalm, I learn that forgiveness is not some light-weight Christian doctrine or a seldom sought-after human want. Even as young children, we know we need forgiveness. As I have been in prison almost four decades, I have witnessed many individuals, including myself, searching for forgiveness, and then learning to live our lives from it. The search for forgiveness mainly included asking family, friends, or parole board. Yet in 2012, I learned these searches were secondary and positive results are not possible until we learn the true source of and meaning of forgiveness.

Satan wants to keep us trapped in the past and our guilt because there we cannot truly confess our sins or be 100% transparent with our Father ourselves or others. Once I completely surrendered and became totally broken over my sins, I began to grow from the reality of God's forgiveness and began to understand and live from scripture such as Psalm 51. Many other scriptures including "far as the east is from the west, so far He has removed our transgressions from us…" Ps 103:12 and "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us…" Rom. 5:8. Once the Holy Spirit led me to forgiveness, I wrote this poem.

"Forgiven and Redeemed"

Whether our sins are great or small
The Bible says Jesus forgives them all.
Nothing better than the gift of forgiving.
Sin's containment needs the Savior's cleansing.

To escape sin's curse, run to the cross,
Then your life will not count as loss.
Bound in chains, break off cast,
Accept God's forgiveness for your past.

Own up to your sin with contrition,
Experience the joy in true confession.
Jesus our Savior, our total Redeemer,
Liberator and true Promise Filler.

All have sinned and fall short of His glory,
But God forgives have faith not worry.

To know Christ is the greatest knowledge,
Grace and mercy to all He does pledge.

Forgiveness and redemption our sins relieved,
God's faith, hope, and love waiting to be received.

I have learned the best thing we can do for ourselves, and others is to forgive and accept forgiveness. This redemptive act of grace not only heals but also clears the way for quality of life to love, renew, and restore. This is a grace our Lord gives even though we have done nothing to deserve it. While I continue to pray still for some people to forgive me (especially my victims), I can live knowing the joy of forgiveness far outweighs the pleasure and guilt of sin and bitterness. Oswald Chambers said it powerfully in his quote, "The forgiveness of God is the test by which I myself am judged."

End of Article Blog.

While researching the topic of forgiveness, a friend shared an article by Fred Luskin. Mr. Luskin was the director of the Stanford University forgiveness project and authored a book titled "Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness." In the article, Luskin discusses why forgiveness can be really hard to practice in our lives. He also goes further to share and explain his "nine steps to forgiveness," research. I really admire the statement that "it's the absence of prejudice that informs forgiveness." Nobody owes us anything and if we grow from this, we realize we do not have to take our hurts and keep passing them along to others. Luskin correlates forgiveness and grief. At the core of forgiveness, we have been hurt somehow. What do we do when we experience being hurt? We grieve! If we grieve for too long, or do not grieve at all, we may never forgive!

While comparing grief and forgiveness, Luskin listed three steps of grief that he feels are essential before someone can even start to forgive. The first step is owning the harm done by both sides. The second step is to let yourselves experience the emotions surrounding the issue, do not stuff them. By sharing these feelings, I truly believe we are free to move forward and forgive. The third step Luskin shares is being open about it with others. Personally, I have long had a motto that "secrets are harmful where surprises are good." Sharing and connecting are central ingredients to healing. I like that Luskin recognizes that telling everyone only adds negative to the situation. This does not induce healing and stirs the pot of emotions.

I would like to share the nine steps to forgiveness that Luskin research tested over the years. I feel these nine steps are self-explanatory but will add some of my own analysis and experience.

1. “Know exactly how you feel about what happened and be able to articulate what about the situation is not okay. Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.” (Personally, I feel if people use your emotions to stir you up even further or promote your unforgiveness, then you have chosen the wrong people).
2. “Make a commitment to yourself to do better. Forgiveness is for you and no one else” (This is not an easy step to conquer, but I know it brings success. Some of the personal stories I will share from the surveys later will bring this step to life).
3. “Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who hurt you, or does it mean you condone their actions. In forgiveness, you seek the peace and understanding that come from blaming people less after they offend you and taking those offenses less personally.” (I have a codefendant I forgive but I will never be close to her or call her a friend ever again. I pray for her, and this has brought me more peace in my life).
4. “Get the right perspective on what is happening. Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset you are suffering now, not from what offended you or hurt you two minutes or ten years ago.” (I believe Luskin is telling us not to keep the strength of hurt that we felt at the beginning of the offense and get in touch with how we are still letting it affect our lives).
5. “At the moment you feel upset, practice stress management to soothe your body’s fight or flight response.” (In an Anger Management course, I practiced and learned that time out, counting to ten, and several small tactics really do help take the initial sting out of situations).
6. “Give up expecting things from situations in your life or from other people that they do not choose to give you. Remind yourself that you can hope for health, love, friendship, and prosperity, and work hard to get them. However, these are not ‘forceable rules.’ You will suffer when you demand that these things occur, since you do not have the power to make them happen.”. (I do not agree totally with this step because I know God wants us to have an expectant hope. I do feel people may feed off one another’s emotions, in the end we cannot force forgiveness any more than we can force someone to agree with us or do what we want).
7. “Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you.” (There are times we spend our days “spinning our wheels.” The same approach time and time again will produce the same result. We need to find new ways and try several avenues to achieve our goals).
8. “Remember that a life well-lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings and thereby giving power over you to the person who caused you pain, learn to look for the love, beauty, and kindness around you. Put more energy into appreciating what you have

rather than attending to what you do not have." (I have witnessed unforgiveness and bitterness rob people of anything and everything even close to a happy life. The cup is always half empty not half full. Not letting offenses steal our joys in life is so much more fulfilling).

9. "Amend the way you look at your past, so you remind yourself of your heroic choice to forgive." (So many people feel they have to start with forgiving themselves. I believe this holds them back and can even stop forgiveness. We cannot forgive ourselves. God does and we forgive others to be in His image. Good can come from our hearts. I have personally experienced and see others grow from their deepest hurts especially when we let go and let God and use the past as a motivation to a better life).

In Celebrate Recovery, a very, very important lesson was number seventeen (17) on forgiveness. Earlier in lesson one, there were two areas of emphasis which define us, affect us, and hold us captive.

1. People have done terrible things to me. They have hurt me…and if I do not forgive, I become angry, bitter and obsessed with getting even;
2. I have said and done terrible things to other people. I have caused hurt, and if I do not make things right, I live in shame, guilt.

I learned that at this point, I need to evaluate and make the decision to forgive others who have hurt me; make amends for the harm and hurt I have caused others. Biblically, we are commanded to do both. Personally, I know these steps lead to freedom and that is what I am after. Matthew 5:7, 9 from the Beatitudes says;

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"

I believe God will grant me mercy when I offer it to others. I want an intimate relationship of being His daughter! Even the philosophical golden rule is "Treat others the way you want to be treated" This stems from Luke 6:31, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". I truly believe that in order to be completely free from resentment, anger, fear, shame, and guilt, we must give and receive forgiveness in all areas of our lives. I will not recover if I will not forgive. When a wrong is done, when a crime is committed, when we sin…there is a debt created that must be addressed. So how does forgiveness work? Forgiveness means that debt is owed.

When I forgive, I do not require payment for the settling of this debt. Celebrate Recovery looks into Matthew 6:12-15 also and really teaches us how the Lord's Prayer is a sample prayer that Jesus gives us but also an explanation of forgiveness. In verse 12, we are asking God to wipe our debts clean. I have

found myself asking God daily for the grace to forgive and make a lifelong commitment. God does not approve sin, and we do not have to approve the hurts, excuse, or even justify what was done. God will never call something evil "good" and does not expect us to do that either. This lesson taught me I forgive without reconciling. It is wonderful when a relationship is restored, but sometimes this is simply not possible. The relationship that does matter is my relationship with Christ and He made it clear we must forgive. I breathed a sigh of relief when my Celebrate Recovery leader told us forgiving is not forgetting. I personally do not think that forgetting is realistic. In fact, it is a greater demonstration of the love of God and grace when I am fully aware of what happened and still choose to forgive. Jer. 6:14 (TLB) says, "You cannot heal a wound by saying it is not there." Forgiveness means that I am willing to humble myself and pay the price for a wrong doing…Knowing that when I humble myself, God will lift me up.

Pastor John Piper has spoken on many subjects but one answering questions on forgiveness was what opened my heart to a better understanding; *If I Fail to Forgive Others, Will God not Forgive me?* Piper also featured The Beatitudes (Mt. 5) and also Mt. 6:14-15 which I have already addressed previously. These same verses were explained in Celebrate Recovery and by several in their upcoming survey answers. However, Piper compares these two Biblical passages and deems they are the same message. James ties them together in 2:13…"Judgement by God without mercy to those who have shown no mercy. But mercy triumphs over judgment." I agree that if we show mercy over judgement, our judgement will not be condemnation, it will be mercy. Maybe we put conditions on judgement thinking that if we are forgiving, we are earning salvation. We cannot earn it but after being saved we bear good choices like forgiveness to glorify that faith in Christ. Mt. 6:15 is also in Mt 7:21-23. If we do not do the will of the Father and our lives show no evidence of a walk-in love, we will hear, "I never knew you" (Mt. 7:23). Plain and simple, if we say we are a Christian (follower of Christ), and receive forgiveness at the cost of Christ's blood and do not let it show effectively in our lives, then we are hypocrites. What is a reviler? Someone who holds a grudge and is unforgiving. 1 Cor. 6:10 says, "revilers will not inherit the Kingdom of God." Well kindness cannot earn our way into heaven either, but it shows we have been broken by the love of Jesus and have embraced the gift of being forgiven. Here is a point I want to make and have learned. If we struggle to forgive others yet are still trying to, I believe we are going to heaven. However, if we are set in the decision not to forgive, have no intentions of practicing forgiveness…this destroys us! The Lord says, "Vengeance is mine…I will repay" (Rom. 12:19). My prayer is that I and others can keep working on "letting God and letting go".

I passed out (30) surveys surmising I would get a few back to use as research on forgiveness. Some people incarcerated with me asked to help yet never gave them back. This happened with incarcerated

more because I feel it is sometimes hard to look at forgiveness in here. I posed four questions on my survey.

1. What is your definition of forgives
2. Is forgiveness important to you. Why or why not?
3. Is it easier for you to forgive or to receive forgiveness?
4. Do you believe that we can go to heaven with unforgiveness our hearts? Explain.

While some shared more intimately and heart-felt than others, I could tell this subject was meaningful to all. A couple of people who are running from forgiveness in their lives only wrote a few sentences. Others who have not only explored forgiveness in their lives, but also seriously practiced it, offered more details that spoke to the level of the forgiveness in their lives. I will attempt to evaluate and dissect each person's responses and end with the most revealing. It will reveal here that all are female except two who replied. If faith affiliation or demographic background is known I will share this as it may relate to the responder's similarities or differences.

The shortest answers received were from an African American woman in her forties. This woman has identified as Chistian, then Jewish and other religious affiliations. I would identify her as the "lukewarm" God spits out. One day she wants to sing in our Christian worship services, the next day she is getting her palms read. Her definition of forgiveness was "letting go of something done to you that hurt you or damaged you". While there is some depth to this definition, I have not seen her angry or bitter ways prove any letting go. This definition seemed impersonal to me due to no other details shared. She did say it is important to forgive because "holding on will make you bitter causing you to never be at ease or at peace with yourself or others". I believe she shared some of herself in this answer to number two because I have witnessed this bitterness and unrest in her life here. When posed with the question of asking or giving forgiveness, she could not commit and said she could do both easily. Her life, or rather her choices and behavior, do not reflect this ease of doing both. She did not have an opinion on the fourth question except to paraphrase a Bible verse "you have to forgive in order for God to forgive you". I guess her spirit did not lead her to form a faith-based opinion.

The second survey came from a woman in her thirties. Before incarceration, she grew up in the hills of Kentucky and seemed to revere honesty and recovery. Her definition of forgiveness was "knowing and accepting being harmed or wronged by another person and doing so without harboring resentment in my heart". I have been around this woman at church, Bible studies, and working out. This rings true in her life because practicing forgiveness seems to have cleared her heart and mind of anger, contempt and more. She does not portray any bitterness in her life. She feels forgiveness is important because Jesus told

us to but also since she wants it, she must give it also. She finds it easier to forgive than ask for forgiveness. She agrees that forgiveness is mainly a gift to us. Pride will sometimes get in the way of us asking and I gathered she feels this way also from her response. She did think about the last question and shared she was unsure if we could go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts. In the end, she feels that God knows our hearts and we are prone to strong emotions. Her side note was worthy of sharing…"What Jesus did FOR me is greater than what anyone could do TO me".

A fifty-seven (57) year old woman I have been around for years answered next. Her definition of forgiveness is also being able to let go of hurts or resentment caused by others' words or actions. In order to have peace in our lives, she feels this is the importance of forgiveness. The act of forgiveness has helped her grow closer to God and in her faith walk, while having healthier relationships with other people. Asking forgiveness is hard for her. A lot of times, she has had "no" for an answer and that left her focusing on other people's responses. She therefore said it is easier for her to forgive others. Her thoughts on heaven were…"I do not believe we can go to heaven if unforgiveness has hardened our hearts." She says ask God to forgive our unforgiveness and let Him soften our hearts.

The fourth woman wrote really proper and almost politically correct on her responses. Her definition shared we should let go of wrongs done to us to the point of not "throwing up old hurts in someone's face". She feels forgiveness is loving someone no matter what but shared no further detail on what that should look like. Again, in the importance of forgiveness, she mentioned old hurts and not using them as a crutch. She says forgiving people gives her power and strength over her own life. I find this woman to be very aggressive in her interactions so she must forgive a lot! She further shared it is God's will for us to ask for and give forgiveness. She does admit that both are hard for her but gives God credit for the strength to do it. This woman has wavered back and forth from Muslim, Rastafarian, and Christian affiliations…but answers the fourth question based on what Jesus did for us. She said, "The Bible clearly states that in order to get to heaven we must forgive and treat people the way Jesus did".

The fifth person that answered the survey questions is a coworker here in chapel. I know her to be a very caring lady who has experienced a lot of abuse in her life as well as losing a daughter to suicide. Her definition of forgiveness is also letting go of resentment and she added blame also so she could have peace. She shares that forgiveness is "very important doctrine in her life". I found her responses to be very honest and heartfelt when I asked if forgiveness is important, so I want to quote her words here: "Forgiveness is a very important belief in my life. Being bitter and resentful uses up a portion of my spirit, keeps me bogged down emotionally, and keeps my mind preoccupied in a negative way. I have found that letting go of resentment is so much easier and uses much less energy than trying to hang on to it. Forgiving others takes me out of the equation. I can then relax and be at peace. I feel that by loving

myself, I am able to give up the negative more easily. I enjoy a positive, joyful attitude in my outlook on life, and I refuse to give space to pettiness in my life. Once I forgive someone, I have freed my soul, and I am no longer consumed. I have my focus returned to be a Christian seeking his image which is what I feel God requests from me". I see this lady who lives with physical scars from abuse, emotional scars from her daughter's suicide, live her life exactly on this path. I was not surprised that she finds it easier to forgive others. She owns that she can only do her part, take responsibility for having judged others in the first place according to her beliefs, and forgives to free herself. This very compassionate woman feels she can get to heaven with unforgiveness in her heart because God knows her heart is filled with love and she really wants to forgive.

The sixth replied to the survey question is a forty-year-old mother of six who was incarcerated for killing her husband while both were high on methamphetamines. I work with her on a daily basis and while her answers sound good, I have heard her excusing and justifying her actions. I do not think she has acknowledged or accepted her responsibility for her decisions and actions. Her definition of forgiveness is "releasing control over human feelings that may imprison us". I agree with her that unforgiveness can be a breeding ground for anger, hate, bitterness, and revenge. These feelings can and do hold us captive. I respect her words that choosing to love and forgive can give Jesus control in our lives and keep us from falling victim to the power that unforgiveness can have in our hearts. She knows the importance of forgiveness because she can have more peace in her life. She quoted Matthew 6:14-15 as I had shared previously and uses these scriptures as a basis for wanting forgiveness when she wrongs the Lord or others, so therefore must forgive in return. She answered that forgiving someone else is easier but does not give reason as to why. She does reason why it is hard to ask for forgiveness. Doing wrong to someone else causes her to beat herself up and fill with guilt; yet, she says God's grace has taught her she can never be perfect and needs to ask forgiveness when she messes up. This allows God to move in many situations especially healing relationships. Answering question four, she quotes from Galatians 5:20-21, "idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy…Let me tell you again, that anyone living that life will not inherit the Kingdom of God". She says we cannot go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts, because unforgiveness flowers into anger, quarreling, and more on this list in Galatians. Looking at the subject this way, she adamantly feels we cannot go to heaven with the sins that unforgiveness breeds in our hearts.

Number seven is the response from one of two males. He is a fifty-eight-year-old who teaches Sunday school to kids and runs his own research/marketing company. I expected his answers to be shorter and they were. His definition of forgiveness is to no longer hold a person that wrongs you as being accountable for the wrong any longer period he feels without forgiveness we would all be tied in knots

from holding on to things that should be forgiven. He says, “forgiveness is hard to do in its purest sense”. Wow no further details were shared, I imagine he means completely letting go with no residual effects that rear up when we are around the person who wronged us. Forgiveness is hard on the give or accept end, but he feels is it easier to ask or receive forgiveness. He replied with a definite “yes” when posed with if we can go to heaven with unforgiveness in our heart. He said “Unforgiveness will show up as ‘rewards’ that we will miss out on in heaven. We will still be white as sheep, but upon reading the second book of heaven we will be held accountable for what we did or did not do.”

Survey number eight is from a lady in her fifties whom I have never met. She began writing to me because a high school friend shared my life story with her. She joined a Facebook prayer group on my behalf and then began corresponding by mail. I enjoyed her simple yet transforming answers. Her definition of forgiveness is “not holding a grudge or personal vendetta against those who have wronged you…loving that person the same way you did before they wronged you, or as if they never wronged you”. I am sort of convicted and touched by her definition because we have to acknowledge a sin was committed against us but determine in our hearts that we can choose to love and show grace in spite of it. This is truly powerful in our Christian walk and journey, when we are able to live from this attitude, viewpoint, and put it into action. Choosing to forgive is easier for her because she feels that frees her to move on. She literally said she feels joyful when she is able to forgive very personal wrongs. She was the first to say it humbles us to let go of the hurt and pain. While she combined questions two and three, this Christian delved into number four. She also quotes Mt. 6:14-15 but admits she really does not know what this means because Jesus has already paid the price for our sins as she understands the gospel. Acknowledging that unforgiveness is a weakness in human beings, she hopes this sin does not keep us from the Kingdom of God. Further, I agree with her about we need to search our hearts daily and sincerely strive for forgiveness because Christ commands us to do so.

The ninth respondent is a young mother in her twenties who defines forgiveness as basically no longer seeking revenge or ill will toward the person who wronged you. She stated, “Forgiveness is to not rejoice or find satisfaction in another suffering and to no longer feel anger or resentment towards someone who has hurt you”. She recognizes forgiveness as very important in her life, yet she struggles with choosing forgiveness and sticking to her decision. She shared a personal conflict about forgiving her mom. When her parents divorced, she did not speak to her mom for years because she is the one who left the home. Once they began to speak, she realized she herself had done worse things as a mother to her children. She now works on forgiveness more in all areas of her life because she wants it and the peace that comes with this choice. In order to love and accept people in our lives, I would share that this demands and requires forgiveness. Forgiving others is now easier for her because sorrow and pride interfere more with asking

for forgiveness. Because of the situation with her mom, she struggled with going to heaven with unforgiveness in her heart. However, the hardest person she finds to forgive is herself. Her struggle with this is summed up in her statement, “The Bible says you have to forgive others to be forgiven, that all your sins can be forgiven and unforgiveness is undoubtedly a sin. I am not God, and I cannot speak to question number four of going to heaven because I still sense a contradiction inside with this”. I appreciate that she struggles because this means she cares about God’s word, truth, and how she applies this to her Christian journey.

This tenth survey answers are from another mother in her twenties. These two younger mothers seemed to have thought about the subject of forgiveness with depth and sincerity. Forgiveness is defined as “letting go and accepting that others are not perfect…that they make mistakes truly desiring of another chance if truly sorry”. Forgiveness is a choice, so a theme running through these definitions is here also. Choosing to release another from the pain they caused you allows us to let go and not grow bitter. We can accept the past, put it in the past, and leave it there. I am in agreement that forgiveness can be a chance for self-redemption also and help clean your slate for the future. This young mother has learned that forgiveness is important to her. In her life, she had harbored resentments that ate at her emotions and poisoned her thinking and outlook on life. She also learned that the people who hurt us are not even bothered or affected by her unforgiveness. She is not asking anyone or herself to forget, but feels everyone craves forgiveness; therefore, giving and receiving brings peace in our lives. She admits to struggling with the fourth question. She replied that in her opinion only God knows that answer, and we may not know until He comes even though we read His word. She chooses not to let unforgiveness eat away her soul and says, “Unforgiveness is like swallowing poison and expecting the other person to die”. This was a popular quote among the people answering the survey questions. Jesus gives us the ultimate gift of forgiveness, so we are to follow in His image.

The next survey answers came from a woman in her early seventies who has two immune diseases. She has lived through a lot in her life. She is always positive and shares a very joyful spirit. She has a miniature donkey ministry in which she and Moses, the donkey, visit nursing homes and hospice patients. Her life verse is Phil. 4:13 and she prefaced her survey with that. The definition of forgiveness she shared was letting go of hurtful experiences even those that hurt us to the core. Her advice is to let go at least enough to stop these hurts from affecting our life so God can heal us and the relationships in our lives. Quoting her, “not forgiving just festers and can make you a bitter person”. This Christian woman lives the importance of forgiveness and giving things to God. She shared that the biggest hurdle to her path of forgiveness was the molestation of her daughter. She carried this with her for years and only three years ago forgave her first husband. She started attending a new church and the pastor really brought to heart

God's word and expectations of forgiveness. This messenger of God took the time to counsel her concerning the abuse she and her daughter suffered. She knows all too well the weight lifted for the one who forgives so she now finds it easier to forgive. She did not address the fourth question.

Survey number twelve was returned by a fifty-seven (57) year old schoolteacher and cancer survivor. She defines forgiveness as "extending the same grace to others that God has shown me through Jesus Christ". This is the core of it I agree and very deeply expected if we take our walk with Christ sincerely. I like her answer that forgiveness allows her to be human and realize that others make the same mistakes as she does. Realizing this, we can let go of guilt and let go of expectations of perfection for ourselves and others. This allows peace in our lives and lets love cover the imperfections. She finds it easier to forgive others than asking for forgiveness because she tends to hold on to guilt and believes she should have known better as a Christian. I would tell her God's grace is for her as well as others. Her response to question four was she believes "Jesus paid for our unforgiveness and if we have truly believed in Him and understand His grace, we will have extended it to others. I really connected with her belief that we understand forgiveness in accordance to our maturity in the sanctification process, and God will judge us according to our level of understanding. If we agree on this, then there will be new Christians and children who may still harbor some unforgiveness but will still go to heaven.

Survey number thirteen answers are from a fifty-seven-year-old Christian who teaches school, Sunday school, and is a community prayer warrior. Her answers are from a very mature and loving journey in her Christian life. She describes forgiveness as a complete release from a wrong someone has done with no residual negative feelings toward them. Maturity comes when we realize we do not have to be close to the person again that hurt us because with forgiveness comes healthy boundaries. I agree with her idea of that "forgiveness also means I will no longer withhold a Godly love or hold anything against the person who hurt me". Our level of understanding of true forgiveness would definitely play a part in his choice. Forgiveness is important to this mature Christian because doing so is the only way for true healing to take place in our hearts. She also used the quote others have used and Joyce Meyer puts it a way that she understood. "Holding onto unforgiveness is like taking poison and hoping someone else is going to die." Unforgiveness is holding a grudge and staying angry, which only hurts us more than the other person and can poison all our relationships. That is what the quote says to me. As many have replied, she finds giving forgiveness easier than asking for forgiveness. She shares that she has had many opportunities in her life to forgive and felt free. Experiences she shared were forgiving her ex-husband for leaving her, a coworker lying about her causing her to be fired, and a stepmother who treated her badly. She reveals that these situations empowered her. She admits that asking for forgiveness is harder for her because she has to admit she made a mistake. As she has matured, she does find asking easier because she knows the

freedom of owning her wrongs and that she can grow from them. She declined the fourth question except to say, “Let’s leave that to God”.

A mentor from The Prisoners’ Hope ministry mailed in survey number fourteen, she wrote, “The true meaning of forgiveness is no bad feelings when it comes to the thought of a certain situation or person that I say I have forgiven”. I would agree that this is a true gauge. If bad feelings arise then we still have resentment and are not truly forgiven in our hearts. Once we realize that forgiving is not saying what happened is right or even forgotten, we can’t allow our hearts to stay hardened toward the person that wronged us. I really admire why forgiveness is important to her. She states, “Forgiveness is important to me because it is only through forgiveness that I am connected to Jesus. I am a natural born sinner, and my Jesus dies so that I may have abundant life with Him. The only way I can live abundantly with Him is to forgive anyone or anything as He has forgiven me. Without me being willing to forgive others, Jesus cannot forgive me, and I am disconnected from the sunlight of the Spirit”. It was hard for her to choose on question number three period her raw answer was, “I believe my ego likes to be forgiven by others better, but my spirit loves it more when I forgive others”. She gave lots of thoughts about question four. What I got from her answer is that she believes we can go forward with life with unforgiveness in our hearts but not joyfully. Most agree that if we confess Christ as our Savior that died on a cross so we can have life with Him, then we get to spend eternity with Him and the Father with all other saved people. She said question four was tricky and made her think. However, she did open up something powerful to think about: “I personally do not want to be welcomed in Jesus’ arms with any unforgiveness in my heart because the two of those things just don’t go together”. I found myself getting a mental picture of that day and how that would feel in this made me grow to a deeper level of understanding from this statement.

Survey fifteen answers were long, and I read them several times to discern that this forty-five-year old fellow inmate was really sharing. Once I let go of bias and read in love, I gained insight into her life. She shared that she really must put aside her pride and extend the grace given to her by others. She feels forgiveness is a gift not earned but freely given. She finds the small harms and hurts easy to forgive. She admits, however, to living with hatred and unforgiveness in her heart for a long time and justified those with what had been done to her. I have met many people who survived abuse that feel they have a “right” to feel this way. I admire this woman because she shared that she recognized that her heart was hardening, and she fell into bitterness. This pattern had begun to affect every part of her life, even her physical health. After many tears, and a letter to her father saying, “I forgive you”, she started a path of forgiveness. I do not know personally but I can imagine how hard it is to forgive your father who molested you for years and let his friends do the same. The festering and hate led to her crime of killing one of her abusers after she was an adult. She is working on forgiving herself and accepting that Christ

can cover such a terrible sin. This 45-year-old forgives more easily than asking for forgiveness. She has grown to a point in her life now where she tries to admit her wrongs quickly. Her goal is to never let unforgiveness fester in her again. Decisions are made daily in this environment to talk things out. Like many, survey fifteen believes once saved, nothing can take us out of God's hands. She feels there may be better quality to life here and in heaven if we keep unforgiveness from going with us.

A mentor assigned me through a prison ministry program answered survey number sixteen. She gave me a Google definition of forgiveness: "a conscious, deliberate act to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person who has harmed us regardless of whether or not thy actually deserve your forgiveness." Forgetting, condoning, or excusing the offenses is not in her personal definition. She does feel that "forgiveness is the responsibility of humanity to forgive wrongs as Jesus gave the commandment to the disciples to go out, teach, and forgive sins." Forgiving others is easier for her than asking forgiveness because she feels we have to truly forgive ourselves before we can receive forgiveness. This lady shares Mt. 7:12 which tells her God wants believers to forgive, reconnect, and stay in fellowship, and that forgiveness is the main ingredient of these. Romans 5:6-8 tells us the result of forgiveness is intimacy with Christ and others. She feels Jesus spoke clearly to His disciples in that if you do not forgive others, our Father will not forgive us. We have all read that, yet she feels it could mean God would not forgive now or when we die and stand before God unforgiven. I believe if we pray, asking God to help us love the other person, He will put forgiveness in our hearts. This lady did not answer question four yes or no to heaven with unforgiveness, but implied judgment which we all face will be the answer.

The seventeenth person to answer survey questions was a female chaplain, and she is someone I have known all my life. Her definition of forgiveness began like a textbook, "Forgiveness is a conscious decision to release feelings of resentment toward someone that may have hurt me or someone I love…" but ended with a newness of explanation, "I release them from the obligation of the pain they caused me regardless of their guilt or innocence." That is powerful to me because no one is really obligated except in our feelings and thoughts. As Christians, or decent human beings, we are obligated to do this. This is the only way to have true peace in our lives I related to the view she shared about unforgiveness bringing a burden and negative fruit we have to carry. I agree with her that God has forgiven us, so how can we claim to believe this God not willing to forgive others? Her outlook on giving or receiving forgiveness depends on each unique situation. She unveiled that the closer the hurt is to her heart or someone she loves; it is harder to provide forgiveness quickly. She is the first person to relate the same grief-forgiveness path Pastor Fred Luskin from Stanford University explained. She says she has to recognize and grieve a loss fully before she can forgive. She did answer question four and her answer is worth sharing in detail. She writes, "If we truly have a regenerated heart that includes the forgiveness of God,

the Holy Spirit will work in us to root out unforgiveness in the process of sanctification. I will still sin and have seasons of bitterness, even unforgiveness but if I continue to pray and lean on Christ, He will change me. This will indicate a changed heart that has been redeemed, and I have assurance that I will go to heaven. If I am in the process of working through forgiveness of someone and should happen to die, I believe I would still go to heaven. If I instead nurse grudges, and set my mind and heart refusing to forgive, choosing not to let God work in my heart, then I must question whether I am truly saved or will go to heaven." I am awakened and touched by this response! Is there an assurance of heaven if I refuse to forgive? Maybe we should take Jesus at His word when He says Mt. 6:14-15 "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither your Father forgive your trespasses." Seems everyone knows this verse, but do we take it to heart or literally?

Survey eighteen is from the second of two males that returned answers. Though the males had short answers, they still said a lot. His definition of forgiveness is to have a clean slate by not remembering wrongs done to us. Forgiveness is important to him because Jesus forgives him. He states, "I like Paul am by far the worst sinner of all." I would say this man really sees the necessity of grace, mercy, and forgiveness in our lives. He is among the minority answering that he finds it easier to ask for forgiveness and said, "I would think that is obvious." I understand his stance more when he followed with, "We are at the mercy of the one who need forgiveness from, and we have to humble ourselves to ask for forgiveness." I have met people who call humility and being humble a weakness. In all actuality, this choice takes great strength because letting go of pride, facing our sorrow, and admitting wrongs is the hard yet rewarding choice. He feels we can go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts. To back up his response, he shares, "The Bible speaks many times on unforgiveness and how this will impact how God judges us, but it never answers unequivocally how God will judge us to judgment or to resurrection."

Survey nineteen is from this man's wife. She was just released from prison through a pardon last December. I have personally witnessed her walk in here and fully saw her live these answers. "To stop harboring anger toward a person…to truly let the feeling go and move on " is her definition of forgiveness. She personally feels that unforgiveness keeps her replaying situations and negatives over and over. She states, "I poison myself and my life and keep myself trapped if I do not forgive. I am also a hypocrite since I want forgiveness for my wrongs." Over the years, I saw her give and ask for forgiveness easier. She admits both are equally important to her. "I believe your Salvation is not dependent on being perfect in any area of your life. You could get angry, walk out the door, and be hit by a car. You would still go to heaven." Yes, scripture tells us we all fall short of His glorious standard (Rom. 3:23) this wife, mother, and freed prisoner says, "I feel if you are a Christian, know you are harboring unforgiveness, yet

are unwilling to try and be obedient, then does your heart truly belong to Christ?" Oh, how I agree with this and oh how this same truth has convicted me before! I have been in prison heading toward forty years. I have journey through my Christian walk with Bible study classes, ICCS courses, anger at God and others and so on my knees in tears. I have witnessed women who are married with children have adulterous relationships, deny they have children, prostitute themselves through the mail by internet ads and more, all while claiming to be a Christian, even quoting scriptures to non-believers. No wonder there are so many arguments and lots of filth in here because their hearts do not truly belong to Christ. How could the majority understand much less practice forgiveness?

The next to last survey was from a more mature woman who really tries to be honest. Her definition of forgiveness is "when someone is strong enough in their faith in themselves to decide not to blame or be angry with themselves or another person for a wrongdoing." As I have stated before, I agree forgiveness is the choice that requires strength. There is an amazing sense of peace that comes with forgiveness and This is why forgiveness is important to her. This peace is with God and ourselves. People like to say, "I can forgive but I will never forget." Well nowhere in the Bible do I read "thou shalt forget," so I say forgive and let God take care of the rest. Again, she is among the majority, and shares it is easier for her to give forgiveness and feels it is important to talk it over with God before approaching a situation. I respect her admitting, "There are a few things that I am still working on from my past and I cannot wait for the day that those chains fall away." She further admits to daily making choices she knows are wrong and this could be the reason she finds it harder to ask for forgiveness.

Remembering what Christ's death on the cross means, realizing the amazing victory over sin can be very humbling and gear us toward forgiveness in our lives. This woman who struggles with forgiving herself says she does not think we can go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts. She says God cannot be in the presence of this sin. This is pretty rigid and harsh if God is love! I do agree that forgiveness restores us entirely to the Lord, and he gives us the power to forgive the same seventy times seven he shared with Peter. Even if we can go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts, why would we choose to meet the Lord this way? I would rather forgive and feel the peace now and then. I would rather sleep better and have better relationships. Most of all, I would rather meet the Savior with joy in my heart and not hang my head in unforgiveness.

Survey number twenty-one is the last survey. The questions are answered by a retired college English professor, and a Christian woman. I have known her for years but never really gathered the pain she had suffered. I truly believe answering my survey questions released her from another level of unforgiveness bondage. She shared part of her life that she had never shared before, except with those who already know or were personally involved. This wonderful lady says people have used the expression "forgive and

forget" so much it has muddied the water around the concept of forgiveness. She refuses to confuse the two in her life. I am in agreement that there are things that happen that cannot, and probably should not, be forgotten. Bad, even tragic, things happen that change us, and we hopefully learn from them. The prayer would be that the people being hurt and doing the hurt would learn and grow. She is not sure why, but she says forgiving others is easier for her maybe because she is her own worst critic. She writes, "I think that why so many people in prison and other difficult situations delve deeply into religion-a strong Christian faith emphasizes forgiveness and makes the unthinkable bearable. And perhaps we can more clearly understand other people and their actions (and consequently forgive them) better than we can understand ourselves and our own motivation." I was somewhat taken back by this response at first. I agree several do delve into "religion" in my prison. I see many enroll in Bible studies only to get a certificate to put in their parole packets. I do not see a difference in them or an effort to change. Of course, there is a dense population of sociopaths here that manipulate others and even fool themselves with "religion." I agree with her that a strong Christian faith (major difference in faith and religion) does emphasize forgiveness. However, religion says, "I am sorry", and continues even the same hurts they apologized for, faith on the other hand, repents and true repentance leads to a change in character and decisions in life. Her survey revealed her deepest darkest period her husband who she loved dearly left her for one of her friends who worked for him. It was a quick decision and a terrible back and forth time with him trying to come home and the mistress doing everything to make that impossible. She starts, "I truly hated that woman. Of course, it was my husband I should have hated-he is the one who had the commitment to me". Further in her sharing, she says she knew and understood his weakness and his own agony over what he had done. "Understanding brings forgiveness, that is a good point I want to emphasize," she stated. This lady does not believe still to this day that all involved understand the impact of what they did. She finally got on with her life okay an accomplished thing she may otherwise would not have, but she also let the other woman eat into her being with anger towards her and all sorts of inferior feelings about herself when she had to be around her over the years. In her words, "they stayed married but over the years he apologized many times. He called me a couple of days before he committed suicide-the purpose being a truly heartfelt, long apology. After I realized why he called, I worried about my response. I could not bring myself to say, 'You are forgiven', because to me that said it was okay what he did. I did spend a lot of time telling him everyone came out okay and I was stronger and more independent because of it. 'Everyone is alright, do not beat yourself up about it anymore', I told him". I could feel while reading her words that she felt guilt until she finally forgave the woman and began to heal from the hurt and so many wounds afterwards. Once she forgave, she no longer felt belittled, no hatred and did not dwell on bad events. She asked herself, "Was that forgiveness? I do not know, but somehow it felt like it.' Maybe she developed a little empathy for her which goes back to the earlier

thought that understanding brings forgiveness. She shares that she will not be her friend or be around her. God may like it more if she would, but I suspect He knows what is in her heart. Her response to the fourth question really surprised me. She admitted that she hesitated to answer for fearing she would "confuse" my faith. Here is her answer concerning if we can go to heaven with unforgiveness in our hearts.

"The God I believe in is too loving to let anyone go to hell if there is such a physical place which I doubt. I believe He is a loving God who knows our hearts and minds. He understands all our weaknesses and reasons we act the way we do. And so, He is a forgiving God. If we carry unforgiveness or hatred, it saddens Him greatly because we have not listened to His lessons of what makes a full and successful life. He is saddened because we have squandered the gifts in pleasures we could have. And if people cannot let go of the hurt and/or anger, He understands that. We will have a startling clarity of the good and bad things we have done in life".

I question whether this could be a part of our reward or punishment. It is obvious she does not believe God will exclude or punish us for anything. Next, I questioned that she does not believe there is a hell! There are many Biblical scriptures which contradict her belief on this. That is a whole other discussion. I agree we have a loving God and He does not want anyone in hell, but we choose it for ourselves. I also agree He knows our weaknesses and why we act a certain way, but He does not excuse our sins without repentance and asking forgiveness. Scriptures are plain that He expects us to do the same for others and forgive. This all has to be done on a foundation of Jesus Christ!

The final way I want to look at and share concerning forgiveness is with books written on this subject and the doctrine of forgiveness. The first book is titled, *Why Forgive?* Written by Johann Arnold. In this book, Arnold writes about the lives of ordinary people who have lived through some terrible experiences yet example forgiveness. Upon reading their stories, I could feel the healing power of forgiveness. These people reclaimed a personal power in their lives through forgiveness. One of the most beautiful expressions of love is to forgive. A nasty word, believe it or not, can be just as hurtful as a bullet and those words can take a lifetime to get over. In this book, I believe each story reveals that when you forgive you come out a winner. What do we win? We have better lives because with the grudge or hurt lifted in forgiveness, relationships, character, and attitudes all grow in a positive way. (On a side note, the phrase that I and others used previously about "poison" was originally by Nelson Mandela. It reads "Resentments is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies".) I will not share every story but recommend this book to many here to read. I will share the testimonies that really touched me and hope the importance of forgiveness comes through clearly even through the deepest hurst.

Chapter one is titled “The Cancer of Bitterness”. Arnold shares powerful examples of the bitterness unforgiveness can cause and the damage it does to our lives. The examples are:

- Jen, who could not even comfort her dying husband because he was filled with unforgiveness. She let many small grudges not even huge tragedies, cause her heart to harden.
- Brenda, a sexually abused woman (by her uncle) let alcohol take over her life because of bitterness. She perpetuated her own misery and let the abuser keep influence over her life until she even attempted suicide.
- Glen, a fellow soccer player with David Beckham, was stabbed and beaten. He had stopped to help someone who had been left for dead. The result was getting stabbed and beaten which left him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He remained bitter for years and filled his thoughts with revenge and plotting his attacker’s death.

The ending of these stories is what caught my heart and mind. Jane eventually learned to live in peace through lots of time and counseling. Brenda was hospitalized in a psychiatric unit for suicide attempts. Glenn, on the other hand, found freedom in forgiveness by putting in the hard work to get there with his attacker. After years of self-talk and spiritual growth, Glenn realized his life was not finished. He eventually married and had two children and his own business all while his assailant was harnessed with drug use, psychiatric problems, and in and out of prisons with no family love or support. Glenn’s decision to stop hating and begin forgiving slowly healed him. Shortly after this, his attacker was found dead, and Glenn was able to feel sorry for him and his family. Arnold candidly states that, “bitterness is a power, a destructive one like cancer”. I believe (and have seen) carrying bitterness an unforgiveness can debilitate us physically, emotionally, and definitely spiritually. I have often read a Chinese prover…”who opts for revenge should dig two graves” by Confucious. I am not a follower of Confucianism, but I see people here often harden and die inside due to bitterness.

The next chapter that touched me was chapter three, “Ending the Cycle of Hatred.” Life stories of Jews and Polish immigrants who suffered. The stories of three people who suffered, were tortured, experienced family deaths, and loss of everything but their own lives are shared. One woman, Hela, lived with hurt that turned into bitterness. After years of no love or inner peace, she realized her heart was filled with the same hatred, anger, and coldness of her torturers. She woke up to her own need of forgiveness and forgave the people responsible for her pain. Josef and his family escaped minutes before being persecuted. They remained on the run for years full of fear and anger which also turned into bitterness. When living in Palestine as a young man, he met people who survived the concentration camps. He was filled with even more hatred. After becoming a soldier himself, he drove Palestinians from their homes, brutally beat them, and killed some also. He had begun to do the same acts to people which had been done

to him as a child. He did finally find peace years later through forgiveness and truly accepting Christ. I know most of us have never lived through anything close to the invasions or concentration camps. What I do know is many of us scoff at forgiveness and maybe cannot fathom the level of forgiveness that they embody. Reading their stories made me realize again the potential that forgiveness has to heal wounds. Most people can recite the Lord's prayer in "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," yet do we really know what it means or practice this in our lives?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Bless those who persecute you," and He definitely lived and practiced what He preached. "Bless your persecutors" is the title assigned to chapter four. The two examples that more than exemplify this were Martin Luther King Jr. and nurse Gladys Staines. King's commitment to love as a political weapon is well known. His speeches are memorized and used still to this day for equality rights and forgiveness. I revere his words, "returning hate for hate multiplies hate". He felt forgiveness alone can bring about lasting change and he gave his life for this message. Now Gladys Staines was also accompanied by her missionary husband and two sons. Her family was burned alive on the way back from a religious retreat. Her first response in front of the media even was, "Whoever did this, we will forgive them". Can many of us fathom that level of forgiveness? I have no doubt she still questions God why, but the author shares that Gladys does not pursue the answers to her questions. She chooses instead to dwell on the life they did live.

Please allow me to share that chapter five, "Forgiveness and Justice", and chapter six, "The Deeds of Mercy", really stirred emotions and brought me to my knees. As you may gather from the titles, these chapters are about lives affected by violent crimes and testimonies of both the victims and the offenders. Some stories are about abuse, others about kidnapping assaults, and murder. A young boy at the age of ten was abducted by a spiteful family friend. The man stabbed him and shot him in the head and left him for dead. After being found by a local deer hunter, Chris began his road to recovery. He slept at the foot of his parents' bed in a sleeping bag for several years. He lived fearfully because his abductor had never been caught. He was left blind in one eye but with no brain damage. Chris recovered well, married, and had two children but still each recount of his "survival" left him wondering how this miracle left him so miserable. At the tender age of thirteen, Chris began to see his tragedy in a different way. Once he realized he could have died, he also recognized that staying angry would never change anything. At the age of thirty-two, Chris received a phone call that would drastically change his life once again. After twenty-two years, a detective was calling him to say, "an elderly man in a nursing home had confessed to the crime, but he will not be tried due to lack of evidence". This will shock anyone who is reading this paper! Chris visited his attacker the very next day. He took a friend with him, fearing how he would react. Chris was expecting an intimidating kidnapper but instead saw a seventy-seven-year-old man weighing

around sixty pounds. The only sign of life and love in his small room was a drawing from local schoolchildren. This man was facing death with only regrets and sorrow to keep him company. The friend who went with Chris asked a few questions. When asked if he ever wished to tell the young boy he harmed he was sorry, the frail man resounded an emphatic, “I wish I could”.

At this point, Chris introduced himself as who had left him for dead. He could not see but he grabbed Chris’ hand and cried out an apology. Have you placed yourself in this true story yet? Amazingly, Chris offered the man not only forgiveness, but also friendship! How many of us could do that? Could we go a step further and visit the offender on a regular basis? Chris did this and while he was there shared his road to recovery and his accomplishments in life so his assailant would know before his death that the actions many years ago had not ruined his life. What a powerful living example of “that which you intended for evil, God has used for good”, from the story of Joseph and his brothers. The man died after three weeks of Chris visiting him. Chris shared that the media had picked up on their story. The reporters did not seem to understand his ability to forgive but they sure loved sharing the drama and details of the violent crime. As I read this story, I even more clearly understood we can respond to hurts with revenge or forgiveness. Revenge leaves a life consumed by anger. The urge cannot be satisfied, and it becomes habitual. The opposite is that forgiveness allows people to move on.

Another testimony that deeply move me was about a man who lost his son Michael to a drunk driving accident. While this crime was not intentional, there was still a great loss suffered. The real detail that caught my heart was the young son was named Michael. This is the name of the murdered young man in my conviction. This father was led to believe that “closure” may come with a prison sentence. Having people to blame though did not put the matter to rest in anyone. This father admits there is no amount of justice that can make the pain go away. This father humbled himself and admitted his hatred for the driver and sadly even anger toward his son for making some really bad decisions on his choices of friends. The father is a rare example in the criminal justice world. When he shared that he had to get through his anger in order to come to grips with his emotions, I was convicted to do the same of this myself. I agree that anger will leave a big hole in our soul with nothing to fill it with.

I have written a poem about my life journey that I hope shares from my heart:

In 1964 a little girl was born

Little did she know her life would be torn.

Her name is Karen, born in a really small town,

When I was young, hardly remember a frown.

I started school and did really well.

In subjects and sports, I did excel.

I studied hard to make a good grade,

My family wasn't rich, didn't have it made.

My family developed many dysfunctions.

Alcohol, violence, and other junctions.

Between ages 7-10, felt she became the parent,

Her childhood seemed over it was quite apparent.

She tried to make things better, success in school and sports,

No matter how hard I tried, things were out of sorts.

In four years of high school made all A's and one B.

I wanted to go to college, make something of myself you see.

I attended Centre College from 1982 to '83,

Quit in my junior year, gave up on even more.

I felt like a failure when my parents divorced,
I felt like life couldn't get much worse.

I left my small hometown, moved to the city,

Gave up on myself and wallowed in self-pity.

I moved in with my sister, slept on the floor,

Still had dreams, out of life wanted more.

I tried to find a job that paid good money,

They said, "You didn't finish college, you're not qualified honey".

I worked small jobs made some supposed friends,

Gave in to peer pressure, morals did bend.

I began to use drugs, they said it was cool,

I looked in the mirror, saw a big fool.

One night I found (put) myself in a terrible place,

Saw a young man killed, saw his face

I was arrested, had a trial, court convicted,

I was in a nightmare mostly self-inflicted.

I've learned a lot behind a razor wire fence,

The true value of life, much common sense.

I've tried to make up for my mistakes.

Stopped behaviors, put on the brakes.

Right now, I don't have a very good life,

In prison, there is lots of stress and strife.

I've been in prison over thirty-four years,

Some days manage laughter, most days tears.

There are good things to be involved in.

A walk in faith I've learned a lot about sin.

Accept grace and mercy was the dare,

In a discipleship class full of agape care.

I let go of the closed off child in me,

I gave it to God be the best I can be.

For many others and myself, I made life very blue,

I know God's forgiveness, beg my victims' too.

My name is Karen, I live in prison still now,

I'll keep praying and keep my vow.

I live able to look people in the face,

I hope to make the world a better place.

I ask God for courage to stand above and about,

With truth and care I pray to reach out.

The crime started in her diary in 1985, ended in '86,

My codefendant planned, set out to ruin lives-get her kicks.

Her husband became trapped in her evil, dangerous snare,

There came me the dysfunctional also unaware.

I have a scar on my right leg fro that murderous night,

I put myself in a nightmare was filled with fright.

I should have given my life like in John 15:13,

I was a coward on drugs, the murderer mean.

I used to wish I were killed instead of the young man Mike,

Victims would have their son for me no dislike.

Well not dislike but a deep-seeded hatred for me,

I've begged for their forgiveness, but it's never meant to be.

The trial was turned into a soap opera and circus,

The prosecutor didn't care about the truth or real focus.

I didn't testify because my lawyer forbade me to,

I listened because I didn't know what to do.

I got a chance to speak at a hearing in 2002,

God granted this opportunity to tell fact that are true.

It didn't make a difference but felt good inside,

The good Lord and Michael know I have nothing to hide.

My codefendant planned to kill her husband and even wrote about it in her diary. Did I know this? The answer is no. I only knew her for two months and six days and lost my life to prison. The early childhood patterns I learned were protecting women, standing up for others. When she told stories of being abused, I believed her lies. Little did I know she had made a plan with a male coworker to kill her husband, and she intended to blame it on me. She asked me to go over to their apartment after a night out at a bar and tell Michael she wasn't coming home, wanted a divorce, and told me to get her some clothes. Keith the coworker was supposed protection and went along. I have many more details,

but the fact is I became a part of a murder even though I stabbed no one. I tried to run but the killer cut me. From then on, I followed his orders including helping him lift the deceased into my car. Over the years I have repented to my family and community and tried to reach out to my victims. The following is a letter, one of many I wrote seeking forgiveness. This one was written to Michael's mother. There are others, yet none seemed to penetrate their hatred.

Dear Mrs. Winstandley,

I know that receiving a letter from me will be painful because of my involvement in the crime surrounding Michael's death, and your family's in surmountable loss. Please know that I am very repentant and remorseful for my responsibility and part in Michael's murder. I will keep the deepest heartfelt respect for your loss and pain….

I read the article you wrote in the Advocate Magazine in December 1990. This is a hard letter for me to write as I feel much guilt and shame for the loss I brought into your life. I know that your family has lived with lies and misconceptions and I began to wonder if the truth would ease some of your pain. My lawyer advised me not to write but the Spirit lets me know I must try and offer any part of myself to you because I am the source of your grief and loss. I do know there is nothing I can ever do to right the wrong I have done. I hope you see that my efforts are real and sincere. I was weak and sick both mentally and physically at the time and at trial. My attorney would not put me on the witness stand. Today, I am strong enough to speak with you honestly and candidly about my part in Michael's death and details surrounding the crime.

I met Michael and Liz on the Friday after Thanksgiving in 1985. I knew them for only two months and six days before allowing myself to be entangled in Liz's plan. I admit I was using drugs and did not know all that was going on around me. I take full responsibility for this and all other mistakes I made. I never knew about the diary in which she wrote about "power-wealth-and death" she desired in her life. We did all party four or five times, but I can tell you Michael did not really want to use drugs. He did things to try and please Liz. She was really manipulating and using him as you are well aware.

I hesitate to write all the details leading up to or about the night Michael was killed or the few days after for fear that you do not want to relive it all. You wrote in your article that you saw the courtroom as a soap opera by all parties and you are right. The truth was never told. If you ever want to hear from me since I did not speak a word at trial, I am more than willing to answer any questions from you and share with you what happened. I can assure you I did not stab Michael. However, this does not give me an excuse to lessen my responsibility in his death.

I deeply yearn for some way to help you express how sorry I am. I just don't know what I can do. I can only feel a surface of your deep pain. Your anger toward me is very understandable and I am willing to let you show it to me in any way that you need…I have chosen to learn all I can about what I have done and improve myself in order to help others in similar situations. I can assure you that I will never be the cause of this magnitude of loss ever again and I know every decision I make has a consequence for myself and my community. I deeply care about life, mine and those around me. I deeply care about your life, and this is why I am writing.

Michael was good to those around him. I know my actions cut short all that he would have achieved in life and the joy he still had in store for you. I am determined to honor him by learning and sharing what can be done to keep this from happening in other people's lives.

I pray this letter isn't inappropriate or too bold, I pray for your forgiveness. Please know it is a true prayer. Honoring your loss and accepting my responsibility will be important to my life always. Thank you for listening to me and may your family be healed through faith, time, and memories.

Sincerely,

Karen Brown

I never received a response from the letters I wrote to Michael's father. I have kept my goal, my word and honored what I told them years ago. I have kept learning, sharing and I will continue to pray and walk in faith for forgiveness.

I do not believe my internal guilt can be solved by another's forgiveness, or by external means at all. For years, no for decades, I could not forgive myself. My terrible actions haunted me for those many years. I did things trying to "make up for" the anguish I had caused Michael's family and friends. I did not brood or nurse my feeling of guilt but kept thinking if I do good deeds, I could forgive myself and regain a sense of wholeness and peace. All the while, I would dream of and pray for a day that my victims would say, "I forgive you". I was "working" to gain God's forgiveness and theirs. I prayed that a conversation could wipe away a nightmare. I have grown and I know that forgiveness can be neither earned nor even deserved. I have learned I cannot forgive myself because I am not God. God forgives me so I can in turn behave in His image and forgive others. Forgiveness is a gift! Yes, I still find myself wishing I could meet the family. Furthermore, I catch myself in tears wishing I could bring Michael back. Both being unlikely and impossible, what I needed was forgiveness. I needed to make peace with my soul not talk about my emotions. I had to come to terms with the parts of myself that I wished I could erase. I yearn to live without guilt but also not forgetting the murder of Michael. I sought this even though my victims continued to seek solace in revenge. I continued to keep myself from healing with forgiveness disillusionment.

In 2012 (the year I wrote the poem "Forgiven and Redeemed"), I realized the fact that I mentioned before-God forgives me, and I forgive others not myself. What gets me out of bed in the morning? What motivates me? I live in an expectant hope that God has a better purpose for my life in prison. In spite of what I did or what I have gone through, I believe that God will use this tragedy for His glory somehow. I fully understand the rage Michael's family has, who would not? It is an expression of their hurt and their pain. And I know many people do not think I deserve forgiveness: But who does deserve it? However, there are many in my family, community, faith family, and even strangers who hear my story that have come to give me the gift of forgiveness. This has been a very humbling and blessed strength in my life. I know their forgiveness did not come easily. I know also that once given and received, forgiveness brought about healing, even where healing seemed impossible. Their forgiveness has had staying power in our lives because it was accomplished by a change of heart. I have not slid back in behaviors that required an apology, and I let their gift of forgiveness change me for the better. I tried to admit my wrongs to my victims best I could. I have been blessed with other people who I can admit my sins. I have been humble and honest enough to ask for forgiveness. The angel of repentance slashed my heart which led me to write my victims and share, confess my sins with my own family and friends. I even wrote Mihael a letter in group therapy:

Dear Michael,

It is me Karen. I know I have spoken to you in my thoughts and very often mentioned you in my prayers. I realize I will never forget you, your memory, the crime, or that your life was stopped short of all that you would be. I am writing so I can grow. My prayer is that each step I make will give some positive meaning to this tragedy.

I am glad to have met you and known you for such a short time. I learned more about you during trial from your family and friends. Everything Liz told me was a lie. I know you are with our Father and I like to believe you can understand my life at the time I was involved in your murder. I am healthy enough at times to receive your forgiveness.

Michael, I have written your parents. They haven't replied but I feel sure they read it. I offered myself to them in any way they could possibly need. I pray that knowing I am truly repentant for being the soure of their pain helped ease their grief in the smallest way.

I am remorseful…for many things. There are many decisions I wish I could change. I wish I hadn't played rescuer, quit college, used drugs…but most of all I wish I could have had the courage to help you instead of being a coward in fear.

Michael, I know it doesn't help much but I want you to know I don't use drugs, have taken classes both educationally and restoratively. I am learning not to fall for manipulative lies, self-destruct, or be the cause of loss in people's lives. I know there is no justification for my sins and won't try. I do feel blessed on those days I feel your forgiveness, through Christ. I am trying to give meaning to your death and my life.

I pray this doesn't come across wrong, but I am led to say thank you for saving my life. I know you didn't choose your path and I am blessed to be here. You and God know what happened that night and the week following. Being taken for questioning that third time also saved my life. To get out from under Keith was a blessing.

Sincerely,

Karen Brown

I have come to realize that I will probably never be forgiven by my victims. I still live from a profound sense of guilt; an intense, overwhelming guilt that sometimes causes me to feel self-hatred. However, acknowledging my guilt, I have found redemption, and the power of forgiveness has touched my life and I am determined to live daily worthy of it. I accept God's forgiveness, so I do not live with an attitude of

bitterness and extend not my injuries to my soul or to others around me any longer. I accept that I had a part in taking someone's life that was very needed and very loved. I have to live God's forgiveness every day.

While reading the book, *Why Forgive,* again by Johann Arnold, I allowed the lives of others to be of real use in my life and their journeys to intersect my own. Their lives had me praying for forgiveness even more, praying for my victims, praying God is perfecting me to be the person He wants me to be. During the early years of my prison sentence, I just functioned. I even settled in physical and emotional prisons. I was worn out, burnt out, frustrated, and miserable in self-hatred because I had made terrible mistakes. I let things recorded in my emotions shake me up daily. When I was first condemned, convicted, I did not know how to say I made a terrible, tragic mistake, go to God, ask forgiveness, receive forgiveness, or press on. I knew I had done something in what seemed like an instant that will give others and myself heartache for life. I am mature because I have learned from the trials and experiences in my life. As I have walked through them, I know forgiveness is an essential in life. Although life changes in this tragedy in a matter of minutes for many people, forgiveness usually does not come as quickly as the tragedy. However, the emotions of guilt, shame, and even bitterness can sometimes guide us to our better selves if we choose to let them. The world is full of suffering, but it is also full of the overcoming of it.

John MacArthur wrote a great book titled, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness.* This book deals with the Christian-truth of forgiveness. Few concepts are more basic, more important to spiritual wellness than forgiveness. I hope examining this book will help me, and those who read this paper understand why we should practice forgiveness in our lives. MacArthur shares a point I think we can all agree to, "Forgiveness…Nothing more foreign to sinful human nature. And nothing is more characteristic of divine grace". "The Ground of All Forgiveness" is the first chapter. Before sharing my viewpoints, MacArthur shared 2 Cor. 5:21…"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him". We know the Him is Christ and the sacrifice He made for us. Even as a Christian, I know being on the receiving end of forgiveness is much easier to accept it as one of the highest virtures. Yet, when we are the one who needs to extend forgiveness, we find this hard. MacArthur shared the bad news first, "God does not forgive by simply looking the other way when we sin." The Bible says in many places sin brings punishment. The Word also states there are no scales put on sin, we are all in the same boat. As Christians, our penalty is paid by Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Most likely all Christians would agree with that. Could they really explain it or live it to bring non-believers the example they need to come to Christ as far as forgiveness is concerned? The Bible does not tell us that we can do anything to bring about reconciliation. It is God who provided His Son, His Son willing to pay the price that brings us a way to be reconciled with the Father. I have never read, "Forgive yourself so you

can forgive others". Forgiveness costs us nothing because it already cost Christ everything. That inestimable gift of free forgiveness is the grounds for which all other forms of forgiveness are based! The Bible is clear that this invaluable gift of forgiveness is the pattern for how we are to forgive others. If a Christian keeps in mind the price paid, this should help us realize that no wrong done to us can ever justify an unforgiving spirit. The most divine forgiveness is exampled in "Christ's Dying Prayer".

This prayer is the opening to this title of chapter two…"but Jesus saying, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' " The only person with a real reason to not forgive was Jesus Christ. Yet, He was totally committed to love and forgiveness. The principle of forgiveness was the prominent message in Christ's ministry from the beginning. In His Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:38-39), Christ rescinds the eye-for-an-eye law and replaces it with forgiveness! Some of the hardest Christian principles stem from this sermon (Rom. 12:14, Luke 6:28). When Christ prayed His final prayer, it was obvious His mind was not on revenge or unforgiveness.

"Put That on My Account", is the title of chapter four and it grabbed my attention. The scriptures of Philemon 17-18 preface this chapter…"Accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account". In these verses, Paul was offering to pay whatever restitution was necessary for Onesimus to be reconciled, following Jesus' example of reconciling sinners to God. Interestingly put, MacArthur writes, "God's forgiveness of sinners is sometimes referred to as vertical forgiveness. The sinner's forgiveness toward others is horizontal forgiveness". The Book of Philemon is totally dedicated to forgiveness yet does not mention the word even once. This book of the Bible is a case study on how every Christian should follow the path of forgiveness in their life. While Philemon was an inspirational letter to an individual, it does instruct Christians on the importance of forgiveness. Who are we to withhold forgiveness if God forgives? We all have an incalculable debt and every Christian should realize this: Forgiveness can cost us pride, human defined power, and other earthly prices; yet, nothing compared to the price Jesus paid. Those of us who believe and benefit from this great gift have every reason to forgive others.

Chapter five is "Forgiving One Another". The scripture forward is, "As those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Col. 3:12-13). A Christian should never be unwilling to forgive. In these verses, in view of what God has done through Jesus Christ for the believer, Paul describes the behavior and attitude that God expects in response. Compassion is the seat of emotions; Kindness is the goodness toward others suffering our harsh intention; Humility tells us to love others; Gentleness is willing to suffer rather than to inflict; Patience tells us to hold no revenge, resentment and is the opposite

to quick anger and unforgiveness. As God's children, we are to mirror His image. Eph. 4:24 tells us we are given and to put a new nature that bears God's likeness. Forgiveness has to be an integral part of the Christian's new nature. I feel every scripture on the subject of forgiveness tells us also that an unforgiving Christian is a contradiction. I have learned the hard way that refusing to forgive makes me and others question if our faith is genuine. Forgiveness is so important to a Christian's walk that it was the focus of what Christ taught. MacArthur points out that scriptures on "Christ's sermons, His parables, His private discourses, and even His final prayer were all filled with lessons about forgiveness. "Forgiveness is in the Lord's prayer as I have mentioned before. If this is not a prominent place, Jesus even emphasized and explained in more detail right after the Lord's prayer in Mt. 6:14-15.

Powerful examples of forgiveness are shared in chapter six, "Just as God has Forgiven you". Victims of school shootings, their parent, and murder victims from many walks of life have said, "Tell them I forgive them". We often see these as superhuman acts of forgiveness just like Stephen the martyr exemplified in Acts 7. What we fail to realize is that as believers we all have this power within us. We choose even prayer for vengeance at times. "There is nothing wrong with desiring justice. Justice honors God. It is certainly legitimate to want to see wrongs made right and evildoers recompensed for their wickedness". The Bible says God is a just God, but it is His place to avenge. His word tell us that a longing for forgiveness is better and Christians are to be known by a desire for mercy and forgiveness even for our enemies! The attitude of the forgiven is where the focus of scriptures are not the terms of forgiveness. MacArthur uses Mt. 6:12, 14-15; James 2:13, Mt. 18:35, and Luke 6:36-38 to backup this view. I do believe it is important that I ask forgiveness for the wrong I have done. My offense required me to do so. There is a difference in repentance and regret! I feel that repentance is the only appropriate response to sin and wrongs we have committed in our lives. Regret is a worldly sorrow, and everyone is capable of this. Repentance is a true remorse and asking forgiveness from God and also others who were harmed by my mistakes. This is not easy to do, but well worth the effort. Repentance centers on the act I did, not the consequences. My repentance is also evidenced by my commitment to change. This should happen in our Christian walk: A core change not merely of our behaviors but especially of our character. Ownership of my wrongs led me to a brokenness that I cannot even describe. I do know that brokenness brought me to a reversal of behaviors, and I am blessed to have the opportunity of being that broken. We need to request forgiveness, and I have in many ways. Yes, the Bible speaks on restitution, and I have paid a debt of approaching forty years in prison yet realized it is a debt I can never repay. I have responded with rehabilitation of my character. Can we as Christians forgive even if these godly steps have been taken? 2 Cor. 2:6-8 "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow". I believe Paul is telling us the process of discipline and punishment was enough and there is a time to show mercy

because there was repentance. There is no place in the church for man-made limits on God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. There is a time for forgiveness so the repentant can be restored and experienced true Godly joy.

Chapter eight of MacArthur's book brings about "The Blessing of Forgiveness". The author shares why Christians should have a core value of forgiveness. "Unforgiveness is a toxin. It poisons the heart and mind with bitterness, distorts one's whole perspective on life. Anger, resentment, and sorrow begin to overshadow and overwhelm the unforgiving person-a king of soul pollution that enflames evil emotions". He uses Hebrews 12:15 as a basis for his opinion. I would gather from this that forgiveness is the only cure of all of this toxin in our lives. Forgiveness is Christianity at its highest level. Paul often told us that a Christian should have no place for pride, vengeance, or retaliation in his heart at all! MacArthur tied in Paul's view of forgiveness being inextricably tied to humility, merc, oy, and peace. There are all fruits of the spirit and noble virtues. However, I feel forgiveness is tied to obedience because God commanded us to forgive. Forgiveness puts Satan in his place because it fosters mercy, proves obedience. Satan would rather us live in unforgiveness and fester destruction of character and harmony in our Christian Walk.

The Bible urges us to forgive yet there is no teaching on forgiveness in Judaism. We should mean what we say if we choose to pray the Lord's Prayer. The fifth petition of the prayer is "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" and I imagine this line has made liars out of many Christians. I believe Jesus added a P.S. to this prayer and verses 14 and 15 are why He gave us the prayer in the first place. I believe this demonstrates which petition is the most important. We have to practice forgiveness to have an intimate relationship with God. We cannot fellowship with God if there is bitterness in our heart. Even though we do not achieve salvation through our work, we are required to do good work and one of those is forgiving those who have hurt us. There are consequences if we choose to walk in unforgiveness. There are benefits to walk in forgiveness. God condemns an unforgiving spirit because it shows an indifference to the greatest thing God did in sending His Son to die on the cross for our sins. Two, unforgiveness interrupts God's purpose in the world which is reconciliation. He gave this ministry to Christians and want us to continue it. Making a choice to stay in unforgiveness shows that we are not grateful for God's forgiveness in our own sins. Consequences of unforgiveness are grieving the Holy Spirit and we are left to cope with our problems in our own strength. We are basically saying, "Move over God, I want to do your job". Which do you prefer-peace or bitterness? You cannot have it both ways.

As followers of Christ, forgiven people must be forgiving people (Eph. 4:23). The need for forgiveness is universal because sin and guilt are universal. The cost of our forgiveness as Christians is the cross, and in reality, that is still devastating. The source of our forgiveness is grace. It is given not earned.

Forgiveness can transform. Once we develop this doctrine in our lives, we are putting on the image of Christ and showing the world His characteristics that restore and renew us. Jesus is our model of forgiveness, and the Word tells us to follow in His steps. Even Christians marvel at the doctrine of forgiveness and the Word tells us to follow in His steps. Even Christians marvel at the doctrine of forgiveness that is so obvious in scripture. We need to repent if we do not put it into practice in our Christian walk. Story after story in true testimonies have proven that the person who gains the most from forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. When we have experienced God's level of forgiveness, how dare we refuse to practice and manifest a spirit of forgiveness toward one another. Forgiveness is never easy, but the standard of Christ remains. Forgiveness is the generous result in our lives of the grace of God. Our forgiveness was Jesus Christ's purpose for coming to Earth, and God's forgiveness is the only means by which we can forgive others. To forgive others will involve our will, intellect, and emotions. It involves our will because it is a decision. The intellect because we base it on facts of an offense. Our emotions are involved because they carry the weight of what was done to us. Consider some of the word pictures the Bible gives to help us understand.

Forgiveness:

- To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell, and let the prisoner walk free (one of my favorites)!
- To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare, "Not guilty".
- To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal".

As a prisoner, these stand out to me. They help me know God's forgiveness.

Why people become fascinated with certain topics, ideas, or doctrines is sometimes a mystery. For many years now, I have been fascinated with forgiveness. I have prayed for it, thought about it, read about it, and now written about it. I have come to see forgiveness as a buried treasure, one I want to discover. Unfortunately, many people, even Christians, do not set out to find it or practice it. My hope is that this thesis paper will somehow help those who read it to seek and encounter the power of forgiveness. The will to forgive may strike us as unnatural at first; yet, many people have showed the peace forgiveness brings into their lives, and that they are forever changed through forgiveness. It is a core value and a path that especially Christians should journey on. Not everyone will value or respect forgiveness as a virtue or gift. Not everyone is willing to deal with a transgression. My prison experience has taught me that forgiveness is not merely a religious sentiment. Forgiveness is a command from God and serious doctrine, part of our Christian walk. Unforgiveness can wound our spirit. Pursuing forgiveness can be a test and an opportunity to grow. When Christians forgive, they stop hatred in its track and become an example of Christ to others. Seeking forgiveness will result in transformation and change. Christians should be

moved to forgive and seeking forgiveness will result in transformation and change. Christians should be moved to forgive and seek forgiveness in authentic worship to our Sovereign Father and most of all to image Jesus Christ who died for our transgressions. The best thing we can do for ourselves is to forgive. Forgiving heals! It clears the way for quality life, to renew and restore. Forgiveness is a time of grace when we have nothing to deserve it. Forgiveness never degrades but elevates and is not to let someone else get away with something but to free ourselves from entanglement. A grudge is a stone wall that will forbid us to move in any direction. Pride can make it hard to ask and give forgiveness. Words are important in forgiveness and courage. I did not mean to get caught up in a bad tragedy, but I did put myself in the wrong place. I have come to crucial forks in my journey, and I decided to ask for and practice giving forgiveness. My journey is proof that a Christian should develop the virtue of forgiveness. Since Christ gave His life so we are forgiven. My prayer is that we will appreciate His sacrifice and walk in forgiveness.

"If a man takes unto himself God's right to punish, then he must also take upon himself God's promise to restore".

-Patton