

FORGIVENESS

What forgiveness is not

- Forgetting: deep hurts can rarely be wiped out of one's awareness.
- Reconciliation: reconciliation takes two people, but an injured party can forgive an offender without reconciliation.
- Condoning: forgiveness does not excuse bad or hurtful behavior.
- Dismissing: forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.
- Pardoning. a pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of an action, such as a penalty. Forgiveness is a personal transaction that releases the one offended from the offense.

Adapted from Robert D. Enright, in Niki Denison, "To Live & Forget," *On Wisconsin* (Nov.-Dec. 1992).

The process of forgiveness

1. Don't deny feelings of hurt, anger, or shame. Rather, acknowledge these feelings and commit yourself to doing something about them.
2. Don't just focus on the person who has harmed you, but identify the specific offensive behavior.
3. Make a conscious decision not to seek revenge or nurse a grudge and decide instead to forgive. This conversion of the heart is a critical stage toward forgiveness.
4. Formulate a rationale for forgiving. For example: "By forgiving I can experience inner healing and move on with my life."
5. Think differently about the offender. Try to see things from the offender's perspective.
6. Accept the pain you've experienced without passing it off to others, including the offender.
7. Choose to extend goodwill and mercy toward the other; wish for the well-being of that person.

8. Think about how it feels to be released from a burden or grudge. Be open to emotional relief. Seek meaning in the suffering you experienced.
9. Realize the paradox of forgiveness: as you let go and forgive the offender, you are experiencing release and healing.

Adapted from Robert D. Enright, in Scott Heller, "Emerging Field of Forgiveness Studies Explores How We Let Go of Grudges," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 17, 1998).

Degrees of forgiveness

The ability to forgive depends on other variables: the nature and severity of the offense, and the nature or type of relationship between the offender and the offended one. When trust is shattered between persons where there is a significant relationship (between spouses, parents and children, or pastors and parishioners), forgiveness can be very difficult to attain. Consequently, one forgiveness researcher (Michelle Nelson) talks about degrees or different types of forgiveness:

DETACHED FORGIVENESS There is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, but no reconciliation has taken place.

LIMITED FORGIVENESS There is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, and partial relationship is restored with the offender and a decrease in the emotional investment in the relationship.

FULL FORGIVENESS There is a total cessation of negative feelings toward the offender, and the relationship is restored and grows.

Adapted from Beverly Flanigan, in *Exploring Forgiveness*. International Forgiveness Institute: www.inti-forgive-inst.org Christianity Today January 10, 2000

The items above from Christianity Today were from an article that looked at Forgiveness in current academic studies. It had limited discussion

of Christian teaching. The authors were surprised to find nothing in Psychology on forgiveness before they began in the early 1980s and almost nothing on person to person forgiveness in theology. They experienced much hostility from Christian Theologians to the idea of person to person forgiveness.

We need to understand forgiveness is normal human behavior. Even non-believers understand the idea of forgiveness, practice it on the human level and thus are able to understand the message of Divine forgiveness through the cross of Christ. It is good for us to forgive, but accepting forgiveness changes us. The power of the Spirit of God in Christ transforms us to be the redeemed of the Lord God.

It is sad that in the church, we so focus on Divine forgiveness that we ignore the command of Jesus to forgive as we have been forgiven. It is no wonder the world often does not see Christians as forgiving people. Indeed, we must go further, work for reconciliation in our personal relationships, in the Church and in our society. Leaving to Jesus, what He has given to us as our responsibility, just adds to our condemnation.

Mt 6:14f For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

There is much said about forgiveness that is only partially true because it does not include Repentance, Confession, Amendment of Life, Reconciliation. That is why some say they cannot forgive. They are confused about what forgiveness really is. They might be thinking that forgiveness means in some way giving approval for the people who did evil to them.

We tend to forget what we have done. Not just when we were under the influence either. We twist our memory to justify, invent good reasons for whatever happened. You do not think so? You have known others who do. Did the men who flew into the World Trade Center think they were doing something bad?

Pray that God would give you His Spirit to see yourself as you really are. Listen to what others have said about you. Understand their version may be as correct as yours.

Jesus gave Salvation to all, yet He said many will be in Hell. They will not accept the gift. They reject forgiveness. We only receive forgiveness when we admit we need it.

You can forgive someone but that does not make his problem disappear. A man who stole \$500 does not get to keep the money because he is forgiven. He pays it back or remains a thief deserving punishment. Forgiven people do not have God's approval to keep sinning.

Jesus died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. 2 Cor. 5:15 God invites us to live as perfect Holy Saints. Those who want to live their own way, will have to go somewhere else.

"God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Rom 5:8 He forgave us, before we ask for forgiveness. We are to forgive the same way. Forgive before those who hurt us, apologize! Perhaps forgiveness will lead them to repentance and reconciliation. Rom 12:19f Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, . . . for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord. Therefore if thine ene-

my hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. See also Leviticus 19:18.

Forgiveness lets the victim lay his burden down, no matter if the one who did the wrong benefits. To accept forgiveness, is to admit we are not right, obligates us to change our ways and appreciate the gift we have been given. Everyone can improve their actions, if they want. It says something when they won't try. People can change their outward behavior to some extent, by human effort, even if they are not saved, Christians.

We are all fundamentally flawed - sinful. Only the power of God, the Spirit of Christ, living within us gives us new life, a new birth. God's Spirit, within, is at war with our old nature. Jesus' followers experience inner conflict as they are transformed.

God transforms people into saints but He does not force them. He invites them to come, seek, ask. He may allow pain when that might lead someone to come to Him. We have the freedom to walk away from God, reject His will, refuse to serve Him and suffer the consequences.

He invites us to live now and forever in His love, with deep joy. That cannot be done without will and action on our part. We have to want that and decide to act His Way. It takes effort on our part. He promises to give His power, wisdom and courage to all who pray to Him. He gives us the the honor of being participants with Him in the victory over sin, death and Satan. Soldiers of the Cross. By His power and grace co-laborers who have earned trophies to present to Him.

In the Name of Jesus

Forgiveness

IS NOT

Repentance

Confession

Absolution

Reconciliation

Amendment

Of Life

To God alone be Glory

Rev. Stephen H. Funck
written when Chaplain at
Baltimore City Detention Center

If you would like to learn more about this ministry or offer support, contact. signdovesf@mac.com

Jesus taught we will be forgiven by God as we forgive others. Those who do not forgive, will not be forgiven. We are quick to feel hurt by others and slow, blind to the harm we cause.