

Fear Of Forgiving

If we long to receive mercy, why is it so painful to give it?

- Allen C. Guelzo

If one of the sweetest words in the Bible is *forgiveness*, why do many people find it so bitter?

The answer is plain, brief, and painful: The kind of forgiveness we love to sing about is not the only forgiveness that matters. We are called to another forgiveness that often tastes bitter, the kind that flows from us to other people.

God forgives us: but then he obliges us to forgive others.

When forgiveness is hard work

Not only are we told to forgive anyone who has provoked us; we also learn we cannot enjoy forgiveness ourselves if we are not exercising it toward others.

But consider a second reason why we should forgive: *When we refuse to do so, we in effect try to keep God from forgiving someone else. When we withhold forgiveness, we are really saying that the person who has offended us is no proper object of God's forgiveness. After all, if that person is not worthy of our forgiveness, how could he or she possibly merit God's forgiveness?*

Or worse, we say (in effect) that the other person is no person at all, but subhuman. Persons can be forgiven; but if the object of our hatred or mistrust is not worth the trouble of forgiveness, then what-else can that mean but that they are not persons? In that case, we not only "kill" another person, we kill a little bit of ourselves, too. By withholding forgiveness, we deprive another person of what could lead to wholeness and healing and we deprive ourselves of the inner healing and wholeness that could come from being part of that renewal.

And yet, despite all these seemingly obvious reasons why people need to be forgivers, the secret truth for many people is that we find it infinitely easier to be forgiven by God than to forgive others. The reasons for that cold reluctance are as varied as people themselves. There are people who were hurt years ago by the breakup of their parents' marriages, and hurt is buried so deep, or festers so close to the surface, that they see no way to forgive. There are people who have been wronged on the job or who have been gossiped about in the community. And all of them together think, "I cannot, just cannot find it in me to forgive them."

We struggle to extend forgiveness because the wrongs done to us by others hurt so much. At the same time, we are not completely sure what forgiveness really is or what it might involve. It is not that we cannot forgive someone, but that we are afraid of what it might cost.

Throwing away resentment

What, exactly, does God expect us to do in response to his words to forgive if we have anything against anyone?

Three Greek Words are usually translated as forgive. One speaks about having an attitude of mercy or love being tender hearted and forgiving one another. Another word describes the cancellation of an obligation (forgive and you will be forgiven). The most common word for forgiveness literally

means to release, to hurl away, to free yourself from something. It is this aspect of forgiveness that involves putting aside one's selfish will in order to be free of the entrapments or cancerous effects of unforgiveness.

To forgive means to willingly throw away our resentment at being wrong. This entails not just containing or restraining our resentment, but letting go of it entirely so we can be truly free of its influence.

Resentment is a feeling of displeasure and indignation from a sense of being injured or offended.

Indignant is a feeling or expressing of anger or scorn especially at unjust, mean, or ungrateful action or treatment.

This approach, however, may strike us as phony and sanctimonious, as if we are expected to greet every piece of rottenness dished out to us with a saintly smile and an understanding, "There, there, you didn't mean that, did you?" Because we fear that this is exactly what forgiveness means, we find it unpalatable. We are willing enough to suffer for our well being or inner peace but there is something in us that does not want merely to be exploited, even for righteousness' sake.

Neither pardon nor excuse

Fortunately, forgiveness means more than just rolling over and playing dead. There are a few things that forgiveness is not, and these may balance the picture. *Forgiveness does not mean pardon.* Forgiveness is personal: it refers to the impact an offense has on you and your need to release the resentment you feel. Pardon is legal rather than personal, concerned only with the legal status of the offense, not the relationship between offender and victim. And pardon unlike forgiveness, means letting someone off the moral hook and releasing them from punishment they deserve.

It is possible to have pardon without forgiveness—a murderer can be pardoned by the governor, but that does not mean the victim's family has forgiven him. And there can be forgiveness without pardon. In 1986, Michael Saward, a well-known city resident, answered the door of his London house. The three men who stood in his doorway pounded Saward over the head with a cricket bat, fracturing his skull. Then they broke into his house, raped Saward's daughter and beat up her boyfriend. The three were quickly arrested, and in a television interview shortly afterward, a badly battered Saward touched the British nation by publicly forgiving his assailant. But when the men were sentenced to prison terms of 3-5 years, Saward frankly criticized the sentences as too lenient. Saward had forgiven them, but that did not mean he wanted them automatically pardoned for their crime.

A second thing forgiveness does not mean is excuse. When we excuse someone, we suggest that if we could only understand how a person's actions were shaped or motivated by environment or genetic makeup, we would see that he or she had no alternative. And it is true that understanding someone's difficulties or shortcomings can help us forgive. *But understanding is not the same as forgiving, because all the difficulties and shortcomings in the world do not negate the fact that fully conscious offenders remain responsible for what they do.* To suggest otherwise we cannot be responsible for our obedience, either.

Forgiveness cannot be watered down to mere "understanding". People cannot be trivialized into machines, and forgiveness cannot be civilized into excuse. C. S. Lewis wrote,

There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says: "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology. I will never hold it against you and everything between us will be exactly as it was before." But excusing says: "I see that you couldn't help it, or didn't mean it. You weren't really to blame." If one was not really to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites.

If this is true, we need not be afraid that in practicing forgiveness we are somehow tolerating wrong or condoning evil. Forgiveness does not mean "ceasing to blame" but rather, "letting go of resentment" Lewis once again, says it all:

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the [offense], the [offense] that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it that in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.

Practicing forgiveness

Once we understand what forgiveness is, how do we put it into practice? Many of us have trouble forgiving others because we fail to understand what forgiveness means, or because we confuse forgiveness with something it is not. But for others, forgiveness is frightening because we misunderstand the process of forgiving, or we fear that practicing forgiveness will hurt more than receiving the original offense.

Ethicist Lewis Smedes identifies four stages in the process of forgiveness:

1. **The first occurs at the point of our hurt.** We have been injured in some way, spiritually, emotionally, or materially, and we feel the injury.
2. **Second, we hate.** The injury we feel boils into an active resentment of the person who committed the injury. And this, too, is a natural response. So we experience resentment or actual hatred.
3. **Third, we heal.** At this point, we finally let go; it is the critical moment of forgiveness. And, unlike hurting and hating, it is anything but natural. To let go of hatred means we need a strength to operate on us that will work entirely in the opposite direction of our hurting and hating.

Perhaps *moment* is the wrong word to use here. The healing of forgiveness can sometimes occur in one immense rush of relief and compassion. But more often it takes much longer. Forgiveness looms as a goal to be worked toward rather than a prize to be grasped; and it is something on which we may repeatedly lose or gain ground. It is possible to achieve a spiritual attitude resembling forgiveness toward someone and wake up the next week with the old hate burning as hotly as ever and the whole work needing to begin all over again. Wisdom may lie less in expecting forgiveness to occur as a spiritual drama and more in spending time in prayer over our hurt, in patiently pushing aside its incessant demand for attention, and in watching it shrink slowly and fitfully into remission.

4. Finally, as we heal, we must then forget. This does not imply some kind of sentimental amnesia. Nor is it really possible simply by the force of will literally to "forgive and forget." Rather, forgetting means we no longer allow our past resentments to be the judge of the trespasser. The way we do that will vary with the trespassers themselves.

We have to be prepared for trespassers who either do not think they need forgiveness or who do not really care whether you or anyone else forgives them for anything. We need to make a distinction here: In the case of someone who shows no desire for our forgiveness, forgiveness means we stop thinking up ways to hurt them. But then there are cases where our act of forgetting does become a catalyst for change and repentance in the other person. By our unnatural act of letting go and not seeking personal revenge, we may surprise an offender into another unnatural act: reflecting on their offenses.

In that case, when someone seeks forgiveness and confesses his or her shame to us, forgetting must take the form of trust, because trust is the most compelling evidence of forgiveness. Trust is exactly the evidence that God shows us concerning our own experience of forgiveness.

Reducing forgiveness to a prescription runs the risk of making it sound easy, of course. It is not: the power to forgive must ultimately come from God. But at the same time, it must be pursued.

If we want to know what the forgiveness of our offenses really means and what it really cost, then we will know those things only as we forgive. And only then will we begin to sample the full sweetness of the word forgiveness.