

Forgiveness – Part 2

Today I want to talk about what forgiveness is, what it is NOT, how to forgive, and what to do if someone does not forgive you. This can be very involved and stir up some very deep emotions. So be ready for anything.

Forgiveness – According to the dictionary, forgiveness means - release from the guilt or penalty of an offense; pardon; no longer hold a person responsible to pay the penalty. (This is important; to forgive does not mean a person is not guilty. It means that they are guilty, but will not have to pay for their guilt)

These are some words we use in place of forgiveness - absolution, amnesty, forgiveness, remission, remittal; also we think about - parole; acquittal, exculpation, exoneration, vindication; exemption, immunity, impunity, indemnity; commutation, commuting, reprieve.

All of these words mean something to each of us and sometimes it means different things to each of us. A lot of that depends on our upbringing, our experience, and our understanding of human nature. Let's talk about what forgiveness is not first.

1. **Forgiveness is not letting someone “off the hook”.** To forgive we are not saying to someone that their action, words, or behavior will have no consequence. It is just that we will not be the one getting that “pound of flesh” from them. Others may create situations that make it difficult for that person, but you are not demanding your penalty.
2. **Forgiveness is not saying that we agree with or condone the actions, words, or behavior of the one who we are forgiving.** We are saying that we are not going to let that person control our thoughts, actions, and emotions by being consumed with their actions.
3. **Forgiveness is not telling others that we are weak or a push over.** The truth is that it is far more courageous to forgive than to retaliate. It is easy to take revenge out on someone, but to forgive really take strength and courage.
4. **Forgiveness doesn't mean you must forget.** Forgiving and forgetting are two *different and separate acts*. *The truth is you can forgive before you forget. But often we forget before we consciously forgive.* How many times have you forgotten some offense really before you had a chance to get even? We don't even know sometimes why we are mad at someone because the offense was

really nothing. Many times I hear this; “I don’t remember what they did to me, but I know it wasn’t fair”. That is baloney!! If you can’t remember what someone did to you, it probably wasn’t important. Remember – there is no future in the past. All of your future is ahead of you and the past can only hurt you if you let it. (More on that later) God has given us wonderful minds and the ability to forget bad things and remember the good. The truth here is that we should be in such a state of forgiveness that we do not realize that we are forgiving others. It comes naturally, and as we saw last week, it is a command of God to us and we need to forgive so God will forgive us.

5. **Forgiveness does not mean that we carelessly go on as if nothing happened.** Just because you forgive, you may still need to “watch your step” with them, but you also need to try to rebuild the trust you once had. Trust-building is a process that takes time and effort and lots of both. But the payoff is worth it.

So if this is what forgiveness is not, just what is forgiveness? Forgiveness may result in sincerely spoken words such as “I forgive you” or tender actions that fit the relationship. But more than this, *forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life. The offense is no longer front and center in your thoughts or feelings. Your hostility, resentment and misery have made way for compassion, kindness and peace.*

Also, remember that forgiveness often isn't a one-time thing. It begins with a decision, but because memories or another set of words or actions may trigger old feelings, you may need to recommit to forgiveness over and over again.

Many of you may be thinking right now, “but you don’t understand my situation!” “You don’t know how much they have hurt me.” Or “They will never ask for my forgiveness or say they are sorry for their hurt to me.” Whatever the circumstances, you are not responsible for their actions, just your reaction. Let’s look at some benefits of forgiveness and then look at some “What ifs?”

Some benefits are:

- Lower blood pressure and heart rate
- Stress reduction
- Less hostility and Better anger management skills
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Fewer depression and fewer anxiety symptoms

- Reduction in chronic pain
- More friendships and healthier relationships
- Greater religious or spiritual well-being
- Improved psychological well-being

In addition to these, there is an overwhelming sense of peace that comes from true forgiveness.

But what if we don't forgive? What are the effects to us and others if we refuse to forgive and let go of the hurt and the pain we believe that others have caused us?

A. *Why do we hold grudges and become resentful and unforgiving?*

The people most likely to hurt us are those closest to us. Our friends, brothers and sisters, the people we work or go to school with, and parents. When we're hurt by someone we love and trust — whether it's a lie, betrayal, rejection, abuse or insult — it can be extremely difficult to overcome. And even minor offenses can turn into huge conflicts.

When you experience hurt or harm from someone's actions or words, whether this is intended or not, you may begin experiencing negative feelings such as anger, confusion or sadness, especially when it's someone close to you. These feelings may start out small. But if you don't deal with them quickly, they can grow bigger and more powerful. They may even begin to crowd out positive feelings. Grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility take root when you dwell on hurtful events or situations, replaying them in your mind many times.

Soon, you may find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice. You may feel trapped and may not see a way out. It's very hard to let go of grudges at this point and instead you may remain resentful and unforgiving.

B. *How do I know it's time to try to forgive?*

When we hold on to pain, old grudges, bitterness and even hatred, many areas of our lives can suffer. When we're unforgiving, it's we who pay the price over and over. We may bring our anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Our lives may be so wrapped up in the wrong that we can't enjoy the present. Other signs that it may be time to consider forgiveness include:

- Dwelling on the events surrounding the offense
- Hearing from others that you have a chip on your shoulder or that you're wallowing in self-pity

- Being avoided by family and friends because they don't enjoy being around you
- Having angry outbursts at the smallest perceived slights
- Often feeling misunderstood
- Drinking excessively, smoking, sex, or using drugs to try to cope with your pain
- Having symptoms of depression or anxiety
- Being consumed by a desire for revenge or punishment
- Automatically thinking the worst about people or situations
- Regretting the loss of a valued relationship
- Feeling like your life lacks meaning or purpose
- Feeling at odds with your religious or spiritual beliefs

The bottom line is that you may often feel miserable in your current life.

Let's look now at some of those "What ifs?"

I. What happens if I can't forgive someone?

Forgiveness can be very challenging. It may be particularly hard to forgive someone who doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of their sorrow. Keep in mind that the key benefits of forgiveness are for you. If you find yourself stuck, it may be helpful to take some time to talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a pastor, family member or friend.

It may also be helpful to reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who have forgiven you. As you recall how you felt, it may help you to understand the position of the person who hurt you. It can also be beneficial to pray. In any case, if the intention to forgive is present, forgiveness will come in its time.

II. Does forgiveness guarantee reconciliation?

Not always. In some cases, reconciliation may be impossible because the offender has died. In other cases, reconciliation may not be appropriate, especially if you were attacked or assaulted. But even in those cases, forgiveness is still possible, even if reconciliation isn't.

On the other hand, if the hurtful event involved a family member or friend whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation. This may not happen quickly, as you both may need time to re-establish trust. But in the end, your relationship may very well be one that is rich and fulfilling.

III. What if I have to interact with the person who hurt me but I don't want to?

These situations are difficult. If the hurt involves a family member, it may not always be possible to avoid him or her entirely. You may be invited to the same family holiday gatherings, for instance. If you've reached a state of forgiveness, you may be able to enjoy these gatherings without bringing up the old hurts. If you haven't reached forgiveness, these gatherings may be tense and stressful for everyone, particularly if other family members have chosen sides in the conflict.

So how do you handle this? First, remember that you do have a choice whether to attend or not attend family get-togethers. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to go, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. It's important to keep an eye on those feelings. You don't want them to lead you to be unjust or unkind in return for what was done to you.

Also, avoid drinking too much alcohol as a way to try to numb your feelings or feel better — it'll likely backfire. And keep an open heart and mind. People do change, and perhaps the offender will want to apologize or make amends. You also may find that the gathering helps you to move forward with forgiveness.

IV. How do I know when I've truly forgiven someone?

Forgiveness may result in sincerely spoken words such as "I forgive you" or tender actions that fit the relationship. But more than this, forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life. The offense is no longer front and center in your thoughts or feelings. Your hostility, resentment and misery have made way for compassion, kindness and peace.

Also, remember that forgiveness often isn't a one-time thing. It begins with a decision, but because memories or another set of words or actions may trigger old feelings, you may need to recommit to forgiveness over and over again.

V. What if the person I'm forgiving doesn't change?

Getting the other person to change their actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. In fact, the other person may never change or apologize for the offense. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life — by bringing you more peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing.

Forgiveness takes away the power the other person continues to wield in your life. Through forgiveness, you choose to no longer define yourself as a victim.

Forgiveness is done primarily for yourself, and less so for the person who wronged you.

VI. What if I'm the one who needs forgiveness?

It may help to spend some time thinking about the offense you've committed and trying to determine the effect it has had on others. Unless it may cause more harm or distress, consider admitting the wrong you've done to those you've harmed, speaking of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically asking for forgiveness — without making excuses.

But if this seems unwise because it may further harm or distress, don't do it — it's not about making yourself feel better by apologizing. You don't want to add salt to a painful wound. Also, keep in mind that you can't force someone to forgive you. They will need to move to forgiveness in their own time.

In any case, we have to be willing to forgive ourselves. Holding on to resentment against yourself can be just as toxic as holding on to resentment against someone else. Recognize that poor behavior or mistakes don't make you worthless or bad.

Accept the fact that you — like everyone else — aren't perfect. Accept yourself despite your faults. Admit your mistakes. Commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect. And again, talking with a pastor or trusted friend or relative may be helpful.

Forgiveness of yourself or someone else, though not easy, can transform your life. Instead of dwelling on the injustice and revenge, instead of being angry and bitter, you can move toward a life of peace, compassion, mercy, joy and kindness. God can and WILL help you get there.