

"Five Things Everyone Should Know About Forgiving"

Let's say that you've been hurt. Somebody you counted on let you down. Somebody you trusted betrayed you in your trust. Somebody who promised to take care of you, instead took advantage of you. The hurt goes deep. What makes the pain worse is that you were wronged. You did not have it coming. Nobody deserves to be treated the way you were treated. It was not fair.

One thing is for sure. You cannot change what happened. There is no delete button for the past. You are stuck with it. You cannot forget what happened. You cannot erase it from your mind. It is like a video tape sewed inside your head. And every time it plays its rerun, you feel the pain all over again.

Now you have to make the hard decision. Do you want to spend the rest of your life with a pain that you did not deserve to get in the first place? Or do you want to be rid of it, healed, freed from it, so that you can go on with your life without that painful memory shadowing you?

There is one way to heal yourself. It is not one way among many. It is the *only* way. God invented it. It did wonders for him and does wonders for us. We call it forgiving. And God tells us to try it for ourselves. "Forgive each other," the Good Book says, "as God in Christ forgave you."

It is so simple. And yet people often misunderstand what forgiving is. And what it isn't. So I want to share five simple things about forgiving just to clear up some mistaken notions about God's way of healing unfair pain.

I. Forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself

People have said to me, "Forgiving is just not fair. Why should I have to forgive the lout who did me wrong and let him off Scott free as if it never happened? "That just isn't fair," they say.

When they say that forgiving is not fair, I tell them that forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself. Would it be fair to you that the person who hurt you once goes on hurting you the rest of your life? When you refuse to forgive, you are giving the person who walloped you once the privilege of hurting you all over again in your memory.

Remember this: The first person to get the benefits of forgiving is the person who does the forgiving. It's so important that I want to say that again: The first person who *benefits* from the forgiving is the person who *does* the forgiving. Forgiving is, first of all, a way of helping yourself to get free of the unfair pain somebody caused you. The most unfair thing about unfair pain is that you should go on suffering it in your bitterness and misery when there is such a simple remedy for it.

So if you think forgiving is unfair, let me tell you that once you've been wrongly hurt, forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself.

II. Forgivers are not doormats

Some people have the notion that if you forgive you make yourself a doormat for people to walk on. A wimp. Nothing could be more wrong than this.

Let me tell you what one woman learned about not being a doormat and still being a forgiver. I was a guest on a radio talk show one time and a lady called in to tell us about how she had suffered the worst thing that could happen to a mother. A drunk driver in her neighborhood

swerved his car out of control and hit and killed her three year old little girl who was playing on the grass near the curb. She died before they reached the hospital. Now, in a rage, her mother asked me how I could expect her to forgive a monster who got himself drunk, then took his car and killed her precious three year old daughter.

As soon as she hung up another woman called to say she had to speak to the first caller because the very same thing had happened to her. A drunk driver killed her five year old boy four years before, right in front of her own house. But listen to what she went on to say: She said that for two years, she lived in the fog of terrible rage. She fantasized the most horrible things happening to the man who killed her child. She wanted him to suffer more than he had made her suffer; to have nightmares the rest of his life and then burn in hell.

Well, after living in the misery of her blind, unhealed rage for two years, she woke up to the fact that the drunk who killed her son was now killing her *inside* a day at a time, killing her soul. And she was helping him do it. She was wise enough to go and see her priest who listened to her story and told her what she already knew, that the only way out of her pain was to set out on the journey of forgiveness. Yes, even for this wretched man who had done such a horrible thing to her. But he said there was something they had to do first. They had to begin a chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving in their town. They had to make it known that if you forgive a drunk driver it does not mean that you must tolerate drunk driving.

Forgive those who wrong you, but do not tolerate their wrong doing. Forgive them and tell them what Jesus told people he forgave: You are forgiven for what you did, but stop it, don't do it again. Let me say it again: Forgivers are not doormats.

III. Forgivers are not fools

Some people think that if you forgive somebody you once trusted, it means that you have to go back into the same relationship with him or her that you had before. If she was a friend who made a practice of betraying you, forgive her and be friends again. Not a good idea. Forgivers do not have to be fools.

Suppose he was your husband once, and that he beat you or betrayed you until you just could not put up with it anymore and you left him. Now to heal yourself, you are ready to forgive him, ready to clean the garbage of spite and resentment out of your life.

But suppose he has given you reason to believe that if you went back to him, he would soon be back at his old abuse again. Don't go back to him. Forgive him and pray that he will be changed. But don't go back. Remember: You may be a forgiver, but forgivers do not have to be a fools.

IV. You don't have to wait until he says he's sorry

Some people believe that you should not forgive anyone who wronged you unless he or she crawls back on his knees, says he or she is sorry, and begs you to forgive him. I think that is a bad idea.

If you wait for the lout who hurt you to repent, you may have to wait forever. And then you are the one who is stuck with the pain. If you wait for the person who hurt you to say she's sorry, you are giving her permission to keep on hurting you as long as you live. Why should you put your future happiness in the hands of an unrepentant person who had hurt you so unfairly to begin with? If you refuse to forgive until he begs you to forgive, you are letting him decide for you when you may be healed of the memory of the rotten thing he did to you.

Why put your happiness in the hands of the person who made you unhappy in the first place? Forgive and let the other person do what he wants. Heal yourself.

V. Forgiving is a journey.

Some people suppose that you should be able to forgive everything in a single minute and be done with it. I think they are very wrong. God can forgive in the twinkling of an eye, but we are not God. Most of us need some time. Especially if the hurt went deep and the wrong was bad. So when you forgive, be patient with yourself.

When you decide to forgive you first make a baby step on the way to healing. And then you go on from there. You may be on the way for a long time before you finish the job. And you may backslide and need to forgive all over again.

I once was in a rage at a police officer in the village where I live for abusing my youngest son for no good reason. I stomped about my house for several days in a fury of anger at the officer. I knew I would be miserable unless I forgave him. But I did. I did forgive him. I forgave him by going into my study and getting on my knees, and saying, "Officer Maloney, I forgive you. In the name of God, I forgive you."

About a year later I saw this same office drive by in a patrol car and I had to do it all over again. Only it was easier the second time. Then, a few years later, I heard that he had been fired from the force for abusive conduct. Hearing that tasted sweet as honey to me. I secretly smacked my lips with vengeful satisfaction. Then I realized I needed to forgive him one more time. Which I did. And, who knows, I may have to do it a few more times before I'm over it.

Nobody but God is a real pro at forgiving. We are amateur and bunglers. We cannot usually finish it the first time. So be patient with yourself. Make the first step. It will get you going and once on the way, you will never want to go back.

These are the five things I wanted to tell you about forgiving somebody who wronged you. Let me go over them once more:

1. Forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself after someone hurts you unfairly.
2. Forgivers are not doormats; they do not have to tolerate the bad things that they forgive.
3. Forgivers are not fools; they forgive and heal themselves, but they do not have to go back for more abuse.
4. We don't have to wait until the other person repents before we forgive him or her and heal ourselves.
5. Forgiving is a journey. For us, it takes time, so be patient and don't get discouraged if you backslide have to do it over again.

And remember this: The first person who gets the benefit of forgiving is always the person who does the forgiving. When you forgive a person who wronged you, you set a prisoner free, and then you discover that the prisoner you set free is you. When you forgive, you walk hand in hand with the very God who forgives you everything for the sake of his Son. When you forgive, you heal the hurts you never should have felt in the first place.

So if you have been hurt and feel miserable about it, our Lord himself recommends forgiving as the only way to healing. I hope that you will try it for yourself.