



*Steve Diehl*

Steve has ministered to youth and adults for over 36 years, serving as the pastor of the Walnut Creek Friends Church for 20 of those years. He holds a bachelor's degree in biology from the California State University, Hayward. He has memorized over 130 chapters of the Bible, including most of the books of the New Testament. Steve is the founder of Forgiveness Ministries, travels extensively giving seminars on forgiveness, and has written *Developing a Lifestyle of Forgiveness*. He and his wife, Becky, have been married since 1980; they have six children and live in Concord, California.

*BIBLE READING: Luke 4:16-21*

Our oldest daughter is married to a wonderful man who is paralyzed from the elbows down and from the chest down. Eight years ago he broke his neck diving off a bridge into a river in Belize while they were on a mission trip. He used to be an athlete, a star soccer player; but now he cannot walk, roll over in bed, feed himself, or get a drink of water. He knows how to do these things, but he is unable to do them because his body is injured. He is in a physical prison. Healing is the key that would unlock the door to his prison.

Jesus came to teach people, yes, but he also came to heal people—to set them free from whatever held them in bondage and prevented them from experiencing the fullness of the life of God. Jesus described his ministry as one of healing and setting prisoners free. Some of that ministry can only happen when he returns, but much of it can happen here and now.

When a person comes to Christ, he comes as a broken person, not just an ignorant person. The sins in our past—both our own sins and the sins others have committed against us—have damaged our souls. And yes, we need to learn the truth that will make us free, but that truth includes learning how to let Jesus heal us. We need him to set us free from our inner prisons.

Prisons take many shapes and forms. The prisons in the human soul are the worst. Jesus came to set prisoners free, to heal human souls.

*SONG: Thank You, Lord (Bessie and Seth Sykes)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, help us to see ourselves as broken people in need of your healing.*

—Steve Diehl

*BIBLE READING: John 10:10*

Remember the old fairy tale about King Midas? In that story, the king was granted a wish of his choice. His wish: that everything he touched would turn to gold. At first this seemed to be a great asset. Ordinary items became immensely valuable at Midas's touch. Unfortunately, he eventually hugged his daughter who, upon his touch, turned to gold. Sins are kind of like that. For a moment, they seem to give us what we want, but in the end, everything they touch dies.

Jesus said that sin can do only three things in our lives, in our families, in our churches, in our communities, in our nation, in our world—steal, kill, and destroy. Make no mistake about it, there are no exceptions to this rule. Sin is destructive to everything it touches.

Committing a sin is like putting your hand on a hot stove. We will get burned. And when someone sins against us, it is like they are forcing our hand on the hot stove. Some sins actually do damage us physically, but more importantly, all sins damage our soul. Sins—the ones we commit and the ones committed against us—affect how we think, what we choose and how we feel.

Jesus came to heal what sin injures, to restore what sin takes away, to resurrect what sin kills. Jesus came that we might experience life—God's life—in all its fullness! Jesus, and only Jesus, can save us from the damaging effects of sin.

*SONG: Beautiful Things*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, I cry out to you to heal my soul.*

*—Steve Diehl*

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 18:21-35*

About two years ago I accepted my son's invitation to play softball on his team. I had not been running for perhaps 15 years. It took seven games, but eventually I snapped my Achilles tendon while trying to outrun a ground ball to first base. It was incredibly painful! And even after surgery, my freedom was severely limited for many months.

Jesus teaches that when we do not forgive the people who sin against us, we will find ourselves in great pain (the purpose of a torturer; see verse 34) and our freedom will be severely limited (torturers don't make house calls; they work in prisons). This is not because God is hurting us, but because sins can only do three things in our lives; steal, kill, and destroy. When someone sins against us, they damage our soul. We feel it as pain and anger. We experience it as a new limitation to our ability to experience this life. The good news is that God can heal us and set us free, but only if we forgive the person who sinned against us.

The picture of torturers and a prison in our Lord's story is simply an illustration of a simple truth: sins damage the human soul. Practicing real forgiveness "from the heart" is how God heals that damage. Peter didn't want to forgive. He hoped there was a limit to how often he had to forgive. Jesus told Peter that he didn't need to forgive at all—unless he wanted God to heal him and set him free. If he wanted that, then Peter would need to forgive every time someone sinned against him.

*SONG: Good To Me (Vineyard)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, please show me who I need to forgive and how to do it so that I may be healed.*

—Steve Diehl

*BIBLE READING: Luke 17:3; Mark 11:25a*

How is it that forgiving someone is both conditional (based on repentance) and unconditional at the same time?

A terrorist broke into a federal facility and stole plutonium to make a bomb. He was captured, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. His execution was set to take place in two months. In addition, the terrorist failed to protect himself from the highly lethal radioactivity of the plutonium and was now dying from radiation sickness. The doctors gave him two months to live.

Even though a man can die only once, this man had two separate problems. If the president of the United States pardoned him of his crime, he would die from radiation sickness. However, if doctors gave him a pill that would heal him, the government would execute him for his crime.

This is true for every human being. Every sin is a crime against God and punishable by death. This is why Jesus died for us: to pay the penalty for our crimes. God forgives the penalty for sins because Jesus paid for them all. But every sin is also a destructive act that sets in motion a chain reaction of negative consequences which eventually lead to death (physical, emotional, relational). This is why Jesus rose from the dead—so that he could live inside of us, heal us, and transform us into people who stop sinning. But he can only help the people who want to stop sinning. This is why repentance is necessary for God to forgive the consequences of sins.

In the same way, we can forgive the penalty for a sin because Jesus has paid for it, and we can forgive the consequences of a sin when the guilty person repents.

*SONG: Only the Blood*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Whom do I need to forgive?*

—Steve Diehl

*BIBLE READING: Ephesians 4:26; 1 John 2:2*

It was dark. I didn't want to turn the lights on and wake up all the way; I wanted to go back to sleep as soon as I got back into bed. In my semiconscious state I veered off the path to the bathroom and caught my little toe on the leg of a chair. The severe pain forced me out of my stupor. I yelled in pain—and then in anger I kicked the chair with my other foot.

We all feel angry at the person, thing, or system we believe is responsible for our pain. (Or at least we should. The NRSV translates Ephesians 4:26 as a command in the Greek: “Be angry....”) Our anger is a twisted form of our heart's cry for justice. “You hurt me, and I need to see you suffer as a just payment for my suffering!” We feel this because God has put in every human soul the need to see and feel his divine justice. When we don't see and feel his justice, we are like a drowning person trying to get his next breath. We are obsessed with making the other person suffer or watching until they do.

God wants us to learn how to come to him for comfort in our pain, to feel his empathy. And he wants us to go to the only place his justice is accomplished once for all—the cross of Jesus Christ. The only healthy way to get rid of our anger is to bring it to the same place God brought his anger—the cross. When God's justice was accomplished, God's anger evaporated.

If God can get rid of his anger at the cross, so can we!

*SONG: At the Cross*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: May my heart's cry for justice be satisfied at the cross.*

—Steve Diehl

*BIBLE READING: John 11:28-36*

My wife, Becky, spent years teaching me to ask her how she was feeling when I came home from work at the end of a day. She said that it didn't even matter if I meant it; she just wanted me to ask the question and then listen to her. (Becoming a man who really cared how she was feeling took several more years of life transformation.) Becky wanted me to do this because caring about how others feel is an act of love. Even more so, letting ourselves actually feel what they are feeling is an act of love.

The Jews who saw Jesus weeping thought he was weeping for the dead man, Lazarus. However, you don't cry for someone you are about to raise from the dead! No, Jesus was not crying for anyone. He "saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping...." He was crying with Mary and those who were feeling the pain of losing a cherished brother, a close friend, a caring partner. Jesus was feeling their pain, and he could feel it so deeply that he wept deeply (read verses 35-36). Jesus hurt because they hurt.

God feels your pain. He has always felt your pain. He felt your pain even before you did because he saw the cause of it coming before it actually happened. And he feels your pain more deeply than you do—God never takes "pain pills."

Believe that God feels your pain and hates the cause of it. Talk with him. Cry with him, if necessary. He always cries with you, even when you don't know it.

*SONG: Your Presence*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, please let me feel your tears when I am hurting.*

—Steve Diehl

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 18:15-17*

There are people in my life who wronged me years ago and still cannot face it, take responsibility, or make amends. Some of them are still sinning against me. I have learned how to bring their sins to the cross, believing that Jesus died for them, paying for their sins just as he paid the penalty for mine. I have forgiven them of the penalty for their sins, but not the consequences.

Jesus teaches that when someone sins against us, we may need to confront them in love (having forgiven them of the penalty at the cross) and see how they respond. If they repent and want to have a more loving relationship with us, then we can start to forgive (change) the consequences of their sin and let them start to earn our trust again. However, if they don't repent, Jesus says that we might need to increase the negative consequences and bring other people into the situation. The goal is to give the offender the best opportunity to repent so that a loving relationship can be established. But when people do not want to repent, when they do not want to stop sinning against us, we will have to love them from a distance, perhaps only with our prayers.

We are always to love people, but the form that love takes is different depending upon whether or not a sinning person is repentant. Pray for their repentance. Give them the best opportunity to do so; but if they don't take it, know that you may need to love them from a distance.

*SONG: May the Mind of Christ, My Savior*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, please show me how to forgive people of the penalty for their sins at the cross, then how to give them the best opportunity to repent.*

—Steve Diehl