

# **FORGIVENESS**

## Going the Extra Mile

All of us need to forgive someone sometime in our lives.  
We live in a society and age of anger.

A lot of people seem to carry so much anger.

- A couple that was so loving is now torn apart in a distressing divorce.
- Children do not talk to each other and are distant from each other during their father's funeral.
- Friends have become enemies.
- We wonder why the rest of the world hates us.

We all agree: We need to forgive and be forgiven.

First of all, what is forgiveness?

Let me start by affirming what forgiveness is NOT.

### **Getting rid of Certain Misconceptions**

- Forgiveness does not take away the bad feelings inside.
- Forgiveness does not call for abdication of the right to prosecute or to demand restitution.
- Forgiveness is not an excuse for the other person to exploit you.
- Forgiveness does not expect you to hug and kiss the perpetrator or invite him/her to your home for dinner.
- Just because you forgive someone, it does not mean that you forget.

### **What is forgiveness?**

Unforgiveness is defined as delayed emotions involving resentment, bitterness, residual anger, residual fear, hatred, hostility, and stress, which motivate people to reduce the unforgiveness.

Here is the flow-chart of unforgiveness:

- A transgression is committed.
- The victim perceives it as a hurt or an offense.
- As a result of the perception, hot emotions such as anger and fear arise.
- The individual subjects self to a period of rumination that leads to unforgiveness.

People try to reduce unforgiveness in a variety of ways:

***Through sweet revenge:*** it does not work.

***See justice done:*** it does not satisfy. In *Dead Man Walking*, the murderer faces the parents of the two youths he killed. To one father he says, "I hope that seeing my death will give you peace." It doesn't.

***By denying the transgression:*** Making excuses can reduce the negative emotion.

***By simply accepting a transgression:*** It can reduce negative emotion too.

The best option is: Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the emotional replacement of (1) hot emotions of anger or fear that follow a perceived hurt or offense, or (2) unforgiveness that follows ruminating about the transgression, by substituting positive emotions such as unselfish love, empathy, compassion, and even romantic love.

- Forgiveness is not merely an act of the will. I must grit my teeth and forgive because it is the right thing to do.
- Forgiveness is not merely a mental activity – not just changing our view of the situation.
- Forgiveness is not just an action. Just because I try to act forgiving does not mean that I feel forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness according to our Scriptures**

The words used are: "aphiemi" (to forgive) and "aphesis" (forgiveness, release). These terms are frequently used in the sense of remission of financial debt. Jesus did evoke the picture of release from debt as a metaphor for forgiveness. Another frequent synonym is "charizomai", which usually takes the meaning "to give (freely)."

The calamity of sin is probably the major concern of the NT. Divine forgiveness is dependent on the loving nature of God. While it is offered to all, pardon is not given to all. Impediments include: stubborn unrepentance (Mark 4:12), unbelief (Acts 2:37-38, 40), denial of wrongdoing (1 John 1:8, 10), and refusal to forgive other people (Matt 6:14-15).

The NT consistently teaches that the imperative to forgive one's fellows is based squarely on God's gracious forgiveness – The parable of the unmerciful servant Matt 18:23-35.

Other texts include: Matt 5:7; 6:12, 14-15; Matt 18:15-17, 21-22; Luke 6:37; 11:4; 17:3-4; Eph 4:32; Col 3:13; all of Philemon.

Forgiveness is commanded to be given to those who regret their offense. Jesus' teaching is rich with exhortations to love one's enemies; taking vengeance is forbidden, as is harboring resentment (Matt 5:39; Luke 6:35; see Rom 12:14-21). The disciple must be forgiving in spirit even if the offender is hardhearted. The disciple must follow the example of Jesus who forgave his executioners (Luke 23:24) just like Stephen (Acts 7:60) and a number of early Christian martyrs.

### ***There are advantages:***

- You can't hurt the perpetrator by being unforgiving, but you can set yourself free by forgiving. "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was YOU!" (Unknown)
- Unforgiveness is a heavy burden to carry. Resentment is like carrying around a red-hot rock with the intention of someday throwing it back at the one who hurt

you. It tires us and burns us. Harry Emerson Fosdick said: "Hating people is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat."

- You will be healthier if you forgive than if you stew in your unforgiveness.

## **Five Steps to Forgiveness: REACH**

In his groundbreaking book, Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving, Dr. Everett Worthington proposes a definite strategy this all important human endeavor. After having conducted research on forgiveness for fifteen years, he had a taste of his own bitter medicine when he had to come to terms with the murder of his mother in Knoxville, TN, on New Year's Eve 1999. Out of his own struggles there emerged this approach to forgiveness. There are five clear steps in forgiving:

1. **R**ecall the hurt.
2. **E**mpathize.
3. Offer the **A**ltruistic gift of forgiveness.
4. **C**ommit publicly to forgive.
5. **H**old on to forgiveness.

### **1. RECALL THE HURT.**

There are different types of hurts: some are small and some are deep.

When we are hurt, we respond with fear.

When a person offends us, we get angry.

In any given transgression, we may experience a mixture of these emotions.

How do we react to these emotions?

We can respond in a variety of ways: avoidance, retaliation or revenge, attack, withdrawal and submission. We can also engage in denial or self-justification.

In the first step of forgiveness, we try to recall the hurt in detail while we avoid certain things.

- We try to be as objective as we can be. It is normal to remember the events that support our view of any situation.
- Don't dwell on the negative.
- Take deep breaths.
- Forgive a difficult person by focusing on symbolic events. Forgive a person requires accumulating forgiveness from several symbolic events.

### **2. EMPATHIZE.**

God can forgive anyone because He knows the person from inside out.

It is hard for us to get under the skin of the other person.

We can speak of three levels of empathy.

1. At the shallowest level, we understand the point of view of the other.
2. At a middle level, we feel with and think with the other person.

3. At the deepest level of empathy, we feel compassion as well as emotional identification. In order to forgive we need to reach this level of compassionate empathy.

While trying to empathize with the perpetrator, bear in mind the following facts:

- People are influenced by situations.
- People are hardwired for survival.
- People are conditioned by past experiences.
- People don't want to think things through when hurt.

Here are a few helps in trying to develop empathy:

- Write a descriptive letter.
- Write a letter of apology.
- Create your own empty-chair therapy room.
- Listen to the transgressor's story.

### **3. ALTRUISTIC GIFT OF FORGIVENESS**

Of some thoughts one stands perplexed – especially at the sight of men's sins – and wonders whether one should use force or humble love. Always decide to use humble love. If you resolve on that, once and for all, you may subdue the whole world. Loving humility is marvelously strong, the strongest of all things, and there is nothing like it. (Fyodor Dostoyesky)

- Forgiveness is a gift you give. The other person does not deserve it.
- Empathy is necessary for forgiveness but not sufficient. One must decide to offer this gift.
- Such a decision is possible when one becomes humble.
- We have two motivations for humility: God's forgiveness and others' forgiveness of our transgressions.

In order to take this step, do the following:

- Remember the times you have been the transgressor (guilt).
- Be grateful for the times you have been given the gift of forgiveness (gratitude).
- Counting your blessings may help you to offer the gift to another (gift).

### **4. COMMIT PUBLICLY TO FORGIVE.**

Even if we decide to give the altruistic gift of forgiveness, we begin to doubt ourselves.

Our doubts get stronger on several occasions:

- I doubt my forgiveness when I see the perpetrator again.
- I doubt when I am hurt similarly by someone else.
- I doubt when I am under high stress.
- I doubt if I am hurt by the same person again.

In order to overcome these doubts:

- Don't just treasure forgiveness in your heart. We are hardwired to remember hurts. Forgiveness is an emotional replacement. If I confine my emotions to private feelings, that forgiveness will be fragile.
- Decondition yourself.
- Discipline yourself not to criticize.
- Describe the positive.
- We need to hold ourselves accountable. Towards that end, do the following:

**Symbolize your forgiveness** through some ritual: hand-washing, burning up the transgressions, or leaving them at the foot of the Cross. We Catholics have the great Sacrament of Reconciliation.

**Write out your forgiveness** out in some form: a certificate, a letter, a journal entry, or a poem.

**Tell someone about forgiveness.**

## **5. HOLD ON TO FORGIVENESS.**

Nothing is created suddenly, any more than a bunch of grapes or a fig. I answer you that there must be time. Let it first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen. (Epictetus)

Our pride gets in the way and we can return to unforgiving attitudes. It is so hard to hold on to forgiveness.

It is almost impossible to tell ourselves not to think about something and then desist from thinking about it. We need to fill our mind with some other thoughts.

We need to fight the rumination. Here are six simple steps to do that:

- Realize that the pain of a remembered hurt is not unforgiveness.
- Don't dwell on negative emotions.
- Remind yourself you have forgiven the person.
- Seek reassurance from a partner or a friend.
- Use the documents that you created.
- Look at the Pyramid Model to REACH forgiveness and think through the steps again.

## **PRACTICAL TIPS TO FORGIVE BETTER**

- 1. Focus on the person and not on the hurt.**
- 2. Be deeply aware of your own failures and sins.**
- 3. Take one small step at a time.**
- 4. Take trouble to listen to the other person's side of the story.**
- 5. Develop a bad memory for bad memories.**

- 6. Refuse to continue to play the videotape in your head.**
- 7. Reject the temptation to feed the hurt.**
- 8. Remember how often you have been forgiven by others.**
- 9. Meditate on God's boundless mercy towards you.**
- 10. Pray. The ability to forgive is a grace.**

## **HOW TO LIVE AS A FORGIVING PERSON**

- 1. Learn to live with imperfection.**
- 2. Cultivate humility and gentleness.**
- 3. Refuse to take the moral high ground. Do not condemn.**
- 4. Reject the entitlement mentality.**
- 5. Learn to deal with frustration.**
- 6. Resist the temptation to complain constantly. Be grateful.**
- 7. Empty periodically the garbage bag on your shoulder. Don't let things build up.**
- 8. Refuse to demonize or objectify human beings, no matter who they are.**
- 9. Cultivate healthy relationships and have at least one or two friends to whom you can always turn with confidence.**
- 10. Leave final judgment in the hands of God.**

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