



Learning the Art of Forgiving

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Abstract: Resentment is one of the worst enemies for a happy and healthy life because it leads to continuous stress and causes hypertension. The third reason that blocks forgiveness is depression. The wound was deeply buried but is believed to have passed. Revenge, resentment and depression are symptoms of the absence of forgiveness. The author argues in this article that once we are healed of our resentment through forgiveness, we are better prepared to forgive those who harmed us. Forgiveness is more a theological virtue than a moral virtue. This means that God inspires us to forgive, while our willingness to enter into the dynamic of forgiveness plays an important role in the early stages.

Keywords: Resentment, Forgiveness, Art of forgiving, Healing, Suffering

According to some psychologists, the psychiatric ward will be twice less crowded if only people knew that they are forgiven. Forgiving and being forgiven are necessary for mental health. However, there are people who refuse to forgive others for many different reasons.

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The first reason for not being able to forgive others is revenge. Revenge is natural because it comes from an instinct of justice. But the danger of revenge is the spiral of violence it engenders. We wonder why some countries have been fighting for centuries. The sense of revenge is collectively passed on from one generation to another. The second reason that makes forgiveness difficult to practice is the sense of grudge and resentment that people hold on in their hearts for years. This is also a kind of revenge, not aggressive but passive. Resentment is one of the worst enemies for a happy and healthy life because it leads to continuous stress and causes hypertension. The third reason that blocks forgiveness is depression. The wound was deeply buried but is believed to have passed. Revenge, resentment and depression are symptoms of the absence of forgiveness.

Dispelling Misconceptions about Forgiveness

Before we can understand forgiveness, it is important to dispel some myths about forgiveness. In other words, we need to first understand what forgiveness is not. Unfortunately, there are many misleading ideas about forgiveness that are more harmful than helpful in practising the virtue of forgiveness. First of all, forgiveness is not about forgetting the pain succumbed to. Psychologists caution us that we do not forget the harm done to us by others. We merely bury them in our subconscious and when they resurfaces to consciousness, they bring back a bitter memory that ends up in resentment. Without the healing of emotions, forgiveness is not possible.

Secondly, forgiveness is not merely a heroic act of our will that can bridle our emotions. In fact, forgiveness involves all our faculties. It becomes important not to rush to forgive as we need time for all our faculties to reckon with the harm done to us by others. Anger is a healthy emotion that God has given us to be able to defend our integrity. It is not a sin to feel angry and, in fact, feeling angry is part of the forgiveness process. During this process, we can pass

over from destructive revenge to a sense of serenity and emotional healing. Forgiveness is not complete as long as we have not experienced inner peace and emotional healing. Forgiveness involves the element of healing (McKenry & Bruun, 2019).

Thirdly, forgiveness does not imply that we do not hold the offender accountable for his or her actions. If someone hurts us involuntarily, we can excuse that person even if the person did not apologize. On the contrary, if the person has harmed us voluntarily, his or her wrongdoing is not excusable even though we might play it down by finding mitigating circumstances. Forgiveness is the ability to accept that the other person has wronged us and enable the offender to realize this without any pretention. God appears to Moses as one who is merciful and forgiving, but he holds the people who wrong him accountable (Exodus 34: 5-7).

Fourthly, forgiveness does not mean reconciliation. Forgiveness is needed when there is a rupture in relationship. But what establishes and maintains a relationship is not forgiveness but mutual trust. If trust is betrayed, a simple decision of the will would not suffice because trust must be earned and after the relationship breakdown it has to be rebuilt. Two friends who are deeply hurt cannot decide that everything will continue as before, with a snap of a finger. Therefore, reconciliation is not synonymous to forgiveness. It involves important questions such as whether we want to continue this relationship and even deepen it. Hence, reconciliation is the result of forgiveness. We cannot achieve reconciliation until there is the experience of forgiveness with the recognition of the suffering undergone.

Fifthly, forgiveness cannot be forced upon. Forgiveness is an act of love. The person who forgives must have the freedom of choice. Forcing someone to forgive amounts to saying, "I want you to love me despite the dirty tricks that I have played on you". When Christ asks us to forgive, it is an invitation to follow him and his example of love. When Jesus invites us to pray in his words, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" he is telling

us to ask the heavenly father to teach us to forgive as he does. Many of us, who pray this prayer taught by Jesus, have the impression that if we forgive our wrongdoers, God will forgive us, while the opposite is true. It rather means, “forgive us so that we have the strength to forgive others”. The love of God comes first. Anyone who has experienced God’s forgiveness will be able to forgive others.

Finally, forgiveness is not an abdication of our rights. It does not remove either the consequences of an unfortunate act or an insulting word. Forgiving a murderer does not bring back the victim to life. At the same time, forgiveness is not an act of justice. It is a journey of love for the rehabilitation of the offender. It aims at transforming the offender. Forgiveness enables the offerer to become aware of his or her misconduct and to change his or her attitudes and behaviour. But, at the same time, forgiveness has no power over the other, rather it has power over us, the power to heal us and free us.

Steps Involved in Forgiveness

Here are five steps that describe the process involved in true forgiveness. Though all of us are capable of forgiveness, a believer recognizes two elements in forgiveness: God’s gift and human effort. Regardless of human efforts, at certain times we recognize that forgiveness first comes from God. This is especially true for deep and serious injuries. God is always ready to forgive us and give us his unconditional love. The difficulty does not come from God, but it comes from us, from our inability to be loved. How can we open our hearts to receive God’s forgiveness?

Taking the Right Decision

Forgiveness does not happen naturally. We must consciously decide not to take the road of revenge, yet to find a way out of a situation of abuse, injury and betrayal. It is also important to try and stop the offense. Forgiveness is difficult and it becomes even more difficult while someone continues to offend us. We must decide to talk to this person asking him or her to stop hurting us. Forgiveness takes

courage. Often, some hide their lack of courage behind the beautiful facade of a freely given forgiveness. But the truth is that most people cannot really forgive under the conditions of a continuous offense. They stifle their feelings because it is most comfortable.

Recognising the Harm

Sometimes, when we have suffered injustice and betrayal, we tend to apologize in an effort to minimize the fault. In some cases, the offended people feel guilty, as is often the case with victims of sexual abuse. These are defence mechanisms that prevent us from getting in touch with our anger, inner wound and suffering. These defence mechanisms make all sorts of manoeuvres to avoid contact with our emotions. Therefore, we tend to forgive our offenders too quickly to avoid the painful process of healing our emotions. Many people are too quick to forgive their offenders quickly without observing what is happening within themselves. But if there is no purging of different emotions (grief, sadness, anger, frustration), healing does not take place.

Recognizing that we have been injured also means identifying what we have lost. It is not a question of playing the victim and whining about ourselves in general. It is important to know exactly what was lost. In all forgiveness, there is a “mourning” in relation to the expectations that we had vis-à-vis the other and the betrayal experienced. If we can then identify what has been violated, the healing process is easy as our aggressiveness begins to melt.

Talking to Others about Suffering

We must be able to do something in order to be healed. There are many possible approaches, like writing a journal and talking to someone we can trust. It is not done with an intention of maligning others or to work out a master plan for revenge. We need to have already made a conscious decision to rule out revenge. Talking about our suffering helps us to describe the facts without attributing motives. It is also important that we choose the right person to talk about our suffering, who does not sit on judgement or spread false

news (Haber, 1991). Solitude is not an option as it brings out from us evil tendencies that prevent us from having a reasonable understanding of the process of forgiveness. When we come across people who silently suffer, without being able to talk about their suffering, we need to enable them patiently and give a compassionate attentive listening to their grievances.

Receiving Healing

Forgiveness is not possible if our inner self is not healed. Most of the time talking to the right person allows healing to take place gradually. We then develop within us an inner restorative capacity. For a believer, this is where God becomes significant. A friend, counsellor, spiritual director or psychotherapist can help us move towards healing but they cannot offer us healing. When a wound is too deep to heal, the inner self has no strength on its own to repair the damage. We need the power of God to get healed. For a believer, God is the source of our healing. Some studies on mental health have shown that believers show better mental health than non-believers when faced with serious crises in life.

Conclusion: Openness to Forgiveness

Once we are healed, we are better prepared to forgive those who harmed us. Forgiveness is more a theological virtue than a moral virtue. This means that God inspires us to forgive, while our willingness to enter into the dynamic of forgiveness plays an important role in the early stages. In the final stage, we need to be hospitable enough to receive God's love. Anyone who is open to God's love is inspired by it to forgive others. The grace of God comes upon all people who open their hearts to God's love. In this sense, our ability to forgive comes from God's grace and therefore, God is the agent of forgiveness. The dynamic force behind forgiveness is God's unconditional love of which we are beneficiaries. If we do not feel loved, then it is impossible for us to forgive. When we enter the world of forgiveness, we enter a world of abundance and generosity, and perhaps less rationality.

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