

# Understanding Forgiveness

## How can I forgive, when it hurts so much?

**Pastor Neville** encourages some further reading on forgiveness, the core of our Christian walk, and perhaps particularly challenging at this time in our congregation's life.

*'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.'* (Phil 2:1-5)

Ten years ago, in the Spring of 2009, I came to Melbourne to be installed as the Secretary of the LCA and the Director of International Mission for the Church. This happened at the LCA Convention of Synod conducted at Luther College. At the same Convention an excellent resource was launched. The resource is a booklet titled *Towards Freedom – The Practice of Forgiveness in the LCA*. You can find the full work on the LCA website at <https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/commission-worship/biblical-theological-resources/>. This resource was the product of some fine work undertaken

by a task force, lay and ordained, with expertise and skills in the areas of psychology and theology and pastoral practice.

At this time and in this place ten years later I commend a particular aspect of this work to you. It is the chapter titled 'Understanding Forgiveness' which is reproduced in part here, and was largely written by one of the task force members, Marlene Pietsch. She's provided us, indeed the whole LCA, with a fine and very readable resource.

As the Spring of 2019 unfolds toward our final summer at the Station Street address, I commend it to you for springtime reading.

I've been considering the need for us to set aside a small group of people in task force to consider what we need as God's people together to move into this next season of our congregations' life. I think it may be helpful to task this group to listen and observe in order to identify our needs as community, from spiritual-pastoral, psychological, and organisational viewpoints (including relevant human resources, structure, and policy and procedural needs) and to begin to identify resources (people and material) to help us reform as God's people.

Perhaps this little gem may be one such resource. ■



**Here are questions which are commonly raised both by those who have been sinned against, and by those who have offended. They are meant to help Christians understand how forgiveness and reconciliation work in daily life and in the life of the church.**

**‘If God forgives, why can’t I forgive and forget? If I find it so hard to forget when I have been wronged, even when God has forgiven the offender, does this mean I am not a good Christian?’**

How often haven’t we been encouraged to ‘forgive and forget,’ as if they were the same thing! Yet forgiving is not just a matter of forgetting a wrong that has been done. If this were the case, most wrongs would not be forgiven but merely overlooked. An offence can only be forgotten if it is completely rectified. So strictly speaking, God alone can forget because He alone can undo something evil that has been done.

The purpose of forgiveness is not that we become good friends with an offender by somehow overlooking and excusing a sin, or by no longer blaming the offender and foregoing justice. Forgiveness needs God’s help, for by ourselves we cannot undo the evil things that we do to each other. Forgiveness is painful, because the hurt from an evil act is often deep. It hurts us to face our own culpability, or to admit how damaged we feel by what has been done. Sin, however, needs to be faced honestly – before God, before the wronged person or the offender, before our community, and, perhaps even, before a confessor. Such honesty is very painful.

What is forgiveness, then, if it’s not a matter of brushing aside the offense? It is our reliance on Christ’s death and resurrection to remove the toxic effect of anger and bitterness from us. It involves giving up our absolute right to take revenge and pay the person back for what has happened. It means turning our focus away from the wrong deed and looking at the wrongdoer with understanding and compassion, so that we are ready to ask God to remove resentment from our hearts. It is an assertion that Christ also died for those who sin against us. It is getting to the point when we can pray for them and God’s blessing on them. It is receiving strength to do this from God who accepts us and wants us to bring healing into our broken relationships.

So be patient with yourself and with the offender! God is!

**‘Do Christians have to forgive those who’ve sinned against them, even if the offenders refuse to admit guilt and ask for forgiveness? Do people have to ask for forgiveness before we can forgive them?’**

Forgiveness is not dependent on the other person. In the Lord’s Prayer we commit ourselves to forgive all ‘those who sin against us.’ That may include those who do not repent, those who

continue to offend us, and those who refuse to have a relationship with us.

This is incredibly hard! It is impossible without the courage and strength which God waits to give us. We see this best in Jesus as he hangs on the cross. He forgives His tormenters, even as they continue their assault on Him.

It is also important to say what forgiveness does not mean. It doesn’t mean that we continue to overlook the sin, or accept injustice, or forego blame. It doesn’t excuse the sin. It doesn’t mean that we necessarily continue to place ourselves in a position where we are open to continued abuse, or that we must again place full confidence and trust in the offender. Rather, when we forgive we give up the right to humiliate or pay back those who have wronged us. We do not hold their sin against them. We do not consider the offense that we have suffered as unforgivable, but we consider the offender as a person whom God too wants to forgive, just as He has forgiven us.

**‘How long can I wait before I have to forgive someone?’**

There is no time limit for forgiveness. Since God is infinitely patient with us, we need to be patient with ourselves and wait until we are able to confront the wrongdoer, without adding to the damage that has been done. Our hurt should not, however, be buried indefinitely. A slow burning anger tends to grow and expand, until it begins to overwhelm us emotionally and even physically. So St Paul tells us ‘not to let the sun go down on our wrath’. A counsellor, pastor or friend can help us face our pain, and help us on the path towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

**‘Aren’t there some sins which are unforgivable? Do I have to forgive everything? Aren’t there some people who don’t deserve to be forgiven?’**

Humanly speaking, some things seem unforgivable to us because they cause such deep, lasting damage. Sexual abuse, especially of children, makes us weep with outrage and anger at its lifelong effects. We abhor murder and are aghast at its finality. We find it especially intolerable when such criminals show no evidence of remorse or guilt.

On the other hand, we need also to consider that some such offenders who recognize their sin and are overwhelmed with shame and guilt, to the point of despair, may see themselves . . .



as unforgivable because their sins are so evil. All too often we point the finger at the terrible sinners around us, while we all too easily excuse our own trespasses as harmless misdemeanours. We all fall short of God's justice, both as 'big sinners and as 'little' sinners; no-one deserves God's favourable gaze, His full approval.

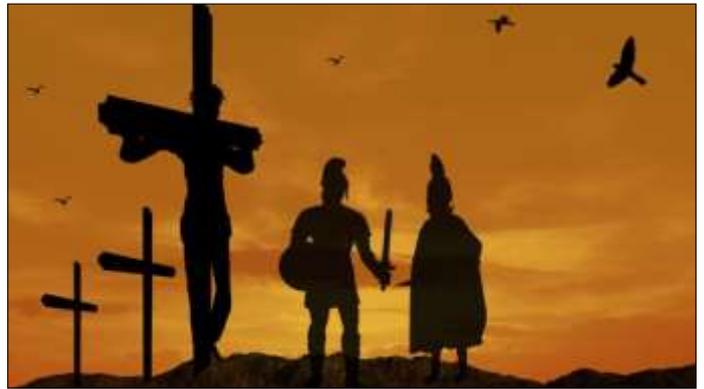
As Christians we work towards forgiving the inexcusable, because God has forgiven what is inexcusable in each of us. Even when the offender is fully to blame, our prayer remains: *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.* No-one would claim that this is easy to do. Yet we can forgive others because God gives us his own Spirit to strengthen and equip us to forgive what seems to be unforgivable, even in ourselves.

### **'It's so difficult to forgive those who have hurt me. How do I forgive them?'**

There is no simple method, no how-to-do-it for forgiveness. It is a process which is different for each person and in each situation. It is complicated because people are complicated. But the most important thing is not to wait until we actually feel like forgiving because we are never completely ready to forgive. It does not really matter where and how we start. The hardest and most decisive step is to just get started on it.

#### **The following may be a possible approach:**

- face the hurt and damage, as honestly as you can.
- don't excuse the hurt or say 'it doesn't matter'.
- hold the other person responsible for what they did to you, and face the fact that your relationship is damaged. Acknowledge that it wasn't OK and it isn't OK.
- decide that you are going to have to live with the scales of natural justice unbalanced and surrender your right to get even.
- realize that the person is a flawed human being who is not entirely evil and try to understand why they are as they are.
- pray for those who have wronged you, and in time you may actually begin to wish them well and revise your feelings for them. Yet, despite your best efforts, reconciliation may never happen. But if you have taken these steps, the offense will no longer have the power to ruin your life and rule your relationship with that person.



### **'If I am sorry and say that I am sorry, isn't that the end of it?'**

A quick fix is always appealing, but it rarely works that way when we face the consequences of sin. Often a quick apology is like placing a bandage over a raw wound, a hurt that continues to fester and infect the relationship. Since human forgiveness is a **process** of restoration, it may take a long time before it is complete. The wronged person may need repeated reassurances of sorrow and regret. In some cases, a damaged relationship may never fully recover from the hurts that have been suffered.

An apology is not dependent on the attitude and reaction of the recipient. It must be offered humbly and sincerely without any strings attached. But an apology does not absolve the offender from the consequences of their deed, which may involve ongoing animosity, estrangement and blaming. It may even have legal consequences and lead to some kind of punishment before there can be any hope of reconciliation.

The end of some evil deeds in our human experience may come only after much suffering. In fact, they may never be fully fixed for us in our relationships with each other until life in the next world. Their consequences need to run their full course before they come to an end. Yet that is the path we must walk as we work for restoration.

### **'How can I relate to a person whom I have hurt and still feels hurt despite my apology?'**

An apology is a necessary part of the forgiving process, but it's not the end of it. Sin has multiple and painful consequences, and in each case they are different. The healing process may take a long time; it may be that the relationship never fully recovers. Hurts can be deep and lasting. So the person who apologizes cannot demand what they may consider an appropriate response from the person sinned against. There may be no continuing relationship. The injured person cannot be forced to accept any apology but always retains the freedom to reject it.

In this situation, we can respond with patience, sensitivity, and, above all, prayer for the hurting person.

### **'Can an apology to someone close to me do more harm than good?'**

Forgiveness from God comes without strings attached. For us

there are no preconditions for His grace that we need to meet, such whether or not we have faced the wronged person and made an apology. But the full process of repentance and reconciliation includes facing the person against whom we have sinned and confessing your wrongdoing to them. This is a painful and threatening process that costs us our self-esteem and pride. In fact, God helps us to do just that. He gives us strength and courage to swallow our pride.

There may, however, be times when love for the wronged person means that we may reckon that full confession to them is much too hurtful and damaging for them. A thoughtless act of confession may heal me, but it may come at the expense of the other person. Love may require bearing the burden of unspoken sin. But even then, we should only do so after seeking guidance from another party. If we withhold confession, it must be for the ultimate benefit of the wronged, not to save our face and reduce our pain.

**‘What if my sins continue to haunt me, even after I have received absolution?’**

Absolution assures us that God has spared nothing to keep us close to Him. Through it God actually forgives us no matter what we have thought or said or done. His forgiveness is complete because Jesus did all that needed to be done to take away the sin of the whole world. When God speaks His word of pardon to us, He removes our sin from us and erases all memory of our wrong-doing from His mind. That is the miracle of His divine love!

As humans, however, we are less than loving, even towards ourselves. We often live as if we have not been forgiven, and our memory of past wrong-doing continues to haunt us. We need continual reassurance of God’s forgiveness, for we don’t quite believe that He has really accepted us for Jesus’ sake. Despite our best intentions, we too keep on sinning. There is also the human dimension of consequence for our sins against each other. God forgives us, but we continue to live with the results of our evil thoughts and words and deeds in our earthly relationships. This is part of our human condition, living as freely forgiven, holy people in God’s eyes, and existing as frail and fallen human beings in our relationships with each other in an unjust world. So, daily we need to return to God and ask for forgiveness from Him as we pray the Lord’s Prayer; daily we need to hear God’s word of love and approval by reading His word and meditating on it. Sunday by Sunday we need to go to church to receive His word of pardon to us.

Yet, if we are still haunted by some sins even after we have received that absolution, we should go to a pastor, confess those sins to him as to God, and receive pardon for them from God. That’s why Jesus established private confession and absolution. Nothing works better than that in dealing with the sins that bother us.

**‘Is it true that, since Jesus has died for the sins of the world, everyone is forgiven, whether they know it or not? Surely, all we have to do, then, is to reassure them of God’s grace.’**

It is true that by his death Jesus reconciled all sinful humans to God the Father and gained forgiveness for every single person on earth.

Yet we must never forget that this forgiveness cost God dearly. If the church simply reassures people of God’s grace, without confronting them with the magnitude of their sinfulness and the gravity of their offense against God’s holiness, it makes light of what actually happened on the cross and does nothing to free the sinner from sin. Sinful people do not just need to be reassured of God’s grace and pardon for them; they need to be brought to repentance as they listen to God’s law which exposes their sin and to receive pardon from God as they listen to the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for them. That, in fact, is the only certain way by which they can actually be assured of God’s grace.

**‘Aren’t we fully freed from our own sin and sinfulness at the Lord’s Supper?’**

Yes, that is wonderfully true! Christ’s death and resurrection becomes part of us as we take in His sacrificed body and blood. We receive the body that was offered up to free us from our sins and the cleansing blood that paid for our sinfulness. His body and blood takes away our sins and the sins of all those who commune at the table with us. They heal us from the sickness of sin and cleanse us from the stain of injustice and abuse.

It is also true, though, that sin remains ever-present in our lives, a blight which we try to shake off but can only escape as we, each day, return to the embrace of the Forgiver and dump it on Him. Even though we confidently leave the table forgiven, we still remain in need of forgiveness and full release from sin. We are fully forgiven by God. Yet we still live in a sinful environment. Others sin against us and damage us for as long as we live. We will not be fully released from the power of sin until we die and are raised bodily with Jesus. Until then, like people on dialysis because their kidneys are no longer working, we need to keep on receiving Christ’s purifying blood to help us in our battle against sin and our own ingrained sinfulness. ■

