

Forgiveness - God's Duty And Ours

*Catechism Reading:
Q/A 126*

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Bernie Fenton never minded that his office overlooked a cemetery. In fact, he kind of liked it. He'd glance up from his desk now and then catching glimpses of friends and family members visiting their loved ones, planting flowers, saying prayers. There was a quiet, faith-filled rhythm to each day that he enjoyed.

At least that's how it was until that warm summer evening when his 18-year-old daughter was bludgeoned to death by her older sister's husband. After that, Bernie would sit for hours, staring out of the oversized window, looking down at his daughter's grave. Day after day, year after year, consumed by grief and rage, he sat and stared, no longer seeing the gentle actions of loving people, no longer sensing the faith or renewal of this pastoral setting. When Bernie died, friends said it was from a broken heart.

Thankfully, most of us will never face the kind of tragedy Bernie experienced.

Some of us have – there are members of this church family carrying deep, oh so terribly deep pains that they never deserved to receive;

hurts and betrayals that no one had any right to subject them to.

What burdens they carry!

And there are the rest of us - not with huge issues, but rather an accumulated clutter of remembered little betrayals, smaller frustrations and hurts —

the ones others have dumped on **us**

and those **we** have dumped on others.

What do we do with all this stuff?

We just prayed the Lord's Prayer, including the phrase -

Forgive us our debts..... as we forgive our debtors.

Forgive us our wrongs....as we forgive those who have wronged us.

Here is one of the biggest, and most demanding petitions of the entire prayer.

Hear, with me, God speak:

Matthew 18: 21-35

The Church teaches:

Catechism Q/A 126

Forgiveness - at once a mystery and clear fact.

How people can actually accomplish the task is a deep spiritual mystery.

That it is necessary, somehow, is absolutely clear.

Judy Robbins is a licensed counselor in Connecticut. Many clients seek her out because they feel stuck in their lives. They want to move forward yet something is in the way. More often than not, it is a hurtful event that keeps calling attention to itself.

It may have happened last year, or 20 years ago;

The person who committed the offense may not admit to any wrongdoing;

That person may no longer be alive—

none of that matters.

What matters is the emotional burden that this thing hangs on our lives in the present.

"Holding on" says Ms Robbins, "holds us back; it keeps us hostage. Forgive others and we are free of them."

When we refuse to let go of an abuse or hurt, we remain a victim of the experience. It holds us. It can -
 Matthew 18:34 - torture us.

- We can find ourselves in constant tension.
- We may be unable to trust others.
- We may be emotionally paralyzed, unable to make decisions.
- We become closed off to intimate relationships.
- We may become swallowed by uncontrollable anger.
- We can fall prey to depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, arthritis.

We become captives.

Forgiveness, says Lewis Smedes, is

God's invention for coming to terms with a world in which, despite their best intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply. [Forgive & Forget: Healing The Hurts We Don't Deserve xii]

Forgiveness – something we do **whether or not** the other person deserves it.

Forgiveness – a project that involves,
 mostly

..... **me**.

Can you understand that?

Not first of all the one who hurt me.

Not the teacher who deliberately picked on me in front of the class;

Not the supposed friend who waited till the rest of the group was present before he started to shoot cruel barbs my way;

Not the co-worker who tried to build his career by sabotaging mine.

Forgiveness first of all involves **me**.

The hurt **I'm** carrying.

The desire **I** harbour to extract vengeance.

Forgiveness is not some cruel divine joke meant to add insult to the injury I've already experienced. Instead, it is a **necessary** divine road to release and healing for **my** life.

I recall one woman I counselled who was continually haunted by depression, and a whole range of physical disorders including skin rashes, joint swelling and neck problems. The doctors had thrown up their hands in exasperation. When I asked her about her mother, her eyes began to blaze with fire and cry with hurt at the same time. Asked her about her husband, and a horrible air of resentment filled the room. She remained ill.

Look at the parable. The servant who would not forgive – not only was he tortured; the forgiveness he sought was revoked.

Life's not fair. This world's not a safe space.

Hey - **we're** not always fair. Neither are we always safe to be with.

Certainly with God – how often we've violated His space, stood Him up, wronged and betrayed our relationship with Him. Yet we come here, week after week, seeking His forgiveness; we go through a Ministry of Reconciliation every week, praying that the Heavenly Father, for Christ's sake, would let go of that legitimate right He has to get even, to make us pay, to have us suffer hell.

We're multiple offenders.

The gospel promise is that forgiveness **IS** available – full and free in Jesus. Amazing. It flows into and through our lives like a crystal clear river, sweeping away the sin and guilt and wrong we've done. Cleansing us. Refreshing us. New beginnings. Renewed relationships with our Heavenly Father.

HOWEVER

When we, who seek holy forgiveness so often, refuse to forgive others we behave like beavers building a dam across a sparkling country stream. The water backs up and floods the landscape. Brush and debris accumulate. Nothing gets washed downstream. Everything clogs up. A sodden mess. Trees begin to rot and eventually death happens.

God's mercy no longer sweeps through our lives, washing away the junk that accumulates within. Bitterness, guilt, sullenness, a brooding spirit, dark attitudes, and even demonic oppressions begin to gather. Joy rots away. Christian freedom and the liberating sense of being a child of the heavenly king gets all clogged up and muddied.

We begin to rot, spiritually and emotionally.

Forgiveness - letting go, and letting God.

Vital for our own spiritual life and liberty.

Someone shared with about their spouse who had an affair and then walked out, taking everything. It was awful, and left this person struggling with questions of self-image and value, empty, ashamed. But, as this individual said, "*Pastor, I had to forgive my ex. Not for their sake. For mine. It had hold of me. I needed to forgive in order to get free; to live.*"

That's why Jesus is so uncompromising about it -

Forgive.

Keep forgiving.

Seventy-seven times..... the perfect number of 7 and then some.

The very opposite of Lamech in Genesis 4, who promised to get even, to work revenge 77 times.

Forgiveness is giving God the hurt and pain from the past so that we can experience the present, free from contamination.

It is letting go, and letting God.

Romans 12:19 says, "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.*"

Forgiveness is when I can look at the drunk driver, the abusive husband, the negligent child, the cheating employee or ruthless boss, the loose-lipped friend

and give the raging desire to "*let them have it, let 'em rot, wish they were dead,*" the yearnings to get even.....

.....to bundle that all up and drop it at the feet of Jesus, trusting Him to deal with it.

Forgiveness – If you haven't already found out, you're going to - trust me - you're going to discover that's it's one of the **biggest, most difficult** projects you will ever face.

It's big because of the constant barrage of little piddly stuff we face all the time – the little 100 denarii violations that get in the way. A hurt here. A whispered word there. A few dollars lost. A friendship betrayed. A promise broken. We all have it – wrongs done against us that need forgiving.

Little wrongs that left unaddressed will soon build into a huge compost pile of rotting feelings and memories in the back 40 of our soul.

Forgiveness is also a big, difficult project because of the significant pains we experience. The ones that build up murderous rage inside. That make us feel literally sick when we see that offending person. The horrors that Bernie Fenton experienced.

Forgiveness.

Allow me to share with you some very practical stuff on doing this forgiveness project.

First - some potholes to watch out for.

1. Forgiveness *isn't* avoiding or ignoring the hurt done to us; pretending it doesn't matter or didn't occur. And it's *not* coming up with a raft full of excuses to let the offender off the hook. The parable in Matthew 18 deliberately counts the cost of the debt. Up front.
2. Forgiveness is not giving permission for the hurtful behaviour to continue. Consequences of the crimes and wrongs are not avoided. The judicial process may still need to be followed. Precautionary measures may be put in place. Relationships may well change. Things may **NOT** be the same as before.
3. Forgiveness is **NOT** forgetting. It is letting go of vengeance. Scars may still remain. The fallout may still be real and present. No ignoring it.

Secondly, and finally - some waypoints to consider as you map out the road to forgiveness in your life.

1. Recognize that granting forgiveness may be like peeling an onion. Layer after layer. Peel one off to discover another below it. It takes time. And is a process. One that can't be rushed. Warning bells go off in my head when I hear people quickly and glibly say, "*Oh, I've forgiven so-and-so.*" I get angry when outsiders stand by and say, "*Forgive them, and get on with life.*" They don't want to see true forgiveness and healing. They want the quick and easy way out - pop a cork in the bottle and stuff it back on the shelf.
2. Forgiveness is an act of the will. Notice that Jesus doesn't command us to **feel** like we should forgive. You can't command feelings. If we wait till we **FEEL** like forgiving, none of us would ever do it. In your **will** recognize the hurt and your response of rage or resentment or whatever. Then recognize the need of **forcefully, consciously** releasing that response into the hands of Jesus.
3. Forgiveness requires recognition of the wrong. As we begin to recognize the violations, we begin to take them, piece by piece to Christ. We bring them to him who has first forgiven us. We acknowledge the hurt we feel, the pain, the desires for revenge we have - lay them all out before his heavenly throne. Perhaps we may want to write a letter to Jesus. Putting it down on paper sometimes is a big help. Or perhaps sharing this with a trusted Christian friend.
4. In more prayer ask for the Holy Spirit's help to carry on. Ask for protection from forces that will want to build dams against rivers of forgiveness flowing through our lives. This job is too big for us to do alone. As we pray, let's visualize the cross of Jesus - where **our** offenses against God were forgiven by Jesus - "*Help me, Jesus! Help me to forgive!*" It's hard to forgive without seeing ourselves first as forgiven people.
5. Then try to say the words, "*I forgive....*" Not cheaply, but recognizing all that has happened - the event, the pain, your bitterness. Try to say the words. You probably won't feel anything the first time. They may be the toughest words you've ever said, and every nerve fibre in your body may be screaming against this. Perhaps these words will need to be said over some time, with much prayer, again and again.

Remember - forgiveness is a process.

We begin with the will. And leave the feelings to God.

We step out in faith and obedience.

And then, in time, slowly, inch by inch we will begin to see the miracle.

YES!! we can sense that this forgiveness is coming.

The hold that this event, this malice had on us is melting away!

And - maybe - just maybe we'll even get to the point where we become so healed through the grace of God that we are able to eventually summon the power to wish that other person well..... in time.

Forgiveness is never easy.

It takes terrific courage.

It generally needs good support from trusted fellow believers.

But it's **always** the best thing we can do for ourselves.

For when we forgive

life is restored.

Faith begins to grow again.

We can experience the love and presence of Jesus once more.

We are

deeply

and truly

free!