

CHAPTER 30

Forgiveness

All of us would like to be surrounded by kind, understanding, loving people. Certainly we would have no problems loving, helping, and supporting them. But what if a friend has offended us and become our worst enemy? Where can we find the courage to understand him, forgive him and, after overcoming the natural bitterness, to go on loving? How long must we forgive before yielding to the desire for revenge?

These questions are not abstract; we face them every day.

Below are a few real-life examples of people facing the need for forgiveness.

Some days ago I talked to my best friend, and foolishly poured out my whole heart to her. I really had to talk about my problem, and it didn't occur to me that next day my secrets would be known by the whole class. And you want me to forgive her? After such treachery?

Recently I came into my room and saw my mother with a pack of cigarettes in her hand that she had found while going through my school bag. She immediately began to shout, "You are 14, and already you smoke, and you are a liar, too!" I had those cigarettes by chance; I really don't smoke. But that is not the point. How could she go through my things without asking? And how could she feel she had every right to? I felt betrayed and indignant. No, I cannot forgive this.

I was born in the Caucasus and went to school there. The children in our class were of a dozen or more nationalities, and there were no problems, national ones at least. But then the war began, and suddenly people who had been neighbors for many years became enemies. Early on, my schoolmate's father was killed, and everybody was shocked. The whole class came to the funeral. No one thought some people should come and others shouldn't, based on nationality. But then a year passed, and now it seems as if our world is filled with hatred and anger. Even in our class there are fights almost every day. "Have you heard what your people did yesterday? You have always hated us!"



How much blood has already been shed! And everybody thinks of nothing but revenge! Of course, it is terrible when your relatives are killed, but can we change that by killing others ourselves? We are all people, aren't we? Hey, grown-ups! Stop! Somebody has to make the first step and forgive, or the bloodshed will never end. I know nothing of politics, and I don't want to find out which side started the killing, or who has more victims. I simply want to live and not to divide the world into Armenians, Jews, Russians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis. ...

"It is my fault. Forgive me if you can."

It is very difficult to think about forgiveness when we are discussing national or religious conflicts in which so much pain is involved and which will take many years to be resolved. Let us discuss other things first.

All of us have made mistakes and caused others pain. Before we learn to forgive other people, we should at least once experience the forgiveness of a person whom we have hurt. We should know what it feels like to be resented, to desire to make amends and to be reconciled to the person who has suffered because of us, and finally to be forgiven by them.

Two weeks ago I quarreled with my bosom friend. The worst thing is it was all my fault. I don't even know how it began. First, I just started to joke about his new infatuation. A new girl has appeared, but there is nothing really special about her. But Sergei is really crazy about her and thinks of nothing else. I simply can't bear to watch! So, Sergei began to say some nasty things back to me, and at some point I lost control and shouted so loudly that everybody could hear (which I normally never would have done), "And your father had an affair with his secretary and left you and your mother!" It was during the break, but there were many people in the class. Sergei went white, grabbed his bag and ran out into the corridor.

I don't know how it slipped from my tongue. A few days before, Sergei had told me about the situation at home. He is very much distressed about it, and it was terrible of me to have betrayed his trust. It's been already two weeks, and I'm at a loss to know what to do. To lose one's best friend in such a stupid way! I feel that I am the worst scoundrel. I have tried to make up for my mistake in different ways, but all in vain — Sergei just ignores me. It is as if I don't exist. It would be better if he beat me. I don't know what to do now. How can I prove to him that I really regret it? Will he ever forgive me?

Once you realize you have made a mistake, you cannot regain your peace of mind until the person you have hurt accepts your remorse and forgives you. Only in this way can the relationship be restored, allowing you to respect yourself again. Often it requires considerable effort on your part, but you are responsible not only for your actions but for their consequences too, so in such situations there is no one to blame but yourself.

If you have ever experienced the feeling of tremendous relief that comes when you are forgiven by someone you have hurt, it will be easier for you to understand and forgive others. All of us may face a situation in which there is nothing to hope for but the mercy of others.

For a religious person, this feeling of forgiveness and the accompanying peace of mind are the result of God's grace. God is full of grace and mercy. Where there is sincere repentance, we can always hope for His forgiveness. Then we will gain the strength to start again, without fearing that our past mistakes will forever trail behind us.

Forgiveness. What is it? Perhaps it is no more than the opportunity to try again, to do better, to be freed from the penalties and shackles of past mistakes. Whatever it is, it is something we all need and long for. That is why our hearts are touched and our eyes grow misty when we encounter truly great examples of it.

— Norman Vincent Peale
The Power of Positive Thinking

What forgiveness is

What happens when someone offends us? Besides damaging the friendship, it can make us resentful, so that our own soul suffers. We cannot calm down. We may repeat again and again to others how we have been insulted, and the feeling of alienation, of inner unhappiness goes on gnawing at our soul. Most of us can recognize this experience.

The following story is one of real pain and resentment. As you read through it, try to imagine how the writer could bring peace to herself and her situation.

Alla and I were childhood friends. Of course, we often quarreled, but never for a long time. After a quarrel one of us soon made the first step toward the other, our argument was soon forgotten and the friendship went on.

But about a year ago an event took place that broke our friendship forever, I'm afraid.

At that time I had serious problems with my parents. The thing is, during the summer I got acquainted with a group of kids. It was in the country. My parents seldom came there, and the way I was spending my time did not interest them. But when I returned to town, it turned out that they did not like my new friends. Mother demanded that I stopped meeting with "those ruffians" (she never called them anything else). And Father threatened that he would lock me at home and tell the militia about my friends, though we never did anything wrong.

Once, in the middle of all this, I was sitting at Alla's and complaining to her. The situation really was desperate. I knew that my friends differed from other young people only by their clothes and hairstyles. Actually they were good and kind. It was much more interesting being with them than with these sleek "businessmen" who can talk only about clothes and money. But how can I prove that to my parents?

One day Alla casually asked me, "And where do you gather?" Suspecting nothing, I told her everything. Two days later, when I ran to our cellar as usual, the door was sealed. I found out later that my dear daddy had come there with a policeman he knew. As a result, the cellar where we used to meet was sealed and my friends had a lot of trouble. But the point is, how do you think my father got to know about the cellar? No, he wasn't spying. My best friend, Alla, had told him everything!

This was the worst offense. I had trusted her completely. We knew all of each other's secrets. And then such treachery! How can I look my friends in the eye now? I am the one who betrayed them! (By the way, I had tried to introduce Alla to them several times, but every time she refused. She is rather reserved and maybe was scared of our noisy gatherings.)



So our group broke up, and I have nothing but pain and resentment left — toward my parents, but mostly toward Alla. Well, the problems of parents and children are as old as the hills. What else can be expected from them? But one's friend, a bosom friend for ten years?

The worst thing of all is that my character has changed, and not for the best. I've become reserved, and it is very difficult for me to trust people. Recently, while chatting with a classmate, I caught myself thinking, "I wonder what she is trying to worm out of me!" But of course she wasn't trying to find out my secrets; it was just an ordinary school chat during the break.

A year has passed, but I cannot forgive my former best friend. I cannot even listen to her. Several times she tried to approach me, to talk, but I pretended not to notice her. She doesn't even know how many people suffered because of her!

They say time is a healer, but my resentment only grows. What should I do? How can I learn to trust people again? Everybody seems to have forgotten this incident, but I feel as if I have a blunt needle in my heart which prevents me from living, communicating with people, making new friends.

What should one do? Wait until everything sorts itself out? And what if by then there are still no good feelings because they have been replaced by resentment and mistrust?

Let us think what forgiveness is and what it can bring us.

Forgiveness is the ability to put aside one's resentment and the wish to punish the person who made us suffer; it is the ability to overcome one's anger and look at a person with a fresh heart. Forgiveness not only releases the person who is the source of pain, but also relieves the victim of his suffering.

What will I gain by forgiving?

First of all, if you are wise and courageous enough to forgive a person who offends you, it will bring peace to your own soul.

All of us have quarreled at least once with those we love. How did you feel in such cases? You must admit that you felt unpleasant until the conflict was solved somehow — not just forgotten, but overcome by constructive efforts on both sides. Only then can the relationship be mended. Moreover, if we can forgive, we will become free to communicate with a very wide circle of people. We do not limit ourselves to relations with only those who love and understand us. The borders of our world are opened. We are not afraid of possible misunderstandings, because we are strong enough to understand and forgive people.

Besides the liberation of our own heart, forgiveness gives peace to another person. Each one of us has experienced more than once the pangs of conscience when we have done something wrong, hurt someone, and then understood our mistake. It is difficult to find the courage to apologize, and we fear being misunderstood or not accepted. In such a situation one can acquire inner peace only if the other person understands and

"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me!" In those who harbor such thoughts hatred is not appeased.

"He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me!" In those who do not harbor such thoughts hatred is appeased.

Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.

— From the Buddhist text
Dhammapada, 3-5

forgives. If we have such an experience ourselves, we will hardly want to increase another person's discomfort.

There is one more reason why forgiveness is "profitable." In a conflict situation, it is the only possible way of restoring the relationship. If our friendship is dear to us, we must understand that nobody is protected against mistakes, and if problems arise, it is necessary to understand them and then to forgive.

How do we forgive?

And if you excuse, and forgive ...
Allah is forgiving and merciful!

— Koran 65:14

But who forgives and mends — is
rewarded by Allah. For Allah does not
love the unfair! But, of course, those
who endure and forgive ... Really it is
from firmness in action.

— Koran 42:38, 41

We have named at least three reasons in favor of forgiving. The next question arises: How can we forgive?

The main requirement is being able to sincerely put aside one's resentment, for it is not the words we say that matter but our changed attitude and feeling for the person. If we forgive, it should be done simply, without any conditions, without expecting from the offender any humiliating proof that he has understood his fault. Forgiveness cannot be based on humiliation.

Having forgiven a person, you must not accuse him of the same thing again. Forgiveness implies that the past offense is forgotten, wiped out of your memory forever. Sometimes friends seem to have made peace, but after some time a new quarrel occurs, and it turns out that the past offenses are brought up again, showing that there was no real forgiveness. It is much

easier to forgive in words than to accept your offender with all your heart and never recall his past faults, no matter how intensely you quarrel.

How do you set about becoming a forgiving person? First, you decide, by an act of will, that you are not going to be judgmental. We should refrain from judging, because we never have all the information that would enable us to be absolutely just. There are always some things hidden from us. Try to remember that each of us is subject to all sorts of strains and stresses that can be hidden from others but influence our actions and often push us to make mistakes.

Cultivating a sense of compassion and a conscious refusal to be judgmental are the first steps. Even so, these are difficult attitudes to achieve when you think you have been wronged. The instinctive, animalistic reaction is to fight back, to inflict hurt because you have been hurt.

If you want to experience the happiness, relief and well-being that come from forgiving, remember these three steps:

1. **Resist the temptation to be judgmental.** Remember, you do not know all the circumstances surrounding any event.
2. **Learn to be compassionate.** The best method is to use your imagination, put yourself in the other person's shoes and ask yourself whether the fault is entirely the other person's or whether there is some blame on your own part that needs to be honestly faced.
3. **Imagine the whole problem in terms of reconciliation.** Visualize the broken relationship healed. See yourself freed of the poisons of anger and resentment. Let your imagination suggest hopeful things you will accomplish with the increased energy that will come to you.





In speaking of forgiveness we must consider another concept which is closely connected with it — repentance. It is very important that we set no conditions for our forgiveness of someone. On the other hand, if we have done something bad ourselves, we mustn't expect the offended person to forgive us immediately. First, we must feel and understand the suffering we have caused to that person. It is best when both parties understand their faults, for there are rarely situations where everything can be divided into black and white. Even if you are offended, you should try to understand the motives of the person who hurt you. Maybe you were not sensitive enough and caused such an attitude toward you. If both parties are guilty, it is better for each to ask forgiveness of the other and not to try to dwell on "who started it all."

How many times shall we forgive?

We have understood why we must to be able to forgive, and how to do it best. But there is at least one question left:

How many times must we forgive? Let us try to understand this by turning to one of the New Testament parables.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

What does this parable teach us? Each of us is far from perfect. All of us have evil inside, and all have made many mistakes, yet each time we want to be understood and forgiven. We all can recognize such feelings. Having done wrong, we may repent quite sincerely and promise that we will never repeat the same mistake, but after some time our courage and will may fail us and we may repeat the same mistake. We naturally hope to be forgiven again. If we hope for such tolerance, perhaps we should treat others in the same way and always forgive them with a fresh heart. There is no one in the world who has not committed a mistake. So why do we look at the splinter in our brother's eye and don't see the plank in our own? We all are apt to act like this, aren't we?

Forgiveness and repentance

In many cultures people have understood the importance of forgiveness. These two elements — sincere repentance for one's bad actions and the ability to forgive another person for the harm he has done — are the essence of human relations. They determine our ability to find a dignified way out of complicated or conflict situations. Let us look at forgiveness from the point of view of two of these traditions, Judaism and Orthodox Christianity.

Jewish tradition

According to the Jewish calendar, the New Year comes after the month of *Elul*, which is called the month of mercy and forgiveness. From the first day of this month, every day (except Saturday) after the morning prayer, in all synagogues a horn is blown. The sound of the horn makes people think, "The year is coming to an end. Look around. Have I committed actions this year of which I must repent? Have I harmed or offended anyone? It is not too late to make amends and with a sincere heart to apologize to them."

Elul is the time not only for repentance and understanding one's sins, but also for merciful forgiveness, making peace with everybody with whom one has had conflicts or quarrels. According to the Jewish tradition, during this time (as well as during the ten following days), God determines the fate of people for the next year. And only those who have been sincere in their repentance and forgiveness may hope for God's mercy, for being forgiven themselves, and for a good next year. The last day of this period is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when those people who already have

understood evil in themselves and overcome their resentment toward others can stand before God with a clean soul. "In your love you gave us this Day of Absolution to forgive and to excuse all our sins. ... O, listen, O forgive us this day which is coming to its end. Open the gates of Heaven to us before the gates of the Sun are closed" — with these words Jews address the Lord on Yom Kippur.



Orthodox Christian tradition

In the Orthodox Christian tradition there is also a day dedicated to the spirit of repentance, forgiveness and love of one's neighbor. It is known as "Forgiving Sunday", which occurs just before Lent. On that day, Orthodox Christians remember the words of Christ, "If you want your heavenly Father to forgive you, you must forgive those who have done you wrong." In fact, how can we expect anyone to forgive us if our own heart is full of anger, if we cultivate resentment? We cannot live together without forgiveness, for every person is always guilty toward others: husband toward wife, children toward parents, parents toward children, neighbors toward one another. We are people, living people, and if we cannot forgive, the world will become hell, a chaotic place full of ill will.

The Orthodox Christian tradition teaches that one should beg pardon of all people, for it can happen that we have offended someone without noticing it. The other person is suffering, and it is so simple for us to deliver him from this suffering by coming to him, talking it over, and begging his pardon.

You can see the importance of such traditions in our lives, no matter whether their roots are religious or not. However, it is hardly sensible to store resentment for the whole year, hoping it all can be solved in one day. It is much easier to overcome conflicts at once, without waiting for a petty quarrel to grow into a big tangle of new suspicions and offenses. Then your heart will be at peace and your life happier.

For Your Journal



Remember a situation when you felt offended. Describe it in detail in your journal. First express your feelings. Try not to hide anything. Describe honestly the most unpleasant feelings connected with the offense and the person who hurt you. Do you think your offender understands your feelings? Now try to imagine yourself in the place of that person and describe the same situation from his point of view. What is the difference between the stories? What do you think caused that person to behave the way he did? Did he offend you on purpose, or did he have some reasons to behave in such a way? What do you feel toward your offender now? Can you forgive him?