



Forgiveness

IS FORGIVENESS REALLY NECESSARY?

Jonathan Golden, Ph.D.



“Is forgiveness really necessary?”

That’s a question that comes up from time to time in the counseling session, especially when someone is struggling with a damaged or broken relationship. It’s a difficult question to answer, especially given the variety of situations and offenses that people bring to it.

In some situations, especially those of extreme physical or sexual abuse, demanding that someone forgive the offender can be counterproductive, even damaging. Pastoral therapist John Patton writes that “much of the literature on abuse makes it clear how the demands for forgiveness from those who have been victimized can itself be abusive.” Imagine being told, for instance, that you must forgive your abuser before you can be forgiven by God, yet the abuse is so traumatic that you simply can’t do it, at least not now. As a result, piled onto the pain of the abuse is now the shame of thinking oneself unworthy of God’s love.

Forgiveness in those situations can never be demanded. If and when it does happen, it comes only through a long and difficult process of healing.

For most of us, however, and the minor offenses that we endure day to day—the spouse or child who angers us, the co-worker or friend

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who offends us—perhaps the answer to the question of “Is forgiveness necessary?” would be “It depends on what kind of world we want to live in, and what kind of world will we want to make with our actions and choices.”

Different religious traditions have different understandings of what forgiveness means, and at times we can learn from one another. Interviewer Krista Tippett, on her radio show “Speaking of Faith,” said recently, “I remember speaking with a holocaust survivor who said that for him the word forgiveness just didn’t do it; it has this cultural connotation of ‘forgive and forget.’ But the Jewish phrase, ‘repair the world,’ [*tikkun olam*] compels him in the same way that the word ‘forgiveness’ compels Christians.”

I like that. On the one hand, forgiveness is indeed about working to repair the world, or at least our little corner of the world. It’s about making our world a more tolerant and caring place. On the other hand, it’s also about healing ourselves in the world. Are we really happier toting around all those minor grudges and resentments? Does that make our lives richer, more meaningful? Who in the long run is being harmed by that? Probably not the person we refuse to forgive.

In Isaiah, God speaks to his wayward people through the prophet: “I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake” (Isa 43:25). It’s a potent phrase—“*for my own sake*.” In other words, I forgive you *not so that you’ll act differently*, but so that my anger and resentment doesn’t become a cancer eating away at my own soul. I don’t do it for you; I do it for me.

Forgiveness isn’t always easy, and nothing in this edition of our journal should imply that it is. It can be a process—often a long and painful process—that comes from personal healing and growth. Is it necessary? The answer to that depends on the kind of world we want to live in.

THE ART OF FORGIVENESS

John Arey, D.Min.

“If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.”

Mother Teresa



“Somebody hurt you, maybe yesterday, maybe a lifetime ago, and you cannot forget it. You did not deserve the hurt. It went very deep, deep enough to lodge itself in your memory. And it keeps on hurting you now. ... Deep hurts we never deserved flow from a dead past into our living present. A friend betrays us; a parent abuses us; a spouse leaves us in the cold – these hurts do not heal with the coming of the sun.”

Forgiveness is integrally related to healing, and it seems that living in our world as it is with the various ways we hurt one another, provides us with multiple opportunities to work at and practice forgiveness. However, forgiveness is not easy. It requires maturity, a willingness to be vulnerable, and patience. Forgiveness is not easy, but if practiced, it can become part of the fabric of our being. There are numerous

admonitions scripturally to forgive, and it is clearly spelled out in the Lord's Prayer. In many ways, working at forgiveness can lead each of us to develop our own art form for forgiveness.

We are all more human than otherwise, and in being human our humanity often asserts itself in the unkindest of ways. Often we reserve our best behavior for complete strangers, exhausting our best efforts on persons with whom we have only a passing or perhaps working relationship. What is left to take home to those we love is less than our best: tiredness, shorter tempers, unresolved frustrations, and even anger over situations that in the larger scheme of life, are not that significant. With a tired psyche, a shortened fuse and frustrations that defy logic, we inevitably turn and take these feelings out on those whom we profess to love. But our actions are anything but loving, and once those unpleasant feelings are expressed, we cannot call them back anymore than we can call back a day that is past.

All this serves to do is to provide us with ample opportunities to work at perfecting what I want to call the "art of forgiveness." In fact, it is our humanity that in a very real sense creates the need/opportunity to forgive others. What are the benefits to forgiveness? Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* says it well: "When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence. While not mandatory in terms of human relating, forgiveness does provide us each with the opportunity to emulate and perhaps even incarnate the love and compassion of Jesus Christ."

So, if I am to work at mastering the art of forgiveness, what do I do? Is there one best way to go about this forgiveness business? Or is each situation going to be so very different that I must learn many different ways to do forgiveness? One might argue that forgiveness can be as simple or as complicated as one makes it. While no two situations are alike and no two individuals are alike, I would argue for a simpler approach to forgiveness.

First, a simple acknowledgement that some type of offense has occurred, which has created hurt on the part of those involved, is a good first step toward developing one's own art of forgiveness. Failure to either recognize or acknowledge the hurt will only serve to deepen the hurt and widen the gap in the situation and the relationship. Maturity enters the picture here, because often a need to be "right" asserts itself. One or both parties can feel wronged by the other. I often ask persons in conflict who are hurting, What do you want? Is it healing, an apology, a good relationship? And then I will ask, Do you want to be right, or do you want to get along? Many persons believe that if they offer forgiveness, that somehow they have condoned what was done. In, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, by Bishop Desmond Tutu, he writes, "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence." Tendering an apology and then moving toward granting forgiveness is a huge step toward "drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence."

Second, following an acknowledgement that hurt has occurred, comes the step of asking for forgiveness. Will you forgive me? Pride is often a stumbling block to asking for forgiveness, and it can often be reflective of the immaturity and/or stubbornness of the human condition. If I have wronged you, I may initially have a hard time admitting my transgression. But without a request, which includes within it the acknowledgement that is the first step, it may be very difficult for things to move forward.

Third is the actual act of forgiving. However, forgiveness is not a simple recitation of the words, "I forgive you." Rather, it is a process that occurs over time. Forgiving another for wrongs committed may do nothing for the person being forgiven, however, it is transformational for the one who does the forgiving. Forgiveness is the gradual letting go of the hurt, pain, and resentment that are often part of being hurt by another. As the hurt and pain are released, then one begins to heal. And with healing can come new life.

The final step is one of reconciliation and reconnection. Having begun the process of letting go of the hurt, pain and resentment that serve as a barrier to a healthy relationship, the art of forgiveness is now embarking on the journey of being reconciled with the other party. Reconnecting with one another begins the process of restoring the relationship. And it is necessary. Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Unless we belong to a community where we are able to tell one another the truth through the practice of reconciliation and forgiveness, we are condemned to live in a world of violence and destruction."

Opening ourselves up to forgiveness provides us not only with an opportunity to grow, but also with a real chance to practice our Christian faith. "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Ephesians 4:32

Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), p. xi.

Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 29.

David W. Augsberger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 101.

Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, editors, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 276NT.

FORGIVENESS AND THE HEALING PROCESS

Marilyn Cirulis, M.Div., M.A./Ed.S.



In the Bible forgiveness in the faith community means rendering null and void the penalty owed an injured party by an offender. Every fiftieth year, during the Year of Jubilee, Jews were called upon to forgive all debts

owed to them by debtors, return held lands to former owners' families, and free all slaves (Lev. 25:8-17, 23-25, NRSV). The Old Testament prophets often

referred to the grace which God extends to a sinful people as forgiveness and this seems to be what Jesus had in mind when he forgave sins (Is. 55:6-7; Hos. 11:8-9; Lk. 7:44-47; Mt. 6:9-15). In contemporary usage forgiveness seems to mean something more akin to not holding a grudge or letting go of old hurts from the past. During the season of Lent Christians are called to repentance and self-examination as we prepare ourselves for Easter, and for many of us forgiveness is major component of Lenten preparation.

When I Googled the word "forgiveness" on the Internet, I got 15,600,000 results, a testament to the importance it holds for many in

our culture. It appears that a lot of folks want to forgive but either don't know how or cannot bring themselves to do so. Some get bogged down in specifics: How does one forgive and forget? Is repentance required of the offender? Should we try to have a relationship with those who have injured us? Is forgiveness a "natural" process that just happens over time or does it demand intentionality? Are there benefits to forgiveness? Are there pitfalls to being too eager to forgive?

Because the issue of forgiveness almost inevitably arises in the counseling situation, it seems to me that the following aspects of forgiveness are worth considering in any examination of forgiveness:

- Forgiveness is a complex subject and difficult to achieve
- The inability or unwillingness to forgive has negative consequences for the injured party
- There are reasons why most religions teach that forgiveness is a virtue
- Forgiveness is a process

People often struggle with their inability to forgive because they imagine that forgiveness is simply a conscious decision. But by focusing on the cognitive-behavioral aspects of decision-making to the exclusion of emotional pain, many find that even though they decide to forgive someone, they still feel hurt, angry and mistrustful, not only toward those who have caused them injury, but also toward others. Unless they are afforded a forum for the expression of these intense feelings, they seem to be unable to forgive wrongs committed against them. If they try to bury and deny these feelings, they often project their negative feelings inappropriately onto others, resulting in damage to other relationships.

Others find it difficult to forgive because they imagine that they must also forget the offense. The problem with this expectation is that not only do we rarely forget pain inflicted upon us by others, it is not wise to try to do so. A healthier way to deal with such offenses is to learn and grow from them. When my son was about nine years old he found me in the house one day and announced that he was going out to play. In predictable motherly fashion I asked him if he had done his homework ("Yes, Mom!") and if he had picked up the toys in his room ("Yes, Mom!"). While he was outside playing, I looked in his room and discovered that he had not even begun to pick up his toys. I angrily began tossing them into his storage closet from wherever I was in the room, when, at that moment he walked into the room and had to dodge a toy gun that went flying through the air, barely missing his head. Fortunately he was quick and able to avoid being beamed by this rather heavy metal toy, but his feelings were wounded: "You tried to hit me in the head with that gun! My own mother!" he exclaimed. I apologized and did my best to assure him that I wasn't actually trying to hit him (that's how I remember it), but, at age 31, he still does fully believe me. I know this because, about once a year, usually around Mother's Day, he will say something like, "I think we ought to start a greeting card company that targets dysfunctional families. Instead of the usual mushy, sentimental verses, our cards could say things like, 'Hey, remember that time you almost bashed in my skull with a toy pistol? Happy Mother's Day.'" It's a joke between us now, and he has forgiven me, but he has never forgotten the experience. We can learn and grow from painful emotional experiences, but only if we discover or make meaning from them, not if

we try to forget them, ignore them, or never talk about them.

Others find it difficult to forgive because they have a set of expectations of the offender that remain forever unfulfilled. They may expect the offender to apologize, confess the wrong or make restitution. To expect contriteness on the part of the offender is often unrealistic, however, for a number of reasons. The offender may not be aware of what he or she has done to offend another or may feel that the offending behavior was justified. The offender may be in denial about having committed the offense. An offender may have died, taking whatever chance that once existed for dialogue or reconciliation to the grave. There are in fact offenders who readily admit to having committed an offending act, but simply do not care that they have injured another. Therefore, if we make the contriteness or repentance of the offender a requirement for forgiveness, we can sabotage our chances of being able to forgive and in so doing are unable to move beyond our hurt, anger and disappointment. This kind of self-sabotage is one of the most serious consequences of our inability to forgive. Individuals who have made their forgiveness contingent upon a change in the offender often come to therapy suffering from lifelong depression, periods of seemingly unexplainable rage, and a chronic sense of hopelessness about their chances of ever feeling satisfied, fulfilled, or at peace.

Many clergy have had the experience of knowing people in their congregations who were unable to let go of old wounds inflicted by another parishioner. Over the years these old wounds have been allowed to fester and have come to permeate and poison the entire church. Factions have formed around the offender and the offended so that church mem-

bers have felt obligated to side with one group or the other, making it impossible for the church to forge a united front for doing its work. Ministers and church consultants come and go, but the old animosities remain. The church finds itself unable to grow or be an effective force for good because new people very quickly sense the underlying tension and opt to go elsewhere.

Similar long-standing animosities exist among families and nations. This was the case for over one hundred years between the Hatfield and McCoy families of eastern Tennessee before they decided to bury the hatchet a few years ago. The peoples of Eastern Europe and the Middle East are perhaps the most visible examples today of the impact of the inability to forgive.

The above illustrations are but a few examples of why most religions consider forgiveness a virtue worth pursuing. Bitterness, anger, and hatred feed on one another and become a breeding ground for more of the same, so that from generation to generation, "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children." The unforgiving individual becomes the depressed, cynical, negative person in our midst who is avoided, thus contributing further to their depression cynicism and negativity. Unforgiving churches become a haven for divisiveness and self-absorbed bickering, gossip, rumor and backbiting. Unforgiving families and communities can continue feuding for generations, long after they have forgotten how it all started. Unforgiving nations and ethnic groups fight wars generation after generation, so that new wounds are heaped upon old ones, making any hope for peace virtually impossible.

This is not what God intended for his people. We are to be a people of redemption and reconciliation, of peace and justice, but we are short-sighted. We live within ourselves, seeing what we choose to see, hearing what fits into our narrow worldview. It is often difficult if not impossible for us to see the long-range consequences of our actions and our failures to act. The writer of Luke's gospel knew this. Luke records that from the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NRSV). Church tradition says he was referring to all those involved in his life and death—the disciple who betrayed him and the one who denied him and the ones who turned tail and ran; the criminals crucified with him that day; the Roman governor who washed his hands of the whole matter; the Jewish leaders whose rigid adherence to the letter of the law made them blind to the spirit of the law; the people who were persuaded of his guilt and the ones who weren't but did nothing. They all had their fingers in the crucifixion pie that day, as do we all, with our quest for power and shirking of responsibility, our propensity for gossip and scapegoating, our wounded egos, our self-righteous pride—we're all guilty and in need of forgiveness. Lent is the time when we are urged to remember this about ourselves, painful as it may be: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Yet, even from the cross, he interceded on our behalf, because of the very short-sighted-ness that keeps us forever being people who do not know what we're doing, who do not realize the full consequences of our actions.

This all encompassing act of forgiveness that comes from Jesus in his greatest moment of suffering reminds us of our ongoing need to ever be both forgiven and forgiving. Such forgiveness is not a once-and-for-all event. It

cannot be, for our very nature as humans requires eternal vigilance. Forgiveness is an ongoing process that begins when we accept our imperfections and is open-ended. In between the alpha and omega of this process lies a number of steps that involve leaps of faith, practice, failures, and backsliding, but the promise of Christ from the cross is that we will get there, so every step in the direction of forgiveness brings us closer to the goal. This means we no longer have to worry so much about whether we can "forgive and forget," whether the offender is repentant, whether forgiveness encourages more sin, or whether forgiveness results in reconciliation. Instead, we have a more important motivator: the example of the Messiah, who invites us into the process with him. Once we take that leap of faith, here are some mile markers for navigating the forgiveness journey:

1. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel about a troublesome offense
2. Remember that forgiveness is more about finding peace within than about reconciliation
3. Recognize that your distress over a past offense has more to do with how you're handling it now than about the offense itself
4. Whenever you begin to feel upset about an offense, learn and practice stress management techniques
5. Give up expecting others to change; you can only change yourself; but, know that changing yourself often results in others' changing in relation to you
6. Instead of replaying old wounds, learn some new ways to get what you need and want from life
8. Edit and revise your grievance story to make you the hero, not the victim

9. If you are not ready to move to forgiveness, don't force it; there is value in taking time to tend your wounds
10. Remember that forgiveness is more likely to proceed from those who have experienced it than from those who have not

FORGIVENESS AS A SEVEN-FOLD JOURNEY

Mark Larson, D.Min.

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”

The Gospel of Matthew: 18.21-22, RSV



At some point or another in their therapy, about 90% of the people with whom I work struggle with forgiveness. How can we deal with our anger, sadness, regret or betrayal when we have been hurt by another? For some, struggling with forgiveness is the main theme of their therapy. Forgiveness and the difficulty of forgiving constitute part of the core of the dilemmas we face in life. Thankfully, our accounts of Jesus' life and ministry address this core dilemma with intriguing answers.

One example is his answer to Peter, quoted above. Peter is referring to the standard forgiveness practice of the Hebrew faith at the time, which was a challenge in itself! But Jesus blew the old formula apart: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Here are my **seven** reflections on Jesus' words for you who are on the journey of forgiveness.

S - Seven

Here, Jesus is building on the associations his people would have with the number seven. In Hebrew thought, the number seven referred to an ongoing process that repeats itself, like the number of days in our week. Jesus is saying that forgiveness is not a cookie-cutter formula with a simple beginning or an end. Instead it might help you to think of forgiveness as an ongoing process that needs to repeat itself.

E – Effort is required

Much has been written in recent years of how we need to make conscious choices toward forgiveness. It does require decisions, actions and conscious effort. Sometimes this means you must try to bring up specific complaints directly with the person(s) who you feel hurt you. Bringing up these complaints directly with the offender requires some coaching or intentionality so as to put the complaint in terms that might open up the possibility of their reconciling response and to avoid venting your anger with the person.

V – Vent/Face scary feelings in safe settings

In order to bring care to our hurts and anger it is usually necessary to find safe places to talk about what happened with persons who will listen and not offer a lot of distracting opinions, especially right away. A good therapist can provide this sort of safe place, especially if trauma or depression is a part of the hurt. Other safe places or sanctuaries can be close friends, journaling, community worship and individual prayer. You decide what is safe.

E – Engage real people

Sometimes it is damaging to continue to have contact with persons who keep hurting you – like in the case of a spouse or family member who is abusive or in an active addiction. In these cases you should seek out other supportive persons to build your own sense of family. On the other hand I have seen people who withdraw from almost all contact with others, to avoid having their anger, hurt or shame triggered. This withdrawal can have the effect of “freezing,” not resolving, unforgiving views. We need the fresh breezes of the Holy Spirit moving through our everyday relationships, to give us new realizations and insights that can get us unstuck in our unforgiving attitudes.

N - New

The last letter of “seven” is “n” and stands for “new.” New is who we can become. New is what we can receive. New is what can happen to us outside our conscious efforts. This is the part of forgiveness that John Patton wrote about in his classic book: Is Human Forgiveness Possible? According to Patton, part of forgiveness comes as a gift of grace. It is a discovery or realization that must come in its own time. It is the discovered awareness that we are more like the one who has hurt us, than we realized. It does not say the hurt was ok or justified. However it is the gift of the awareness of what the other might have been thinking of or caught up in, that we can relate to, that brought our pain, betrayal, anger or hurt.

These seven sides of the process of forgiveness remind me of facets on a jewel. Each side is real yet each one is related together and makes up the whole experience. The more we engage this ongoing process of forgiveness, the more we might experience some of what Clarissa Pinkola-Estes’s (**Women Who Run with the Wolves**) writes about:

“You tend to feel sorrow over the circumstances instead
Of rage, you tend to feel sorry for the person rather than
Angry with him. You tend to have nothing left to remember
To say about it all. You understand the suffering that drove
The offense to begin with. You are not waiting for anything.
You are not wanting anything. There is no lariat snare around
Your ankle stretching from way back there to here. You are
Free to go. It may not have turned out to be a happily ever
After, but most certainly there is now a fresh Once upon
A time waiting for you from this day forward.

Also see:

www.forgivenessweb.com

Methodist Counseling and Consultation Website

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2. Submissions should be no longer than 600 words, and should be limited to the interplay of spirituality and mental health. Please keep format simple, double-spaced, with 1 inch margins.
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