

# On Forgiveness

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*Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother has ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

— Matthew 5:23-24

*Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.*

— Matthew 18:21-22

**E**ach morning before I begin my days activities, I say a prayer primarily of thanks for all the gifts and blessings I've received. However, it also includes the sentence, "Forgive me for all the things I have done in thought, word, and deed, that have hurt or offended others; let them forgive me, let me forgive those who have hurt or offended me, let me forgive myself." I've said this prayer, and consequently this sentence, so often and for such a long time that I now say it by rote without giving much thought to what the words mean for my daily spiritual life. So when my computer calendar informed me that the coming Monday (September 23, 2023) was Yom Kippur, the day that Jewish people are expected to pray to God for forgiveness of their sins, I decided it would be good for me to spend the day thinking about forgiveness, which I did with surprising and unexpected results.

Whenever I begin to think about a spiritual issue, I first turn to the gospels to see what Jesus of Nazareth had to say. My sentence includes four aspects of forgiveness and so it was advice for each that I went seeking. I was surprised to find that the words "forgive" and "forgiveness" do not occur often and that the sayings or stories that were most helpful to me didn't include those words at all.

## SEEKING GOD'S FORGIVENESS

My prayer is addressed to God so the phrase—"forgive me for all that I have done"—is a request for God's forgiveness. Although this seemed like an appropriate request (perhaps influenced by my Catholic upbringing and years of going to confession to ask forgiveness for my sins), I was surprised to realize that it was incompatible with my concept of God and with the gospel story that speaks most clearly to me about God's forgiveness.

My concept of God is not an entity with human emotions or characteristics. It is more like an intelligent energy that is the source of and permeates all creation. Nonetheless, I believe that "whatever it is" for which we use the word God, has a positive regard for all creation, including us human beings. In human language this positive regard is called unconditional love and I believe that is an accurate phrase: God's love is unconditional, unchanging, and bestowed on all equally no matter what we do.

The story in the gospel that speaks most clearly to me about forgiveness and exemplifies the idea of God's unconditional love is the one called The Prodigal Son. [Luke 15: 11-32] Like many others, I believe this parable is inappropriately named; it is really about a father and his relationship to his two sons. Some people view the story as an analogy for God's relation to human beings: the father stands for God, the sons for us. I don't

read the story that way. I believe the father is a man living in the Kingdom of God and as such behaves in a way that manifests the presence of God in his life.

You will recall that the younger son asks for the share of his father's estate that he will inherit, receives it, and then goes off and squanders it in what the gospel calls "wanton living." (Another way of looking at it is that he goes off and has fun and enjoys himself.) When the money runs out, he decides to return home and rehearses a speech asking for forgiveness. But even before he can get the words out, his father welcomes him with open arms, gives him a ring and a robe, and organizes a party. The father's love for his son is unchanged; it is the same love that led him to give the resources. He placed no conditions on the gift of those resources, consequently what his son did while he was away is of no concern to him. He does not judge his son's behavior; he loves him regardless of what he has done, which is to say he loves him unconditionally.

The same is true for God. The gift of life comes with no conditions attached. Nor does God judge our deeds as "good" or "bad." In God's eyes nothing is good or bad, it is, as Shakespeare reminds us, our own thinking that makes it so. The only thing God or the father in the parable might say is, what did you learn from that experience?

So if God's love for me is unconditional, unchanging, and non-judgmental, why am I asking God for

forgiveness? Indeed, it almost seems inappropriate and even insulting to ask for God's forgiveness as if it might not be given unless I asked. My best guess at the moment is that I am doing this to remind myself that my behavior often falls short of the spiritually-led person I want to be, and that acknowledgement helps me to see both the need and the way to change. While that may be useful, a more appropriate prayer would be one that gives thanks to God for its unconditional love despite my frequent failures to live up to the standards of the person I want to be.

### SEEKING FORGIVENESS FOR HURTING OR OFFENDING OTHERS

The gospel gives quite clear advice when it comes to seeking forgiveness from those I've hurt or offended. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother has ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." This sentence contains three important ideas. The first is the meaning of the word "brother" (which I understand to mean sister, too). Jesus defines this word elsewhere when he says my brothers "are those which hear the word of God and do it." [Luke 8:21] A brother is someone with whom you share something important in common and frequently

that means a common spiritual belief. So this saying indicates that those kinds of relationships are very important to maintain and have a higher priority than bringing a gift to the altar, which must have been a very important act for the Jewish people of the time.

The second thing the saying tells us is that if you know someone feels you have hurt or offended them, it is your responsibility to take the initiative to repair the damage done whether or not you feel you have done something wrong. So long as your brother feels hurt, your relationship is broken, and you must address it. The third thing the saying tells us is how to do that.

It is significant that the word used is "reconcile" and not the phrase "ask for forgiveness." Reconcile means to restore harmony to a relationship. How do you do that? By acknowledging what you did and apologizing for it. The focus of your action is on the feelings of the other party, relieving him or her of the burden of anger and resentment that he or she may be carrying, a burden that can affect physical as well as spiritual well-being. There is a tendency to want to add the phrase "please forgive me" or something similar. But I think that is inappropriate, and the reason that the saying uses the word reconcile.

In the TV mini-series, *The Tudors*, Charles Brandon is King Henry's best friend. He travels to Scotland where he previously led a military campaign and meets the ghost of a man he killed. When he asks for forgive-

ness, the ghost says no; “You living are so selfish.” To ask for forgiveness is a selfish act; it is concerned with relieving your shame and guilt for what you have done whereas the focus of an apology should be on relieving the feelings of hurt of the person injured. If forgiveness is offered, it must be the voluntary decision of the other, and if it is withheld until your future actions show changed behavior, that is reasonable and appropriate too.

Certainly, relieving your guilt or shame is one of the benefits of reconciling with your brother. It may even be that guilt and shame rather than your brother’s anger are the impetus for your action. Nonetheless, this is secondary to the primary objective of relieving your brother (or sister) of the burden they may still carry.

### **FORGIVING THOSE WHO HAVE HURT OR OFFENDED ME**

The gospels have much to say about forgiving others. Perhaps the best known is in the Lord’s Prayer. When I was growing up in the Catholic Church the phrase was “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.” Current translations say the word is “debts” not trespasses and the phrase that follows is “as we *have forgiven* our debtors.” In many other places we are told that unless we forgive others God will not forgive us. [Mark 11:25-26, Matthew 6:14-15, Luke 6:37] This seems to be a misunderstanding of the

nature of God, as I previously discussed, and a lack of understanding of God’s unconditional love. In addition, it too seems selfish; it is a kind of reciprocal forgiveness, a *quid pro quo* that has as its primary objective seeking forgiveness for myself and relief of my guilt and shame. Just as apologizing to someone is intended to ease the burden of anger and resentment resulting from my actions, so giving forgiveness should be for easing the burden of guilt and shame that another may feel as a result of their actions.

Most of the books or articles I’ve read about forgiving others emphasize the way in which such forgiveness releases our resentments and from constantly reliving the past. While this an important benefit, it also seems selfish. Forgiveness for me is an act of compassion—compassion for another and for the feelings they may have about actions which they now regret. If, when apologizing for my actions, I hope for reconciliation, then when someone apologizes to me, I must be willing to be reconciled and help relieve the burdens they may still carry.

Better, but more difficult advice about forgiving others is given in Matthew 18:21-22 when Peter asks, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times, but Until seventy times seven.” By using the word “brother” the story is once again referring to someone with whom you have a

relationship based on a common bond. A modern-day psychologist would say that to forgive someone who has hurt you seven times, much less 490 times, makes no sense; it would only encourage continued bad behavior knowing there would be no consequences. But much of what Jesus says doesn't make sense to people who are not living in the Kingdom of God. Here he is making the same point as before—such relationships are of great importance, and you must do more than might reasonably be expected to maintain them.

When I think of someone who has hurt me, and who I need to forgive the first person who comes to mind is my father. He did not do me any physical harm or harshly criticize me; the harm he caused was purely psychological. He was an emotionally distant man and never expressed his feelings in words or obvious actions. He seemed indifferent to me which I took as a lack of love as a result of which I developed a strong resentment toward him that was an expression of my disappointment which I kept hidden within me. The phrase I've used is that I "hardened my heart against him." I said to myself, if you won't love me, I won't love you and thought that would be a form of punishment. Nelson Mandela referred to this type of resentment as taking poison with the belief that it will kill your enemy. The only one who gets hurt is yourself, and that was true for me. Once you harden your heart to someone it becomes easy to harden your heart to others and a hardened

heart cannot express love or accept love from others or be aware of God's love.

Unfortunately, I carried that same pattern into other relationships as an adult. As a result of a disagreement about some carpentry work a friend was doing on my house, we became estranged for several years. One Sunday morning he came to the Quaker meeting I attended which he had never done before. As soon as I saw him enter the meeting room, I knew he was there because I needed to apologize for hardening my heart against him over that disagreement. I was led to stand and speak about forgiveness; although I did not mention our situation, he knew exactly what I was saying. As soon as the meeting for worship ended, I went up to him and apologized. Apologizing to him enabled me to relinquish the grudge I had carried for so long.

When, on Yom Kippur, I thought about all the people who had hurt me, all the grudges and resentments I carried for too long, I realized for the first time that none of them had intended to hurt me. It was my interpretation of their actions that caused the pain and suffering I experienced. It was merely my ego that was bruised, and no harm actually intended or inflicted. It is true that in each situation there was some small incident that was the basis for my response, but it was minor and not intended to hurt. While I may have needed to forgive my father and others for those incidents, I suddenly realized the person I really needed to forgive was myself

for thinking unfairly of them, and for the pain and suffering I caused myself by the resentment I created by my mistaken interpretation.

## FORGIVING MYSELF

At the end of my day of reflection I came to see, much to my surprise, that forgiving myself was at the heart of my ability to achieve peace with myself for my actions and peace with others for theirs. The challenge was not to seek forgiveness externally, but to be able to extend to myself the same unconditional love God extends to me and that I am encouraged to extend to others. Unconditional love means accepting myself as I am, forgiving myself for my mistakes, and trying to learn from them. The same is true for others. Reconciling with someone I've injured is not sufficient unless I can also forgive myself; reconciling with someone who has injured me is not sufficient unless I can forgive myself for my resentment, including the way I might have created that myself by attributing to them something that wasn't there. This was the case when I apologized to my friend after meeting for worship; apologizing to him had enabled me to forgive myself and experience a sense of relief that was as real as having a physical burden lifted from my back.

All the actions for which I felt I needed to seek forgiveness, or the hurts I felt I needed to forgive were in the past. Consequently, it seemed that praying for forgive-

ness—from God, from others or for myself—is not as appropriate as praying for help in being able to extend unconditional love to everyone in my life and thereby making apology and forgiveness unnecessary. While I still feel it is good to ask for God's forgiveness as a reminder that I am not perfect, it seems more important to thank God for its unconditional love and ask for help in extending that to others. Consequently, I have revised my morning prayer to reflect this new perspective.

Alexander Pope's quotation—"To err is human, to forgive divine"—that was the basis of the original title of this essay (*To Err is Human; To Forgive is Human Too*) implies that only God can truly forgive. But that is not what I think it means. It means that when we forgive others and ourselves, we come as close as we can in this lifetime to manifesting God's unconditional love. Forgiveness is the means. unconditional love is the goal.

## QUOTATIONS

*The King James Version of the New Testament*

*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii.

William Shakespeare

*The Tudors*, Season 4, Episode 4

Michael Hirst writer

Phase 4 Films and Take 5 Productions

*An Exercise on Criticism*

Alexander Pope, 1711

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John Andrew Gallery lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he attends the Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). This pamphlet is a companion to his other pamphlets—*On Love*, *On Generosity*, and *On Prayer*. John is also the author of four pamphlets published by Pendle Hill publications and two self-published spiritual books. For more information about John and his spiritual writings, or to order other pamphlets, go to [www.johnandrewgallery.com](http://www.johnandrewgallery.com).

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