

## Can we really FORGIVE and FORGET?

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by Florence MacKenzie

It is truly possible to forgive – and not forget! While we have a biblical imperative to forgive those who have wronged us, there is no corresponding requirement to forget what they have done. This realization can release us from mistakenly gauging the genuineness of our forgiveness by the extent to which we forget offences.

This was brought home to me while speaking at a women's conference. I made a fleeting comment that forgiveness can take place without forgetting. As I stepped down from the stage, an elderly lady asked if she could share her story.

When she was in her early teens, she became aware her father was living a double life that negatively impacted her family. She wanted to forgive him, so she gave up her right to get even. She relinquished any grudge and released him to God to deal with. But she didn't think she had truly forgiven him because she couldn't forget what he had done. For 65 years, she had lived with this misbelief and, when she heard forgiveness did not mean forgetting the wrongs committed against her, she found freedom.

Confusing forgiving with forgetting results in unsafe relationships, false expectations, and a reluctance to forgive.

**Unsafe relationships.** If someone thinks forgiving means forgetting, they're likely to subject themselves to ongoing harm from their offender because they've suppressed the memory of what was done. This makes them vulnerable, as they can't apply lessons from past offences to current and future situations.

**False expectations.** A forgiven person might say to the one whom they wronged, "You've forgiven me. Why can't you just get over it?" However, forgiveness is not a one-time event, but a process; it takes time to heal.



**A reluctance to forgive.** The prospect of developing "spiritual amnesia" can be equivalent to saying nothing unpleasant happened. This is denial, because something did happen, and there are often lasting consequences that remind us of the wrong and make it impossible to forget. Thankfully, we can still forgive the person who wronged us even though we can't entirely forget what they did.

However, there is another side involving the misuse of memory. While forgiveness is not forgetting, neither is it deliberately dredging up memories of what our offender did. As picking the scab on a wound opens it again and delays physical healing, picking over the hurt we experienced is likely to slow emotional healing. We must acknowledge the wrong done to us and allow ourselves to feel the associated pain and anger. But once we've extended forgiveness, we need to quit dwelling on the past. The apostle Paul was right when he said: "Forgetting what is behind and straining to what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13).

Having a right understanding of what forgiveness is can make all the difference to our emotional progress after we have been wronged. Like the lady at the conference, we too can find freedom when we genuinely extend forgiveness – even if we can never totally forget.