

CAPTIVE SET FREE

HOW TO FIND FREEDOM
THROUGH FORGIVING

VALERIE LIMMER

 GREEN SAP
PUBLICATIONS

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Author's Note</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Introduction	19
PART I: RELATIONAL DYNAMICS	31
<hr/>	
1. Keeping Holy in a Clash	33
2. The Body and the Bride	45
3. Et Tu, Brute?	51
4. Which Fruit?	56
<i>Closing Part I: Food for Thought</i>	<i>59</i>
PART II: UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS	62
<hr/>	
5. What Forgiveness Isn't	64
6. What Forgiveness Is	84
7. How Forgiveness Changed the World	87
8. How Forgiveness Changes the World for Us	96
<i>Closing Part II: Food for Thought</i>	<i>105</i>
PART III: OUR FOUNDATION	108
<hr/>	
9. Who We Are	110
10. The Importance of Forgiveness	118
11. Forgiveness Belongs to our God	125
12. BC and AD	130
<i>Closing Part III: Food for Thought</i>	<i>137</i>

PART IV: FREEDOM IN FORGIVENESS	140
13. How God Forgives Us	142
14. Selling Our Birthright	148
15. Willing Victims?	153
<i>Closing Part IV: Food for Thought</i>	159
PART V: HOW TO FORGIVE	162
16. Shaping our Attitudes	163
17. Forgiveness in Practice	174
18. Forgiving Ourselves	196
19. Testing our Forgiveness	201
20. Things That Make Forgiveness Harder	212
<i>Closing Part V: Food for Thought</i>	217
PART VI: EXTRAORDINARY FORGIVENESS	220
21. Love Your Enemies	221
22. Standing in the Gap	233
23. Better Than Before	244
<i>Closing Part VI: Food for Thought</i>	263
<i>Notes</i>	267
<i>Bibliography</i>	277
<i>About the Author</i>	287

Part I

Relational Dynamics

FORGIVENESS. THAT WORD HAS the power to conjure up an immediate visceral response in us. Our reactions may vary, depending on our state of mind and recent events in our lives.

- When we're at fault, forgiveness seems like an oasis in a desert of wrongdoing. It's a promise of hope in a landscape of regret.
- When we've been newly wronged, forgiveness can feel threatening. We would rather ignore it and indulge in self-pity or indignation. But it looms, wagging its finger and demanding action.
- When some time has passed, the idea shifts and weighs heavier on us. We know we ought to forgive and can no longer put it off. We sigh deeply and begin trudging along the winding path whose destination beckons at a weary end.

Perhaps your mental pictures and emotions differ from mine when you hear the word 'forgiveness', but I suspect one

thing is the same for all of us—when we receive it, forgiveness is a relief; when we have to give it, forgiveness can be arduous. In fact, forgiving is one of the most difficult things on earth to do.

Keeping Holy in a Clash

Disunity is one of Satan's greatest strategies against the church.

AJITH FERNANDO, TEACHING DIRECTOR OF
YOUTH FOR CHRIST

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE IN THE human experience, and is it any wonder? I'm a Canadian from multicultural Toronto. As a nation, we Canadians pride ourselves on our skill in interacting with people of many nationalities and our welcoming attitude towards people from various backgrounds.

We all come from different personal cultures, whether or not we're from a foreign country. Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that if we're from the same nation and society as someone else, we must have a solid basis for understanding. However, the country and town where we grew up are only two factors in determining our personal culture. Different cultures may stem from contrasting vocabularies and internal dictionaries that influence the things we say and hear, individual motivations and ambitions, family dynamics in childhood, and distinct emotional backgrounds.

My husband, Peter, and I are examples of divergent cultures. We both came from middle-class families and grew up in neighbouring towns. All four of our parents are Christians.

But the cultures we brought into our marriage were poles apart. His heritage is from Japan and England. Mine is dominantly Eastern European. His family is quiet; mine is loud. His understands personal space and belongings; mine has no such comprehension. His family values music and problem-solving; mine tends to be linguistic and mathematical. His is mostly in Christian ministry or government service; mine is filled with professionals. These differences led to some unexpected friction early in our marriage as we learned to navigate our new relationship and the expectations we both carried.

Personal variations affect our workplaces and friendships as well. Though you and I may be emotionally healthy, not everyone we befriend may be so. Perhaps someone has recently been hurt. They may be sensitive or combative when their emotional bruises are touched. Some people may be healthy in one area and dysfunctional in another.

Therapist and reconciliation consultant Marion Goertz is fond of saying anger acts as the protective ‘big brother’ to the more fundamental emotions of sadness, fear, abandonment, and betrayal.¹ Conflict may stem from unmet needs or people protecting themselves from being vulnerable. The old standbys—hunger, fatigue, and stress—are ingredients of irritability. Those dieting or trying to quit smoking, both of which include hunger *and* stress, may tend to be testier.

Considering all these differences, coupled with our sometimes-mistaken assumption that we understand those around us, is it any wonder tumult is inevitable? Given the

complexity of a single relationship, it's no surprise that there is conflict. It surprising there's not *more* of it.

Many worldly relationships drift towards discord, aggression, and gossip. Sadly, Christian relationships often drift in the same direction.

A Japanese person once told me that in his culture, actions matter more than words. By always watching those around them, the Japanese learn who people are. They say those who demonstrate consistency between their words and actions have 'true hearts' or hearts of sincerity.

Our friends, families, neighbours, and colleagues who aren't Christians are often just as observant. While I was working as an engineer in Canada, one of my co-workers called me out on having said "Oh, God!" in a conversation. He knew Christians tend to shy away from that phrase because using God's name so casually dishonours the One we love. I was surprised at such scrutiny.

Fortunately, that wording is not in my active vocabulary, so there was no chance it had crossed my lips. I could assure him I had said, "Oh, gosh!"—though the "sh" turned out to be quieter than I'd intended. (*I'll have to watch that*, I thought.)

Japanese people and those who aren't Christians seem to have hit upon an important truth that Western Christians sometimes overlook. In a sinful world, consistency between our words and deeds is of paramount importance. If we say

we believe something but our actions don't bear this out, perhaps we should re-examine our beliefs.

The Bible tells us the best way to measure a person's convictions is to examine his or her behaviour. If we accept this as axiomatic, what we find may startle us. George Barna, founder of The Barna Group, has carried out hundreds of sociological studies on the interplay of faith, culture, and behaviour in the United States. According to one survey, there's statistically no difference between Western Christians and non-Christians² in divorce rates, level of community involvement, the incidence of filing lawsuits, and donating to (or volunteering at) non-profit organizations. Though Christians seem to encourage people more and watch violent or sexually explicit movies less, those who are not Christians give more to the poor and homeless.³

According to Barna, for most behaviours, there is no statistically significant difference between Christians and the rest of the world. Those who claim to follow Christ try to maintain the purity of their minds a little more but care less for the poor in practical ways. Does this remind you of anyone in the Bible?

During His life on earth, Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38–40).

The scribes liked to pretend they were pure and holy, but their actions towards the poor revealed the true state of their hearts. If we care only about our perceived purity and not our actual behaviour, we're acting like the scribes. Were we living in the time of Jesus, He would condemn us too.

This begs the question: if the conduct of Christians does not differ from that of the world in so many measurable areas, how will we act when it comes to forgiveness?

Our Western culture prizes individualism and truth. On the other hand, Eastern cultures value unity with one's groups—even at the expense of truth. Saying something false doesn't even fall onto the truth/lie continuum unless it causes someone harm. Instead, each person's dignity is the highest aim, and individuals are expected to work together with the group for the greater good.

In Japan, large black, red, and orange centipedes, called *mukade*, are plentiful. Some people think of the centipede as a symbol for Japanese society. A leg—a part of the communal entity, though not self-sufficient—symbolizes each person working together with the other legs to draw the insect towards its destination. Conversations in Japanese tend to be much longer than in English because participants work relationship-building into every point of contact. No deadline, no matter how urgent, is more important

than the web of relationships embedded in each person's life.

In the West, we sometimes misidentify what unity is. The absence of conflict is not unity, just as the absence of disease is not health. Sometimes the most unified bonds are ones that face strife but also work towards loving resolution. We can have a sense of confidence that may not be present in relationships that have never faced these things. Such confidence is born from an acknowledgement that we don't have to avoid conflict or agree on everything. There can be disagreements—sometimes even unpleasant ones—but at the bedrock, there will always be respect and love.

When we flee conflict, we rob ourselves of the ability to experience true unity, healing, and confidence in our spiritual relationships. We also rob God of the chance to demonstrate His power and exhibit His love, forgiveness, and grace both through and to us. As church planter Aaron Loy once wrote, “Some of God's best work happens in the mess.”

In my time as a missionary in Japan, I've been learning a lot about what it means to live in harmony. The preservation of the *wa*, a sense of social unity, is crucial in the Japanese culture. By comparison, our native North American culture seems increasingly harsh, impatient, and rigid to us. I sometimes wonder if we lose something priceless when we discard the importance of harmony in favour of other, often-opposite goals.

As with so many things, the general attitudes of society have made their way into North American churches. The Bible often mentions unity as a goal within the body of Christ. In North America, we treat it as a byproduct but not an objective. We quote verses like “How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1) while ignoring the implications of Scriptures that urge us to “attain to the unity of the faith” (Ephesians 4:13).

Attaining to the unity of the faith. This sounds like a goal to me. The apostle Paul talks about the need to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3). Unity doesn’t just happen. We’re told to diligently seek and guard it. We have fallen far short of this lofty aim in North America.

Peter and I had each been Christians for more than thirty years when we realized we had missed some profound lessons in the apostle Paul’s teachings.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made

known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

PHILIPPIANS 4:2-9

At the start of the passage above, my Bible has a subheading that reads “Think of Excellence”. The subheading in Peter’s Bible reads: “Exhortation, Encouragement, and Prayer”. These topical headings were added later by editors, *not* by translators. I don’t know if such additions blinded us to understanding this passage, but they can’t have helped.

These headings, and every sermon we had ever heard on this text, made it seem as though Paul was discussing several subjects. Yet perhaps this passage was not so disjointed after all. Perhaps it was all about the same thing. Instead of giving a brief spiel to two women in conflict followed by general exhortations to the church, perhaps Paul was still talking about conflict after the first paragraph. Could it be that this entire section was a list of instructions on the mentality

Euodia and Syntyche should adopt to avoid sinning in the midst of their clash?

I now believe Philippians 4:2–9 is a primer on how to live holy lives even in the presence of conflict. Following these guidelines, we can make forgiveness, restoration, and unity simpler for ourselves. Let's take a closer look.

1. REJOICE.

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!”
(Philippians 4:4)*

Joy is one of the first things that leaves us when we are in a conflict. According to Paul, rejoicing is also one of the first things we should administer as an antidote, because it denotes a trust in God and a recognition that we don't have to tense up and solve our problems by ourselves. God knows what's going on, and He knows what will come next. We can rejoice in His love and care for us, and be confident in our future because He has it in His hands.

2. DON'T RETALIATE.

“Let your gentle spirit be known to all men.” (4:5)

The Greek term for 'gentle spirit' often refers to displaying a gentle or kind spirit when retaliation would be normal.⁴ Our unexpected tenderness should be so consistent that we become known for it.

3. DON'T BLOW THINGS OUT OF PROPORTION.

“The Lord is near.” (4:5)

The original Greek meaning of “near” is unclear. It may refer to near in place or near in time.⁵ We may interpret “the Lord is near” in two different ways:

- The Lord is physically nearby. He sees what is happening to you, and He sees what you are doing. Be assured He will not ignore any injustice you encounter nor any sins you may commit in this conflict.
- The Lord is nearby temporally. He is coming soon, so don't blow this current conflict out of proportion. It's small potatoes in light of eternity.

4. PRAY, GIVE THANKS, AND ALLOW GOD'S PEACE TO FILL YOUR HEART.

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:5–6)

If rejoicing is one of the first things to leave at the start of conflict, then anxiety is one of the first things to arrive. Here, Paul encourages us to lay our anxieties at Jesus' feet and replace them with an attitude of thanksgiving.

Giving thanks can change our perspectives like almost nothing else. When we discover things to thank God for, our fundamental experience is changed. Just as with rejoicing, the

act of giving thanks expresses trust in our heavenly Father. It enables God's peace to flow in, replaces anxiety, and guards our hearts and minds. How closely my heart and mind need to be guarded, especially in conflict!

5. GUARD YOUR HEART AND CONCENTRATE ON THE GOOD.

“Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.” (4:8)

There are two possible interpretations for this point. Both have their merits and could be true at the same time.

- When we're in conflict, our minds tend to spool, rehashing each thing the other person has said and done. We become obsessed with their misdeeds, whether real or fantasized. If we let this happen, we multiply our chances of sinning and allowing bitterness to enter the equation. It is possible, however, to take our thoughts captive.⁶ We can choose not to engage in venomous obsessions but to fix our eyes on Jesus—and therefore on things that are honourable, right, pure, lovely, and so on.
- Jesus' command to love each other as He loved us doesn't stop when conflict begins. We are under obligation to value one another at all times. We can do

this by wilfully focusing our attention on the good and lovely things still true of the other person. In this way, we retain a sense of love for them and are able to bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who mistreat us.

Do you find such thoughts as challenging as I do? None of us can make these changes without Jesus' help. How wonderful that He has promised to never leave nor forsake us and to complete the good work He has started in us!

About the Author

VALERIE LIMMER LIVES IN OKINAWA, Japan, where she works as a missionary, sharing the good news of Jesus' love, hope, and salvation. Her first book, *On the Potter's Wheel*, was a memoir focusing on her first two years as a missionary in Japan.

Valerie is neither a therapist nor a theologian, but she has experienced severe abuse from a handful of people. In *Captive Set Free*, her second book, she shares many of the principles and techniques she's learned and applied to her own life on her journeys towards forgiveness.