

Forgiveness in the Christian life

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Preamble

Forgiveness is an integral aspect of the Christians life. We offend God by thoughts, words, and deeds; we also offend others when we sin because of the religious and social dimensions of sin. Our sins taint and stain our relationship with God. Hence we constantly seek God's mercy and forgiveness. On the other hand, conflicts abound in human relationship. The inevitable presence of conflict in human relationships calls for forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is a virtue in the Christian life. Admittedly, it is difficult for people to practice forgiveness. However, as Christians, it is inconceivable not to forgive those who offend us. The biblical injunction is to forgive and to seek reconciliation. In the *Our Father* prayer, we pray: *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. However, forgiveness and reconciliation do not come easily. Yet, as Christians, we have no other route except that of forgiveness because that is how we can become like Christ.

In this talk, I wish to briefly examine the meaning of forgiveness; this will be followed by looking at the concept of forgiveness in the Old Testament and New Testament. I will then focus on forgiveness in the liturgy and the process of forgiveness. This talk will conclude by emphasizing the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Christian life.

What is Forgiveness?

The Anchor Bible Dictionary defines forgiveness as “the wiping out of an offense from memory; it can be affected only by the one affronted. Once eradicated, the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the offender and the one affronted, and harmony is restored between the two” (**Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol. 2, p. 831**). This definition points out that once one has forgiven another, the offense does not come to mind again in the relationship. The two persons now relate as if the offense never took place as the damage in the relationship caused by the offense is wiped out. Therefore, after forgiving another, one should not recall the offense any longer. The call to forgive is to let go of the past, and to make sure that we do not retaliate. The willingness to forgive and let go of past hurts can break the cycle of hatred and violence.

Forgiveness in the Old Testament

Forgiveness in the OT is always in reference to God. God is the agent for effecting forgiveness. The people of Israel always sinned against God. Thus there is the cycle of sin, sorrow, repentance and forgiveness. An appeal to God for forgiveness is a regular form of intercessory prayer. Moses regularly intercedes for the people the Israel (Exodus 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9-10, etc). For their part, the prophets ask for forgiveness for the people. Isaiah confesses God as rich in mercy and forgiveness (Isaiah 55:7). The Psalms repeatedly show the mercy and forgiveness of God (Psalms 51, 86, 130, etc). The OT shows that God's forgiveness is as a result of God's *hesed* (steadfast love, loving kindness).

While God is the principal agent of forgiveness, the injunction for human forgiveness is the famous *lex talionis*, that is, the “law of retaliation.” For example: “You will award life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound,

stroke for stroke” (Exodus 21:23-24; see also Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21). The aim of this law is to guard against excesses in retaliation. Punishment must be commensurate to the offense; it must not be greater than the offence committed.

Forgiveness in the New Testament

The NT raises the concept of forgiveness to the next level. The NT shows very clearly that God is the author and source of forgiveness. There is a dual dimension to forgiveness in the NT: God’s forgiveness and human forgiveness. The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15: 11-32) is the paradigm of God’s forgiveness of the sinner. God’s forgiveness *par excellence* is revealed in Christ’s forgiveness of his executioners: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23: 34). Stephen followed the path of our Blessed Lord by forgiving his executioners: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Forgiveness attains its peak when one forgives one’s killers or when one forgives the killers of one’s loved one.

However, our Blessed Lord tells us that the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven: “And so I tell you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next” (Matt 12:31-32). This unpardonable sin is an obstinate and deliberate rejection of the Spirit’s work in God’s kingdom and thus a rejection of God himself. This refers to the deliberate refusal to accept God’s revelation and redemption through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Forgiveness of Others

The NT consistently commands us to forgive others because of God’s gracious forgiveness. Forgiveness of others is not just to end one’s anger towards another but the willingness to effect renewal of fellowship. The call to forgive others is always a command in the scriptures. Let us examine some scriptural texts:

i) Matthew 18:15-18

This passage tells us that if your brother or sister offends you, you should go to him/her and resolve the matter with him/her. This shows that though you are on the right, you should initiate the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Scripture scholars tell us that this passage is a difficult one to interpret in the NT. However, what comes out clearly in this passage is that it urges and encourages numerous steps in the process of achieving reconciliation. This should begin by meeting the other person face to face and tell the person of his or her wrong. If this fails, then seek two or three witnesses to go with you to reconcile with the person who has wronged you. This reflects the precept of Deuteronomy 19:15 which says: “A single witness will not suffice to convict anyone of a crime or offence of any kind; whatever the misdemeanour, the evidence of two witnesses or three is required to sustain the charge.”

This passage urges further that the matter be reported to the community if the person remains recalcitrant. After that, the person deserves to be treated as a gentile or tax collector. This is where scripture scholars have a problem because it sounds unlike Christ who does not give up on anyone. In fact, Jesus treated the gentiles and tax collectors with love and mercy throughout the scriptures. How then can we effectively reconcile giving up on the offending person to the next passage which echoes the unlimitedness of God’s forgiveness to us and the command for us to forgive others in the same way as God has forgiven us?

ii) Matthew 18:21-35

Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times? Jesus answered, “Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.” Some translations render it “seventy-times-seven times.” This prompted Jesus to tell the *Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor* (Mt 18:23-35). This parable calls us to forgive others because of the forgiveness we have received from God. This parable makes it crystal clear that there is no amount of forgiveness of those who offend us that can remotely compare with what we have been forgiven by God. Thus, there are dire consequences for those who do not forgive others from our hearts.

Some other texts on forgiveness of others include:

- **“If you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either” (Mt 6:12-14).**
- **“Bear with one another; forgive each other if one of you has a complaint against another. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same” (Col 3:13).**
- **“Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37).**
- **“Be generous to one another, sympathetic, forgiving each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ” (Ephesians 4:32).**

iii) The Letter from Paul to Philemon

This Book of the Bible, situated just before the Letter to the Hebrews, is a private letter of St. Paul to Philemon whom Paul brought into the faith in Colossae. Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon, somehow came in contact with Paul while in prison in Rome. Onesimus became a Christian as a result of his contact with Paul. Onesimus became very dear and indispensable to Paul during his imprisonment. But Paul decided to send Onesimus back to Philemon. Paul asked Philemon to receive Onesimus, **not as a slave, but as a Christian brother**. Paul requested that Philemon should receive Onesimus as he would receive him, since Onesimus had become his son in the faith like Philemon. Paul told Philemon that sending Onesimus to him was like sending a bit of his own heart.

Onesimos in Greek means the “Profitable One.” It also means “useful.” Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon as someone now useful. He is now Onesimus both in name and in fact. He is no longer just a runaway slave with dubious background. Knowing full well that slavery was well entrenched in the society at that time, it would be difficult for Philemon to regard a runaway slave as a brother. But that is exactly what Paul asked him to do. This shows that the Christian must forgive and welcome back the person who has made a mistake. Oftentimes, we do not give people another chance. We believe that God can forgive but we are not prepared to forgive. As William Barclay has noted: “Too often we regard the man who has taken the wrong turning with suspicion and show that we are never prepared to trust him again. We believe that God can forgive but we, ourselves, find it too difficult” (**Barclay, William., The Daily Study Bible Series. The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon, p. 281**). We learn from extra-biblical literature that Onesimus eventually became the great Bishop of Ephesus. St. Ignatius of Antioch (died 101 AD) wrote to Onesimus, the Bishop of Ephesus, in one of his Seven Letters to seven Churches of Asia Minor, on his way to Rome to face martyrdom.

I chose to comment on Paul’s Letter to Philemon in the scripture because of its outstanding message on forgiveness. Paul asks Philemon, not only to pardon the mistake of his runaway slave, but to receive him as a brother and not a slave. How does this beautiful piece of

scripture relate to us? It is like asking you to take back as your sister your house-maid, who stole a huge amount of money from you and ran away? Or asking you to take back your sales boy as your brother, after he looted your shop and disappeared into the thin air? The Christian is the one, who takes the next step against all odds, to forgive. The Christian uses authority not to punish but to forgive.

Forgiveness in the Liturgy

Throughout the celebration of the Holy Mass, the highest form of Christian prayer and worship and the “source and summit of the Christian life” (**Lumen Gentium 11**), we constantly ask for God’s forgiveness. The Mass begins with the *Penitential Rite* where we call to mind our sins and ask for God’s forgiveness to make us worthy enough to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. During the *Eucharistic Prayer*, we ask for forgiveness: *Have mercy on us all*. During the *Our Father*, we ask God to *forgive us our trespasses*. During the *Lamb of God* we ask for God’s mercy. Before we receive *holy communion*, we express our unworthiness: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you....* We ask for God’s forgiveness because we realize our sinfulness and unworthiness before the Lord. If God always forgives us, how come we find it often difficult to forgive those who offend us?

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Forgiveness and reconciliation are indispensable in the Christian life. As human beings, there is a drive in us for revenge, a lust to get back at those who harm us, our families and friends. And sometimes the revenge outweighs the harm done to us. That is why the OT prescribed *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. If we do not forgive, no amount of harm inflicted on the offender can satisfy us. We see this in the case of capital punishment. Family members say they want to watch the execution of the killer of their loved one. But after the execution, they say that the offender has not suffered enough. The execution of a killer does not bring solace to the family of the deceased. But when one forgives for the sake of Christ, one begins to find some form of healing, closure, peace and solace.

In our society, the person who seeks reconciliation is perceived as the weaker party in a quarrel or conflict. But that is not correct. Scripture asks us to initiate the process of reconciliation with the person who offends us (Matthew 18:15-18). According to *Pope John Paul II*, reconciliation is a sign of strength. In other words, if I have a conflict with another person, I am the stronger person, and a better Christian, if I initiate the process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Process of Forgiveness

It should be noted that forgiveness often does not occur automatically; it takes time. Like every aspect of human experience, forgiveness is a process; this process often takes time. What matters is the willingness to undergo the process of forgiveness which eventually leads to reconciliation, whereby the hurt, harm, and pain experienced from another does not affect the relationship. As Christians, we must be prepared to go through the process of forgiveness in order to arrive at fruitful reconciliation with others.

Fr. Joseph Diele, in his article entitled, *Essentials of Forgiveness*, identifies four steps in the process of forgiveness:

- Truly acknowledge the anger you may feel toward the other person.
- Ask God to pay attention to your enemy’s needs.

- Begin to pray for yourself and the terrible hurt you feel because of what this person has done to you.
- Reach for reconciliation, face-to-face and from a distance.

With regard to the first step, be true and honest to yourself by admitting your feelings of anger, hurt, pain, harm, and difficulty as a result of what another did to you. It is okay to admit that I am angry and even hate the other person. Identify and own your feelings whether they are pleasant or not. Secondly, begin to pray for the person that has hurt you. Ask God to touch your “enemy” and fill him or her with the Holy Spirit. This enables you to recognize that the person who offended you is created in the image and likeness of God like yourself. Thirdly, begin to pray for yourself too for the grace to experience healing within and thus let go of the hurt and harm done to you. Fourthly, seek reconciliation. This is possible once you have truly forgiven the other. As Fr. Joseph Diele puts it, “reconciliation means that I no longer own the hurt inflicted on me, and I will therefore not hold it against the other in any way.”

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, undoubtedly, it is difficult but not impossible to forgive because with God all things are possible. As human beings, we are created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, if God readily forgives us, we must strive to be like God by always forgiving those who offend us. Forgiveness leads to reconciliation. One must not immediately jump from hurt to reconciliation. One must gradually undergo the process of true forgiveness in order to experience inner healing and fruitful reconciliation.

In the course of my priestly ministry, I have journeyed with persons who have been deeply hurt by others and have great difficulty forgiving them. Sometimes, they feel helpless about their lack of forgiveness. To forgive others is oftentimes painful but that is the only way to move on with our lives as Christians. If we forgive whatever wrong was done to us, God will reward us. The truth about forgiveness is that it frees us and liberates us. What do I mean? When we do not forgive, we continue to live with the hurt, harm, and pain done to us. But when we eventually forgive, we are freed of the burden of the pain and hurt inside us. Forgiveness ushers in emotional and spiritual healing and the freedom to move forward with one’s life. I admit that it is not easy to forgive but forgiveness is the best recipe for healing and liberation. *Thank you for listening. God love you and God bless you!*