



Moving Toward Forgiveness

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Moving Toward Forgiveness: Three Gatherings for Reflection

Gathering 1: The 'Case' for Forgiveness

- What makes it important to discuss?
- Psychological perspective
- Spiritual Guidance

Gathering 2: Forgiving others

- Reflecting on a process of forgiving
- Accounts and recollections of others

Gathering 3: Seeking forgiveness; barriers to forgiving

- How, when, 'should' we seek forgiveness?
- Identifying possible barriers to forgiving and seeking forgiveness
- Are some things unforgiveable?

Summary from Gathering 1

Definitions of forgiveness include:

- Forgiveness is making peace with the word 'NO;'
- Forgiveness is prosocial change in the motivations to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor with empathy and perspective-taking for the other;
- Forgiveness is giving up hope for a different past.

Forgiveness is Not:

- Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor does it mean condoning or excusing hurts or offenses

Forgiveness IS:

- Forgiveness is being resilient when things don't go the way we want them to;
- Forgiveness means that we are continually willing to forgive the other person for not fulfilling all of our needs; for not being God;
- Forgiveness is the process of reducing or eliminating resentment and motivations toward revenge.

Receiving God's Forgiveness

- Forgiving others may begin with an acute awareness of God's forgiveness of our transgressions.

- Psalm 32: 1-5

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

A Christian Process for Seeking Forgiveness

Sometimes we find it especially difficult to forgive ourselves.

- A Christian process for seeking forgiveness for our transgressions:
 - **Awareness of the wrong done;**
 - Until we have consciousness of behavior that has/may have caused pain for another we cannot begin a process of forgiving ourselves;
 - **Knowledge of/regret for the pain and harm caused to others;**
 - Goes along with above; once we have knowledge of, we must experience/acknowledge to ourselves a feeling of regret

A Christian Process for Seeking Forgiveness


Confession and a request to be forgiven and the relationship restored

- Confession is not just saying: “God, I messed up.” It involves understanding why we mess up; what we were striving for or seeking to avoid.
- Prior to confession comes a season of seeking to understand these things. Following this discernment, we may offer our confession with a deeper understanding of ourselves as well as of the pain our behavior caused another.

Repentance=Change

- Repentance is an effort to grow into the life God offers to us.
- For example, if our harmful behavior has been enduring impatience, we dedicate ourselves to growing in patience; we commit ourselves to change. Our growth is an indication of the Spirit’s work in us, and an indirect confirmation that God has forgiven us. Our growth is also an expression of ‘repair,’ which is another component of taking responsibility for hurting another.

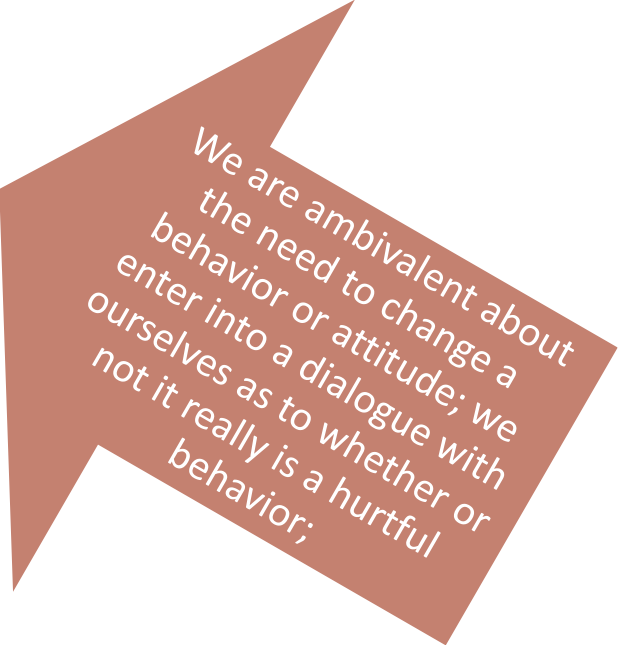
Obstacles to Accepting Forgiveness



We lack knowledge of the depth of pain we have caused another;



We hold a mistaken/false expectation that we must be perfect to receive God's forgiveness or the forgiveness of another.



We are ambivalent about the need to change a behavior or attitude; we enter into a dialogue with ourselves as to whether or not it really is a hurtful behavior;

Remembering God's Forgiveness

- One option for us in seeking forgiveness for ourselves is to focus NOT on what we have done, but on what God has forgiven!
- Psalm 103:8-12

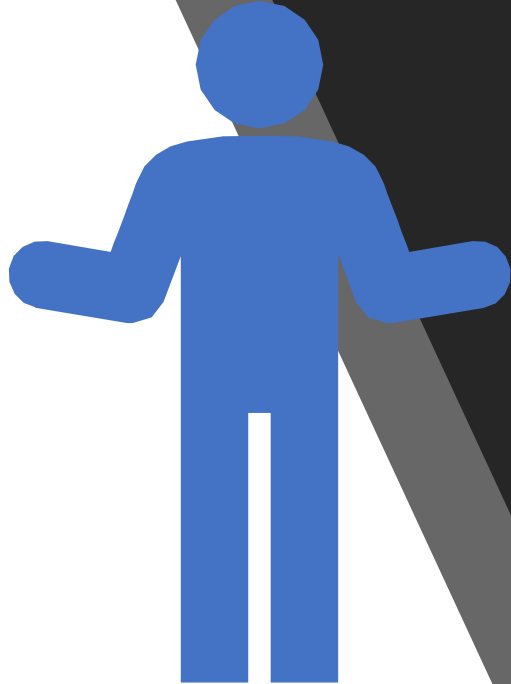
The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. E does not deal with us according to our sins,,, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.



- **Accepting forgiveness from God and others is a key to our being able to forgive others!**

Forgiving Others

The Process of Forgiving Others



- Forgiveness is not an immediate act, but the outcome of a long and often painful psychological and spiritual work. The more serious the wrong suffered (defined by the sufferer) the longer it will take to forgive.
- The **decision** to forgive triggers a difficult inner process entailing the overcoming of negative feelings and the adoption of a positive attitude towards the person who hurt us (Fincham, 2000).
- Forgiveness is an effort, a choice that necessarily involves an act of will and at the same time a creative act, a spiral through which one reaches one's memories, one's psychological and relational sources.

The Process of Forgiving Others

- To forgive it is necessary to develop a partial understanding of the motives of the person who hurt us, but also of ourselves, that is, of the aspects and the characteristics of one's own wound and the relationship with the person who wounded us.
- Very often after having granted forgiveness, there remains some anger; one cannot cancel the past but only heal the suffering that it caused.
- Forgiveness cures the hatred for the person that caused the situation, but does not change the facts and ones not eliminate the consequences. **It is possible to feel anger without hatred.**
- One fundamental requisite for a free forgiveness is the respect for the person we forgive; this means allowing the person forgiven to do what he likes with our forgiveness, otherwise forgiveness becomes an attempt to control the other person, a mere power game in name, for example, of a presumed moral superiority. Forgiveness is sincere only if it has such respect for others that it allows them to take responsibility for what they intended to do with it.

Motivation to Forgive

- The motivation to forgive can be affected by several variables (related to the offended):
 - Stage of cognitive development
 - Cultural background
 - Social group he/she belongs to (family, friends, society)
 - Religious upbringing
 - The time that has passed since the offence
 - The seriousness of the offence

Suggested Steps in Moving toward Forgiving

Describe what the injury was and what made it hurt as it did?

Example: A man developed a friendship with another man at his workplace; he shared that he had been hospitalized for 3 mos. to treat bi-polar disorder. The man was fired by the CEO the following week. The friend had betrayed him by telling his boss about the hospitalization. The injury was being fired; the hurt was having his trust betrayed

What did you learn as a result of the situation?

It is helpful to reflect on the situation to identify anything helpful that may prevent a situation going forward? Sometimes there is nothing. In this situation, the learning may be that important information may not be safe to disclose in a newer friendship.

What is the cost of not forgiving?

For all of us, anger and resentment can consume our thoughts and our energy resulting in less time and less closeness with family and other friends.

Suggested Steps in Moving toward Forgiving

Expand the context of the injury.

We can ask God to help us release our desire for revenge. We can make a decision to work towards letting go of this resentment. We may not be ready to forgive but we can take steps toward that, e.g. looking for the humanity in the other person...what are their life experiences, what are their redeeming qualities, etc., None of these things are excuses, but they help to move us toward forgiving by seeing the person beyond their offense.

Sometimes seeking justice is important; confronting the other for the actions that caused the wound may be essential; victim's statements in court, the #MeToo movement, telling the story may all be essential to healing and leading to forgiveness.

Cancel the Debt

In time and with God's help, we are able to cancel the debt we feel the other person owes to us; perhaps this occurs when we realize that we need and want to be forgiven for something we have done. Perhaps it comes when our lives are in a better place; perhaps it comes when we grow weary of carrying the weight and expending the energy to carry the memory.

The Outcome

It is possible that our forgiveness does not affect the person we forgive; when we act in faith and work to forgive someone, we share in God's nature and God's work. Forgiving others releases a person for the ongoing costs of non-forgiveness. By forgiving, friendships have been restored, marriages worth saving have been saved, and sometimes, lives are changed in the process of forgiving.

Pebbles, Stones and Boulders: Thinking about Forgiving

- A metaphor used by author Adam Hamilton, to describe the different 'sizes' or variable 'impact' of hurts received from others.
- **Pebbles** represent irritations, disappointments and perceived slights of attention or recognition.
 - Happen often enough that if we held onto all these we might soon be unable to function or have sustaining relationships,
- **Dealing with Pebbles: RAP**
 - R: Remember** your own **shortcomings** and the small 'sins' you regularly commit. Hamilton suggests that it's difficult to stay angry with someone else when you're conscious of your own humanity.
 - A: Assume** the best of the other person from whom you received the 'pebble.' A short-tempered cashier may have had one too many impatient to deal with!
 - P: Pray** for the other person. (Paul called us not to return evil for evil, but to return a blessing).

Stones: Represent Medium Size Wounds

'Stones' represent more serious offenses and often create a wall between the offender and the other

What is the goal: 'If you know, you go (to the person).


- Stand up for yourself (we feel shame when we've been treated badly and don't stand up for ourselves);
- Tear down the wall that has risen between you and the other;
- Plan to not repeat what happened!

'I' messages:

- "I was hurt when you said....."
- "I was embarrassed when you made fun of my error in public."
- Is there a larger perspective that helps you understand why the wound happened.

Active listening:

- Offer a non-anxious presence (to the extent possible)
- Does the person offer a defense, an excuse, an apology?
- Is there a larger perspective that helps you understand why the wound happened?



Forgiveness is easier when the person says: “I understand how I hurt you. I’m very sorry. I will try my best to not do that again.”

However, all of us encounter times when the other person doesn’t understand, believes we’re too sensitive, and may well repeat the offense.

Boulders: Represent Deep Wounds

- Adam Hamilton: “...there are some wounds inflicted by others that are so deep they cannot be forgiven quickly. The impact of these wounds can be devastating, and letting go of them takes time, remarkable grace, and the help of others.”
- In *The Forgiveness Project*, Marina Cantacuzino offers collected stories of forgiveness that offer these insights about deep wounds and forgiveness:

- **There are different pathways to forgiveness for deep wounds:**
 - People found different ways of arriving at a place of heart and mind to forgive others for serious wounds; sometimes it was in active search and other times it seemingly 'just came to them.
- **Forgiveness can come through making meaning of some deep wound:**
 - Some realized that it was the wounds that the offender had previously suffered that led them to themselves wound others;
 - Some became advocates in response to the wounds they suffered; several important social justice movements have resulted from the wounded becoming advocates to prevent similar devastating wounds for others (e.g., MADD; universal missing persons announcements???)
- **Blessing often accompanies forgiveness of deep wounds:**
 - Eva Kor is from Poland; she and her twin sister were prisoners in Auschwitz where the Nazi doctor, Josef Mengele used them for medical experiments. Kor writes, "at first I was adamant that I could never forgive Dr. Mengele, but then I realized I had the power now...the power to forgive. It was my right to use it. No one could take it away. And, the day I forgave the Nazis, privately I forgave my parents whom I hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz."

When we cannot forgive:

- Some report in the Forgiveness Project that they cannot forgive.
- There may be wounds so deep and so life-taking that the best we can do is pray that, one day, God will help us to forgive. This may be a life-long process and may be helped by a compassionate and wise therapist.
- A Story of Profound Injury.
- [A Journey of Forgiveness- Ellen Rutledge - TEDxIronwoodStatePrison](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17eR5Mw52og>

Key Factors in Our Ability to Forgive

- Some studies have shown that **empathy** is one of the most influential variables in determinants the capacity to forgive others.
- It is facilitated by the level of intimacy **before the offence** and by the apologies offered by the offender.
- Experiencing a satisfying relationship that is committed and close enables those guilty of offending to be more willing to show their displeasure for what they have done and to ask for forgiveness, also, makes it more likely that the victims will want to put themselves in the others' shoes and forgive them.

Key Factors in Our Ability to Forgive

- A second important result concerns **rumination**, or the intrusive thoughts, images and feelings aroused by the offence received.
- Those who experience high levels of rumination often prove to have great difficulty eliminating intrusive thoughts and feelings from their minds and are more likely to adopt aggressive and vindictive behavior toward the person responsible for the offence.
- Rumination seems to have an important role in perpetuating the difficulties and psychological problems following an offence and in preventing the adoption of a conciliatory attitude

Reflecting on Pebbles, Stones and Boulders....

- For you, is forgiveness:
 - A human necessity?
 - A spiritual requirement ('forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors')?
 - A practical means of releasing uncomfortable feelings, including guilt?
- What role does God's forgiveness of you have in your efforts to forgive?
- Is forgiveness possible without consequences?
- What role does confronting the offender have in your understanding of forgiveness?
- Thinking of a time you forgave someone for a medium size 'stone' wound, what enabled you to forgive?

Reflecting on Pebbles, Stones and Boulders....

- While boulders have an unmistakable permanence about them, boulder-size wounds have a way of appearing and reappearing even after you've worked and prayed to forgive the person.
 - Are some wounds so deep that it is beyond us to forgive?
 - Is it possible that, sometimes, we forgive, in steps stages levels?

Moving Toward Forgiveness: Gathering 3

- At our final session next week we will address the process of seeking forgiveness from others, and at the barriers to forgiveness. We'll close with a powerful Ted Talk offered by a woman who describes her path to forgiving a deep wound.
- We hope you'll join us.