

How to Forgive Yourself and Others

Steps to Reconciliation

*Newly Revised and Expanded
Third Edition*

FATHER EAMON TOBIN



Liguori

LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:
Thomas D. Picton, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Imprimatur:
Most Reverend Robert J. Hermann
Auxiliary Bishop
Archdiocese of St. Louis

ISBN 978-0-7648-1532-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006927162

Copyright © 1983, 1993, 2006, Liguori Publications
Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 / 8 7 6 5 4

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted without the written permission of Liguori Publications.

Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Quotes from *The Art of Forgiving*, © 2006, Ballantine Books, by Lewis B. Smedes, are reprinted with permission by Random House, Inc., New York, NY 10019.

The quote on pages 8–10 was reprinted with permission from *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*, by Jean Maalouf. Copyright © 2005; all rights reserved. Twenty-Third Publications, New London, CT 06320.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

Contents

Foreword ~ vii

Introduction ~ xi

Chapter One

Defining Forgiveness: What It Is and Isn't ~ 1

What Forgiveness Isn't ~ 1

What Forgiveness Is ~ 4

Chapter Two

Three Good Reasons to Forgive ~ 5

Chapter Three

Thirteen Truths to Remember

About the Forgiveness Process ~ 13

Chapter Four

Ten Obstacles to Forgiving Life's Hurts ~ 23

Chapter Five

How Prayer Can Help Forgive Life's Hurts ~ 29

Prayer Suggestion 1: Prayer of Rage ~ 30

Prayer Suggestion 2: Prayer for the Desire to Forgive ~ 32

Prayer Suggestion 3: Prayer of Repentance ~ 34

Prayer Suggestion 4: Prayer for the Offender ~ 35

Prayer Suggestion 5:

Prayer for Deliverance From an Evil Spirit ~ 37

Chapter Six

Moving Through Forgiveness to Reconciliation ~ 41

Using Our Imagination to Prepare
for a Reconciliation Meeting ~ 42

Using a Letter to Initiate a Reconciliation Meeting ~ 45

To Talk or Not to Talk About the Hurt ~ 46

Deepening Forgiveness and Reconciliation ~ 47

Chapter Seven

Forgiving a Deceased Person ~ 51

Exercise 1: Write a Farewell Letter ~ 52

Exercise 2: A Letter Dealing With Hurt and Resentment ~ 54

Chapter Eight

Forgiving God ~ 57

How to Respond ~ 58

Chapter Nine

Forgiving Religious and Secular Institutions ~ 63

What Might Help Us Forgive What Seems Unforgivable ~ 64

Suggested Steps ~ 66

Chapter Ten

Forgiving Yourself ~ 69

Steps Toward Self-forgiveness ~ 70

Three Questions ~ 71

Dealing With a Perfectionistic Spirit ~ 73

Three Suggestions ~ 75

Difficult Questions ~ 77

Concluding Remarks ~ 83

Introduction

Some years ago I listened to a man give a talk about forgiveness. The man had come to lose all respect for his father. But he also felt that there was something missing in his spiritual life despite the fact that he came to church regularly and tried to live a good life. Then one day, moved by the Holy Spirit, the man picked up the phone and said, “Dad, I need to ask for your forgiveness for all the resentment I have been harboring toward you.” Even though the father was not very receptive, it did not matter as far as the *spiritual life* of the caller was concerned. He had done what he needed to do. Immediately, he felt a new closeness to God and a new joy entered his life. Also, his prayers of petition for victory over some personal weaknesses started to be answered. This simple story is a great example of *the power* of forgiveness. Through his willingness to ask his father’s forgiveness and to forgive him for any hurt he did to him, this man was freed from the burden of resentment. Joy was restored to his life and his renewed relationship with God bore fruit as he sought God’s help with his own personal struggles.

When I listen to some very painful hurts and injustices that some people have had to endure, I do understand why they would have absolutely no desire to forgive and let go of hurts and wrongs done to them. I even understand why some people may conclude that it would be wrong to forgive some hurts and grave injustices. Some people find it repulsive to even think about forgiving certain hurts. Unfortunately, the consequence of such a stance is that people are trapped in a sea of bitterness and continue to be controlled emotionally by those who have inflicted a terrible hurt or injustice upon them. When we choose not to forgive, we knowingly or unknowingly choose to cheat ourselves of the joy of living. When we live life with resentment in our hearts, our resentment becomes the lens through which we see reality and people. We see them not as they are but how our resentment wants us to see.

Others who have been grievously hurt feel that forgiveness is way beyond their reach. On a *human* level, forgiveness is beyond many people's reach. That is why we often hear the saying "to err is human, but to forgive is divine." Yet, with the grace of God *all* things are possible—even forgiving what seems like an unforgivable sin or crime.

Inspiring Examples of Forgiveness

One thing that should help us to believe that forgiveness *is* always possible is listening to stories about

ordinary people who decided to forgive what seemed like unforgivable sins, crimes, and hurts. The following are six inspiring examples of people who made a decision to forgive what could easily be called an unforgivable wrong or crime:

During the riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King trial in Los Angeles, California, a truck driver named Reggie Denny was pulled from his truck and severely beaten. When the case came to trial, Denny stunned the courtroom when he offered to forgive those who almost killed him. Later Denny said that only by forgiving the perpetrators could he put the painful event behind him and move on with his life.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa to heal the hurts of decades of apartheid and human abuses, an American couple, Peter and Linda Biehl, went to South Africa to meet and embrace the people who killed their twenty-six-year-old daughter.

After spending twenty-seven years in jail for plotting against South Africa's apartheid government, Nelson Mandela said: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

In June 2005, Ivon Harris and his daughter Sarah were both killed when they walked in on a robbery of their home. Nancy Harris, Ivon's wife and Sarah's mother, publicly forgave their killer, Russell Sedelmaier. In court Nancy said: "Because I value the gift of life

and I know God forgives and loves all of us, especially you Russell, I forgive you and I support a sentence of natural life.”

Father Jenco, one of the Beirut hostages, forgave those who had starved, degraded, and brutalized him. He said that only when he was able to forgive his kidnappers was he able to enjoy his freedom.

Shortly after the tragic shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, at least two parents publicly said that they had forgiven the killers of their children.

Fortunately for the vast majority of us, we never have to forgive wrongs or crimes like the above. Most of the issues we deal with are relational hurts between family members, friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners, or coworkers. I realize that some such hurts can be very big, but many are not, and yet we choose to hold on to grudges about some hurts for years. Sadly, many people take their hurts to their grave.

Chapter One

Defining Forgiveness: What It Is and Isn't

Having a clear sense of what forgiveness is and isn't can be a big help as we face this difficult task. Let's first name some of the things that forgiveness is *not*.

What Forgiveness Isn't

- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we must forget a hurt or injustice. We often hear the advice "forgive and forget." Sometimes it is not possible to forget some hurts and sometimes it is not even wise to do so. Some hurts and injustices are too big and painful to remove totally from our memory. What we can and should seek to do is to let go of the resentments connected with the hurt. If we don't, these resentments will continue to wound us, cloud the way we see reality, and control our

actions. Also, while we may sometimes be able to totally forget some hurts, it is not necessarily wise to forget *all* hurts. We may need to remember some hurts to help us to not allow them to happen again. For example, if we do not remember how a person abused us, we run the risk of allowing such behavior to occur again. Also, remembering hurts that are forgiven and healed will enable us to offer understanding, compassion, and help to others in need of healing.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that we surrender our right to justice. For example, if we know someone has cheated us of a lot of money, forgiveness doesn't mean that we surrender our right to seek justice. The late Pope John Paul II forgave Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him, but he didn't request that he be released from jail. Neither did Nancy Harris ask that the killer of her husband and daughter be released. Forgiving someone who breaks our trust doesn't mean that we give him back his job. I sometimes say to people, we shouldn't confuse forgiveness with stupidity. Jesus did indeed ask us to forgive, but he didn't ask us to be stupid in our dealings with others.
- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that I have to relate to or befriend my offender. This is especially true if my offender shows no sorrow or remorse for the wrong he/she did. Of course, some situations may demand that we try to relate well to our offender, such as when it involves a mar-

ried couple or friend whom we desire to continue to have a relationship with. It is also very desirable that divorced parents who have children, especially young children get along for the sake of the children. Also, it is desirable that coworkers and parishioners get along for the sake of the community. But the good news is that we can love and forgive someone without befriending them.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that I have to put up with intolerable behavior. If a spouse or anyone else abuses us, we should do everything in our power to resist such behavior. Forgiveness does not ask that we become doormats for nasty people. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught their followers to resist those who did them wrong.
- Forgiveness doesn't mean excusing, condoning, or minimizing the wrong inflicted on us. Jesus never suggested that we do any of the above. He only asks that we forgive.
- Forgiveness doesn't mean that we never have negative feelings toward our offender. As we shall see later there is a difference between the *forgiveness* of a hurt and the *total healing* of a hurt.
- Forgiveness does not mean that we have to like our offender. I doubt Jesus liked the Pharisees, yet I assume he forgave them their offenses against him.

What Forgiveness Is

- Forgiveness is a process (which may take a day, a year, or a lifetime) during which we seek to eliminate from mind and heart all resentment and hurt feelings that we have because of what someone did or said to us.
- Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery that we perform on ourselves (with the help of God's grace) to free ourselves from all the venom we feel as the result of a hurt or injustice.
- Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves so that we do not remain stuck in the past and in our pain, living as victims of some big hurt or injustice. When we are able to forgive, we move from being the victim of our story to being the hero of it.

Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past.

JEAN MAALOUF

We know that forgiveness is occurring or has occurred when the distance between our offender and us is a peaceful distance and not a hostile one. We know that forgiveness is occurring when we can pray for our offender, wish him or her well and let go of all desire to get even.