

FORGIVENESS, 2009



Scripture:

Luke 1:67-69 (selected verses)

This child was born to give knowledge of salvation of his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁶⁷Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁹To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'



FORGIVENESS

How to have:

- Lower blood pressure
- Less stress
- Less hostility
- Better anger management skills
- Lower heart rate
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Fewer depression symptoms
- Fewer anxiety symptoms
- Reduction in chronic pain
- More friendships
- Healthier relationships
- Greater religious or spiritual well-being
- Improved psychological well-being

UNTIL MORALE IMPROVES

I saw a bumper sticker in Baltimore that made me want to know more: **"The beatings will continue until the morale improves."**

Beatings ... well tortures in general ... don't always produce the dependable, long term results we want. The bumper sticker, after all, is supposed to be humorous. But there is nothing about abuse or carrying a grudge that will improve morale.

The people most likely to hurt us are those closest to us, says the Chaplain of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, Katherine M. Piderman,

Ph.D. When I saw her essay, I set it aside to share with all of you.

She says the people who hurt us can be our partners, friends, siblings 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. Even minor offenses can fester.

When we experience hurt or harm from someone's actions or words, whether this is intended or not, we 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 we don't deal with them quickly, they can grow bigger and more powerful. They may even begin to crowd out positive feelings.

Grudges begin with resentment. Hurtful events that are replayed many times, can lead to vengeance and hostility. Before long people get swallowed up by their own bitterness or sense of injustice. It's very hard to let go of grudges at this point and instead you may remain resentful and unforgiving.

A BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE

America in the 21st century was not the first to discover the need to find ways to get along with people who have hurt us.

- **Matthew 18.21:** Then Peter came and said to him, ‘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.’
- **Matthew 26.28:** Jesus poured the wine and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
- **Mark 1.4:** John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- **Ephesians 1.7:** In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace
- **Hebrews 10.18:** Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

COMMITMENT TO THE PROCESS

Dr. Katherine M. Piderman, in her essay, “Forgiveness: How to let go of grudges and bitterness,” describes forgiveness as an act that is a “commitment to a process of change.” Her essay is a series of questions and answers about Biblical forgiveness in a modern setting.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

There's no one definition of forgiveness. But in general, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentments and thoughts of revenge. Forgiveness is the act of untying yourself from thoughts and feelings that bind you to the offense committed against you. This can reduce the power these feelings otherwise have over you, so that you can live a freer and happier life in the present. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

DOESN'T FORGIVING SOMEONE MEAN THAT YOU'RE FORGETTING OR CONDONING WHAT HAPPENED?

Absolutely not! Forgiving isn't the same as forgetting what happened to you. The act that hurt or offended you may always remain a part of your life. But forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it

doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF FORGIVING SOMEONE?

Researchers have recently become interested in studying the effects of being unforgiving and being forgiving. Evidence is mounting that holding on to grudges and bitterness results in long-term health problems. Forgiveness, on the other hand, offers numerous benefits, including:

- Lower blood pressure
- Stress reduction
- Less hostility
- Lower heart rate
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Fewer depression symptoms
- Fewer symptoms of anxiety
- Chronic pain reduction
- Improving friendships
- Providing greater religious or spiritual well-being

HOW DO I KNOW IT'S TIME TO TRY TO EMBRACE FORGIVENESS?

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 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.

HOW DO I REACH A STATE OF FORGIVENESS?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. It can be difficult and it can take time. Everyone moves toward forgiveness a little differently.

One step is to recognize the value of forgiveness and its importance in our lives at a given time.

Another is to reflect on the facts of the situation, how we've reacted, and how this combination has affected our lives, our health and our well-being.

Then, as we are ready, we can actively choose to forgive the one who has offended us.

In this way, we move away from our role as a victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in our lives.

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.

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.

WHAT IF I'M THE ONE WHO NEEDS FORGIVENESS?

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 cause 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 spiritual leader, mental health provider 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.

UNLOCKING CHRISTIAN VALUES

These keys to forgiveness unlock Christian values that are at the heart of Christ's message.

- They will make your body healthier.
- They will mend your spirit.
- They will help you discover your own relationship with Jesus Christ in a profound way.

MORE MULLIGANS

I'm nervous that someone will come up to me after worship and say, John, I forgive you. And I'll have an anxious moment as I think, "What did I do now?" Or "Yikes, I had forgotten all about that."

So what would be more helpful to me than replaying the sordid incident yet another time, would be a simple thumbs up, a spiritual thumbs up, a mulligan, an oops.

One of my fellow golfers told me something one time. No one wants to hear about the shots you missed on the last hole you played. In fact, it's not something that I like to talk about either. But what I am really hoping inside is that they will want me to play golf with them again. That I have not messed up so badly that the game is off, and that the first 18 holes have removed the opportunity for the 19th hole.

That's the forgiveness I need: that the missed shot did not spoil a nice walk in the sunshine with people that are pleasant to be with.

Four years ago I gave out mulligan cards to anyone who wanted them. I had ten packs, and I have to tell you they went quickly. Forgiveness cards and the game is life.

I think that this essay by the Mayo Chaplain is much more profound than my mulligan cards. But the conclusion has to be the same, "Everyone needs a mulligan now and then." And if you ever find yourself in that position, you will do better to give the mulligans than to continue the beatings in hopes that the morale will improve.

THAT TAKES US BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED.

Peter came to Jesus and said, "Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

And Jesus said, "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times."

Other commentators say that Jesus said seventy times seven which is 490 forgivenesses. The point is that it should be a huge number.

That means you might have to be ready to give one mulligan for every stroke on the golf course.

Do that and you will really understand what the game is all about.



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