



THE DIFFICULT WORK OF FORGIVING LIFE'S HURTS

In my newly revised and expanded book on *How to Forgive Yourself & Other*, I give three reasons why we should pray and work hard to forgive life's hurts.

Reason #1

- **God's word tells us to do so. e.g. Matt 18:21-22, Mk 11:25**

Reason #2

- **To free our hearts from the destructive power of unforgiveness.**

In this section, I quote an extensive piece from a little book called *The Healing Power of Forgiveness* by Jean Maalouf. He writes:

The benefits of forgiveness have been presented by numerous studies on forgiveness. These studies were conducted in the fields of psychology, medicine, social science, and religion, and they concur in establishing the importance of positive emotions: gratitude, faith, love, forgiveness, hope, caring, and so on. According to these studies, such emotions and virtues have a definite impact on our cardiovascular functioning in particular, and our well-being in general. . .

Indeed, people who practice forgiveness report fewer health problems, feel better psychologically and emotionally, have less stress, and increase the efficient response of their immune system.

On the other hand, it has also been proven that bitterness, resentment, and anger can be a fertile soil for malignant growths. I read a story about a woman with breast cancer who visited a spiritual counselor. This woman was suffering for some time because she had undergone several operations while the cancer was spreading throughout her system. The counselor advised her to spend some time alone every day, to meditate, and to forgive everybody and everything. So she did. Among many different lines she read and meditated on, one particularly drew her attention, when St. Paul recommended to "put on the breastplate of faith and love" (1 Thessalonians 5:8). This line inspired her prayer: Christ is healing me. I put on the breastplate of faith and love and forgiveness and righteousness. I cast all my burdens of injury, hurt, resentment, and bitterness on Christ who is my savior and who sets me free. I am free of every illness. I am healthy. Thank you, God.

For several days, she prayed this way with a heart full of love, hope, and determination. Subsequently, to the astonishment of her doctor, the lump in her breast

disappeared and she was completely healed.

This story is one of many similar stories that can be found in the medical records to prove that forgiveness and love have the power to dissolve gallstones, cancers, tumors, and other similar diseases. What the medical records tell us is that, when we are in a state of unforgiveness, our bodies start to manufacture extra chemicals-like adrenaline, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and cortisone-that build up in the bloodstream. If a situation like this continues for a while unchecked, gastric ulcers and other serious illnesses can result.

Bitter thoughts make bitter cells. Better thoughts make better cells. Forgiving and loving thought create healing cells.

*To choose not to enter into the forgiveness process is to choose to give our offender ongoing control over our emotional, spiritual, and physical life. Does that seem smart? I don't think so. Yet, that is exactly what we are doing when we choose not to enter into the difficult process of forgiveness. Just think about it, our offender may have moved forward with his/her life, but he/she continues to control us and keep us miserable. Refusing to enter into the forgiveness process is a choice to inflict a continuous wound on ourselves. It is like refusing to deal with a cancerous wound in our bodies. In his book *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace*, Wayne Dyer writes: "Resentment is like venom that continues to pour through your system, doing it poisonous damage long after being bitten by a snake. It's not the bite that kills you; it's the venom." Thousands of years ago, Confucius said: "Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass."*

Reason #3

- **When we forgive, we make our world less violent and more loving.**

The media reminds us daily of the hate and animosity that exists in our world. We may even find ourselves saying: Why does it have to be like this? Why can't people settle their differences peacefully? And yet, we ourselves may be guilty of perpetuating hate and animosity in our little piece of the world.

In fact, we are guilty of doing just that as long as we deliberately choose to hold onto grudges and resentments. We are adding more darkness to an already dark world. We may be active participants in keeping a negative atmosphere alive and well in our home, workplace, and church. But when we choose to enter into the forgiveness process we are choosing to overcome the darkness of unforgiveness with love. We become peacemakers whom Jesus called true children of God in his Sermon on the

Mount (see Matthew 5:1-12). So when we choose to enter into the forgiveness process.

- We choose to do what God would have us do.
- We choose to do what is very important for our spiritual, physical and emotional health.
- We choose to make our world a little more peaceful and loving.

Normally, people hurt us or do us wrong because they are immature, spiritually blind, wounded and imperfect like us, not because they are evil and terrible people.

In chapter three of my book, I name 13 truths to remember about the forgiveness process. As I name each one, I invite the reader to ask if he/she believes in the named truths. The above named one is number two on my list. Personally, I think it may be the most important of the thirteen. Remembering the above truth has always been very important for me when I needed to forgive some hurt. On the above truth I add the following comments in my book.

The late popular writer and speaker, Fr. Anthony de Mello, S.J., used to like to say, "People who hurt are asleep. If they were to wake up they would never behave like that." It seems de Mello was only echoing the words of Jesus. When dying on the cross, he said, "Father forgive them, they do not know what they do." (Luke 23:26). We might say: "O yes, they did know the evil thing that they did. Or at least their leaders did." Jesus would disagree with us.

In 2 Samuel 12:1-8 we read the story of how the great King David commit adultery and then arranged for a murder to cover up his sin. David was blind to both of these terrible sins and crimes until the prophet Nathan confronted him. We may wonder how David could be so blind to his sins. As we deal with the imperfections of others and ourselves, we must remember that sometimes very good people are capable of grievous sins or crimes. Also, all of us suffer periodically from spiritual blindness. Sometimes we suffer from having a deep need to believe that the one who hurt us "knew exactly what they were doing and fully intended to harm us." In rare cases this may be true, but usually it is not. Even when it seems to be true, we still have to admit that people act the way they do because they are spiritually asleep. For centuries we as a nation, were spiritually blind and asleep to the sin of racial prejudice.

Reflection Questions: *If presently working through a hurt what do you believe about your offender? Do you think he/she is a horrible, nasty person or do you think he/she is an imperfect, weak, and spiritually asleep person who did you a terrible wrong?*

Obstacles to Forgiveness

Isn't it amazing that some very ordinary people are able to forgive huge hurts while some of us may be unable to

forgive much lesser hurts. Doesn't it make us wonder about the depth of our spirituality or what might be causing us to hold onto grudges or resentments. In my book, I name ten obstacles. The following are two of the ten.

Obstacle #1

We may feel strongly that our offender does not deserve our forgiveness. But, eventually we must ask: Do we deserve the forgiveness of others and especially do we deserve God's mercy for our many offenses against him? And let us not forget that even though we may believe that our offender does not deserve our forgiveness, we deserve to be free of all the resentment, pain and stress that steals our joy because of a particular hurt.

Obstacle #2

Forgiveness involves facing *emotions* that most of us do not like to face and deal with, namely, anger, our need for revenge, hatred, our need to get even. If our tendency is to ignore our feelings we are, most likely, going to have a very difficult time facing and dealing with tough feelings like anger, hatred and revenge. We may not even want to admit that we have such feelings, let alone deal with them. If facing our feelings is an issue for us, remember that feelings are neither right nor wrong. Also, remember that Jesus, being *fully human*, experienced every human feeling.

Using Prayer to Help Us to Forgive Life's Hurts and Wrong

In chapters 5-10, I offer very practical suggestions on how prayer can help us to forgive others (living and deceased), forgive God, religious and secular institutions and self. The following is an example of some of the various types of prayers. I offer:

If the hurt is a big one (or even a small one) we may have little or no desire to forgive our offender. In this case our first prayer will express our anger, hatred and rage.

Prayer Suggestion #1 Prayer of Rage

When we have been deeply hurt, we will, most likely, feel anger, rage and hate. We want to 'get even' and punish our offender. Hence our first prayer will need to give expression to our rage. It is likely that many of us may never have prayed a prayer of rage to God. It may be a new experience for us. The following is a sample prayer that we could use. Of course, it will be important to word each of the following prayer suggestions to suit your personality and the circumstances of your particular situation.

Jesus, I have absolutely no desire to forgive N.____ for the hurt and injustice he did to me. I am so angry with him. I hate his guts. I would even be happy if harm came his way. I cannot imagine myself forgiving him. He is the scum of the earth. I detest and despise him. I never want to see him again.

As I said, most of us may never have prayed like that. In fact, we may feel it is wrong to say such things to God about

another human being. If you are a little scandalized by the above prayer listen to what Jeremiah said to God about his enemies:

I must discuss this case with you. Why does the way of the godless prosper, why do all the treacherous live in contentment? Pick them out like sheep for the slaughter, set them apart for the day of carnage.
Jeremiah 12:1, 3.

“Ouch, Jeremiah isn’t that a bit over the top,” we may not think so if we have experienced some terrible injustice or wrong. Or we may think: “how could you, a holy man of God, speak/pray like that?”

When preaching about prayer, Martin Luther used to say, “don’t lie to God”. If our prayer is going to be real, it must express what we truly feel within. Many of the psalms are wonderful examples of honest speech to God in time of rage, depression etc.

Prayer Suggestion #2 Praying for the Desire to Forgive

Having expressed our rage to God and having expressed our disgust about our offender we will hopefully in time want to ask the Lord for help to move past our anger and outrage. A prayer that could help us at this stage might be:

Jesus, you know the way I feel about N.____. You know my lack of desire to forgive. You know that all I want to do is to get even with him. But, I also know that holding onto a hardened unforgiving heart is no good for my body, mind or spirit. It hurts me more than it hurts my offender. It also hurts my relationship with you.

Jesus, I admit my helplessness and powerlessness when it comes to even thinking about forgiving N.____. But, I also know that all things are possible for those who cooperate with your grace. With St. Paul, I believe that I can do all things in you who strengthens me. Empower me Jesus to do this work of forgiveness. Place within my heart the desire to forgive N____. I find it so hard to even make that request because my heart has so much venom towards N____ But; I make the request however feebly hoping that you will give me the grace to do what I am powerless to do for myself.

Sometimes I will have to pray that prayer fervently many times before I will notice any desire to work through my hurt and anger. Just as physical therapy takes time, so it is with *spiritual therapy*. We have to stretch ourselves a lot emotionally and spiritually if we want God to melt a heart that is hardened. This may be the toughest step in the entire process. Millions of people choose not to even pray for the desire to forgive. If you find yourself stuck at this stage, I suggest you go see a counselor or a spiritual guide.

The above prayers are *not easy* prayers to pray especially if we are the type of person that likes to keep his/her emotions in tight check. As I said above the above prayers may stretch us emotionally and spiritually. But if we are to successfully work our way through some pretty bad hurts, then we may need to be willing to let ourselves be stretched.

Difficult Questions

Towards the end of my book, I ask three questions that are often raised about forgiveness.

- Why forgive someone who has no remorse for the wrong he/she did?
- Aren’t there some things that shouldn’t be forgiven like terrorists attacks or rape?
- What can we do when the hurt or wrong is ongoing? For example, when a spouse or employer continues to be abusive.

The following is my response to question one.

Needless to say, it is not easy to forgive someone who shows no remorse for what he/she did. If we have to deal with such a person remembering the following may help:

- We forgive another not because our offender deserves our mercy. We forgive them because that is the example Our Savior has set for us. He died for us while we were *still* in our sins (Romans 5:7-8). He forgave his executioners even though they were hardly sorry for the heinous act they had done. We forgive so that the toxic poison of unforgiveness does not continue to hurt us emotionally and spiritually. We must never forget that the choice not to forgive is a choice to allow our offender to continue to hurt us and a choice to give him/her control over us emotionally and spiritually. “The act of forgiveness does not depend on the other taking responsibility for his or her actions. Forgiveness asks only that we take responsibility for ourselves” (Jean Maalouf). When we choose to forgive let’s remember who benefits most from our decision to let go – us and not our offender.
- When we choose to forgive an unrepentant offender, we are choosing to take control away from the flow of hatred or animosity that goes on between two people. Lewis Smedes writes: “Waiting for someone to repent before we forgive is to surrender our Future to the person who wronged us.” In his book, *Forgive and Forget*, (Harper & Row, 1984), Smedes quotes an ancient Jewish document called the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which says: “If a man sin against thee. . . if he repent and confess, forgive him . . . But if he be shameless, and persisteth in his wrongdoing even so forgive him from the heart, and leave to God the avenging.”

Have a blessed week,

