



Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time C February 24, 2019

Forgiving Life's Hurts

- ◆ 3 Reasons why we should forgive
- ◆ Some obstacles and helps
- ◆ Prayer suggestions
- ◆ Response to a difficult question

In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "Love your enemies... Do good to those who hate you... Bless those who curse you."

Nothing could be clearer in the Gospel than the call to forgive life's hurts. Yet nothing can be harder to do. The following are some excerpts from my book on ***How to Forgive Yourself & Others*** (also available in Spanish).

Three reasons why we must engage ourselves in the hard work of forgiveness

Reason #1: God's Word tells us to do so as we saw in today's Gospel (Lk 6:27-38, also see Mt 18:21-22).

Reason #2: Forgiving another brings healing to our body, mind and spirit. In my book, I quote an extensive piece from a book called *The Healing Power of Forgiveness* by Jean Maalouf. The following are some excerpts from a larger quote.

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."

To choose not to enter into the forgiveness process is 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."

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

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 decide to enter into the forgiveness process, we are choosing to overcome the darkness of unforgiveness with love. We become peacemakers whom Jesus calls true children of God in his Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:1-12). In choosing to enter into the forgiveness process:

- we are doing what God would have us do.
- we realize what is very important for our spiritual, physical, and emotional health.
- we are making our world a little more peaceful and loving.

13 truths to remember about the forgiveness process

In Chapter 3 of my book, I name 13 truths to remember about this whole issue. Truth no. 2 states: Normally, people hurt us or do us wrong because they are immature, spiritually blind, wounded and imperfect like us, and not because they are evil and terrible people.

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. Dying on the Cross, Jesus said, *“Father forgive them for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:26). We might say that they did indeed know the evil thing they had done. Or at least their leaders did. Jesus would disagree with us.

In 2Samuel 12:1-8, we read the story of how the great King David committed 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. Many clergy who abused children did many good things in their parishes. Also, all of us suffer periodically from spiritual blindness. Sometimes we suffer from having a deep need to believe that those 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 and as a Church, were spiritually blind and asleep to the sin of racial prejudice.

Reflection questions

If you are 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 imperfect, weak, and spiritually asleep to have done you a terrible wrong?

2 of 10 obstacles to forgiving life’s hurts

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, even more importantly, 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 confront and deal with, namely, anger, our need for revenge, hatred, our need to get even. If our tendency is to ignore our feelings, there is the likelihood that we will 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 wrongs

In Chapters 5-10, I offer very practical suggestions on how prayer can help us to forgive others (living and deceased), to 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.

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. Many of us may never have uttered 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 our personality and particular circumstances.

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's 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 (12:1, 3) 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."

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.

Suggestion #2: Praying for the Desire to Forgive

Having expressed our rage to God and 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. ___. However, I make the request feebly, hoping that you will give me the grace to do what I am powerless to do for myself.

Sometimes I will have to say 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. I will be happy to also meet with you.

The above prayers are *not easy* to pray especially if we are the type of person who likes to keep our emotions in tight check. As I just said, 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.

A difficult question

Towards the end of my book, I ask three questions that are often raised about forgiveness. One of them is: What can we do when the hurt or wrong is ongoing, e.g., when a spouse or employer continues to be abusive?

The following is my response to his question:

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 our offender not because he/she deserves our mercy. We forgive 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 to allow our offender to continue to hurt us and 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 more greatly from our decision to let go: it is us and not our offender.

- When we choose to forgive an unrepentant offender, we 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 sins against thee..., if he repents and confesses, 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,

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