



Forgiveness

Transformation in Love

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FORGIVENESS IS ESSENTIAL TO HEALTHY HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. The French Jesuit and theologian, François Varillon, once said, “People cannot live together unless they forgive each other just for being who they are.” We all need to forgive and be forgiven, over and over again, if our life together is to be life-giving, and if we are to be the agents of healing and reconciliation in the world that Christ calls us to be.

Sometimes it is easy to forgive. We find no difficulty in setting aside the incident and moving on. But at other times we may find it extremely difficult to forgive the one who has hurt us. We may believe that we *should* forgive; we may even *want* to forgive. But we recognize that our heart is so full of anger and pain that we cannot yet say, “I forgive you,” and mean it. A declaration of forgiveness at this point would be dishonest and premature. In circumstances like these, we can at least set ourselves on a path towards forgiveness, recognizing that arriving at forgiveness is a desirable and necessary goal, not only because we are commanded to forgive one another “seventy times seven,” but also because forgiveness will rid our hearts of the toxic presence of resentment, anger, and bitterness.

In this article, I hope to raise some questions that one who is on the path towards forgiveness may want to consider. Hopefully, honest engagement with these questions will enhance and facilitate the process of healing so that we may arrive at our destination (actual forgiveness) as soon as possible, recognizing that the time required will vary, depending on the depth of the wound.

Why Forgive?

Before we set out on the path towards forgiveness, we must be convinced of the worthiness of our goal.

We might first reflect on the costs of withholding forgiveness. Without forgiveness, the hurt we have experienced is perpetuated and passed on to others. Anger, bitterness, and resentment take root in our hearts and gradually change us from within. We stay mired in the past and lose our ability to be present in the moment and to be hopeful about the future. We may become bitter and cynical, or we may be tempted to seek revenge, which will lock us into a cycle of violence that will bring on a whole series of disappointments and misfortunes. Withholding forgiveness is not a healthy option.

“When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free.”

- Catherine Ponder

We might also reflect on the benefits of forgiving. Forgiveness is essential to our spiritual well-being; it is the necessary outcome of loving one another as God has loved us. “Forgive us our sins,” we pray, “as we forgive those who sin against us.” Jesus commands us to forgive, repeatedly, just as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness heals the brokenness of our hearts and sets us free; it enables us to cultivate a loving heart towards others. It will afford us a clear conscience and bring us peace. There is every reason to set out on this path.

It is important at the outset to rule out the possibility of taking revenge. (As Mahatma Gandhi – and Jesus – taught us, “Violence begets violence.”) Even if we feel that revenge is justified, in the end it will lead only to further misery and guilt, and will deepen our resentment, hostility, and anger. We do best to avoid it at all costs.

It is also important at the outset to put a stop to the offensive actions of another, which is not at all like taking revenge. As long as the offensive behavior continues, there can be no possibility of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean giving up our rights or cowering before the offender. Putting an end to the offensive behavior may mean confronting the person, or seeking outside assistance, or even appealing to the justice system. But these hurtful actions must stop.

What relationships or situations in your life are calling out for forgiveness?

What is the cost of letting the situation continue as it is?

What benefits can you foresee from addressing the situation?

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” – Lewis B. Smedes

Naming the Offense

We will run the risk of never being able to offer real forgiveness unless we admit the hurt we have experienced at the hands of the offender. Denying the offense or simply trying to forget it will short-circuit the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean excusing the offender or absolving him or her of all moral responsibility, nor does it mean simply ‘leaving it to God’ (God does not do what is up to us to do; forgiveness depends as much on human as on divine actions). Examining the painful incident honestly is a critical first step towards healing.

We may find it helpful to share our pain with someone who is discrete and trustworthy, and who will not judge us or minimize our pain or overwhelm us with advice. It can add to our suffering if we feel that we are carrying the burden alone. Telling someone also allows us to name and relive the painful event calmly and in a safe environment. When we do this, the pain becomes less threatening and more bearable. The unconditional acceptance of the other person allows us to treat ourselves with compassion.

Examining the effects of the painful incident will help us grieve our losses and move towards genuine forgiveness. We might try to describe what has been damaged or lost (our self-esteem, our reputation, our self-confidence, our integrity, our faith in others, our ideals, our material goods or health or social image, the ability to trust someone with our secrets, admiration for a person we have loved, and so on). Recognizing these wounds is healthy and helpful, whereas taking on the label of “victim” is unhealthy and unhelpful. By labeling ourselves as victims, we lock ourselves into an unhelpful role, which makes forgiveness difficult or impossible.

While it is important to own our own responsibility in the matter (e.g. in the breakdown of

a relationship), it is just as important to realize that we are not the only one responsible for the painful event or offense.

If we recognize the presence of anger, it is best if we try to express and release it in the most constructive way possible. Anger is a legitimate emotional response to the hurtful actions or words of an offender, but we must be careful to keep it from taking root and growing into resentment or bitterness. Repressed anger hinders our ability to find joy in relationships; it reveals itself in negative behaviors such as blaming, nagging, cynicism, hostility, or sulking.

Name the offense you wish to forgive, as specifically as you can.

Can you describe its effects on you? What emotions do you feel now as you recall it?

Confronting the Other

We will find it easier to forgive those who hurt us if they recognize their fault, express their regret, and decide never to repeat the offense again. We can go to the offender (either by ourselves or in the company of another), objectively describe the pain we have experienced (“When you did this, I felt this”), and see if these conditions are met, but the fact is they may not be met. The offender may not be willing to admit that their actions or words were hurtful, or may not want to talk about the incident or the breakdown of the relationship.

The unwillingness of an offender to accept responsibility or to express regret does not prevent us from moving towards our destination of forgiveness. Forgiveness involves a change of heart that is not dependent on the attitudes or actions of the offender; it is an internal process. If we claim that we cannot forgive the other because they have not owned their part in the matter or expressed appropriate regret, we give them power over us by letting them block our path to wholeness and healing.

Do you wish to confront the person who has injured you? What do you expect would happen if you did?

“When a deep injury is done us, we will never recover until we forgive.”

- Alan Paton

Forgiving Ourselves

People in distress often tend to blame themselves. They may despise themselves for having contributed to the painful event or for having failed to prevent it. They may feel humiliated or overwhelmed by shame and guilt because their shortcomings have been exposed. They may even continue to persecute themselves after the offense is over (“I should have...I was so stupid...I always do this...” are ways of blaming ourselves and further undermining our self-esteem).

If we recognize these critical voices within ourselves, we can challenge them and offer ourselves the balm of kindness and compassion. We will need to forgive ourselves before we can effectively forgive the other.

Can you offer forgiveness to yourself? What words could you say to yourself to help heal this wound?

Understanding the Other

We can only take this step when we have stopped being preoccupied with our own pain. If that is not the case, we should return to the earlier steps of resolving to set out on the path towards forgiveness, naming the offense and describing its effect on us, sharing our pain with another, and forgiving ourselves. Only then will we be ready to change our perception of the person who has hurt us.

When we have been hurt, we are often inclined to see our offender in the most negative light – as loathsome, deceitful, unfaithful, harmful, irresponsible, etc. When we view the offender in this way, we stop seeing him as a person who can change and bind him to this painful event forever. We may then lose sight of our own weaknesses and flaws and assign all the blame to the other person. Needless to say, this will limit our ability to forgive.

Understanding those who have offended us does not mean excusing them or exempting them from blame. It is instead an effort to see them in a clearer light, to recognize that they are a mystery to us that can never be fully fathomed, and to appreciate some of the factors that may have caused them to act or speak the way they did. If we can put ourselves in their place, we may be able to begin to understand the motives behind their actions and discover within ourselves a measure of sympathy for them that will allow us to move closer to forgiveness. Of course, we will never reach a complete understanding. In the end we will have to entrust these persons to God, who alone can penetrate the mystery of their hearts.

What do you know about the person who wronged you, or about the circumstances, that might help you better understand their hurtful words or actions?

If you cannot understand this person, can you entrust them to God?

The Grace of Forgiveness

Even in the most difficult circumstances of our lives, we can often recognize the grace of God at work. God's work is to bring life out of death, joy out of sorrow, healing out of pain, and hope out of defeat. At this place on the path towards forgiveness, we might be able to imagine what we could learn or how we could grow from this painful experience. We may be able to discover a positive outcome (or potential outcome) that will allow us to recall the event(s) in a more hopeful way. Perhaps we can say, "I've learned to say 'no' when my values are being compromised" or "I now have more compassion for others who are in a similar situation" or "I've developed some practical ways to respond if this comes up again."

At this point we may be able to imagine a brighter future. The pain surrounding the offense no longer seems all-consuming because our perspective has changed. We may still bear the scars of the offense, but they are no longer raw, gaping wounds. They are not as sensitive or painful to the touch as they once were.

A Gift, not an Obligation

If I imagine forgiving my offender as an obligation placed upon me by a rigid or demanding God (a God, perhaps, who waits to forgive me until I have forgiven others), I will find it difficult to forgive others freely and generously. But if I have known and accepted forgiveness from God as an unmerited gift springing from God's generosity and love, I may well find within myself the same generous capacity to forgive the one who has hurt me. "We love because he first loved us," writes the author of 1 John, and so we might also say, "We forgive because he first forgave us." In Luke 7, Jesus praises a woman who is able to love much because she has been forgiven much, and this serves as a reminder to us that we, too, have been graciously forgiven our offenses.

If we have known the God who (like the father in Luke 15:11-24) runs down the road to meet us and embrace us when we have come straggling home, soiled with sin and guilt; then we may be able to find within ourselves the same capacity for generosity, compassion and forgiveness towards those who have wronged us. But if we have not yet discovered this extravagant loving forgiveness of God in our own lives, we may (like the unforgiving creditor in Matthew 18:23-35) find it difficult to extend mercy toward those who have offended or hurt us.

Forgiveness is a gift of love which we receive from God, and can then pass on to others.

“There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love.”

- Bryant H. McGill

When and how have you received the gift of forgiveness in your life?

Can your knowledge of the extravagant loving forgiveness of God feed your forgiveness of others?

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

We may find ourselves pausing at the threshold of forgiveness because we wrongfully assume that forgiveness necessarily leads to reconciliation, and we are reluctant to open ourselves to further abuse. But forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation. Although reconciliation may be the normal and desirable outcome of forgiveness, we should not imagine that it implies a return to the way things were before the offense. When a serious offense has occurred it is impossible to resume the former relationship because it has been forever changed. At most we can try to re-imagine it or give it some other form. But we must not assume that, in every case, forgiveness will lead to reconciliation. In many cases, it would be foolhardy or even dangerous to resume the relationship.

Forgiveness is possible even when reconciliation is not. Granting forgiveness helps us to recover our inner peace and freedom, it releases us from the burdens of resentment and the desire for revenge, and it restores our self-esteem. It can help us to understand and accept the person who has hurt us, discover positive benefits in the situation, and enable us to wish them well. Our ability to forgive may even lead the offender to a change of heart.

Granting forgiveness does not magically resolve the difficulties in a relationship; nor does it guarantee that the offender will not repeat the offending actions. But it can prove beneficial to us and further our growth and transformation in love. It is also the essence of the new

community which Christ has called into being, as Paul reminds the Colossian Christians:

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...and be thankful.” (Col. 3:12-15)

“You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.”

- Lewis B. Smedes

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