

Forgiveness in the Christian Life (2)

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Introduction

It is once again my great joy to welcome you to our Lenten *Desert Day of Prayer*. Exactly one year ago, our *Desert Day of Prayer* was on the above topic. Divine providence has given us yet another opportunity to reflect on this topic that is very important in our Christian lives and relationships. This paper will examine forgiveness as contained in the *Our Father*, Jesus as the model of forgiveness, the effects of being offended by others, the process of forgiveness and finding the ways for healing and inner peace when we feel hurt. The paper concludes with a prayer for healing.

A. Forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer

The *Lord's Prayer* is a compendium of all Christian prayers. This is a prayer that our Lord taught his disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray as John taught his disciples (Lk 11:1). Contained in the *Lord's Prayer* is forgiveness: "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us" (Mt 6:11-12).

Our Lord further enjoins us: "Yes, 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 6:14-15). The prayer for forgiveness is somewhat frightening because it shows that the Lord will forgive us in proportion to how we forgive others. It shows that human forgiveness and Divine forgiveness are intertwined. Thus a Christian should not, "I will never forgive him/her for what he/she has done to me." If we really mean the prayer for forgiveness in the *Our Father*, there would be times that we would not be bold enough to pray it.

William Barclay points out that, three things are necessary if we are to have Christian forgiveness in our lives (**The Daily Bible Series. The Gospel of Matthew. Vol. 1, p. 223**). They are as follows:

i) We must learn to understand

When people hurt and offend us, we should try to find out and understand why they did what they did to us. If someone insults you, the natural instinct would be to retaliate. But as a Christian, try to find out if the person is okay. Perhaps, you may find out that the person had a bad day, was stressed out, depressed, etc. William Barclay points out that, "Forgiveness would be much easier for us, if we tried to understand before we allowed ourselves to condemn" (**The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 223**).

ii) We must learn to forget

William Barclay says: "So long as we brood upon a slight or an injury, there is no hope that we will forgive" (**The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 223**). To say that "I will never forget what he did to me," makes it harder to forgive. When we print the memory of the hurt or injury in our minds, we will find it hard to forgive. To forgive means to act and relate with the person who offended you as if the harm was never committed. Thus, after forgiving, one should not recall the offense any longer. Many persons have told me in the course of my ministry, "Father, I

have forgiven him, but each time I see him, I feel the pain all over.” It might be that you have never really forgiven him.

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***). Even if I did not forget the injury done to me by another, I do not recall it with malice.

iii) We must learn to love

Jesus commanded us: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12, 17). The love referred to here is *agape*. *Agape* love enables us to seek the highest good of others, even of those who have done us harm. Without love, there can be no forgiveness. The precept of love in the NT has always been a commandment, not an optional precept but an obligatory one. Both the precepts of love and forgiveness include the enemy: “You have heard how it was said, *You will love your neighbour* and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:43-44). Thus, if a person offends you and you find it difficult to forgive, you should try to love the person and this will gradually lead to forgiveness.

Summary

Like every other aspect of the Christian life, we must pray for the grace to forgive others. To forgive others is the condition for our own forgiveness. As William Barclay has noted: “To be forgiven we must forgive, and that is a condition of forgiveness which only the power of Christ can enable us to fulfill” (***The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 224***). In fact, **to forgive those who offend me benefits me more than those who offended me**. *How?* Inasmuch as I carry the hurt or injury done to me, I am affected emotionally, spiritually and otherwise by the harm done to me. But if I forgive and let go, no matter the gravity of the injury, I become a renewed and stronger person. As Fr. Thomas Pazhayampallil has remarked: “To forgive is a sign of greatness. Forgiveness implies love. Christian love seeks the good of others no matter what they do to us, no matter how they treat us” (***Words of Eternal Life, Vol. 1, p. 1186***).

B. Jesus, the Model of Forgiveness

Our Lord Jesus practiced to the fullest whatever He commanded us. Whether it is carrying the cross, loving others, showing mercy to others, caring for the poor and the sick, welcoming and accommodating sinners etc, our Lord Jesus is a perfect example of what he demands from us. Where else can we find an example of forgiveness if not from our Lord Himself. Our Lord forgave the adulterous woman her sins (Jn 8:1-11); he called sinners to follow him (Mt 9:9-13); he allowed a sinful woman to kiss him and wipe his feet with her hair (Lk 7:36-50), and so on. But on the cross, our Lord forgave those who killed him: “Father, forgive them; they not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). Our Lord opened the gates of paradise to the *good thief* who was crucified with him. He said to Jesus, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’ (Lk 23:42). Jesus said to him in reply: “In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). Stephen, the first martyr, followed the example of our Lord by forgiving those who stoned him to death: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Oftentimes we find it difficult to forgive, and that is understandable. However, let us know that Jesus suffered worse things and yet forgave those who killed him. Hence, we should in our prayer pray to the Lord Jesus for the grace to forgive. But when we deliberately refuse to

forgive, it becomes harder for us to receive the grace to forgive. And when we do not forgive, we ourselves are not free as we continue to carry in our hearts and souls the effects of the injury done to us. The scripture enjoins us to forgive as Christ has forgiven us:

- “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).
- “Be generous to one another, sympathetic, forgiving each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ” (Eph 4:32).

C. The Effects of Being Offended by Others

We are constantly in relationships as human beings. God is the origin and author of human relationships. Human relationship implies that those we know, love, and care about will hurt us and cause us sorrow. Our colleagues in the office, friends, and even family will offend us at one time or another. For our part, we would also offend others. It is worth asking: How are we affected when others offend us? What are the effects of the injury done to us? What happens to us when offended and we refuse to forgive? Let us examine some effects of being offended.

i) A Feeling of Betrayal

Oftentimes, we feel betrayed by our friends and loved ones when they offend us. We expect them to bring joy and happiness to our lives. Betrayal occurs when the trust level is severely damaged when a person acts contrary to the love and trust reposed on him or her by another. A Christian must learn to forgive even when betrayed. This does not come very easily. But with prayer, counselling, spiritual direction, one gradually forgives the person(s) who betrayed him or her.

ii) Emotional Pain and Stress

When we are hurting as a result of injury and offense against us, we go through all kinds of emotional pain and stress. Emotional pain and stress are those hurts that affect the mind and soul. They are oftentimes more devastating than physical pain. Emotional pain is internal and slowly eats up a person from inside. People undergo all kinds of emotional trauma as a result of harm, injustice, and offense received. Many persons who are hurt do not know how to overcome it. That is why sometimes people meet their priests and say to them that they are hurting and have difficulty forgiving those who have hurt them. Emotional pain and stress can lead to all kinds of illness such as fever, ulcer, hypertension, stroke, and even heart attack. People suffer from all kinds of psychological problems because of the pain and hurt they carry in their hearts. This is where forgiveness is very important for the Christian. If we learn to truly forgive from our hearts, we become relieved of some of these emotional pains and stress. Forgiveness brings healing to our wounded hearts.

iii) Broken Relationships

When a person who is offended is unable to resolve the conflict with the offender, there is bound to be a broken relationship. We see this in married persons when reconciliation cannot be achieved by a husband and wife. Once the love and friendship that bind a relationship are broken, there is bound to be ripple effects which adversely affect people in so many ways. But if

an offended partner forgives, a broken relationship is averted. When a relationship is broken, some persons even go an extra mile to calumniate the other person.

iv) Broken Families

Families have been torn apart because of lack of forgiveness. The harm and injury done to another in a family has led to broken marriages and families. Forgiveness is the only way out of this brokenness.

D. The Process of Forgiveness and How to Find Healing and Inner Peace When Offended

We carry much burden in our hearts when people offend us. We carry so much pain and hurt. At times, we simply don't know what to do. At such times, let us remember the invitation of our Lord: "Come to me all you labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Matthew 11:28-30). As Christians whenever we experience emotional pain and hurt due to injury done to us, we have no one else to go to except Jesus Christ.

Emotional pain and hurt prevent us from experiencing joy, peace, and inner freedom. Hence we need to pray for healing and it is only God that can heal us. As Christians, seeking inner healing is the firm belief that Jesus Christ can heal me from the wounds, pains, anxieties, frustrations, that affect my present life and that he will fill me with His love in place of my pain and emptiness. As Christians, we should know that we truly need healing when we are aware that we are held down by our past hurts and pains. According to Frank MacNutt: "The idea behind inner healing is simply that we can ask Jesus Christ to walk back to the time we were hurt and to free us from the effects of that wound in the present" (**Healing, p. 183**).

In order to forgive, one has to go through the process of forgiveness. The process of forgiveness often takes time. But that process must begin whenever one feels hurt and offended. The duration of the process varies from person to person. One must be willing to undergo this process in order to arrive at peace and reconciliation. I wish to propose the process of forgiveness and some of the ways through which we can find healing and peace when we experience emotional pain and hurt and are willing to forgive.

i) Be in Touch With Your Feelings

Learn to come to terms with your feelings. Admit and accept the way you feel. Look honestly at yourself and ask yourself: How do I feel? Go deep inside yourself and face the feelings of hurt, pain, betrayal, relief, etc. Don't brush your feelings aside. Don't say "I am okay" when you are not. In fact, to be in touch with your feelings, no matter how unpleasant such feelings are, is the beginning of healing and eventual forgiveness of an offender. It is okay to admit that I am angry and that I even hate the other.

ii) Seek the Help of Competent Persons

Once you have identified your feelings and come to terms with them, you should seek to share your feelings with trusted and competent persons who will help you to deal with the reality of your situation. However, you must share with someone who will be ready to listen to you without being judgmental; someone who will listen to you and allow you to share your pain and

hurt without condemning you. Don't keep your hurt and pain to yourself. Share your pain and brokenness to someone in a position to help you out emotionally and spiritually.

iii) Live in the Now (Present)

Oftentimes, we are weighed down by the hurt and emotional pain of the past that we become unproductive in life. Learn to put the painful past experience behind you. To live in the past is to be unreal because the past does not exist anymore. Focus on the **Now**; think of the present. What can I do **Now** in order to take good care of myself? Be aware of God's power and presence in your life **Now**. Be filled with gratitude to God that you survived the past hurt in your life. Convince yourself that because you survived the past, God will bless your present and will make the future better. Put the past in God's hands, forgive those who offended you and learn to move on with your life.

iv) Prayer

This is the most important means of finding healing and peace in the process of forgiveness. Prayer should accompany every step of the forgiveness process. The highest form of prayer is the Holy Mass. Bring your pain and hurt to the Lord for healing at Holy Mass. You can also find healing and solace in your private prayers. In your prayer, take your feelings of pain and hurt to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for healing. Your prayer must be from the heart. It must be an honest prayer before the Lord to whom you empty your pain, hurt, and wound, for healing. Empty your feelings and place them before the Lord and ask the Lord to grant you peace and healing. In your prayers, ask the Lord to give you the grace and courage to forgive the person that offended you. Ask God to heal you of your hurt and also that anyone you have hurt may equally be healed.

v) Seek Reconciliation

After you have gone through the above process, you can seek reconciliation with the person that offended you and then forgive him or her face to face or from a distance.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude with a beautiful prayer for inner healing by Sr. Joyce Rupp, in her book **PRAYING OUR GOODBYES** (p. 176). Perhaps, this is a prayer to say when we feel hurt and find it difficult to forgive and also when we truly want to forgive.

God of love, you are the shepherd and I am one of your flock. The words of Ezechiel speak to me of your comforting presence and the truth of your care. I bear so much hurt inside from what happened to me. My inner world has been of anxiety and distress. In Ezechiel you promise never to let me out of your sight, to look after me and to keep me from harm. You assure me that you will rescue me when I am scattered, that you will draw me close when I lose my way in the mist and darkness created by my wounds.

The pain of my hurts keeps me in a foreign land where I do not feel at home with myself or others. Help me to believe that you will lead me into a future rich with growth and peace. Show me where to rest, how to lay down my burdens and what to do in order to be healed.

Loving shepherd, I need to find a source of new life. Come, bandage my wounds and grant to this weak one a profound and deep strength to go on. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, let us pray for the grace to forgive those who offended us and to ask for forgiveness from those we have offended. Let the practice of forgiveness be part of our Lenten observance. I admit that it is not always easy to forgive. Undoubtedly, forgiveness is difficult but not impossible because with God all things are possible. I wish you a fruitful Lenten season. *Thank you for listening and God bless you.*