

Letting go of Anger at God

Some people are shocked and even scandalized when they hear about our possible need to 'forgive' God. When bad things happen to us or our loved ones, the worst thing we can do is to break our relationship with God or distance ourselves from him. When we do this, we hand Satan a victory. The best thing to do involving our relationship with God is to let him know *exactly* how we feel. This is what men and women of God do, with a genuine search for the truth and a yearning in their heart to know God deeper. "Search me,

O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts" *Psalm 139:23*. Each of them could have broken their relationship with God or mouthed rote prayers. Instead they chose to have a truthful, sincere and intimate relationship with the Creator of the universe.

We may wonder and ask ourselves why our relationship with God feels 'lifeless', it's because we are not expressing our feelings and intentions in an honest way. This only creates a distance, and consciously or unconsciously, bad feelings about God will fester within us. We need to remember we are engaging in a spiritual warfare, the powers of darkness are trying every trick in the book to make us believe that God does not care about us, while the Holy Spirit is trying very much to open our eyes to God's presence, to bring about a victory that will radically change our lives.

Forgiving Yourself and Dealing with a Perfectionist Spirit

"Perfectionism is a self destructive and addictive belief system... it is not the same thing as striving to be our best. Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth; it's a shield." Brene Brown

Failing to forgive ourselves when we are truly contrite for what we did is a form of self-hatred, which is very destructive to our ongoing personal and spiritual growth. The presence of such a perfectionist voice will make it very difficult for us to even *begin* to believe in God's love for us. This is the inner voice that harshly condemns; it holds up before us an unattainable standard. Its favourite Scripture is of course "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (*Matt 5:48*) – a verse that actually translates to "be you whole as our Heavenly Father is whole." This translation should change our perspective. It is God's very desire that we heal and become *whole*. Therefore, it is imperative we become aware of the inner voice sometimes called our "inner critic" and learn to gently but firmly speak back to it. If we continue to have a difficult time forgiving ourselves or accepting God's forgiveness, let us open up to someone *trustworthy* who knows us and can affirm us. We should also be continually immersing our minds in the Word of God, taking the time to slowly read through the Scriptures that speak of the Father's love.

Forgiving a Deceased Person

When a loved one dies, many people have to face what is called "unfinished business." Survivors sometimes feel feelings of both anger and guilt toward their loved for dying and have a hard time allowing negative feelings to surface because they feel guilty about having such feelings and they do not know what to do with them. Many mistakenly think nothing can be done since their loved one is now deceased. The good news is that much can be done, unfinished business can be processed, forgiven, and reconciled. As Christians we believe in life after death.

"We may wonder and ask ourselves why our relationship with God feels 'lifeless', it's because we are not expressing our feelings and intentions in an honest way."

Write a Farewell Letter

The purpose of this letter is to help us deal with any guilty feelings or unfinished business, also, if we never had the opportunity to say goodbye. Before writing remember that the loved one is now in a new, transformed state of being. He or she has a much greater capacity to give and receive love, to forgive and be forgiven.

When writing we should pour out our heart, expressing all the feelings and emotions we are experiencing, all the things we wanted to say, but didn't. If we feel guilty about anything, we should seek forgiveness and believe we are receiving it. If we feel odd about writing such a letter, we should know that this is normal, but we must not let these feelings stop us for doing what is tremendously helpful and healing for both us and the deceased person.

A letter dealing with Hurt and Resentment

The purpose of this letter is to help us deal with the anger and hurt we may feel toward a loved one. We need to give ourselves permission to hurt and be angry, resisting the temptation to *minimise* our hurt. We may feel disloyal about thinking and writing negative things about our deceased loved one, also we may have little or no experience in dealing with our anger. We may even think that writing a negative letter would be sinful. The truth is we need honesty if we are going to heal and writing such a truthful letter is very healing. We need to remember that growth invariably means stretching ourselves beyond our comfort zone.

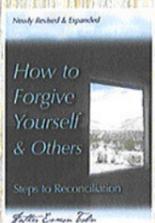
Conclusion

When we have been hurt or unjustly treated by others we have three options:

1. We can deny the hurt and injustice and do nothing to free ourselves of it.
2. We can become enraged with our offender and stay enraged never choosing to work through our hurt and in the process wound ourselves emotionally, spiritually, and physically.
3. Or we can decide to cooperate with the grace of God to forgive these hurts – remembering that this option does not exclude bringing our offender to justice if he/she committed some grave injustice against us or if the person continues an abusive (physically, mentally or spiritually) behaviour, we should separate ourselves from them.

Choosing to deal with life's hurts and injustices may be some of the toughest inner work that we will ever engage in, but it will be work that will free us from our emotional prison and free us to live more joyfully and fully. When we choose to walk and work with our forgiving God, we will become more like him. We will become ambassadors of reconciliation with Christ. ■

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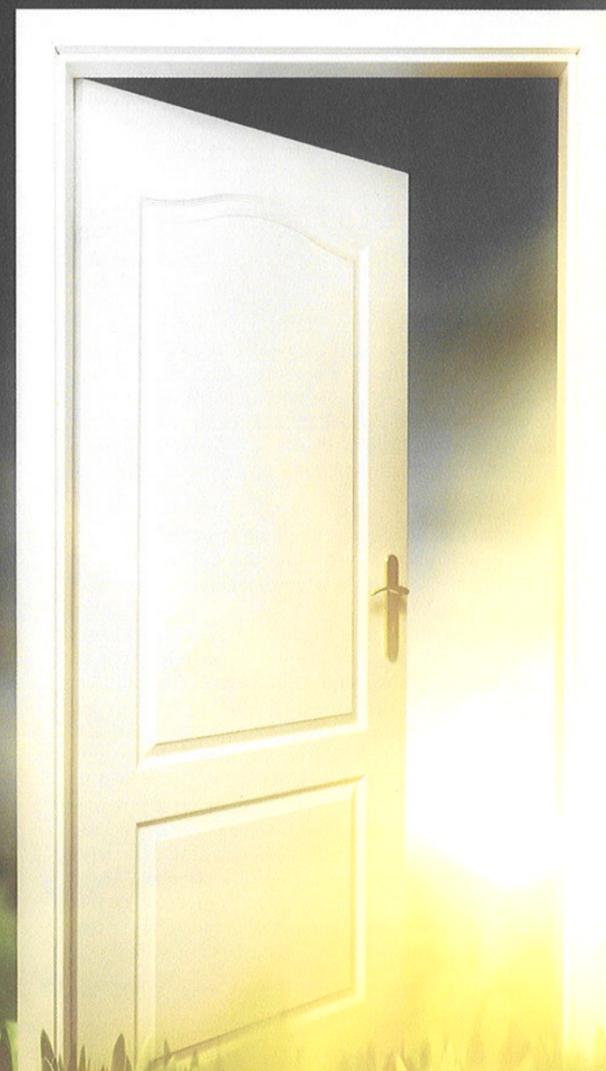


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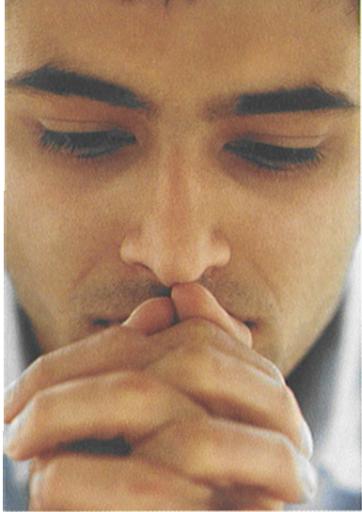
A Fresh Start



HOW TO FORGIVE YOURSELF AND OTHERS

"Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past"

- Jean Maalouf



Introduction

Some years ago I listened to a man give a talk about forgiveness. The man had come to lose all respect for his father. But he also felt that there was something missing in his spiritual life despite the fact that he came to church regularly and tried to live a good life. Then one day, moved by the Holy Spirit, the man picked up the phone and said, "Dad, I need to ask for your forgiveness for all the resentment I have been harbouring towards you". Even though the father was not very receptive, it did not matter as far as the spiritual life of the caller was concerned. He has done what he needed to do. Immediately, he felt a new closeness to God and a

new joy entered his life. Also, his prayers of petition for victory over some personal weaknesses started to be answered.

Through his willingness to ask his father's forgiveness and to forgive him for any hurt he did to him, this man was freed from the burden of resentment. Joy was restored to his life and his renewed relationship with God bore fruit as he sought God's help with his own personal struggles.

When I listen to some very painful hurts and injustices that some people have had to endure, I do understand why they would have absolutely no desire to forgive and let go of hurts and wrongs done to them. I even understand why some people may conclude that it would be wrong to forgive some hurts and grave injustices. Some people find it repulsive to even think about forgiving certain hurts. Unfortunately, the consequence of such a stance is that people are trapped in a sea of bitterness and continue to be controlled emotionally by those who have inflicted a terrible hurt or injustice upon them. When we choose not to forgive, we knowingly or unknowingly choose to cheat ourselves of the joy of living. When we live life with resentment in our hearts, our resentment becomes the lens through which we see reality and people. We see them not as they are but how our resentment wants us to see.

On a *human* level, forgiveness is beyond many people's reach. That is why we often hear the saying "to err is human, but to forgive is divine". Yet, with the grace of God *all* things are possible – even forgiving what seems like an unforgivable sin or crime.

Defining Forgiveness: What it is and isn't

What Forgiveness isn't

– Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we must forget a hurt or injustice. We often hear the advice "forgive and forget". Sometimes it is not possible to forget some hurts and sometimes it is not even wise to do so. Some hurts and injustices are too big and painful to remove totally from our memory. What we can and should seek to do is to let go of the resentments connected with the hurt. If we don't, these resentments will continue to wound us, cloud the way we see reality, and control our actions. Also, while we may sometimes be able to totally forget some hurts, it is not necessarily wise to forget *all* hurts. We may need to remember some hurts to help us to not allow them to happen again. For example, if we don't remember how a person abused us, we run the risk of allowing such behaviour to happen again. Also, remembering hurts that are forgiven and healed will enable us to offer understanding, compassion, and help to others in need of healing.

– Forgiveness doesn't mean that we surrender our right to justice. For example, if we know someone has cheated us of a lot of money, forgiveness doesn't mean we surrender our right to seek justice. The late Pope John Paul II forgave Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him, but he didn't request that he be released from jail.

– Forgiving someone who breaks our trust doesn't mean that we give him back his job. I sometimes say to people, we shouldn't confuse forgiveness with stupidity. Jesus did indeed ask us to forgive, but he didn't ask us to be stupid in our dealings with others.

– Forgiveness does not necessarily mean I have to relate or befriend my offender. This is especially true if my offender shows no sorrow or remorse for the wrong he/she did. We can love and forgive someone without befriending them.

– Forgiveness doesn't mean that I have to put up with intolerable

behaviour. If anyone abuses us, physically, mentally or spiritually (Body, Soul or Spirit), we should do everything in our power to resist such behaviour. Forgiveness does not mean we become doormats for nasty people.

– Forgiveness doesn't mean excusing, condoning, or minimizing the wrong inflicted on us.

– Forgiveness doesn't mean that we never have negative feelings toward our offender. There is a difference between the *forgiveness* of a hurt and the total *healing* of a hurt.

– Forgiveness does not mean that we have to like our offender. Jesus did not tolerate the Pharisees, they repulsed him, yet he forgave them their offences against him.

What Forgiveness is

– Forgiveness is a process (which may take a day, a year, or a life time) during which we seek to eliminate from mind and heart all resentment and hurt feelings that we have because of what someone said, did or failed to do.

– Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery we perform on ourselves (with God's grace) to free ourselves from all the venom we feel as the result of a hurt or injustice.

– Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves so that we do not remain stuck in the past and in our pain, living as victims of some big hurt or injustice. When we are able to forgive, we move on from being the victim of our story to being the hero of it.

Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past. Jean Maalouf

We know that forgiveness is occurring or has occurred when the distance between our offender and us is a peaceful distance and not a hostile one. We know that forgiveness is occurring when we can pray for our offender, wish him or her well and let go of all desire to get even.

Three Good Reasons to Forgive

Reason 1: God's word tells us to do so, not once but many times.

In *Matthew* 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In *Mark* 11:25, Jesus says to us: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." Jesus is saying to us that his love and healing cannot flow into us unless we allow it to flow out to others.

For many of us, forgiveness may be the toughest thing we may ever do emotionally and spiritually. It stretches us way beyond what we thought we were capable of. Forgiveness goes against the grain. It seems unnatural. Our Lord's command to forgive may even seem repulsive and outrageous, even foolish. Yet forgiveness is what God's word clearly asks of us. In a life time, God will have forgiven us thousands of times. Why would we who call ourselves his followers think we shouldn't have to show the same mercy to those who offend us? An unforgiving heart hurts our relationship with the Lord and hinders his healing from coming to us. *Deliberately* holding onto hurts and wrongs is a big obstacle to people receiving God's healing on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. Think about it this way, forgiveness is Jesus' medicine for hurts and wrongs inflicted upon us just as mercy is the medicine that heals us of the guilt associated with our sins and wrong doing. Would the Lord prescribe evil or the impossible for us? He prescribes the medicine of forgiveness so that our hearts would be free of the resentment and desire for revenge that steals our peace and joy and wounds us in every area of our life.

Reason 2: To free our hearts from the physical destructive power of unforgiveness.

In his excellent book, *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*, Jean Maalouf writes:

...It has also been proven that bitterness, resentment, and anger can be a fertile soil for malignant growths.

There are numerous medical records that prove forgiveness and love have the power to dissolve cancers, tumors and other diseases. What the medical records tells us is that, when we are in a state of unforgiveness, our bodies start to manufacture extra chemicals – like adrenaline, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and cortisone – that build up in the bloodstream. >

"We know that forgiveness is occurring or has occurred when the distance between our offender and us is a **peaceful distance and not a hostile one.**"

To choose not to enter into the forgiving process is to choose to give our offender ongoing control over every area of our life, including our physical health. Does that seem smart? I don't think so. Yet, that is exactly what we are doing when we choose not to enter into the difficult process of forgiveness. Just think about it, our offender may have moved forward with their life, they continue to control us, keeping us miserable. Refusing to forgive is a choice to inflict a continuous wound on ourselves.

Reason 3: When we forgive, we make our world less violent and more loving.

The media reminds us daily of the hate and animosity that exists in our world. We may even find ourselves saying: Why does it have to be like this? Why can't people settle their differences peacefully? And yet, we ourselves may be guilty of perpetrating hate and animosity in our little piece of the world.

In fact, we are guilty of doing just that as long as we deliberately choose to hold onto grudges and resentment. We are adding more darkness to an already dark world. We may be active participants in keeping a negative atmosphere alive and well in our home, workplace, and church. But when we choose to enter into the forgiveness process we are choosing to overcome the darkness of unforgiveness with love.

We choose to do what God would have us do.

We choose to do what is crucial for our physical and emotional health.

We choose to make our world a little more peaceful and loving.

Obstacles to Forgiving Life's Hurts

Sometimes obstacles to forgiving a hurt are often unconscious. If, at this time, you are trying to forgive a hurt or wrong done to you, you can see if any of the following obstacles are present in your life.

1. Because of life's experiences, we may not be very forgiving.
2. We may feel strongly that our offender does not deserve our forgiveness.
3. Intellectually, we may feel consciously or unconsciously that Jesus is wrong on this issue.
4. Pride is a big obstacle for many people. Some of us may not be humble enough to get down on our knees and beg God to help us to do something that we may have absolutely no desire to do. Pride may also prevent us from accepting the *sincere* apologies of our offender.
5. Forgiving a hurt may seem like we are *minimizing* or *excusing* a hurt. It may seem like an act of weakness. Forgiveness is not an act of weakness, it is an attribute of the strong.
6. Forgiveness involves facing emotions that most of us do not like to face and deal with, namely anger, hatred, and our need for revenge. Remember that feelings are neither right or wrong.
7. We may fear that forgiveness would only leave us open to being hurt again.
8. We may not even want to talk to God about the issue because we don't want to hear him say "forgive" or "let go". As a result we may even keep God at a distance. Of course, such a decision negatively impacts our *whole* relationship with him.
9. We may not be able to get beyond the anger and rage we feel that is related to the hurt. It's ok to be angry, we just need to decide how long we *need* to be angry. A year? Ten years? Twenty years? Keeping our anger alive is a decision to allow our offender to continue to control our emotions for years or maybe a

lifetime. We may feel (and this is nearly always unconscious) that our anger is all we have left when it comes to a particular relationship. If we let the anger go we may feel diminished, empty, and very powerless.

10. We may adopt what I call a "righteous victim stance". If we suffer from the spiritual disease of self-righteousness we will, most likely, be more resistant to forgiving others.

Prayer and Forgiveness

Naming, owning, and giving expression to our real feelings is a very important first step when it comes to dealing with life's hurts and injustices.

Prayer of Rage

When we have been deeply hurt, we feel anger, rage, and hate. So our first prayer will need to give expression to our rage. It is likely that many of us may never have prayed a prayer of rage to God. It may be a new experience. We may feel it is wrong to say such things to God about another human being. If you are a little scandalised listen to what Jeremiah said to God about his enemies:

Let me put my case to you.

Why does the way of the guilty prosper?

Why do all who are treacherous thrive?

Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter,

And set them apart for the day of slaughter (Jeremiah 12:1,3)

Ouch, Jeremiah! Isn't that a bit over the top? We may not think so if we have experienced some terrible injustice or wrong.

Don't lie to God, if our prayer is going to be real, it must express what we genuinely feel within. Many of the Psalms are wonderful examples of honest speech to God in time of rage or suppression. Expressing out loud what we have judged to be unspeakable hurts can be a wonderful and freeing experience.

Prayer for the desire to forgive

Having expressed our rage to God and having expressed our feelings about our offender we will hopefully want to ask the Lord for help to move past our anger and outrage with the understanding we have to stretch ourselves a lot emotionally and spiritually if we want God to melt a heart that is hardened. This may be the toughest step in the entire process.

Prayer of Repentance

This part of the forgiveness process is very challenging because it asks us to move away from focusing on the sin of wrongdoing of our offender to focusing on our sin or wrongdoing. This step demands humility and a good bit of self knowledge. As long as we keep the focus on what our offender did wrong we will not be able to forgive. But once we begin to focus on our need for forgiveness and mercy, we become much less self-righteous and condemning. This step is very helpful because it will, most likely, soften our hardened heart. Becoming deeply aware of our own need for mercy should ready our heart to show mercy to those who hurt us.

Prayer for the offender

As we stretch ourselves to do what we may find repulsive, God will create in us a new heart, a heart more like his heart, open to forgiving what seems unforgivable. At this stage we may begin to experience the miracle of forgiveness – the miracle of wanting to let go of something that we had previously held on to as if it were a 'precious jewel.' >

