

FORGIVENESS MIGHT NOT ERASE PAIN, BUT IT SETS YOU FREE



Q: I know that I am supposed to forgive those who have hurt me, but it is so hard. Every time I see this person, I get so mad! What do I do?

A: The fact that you are asking this question indicates that you are on the right track. You are clearly taking Jesus' words about forgiveness seriously. Still more, it sounds like you know the stakes. In the Our Father, we pray that God forgives us in the same way that we forgive those who have hurt us. That puts forgiveness at the top of the list when it comes to the things Christians are called to do.

But how do I forgive, especially when I have been seriously hurt by someone?

Before I talk about what forgiveness is, I want to say something about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not excusing what a person has done or pretending that it never happened. That is simply dishonest. Forgiveness cannot be genuine until the person who has been hurt fully acknowledges the depth and reality of the offense.

Sometimes people will say, "Oh, there's nothing to forgive" when another comes asking for forgiveness. That denies the truth about the past and about the fact that they are now injured. It is a common temptation; sometimes the fear is that, if I admit that you actually did hurt me, you will have some kind of power over me — you will know how to hurt me in the future. Therefore, I will pretend to be unaffected and simply dismiss the request by laughing it off.

Forgiveness is also not the same thing as not hurting. It is hard to feel like you have forgiven someone when you still carry the wounds from the offense. It is hard to feel like you have forgiven them when you still get angry at the very thought of them.

But forgiveness is a decision. Hurting is often a feeling. The two things are not the same.

I can choose to release a person from what they owe me, and still experience the sting of what they took from me. If you struggle to forgive someone because the wound is still there, that's fine. You can still decide to release them from their debt.

One last thing that forgiveness is not: It is not the same thing as forgetting. It is not the same thing as pretending that you can trust this person or that (in the case of betrayal by someone close to you) this person is still your best friend. That would be foolish.

As Christians, we are called to be wise. Yes, we are called to forgive, but that is not the same thing as bringing someone who has proven that they are untrustworthy back into your confidence without them first demonstrating that they have earned your trust again.

If a friend hurts or betrays your friendship, forgiving them does not necessarily mean that you will be friends again. You can do what you're called to do (release them) without entering back into a significant relationship with them again.

And this brings us to what forgiveness actually is. Forgiveness begins by acknowledging that the person who has hurt or offended you actually owes you something. They are, in a sense, "indebted" to you. Justice would demand that they give you what they owe you. Forgiveness is when you make the decision to release them from their debt. Forgiveness is when you make the decision that you will not "collect" what they owe you. It is setting the other person free.

In this entire process, it is important to keep in mind that this doesn't always go as smoothly, and is not always received as graciously, as you might imagine. The person that you forgive may not know or believe that

they have done anything wrong. They may not accept your offer of forgiveness and instead may turn it back as an accusation against you.

In these cases, it is still vitally important that you make the decision to forgive because God has commanded it and has made it clear that we are forgiven to the extent that we are willing to forgive those who have hurt us. When we release others from their debt, it is only because God has released us from the debt that we owed it to him.

In addition, every act of forgiveness sets at least one person free: the person doing the forgiving. Forgiveness can be the decision to not become bitter. Even though the person who has hurt you may never acknowledge or receive your offer of forgiveness, when you forgive you are released from bondage. You are released from the pain of the past. You can be hurt, you can still remember the injury, but if you forgive, you can also still be free.



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