

Forgiving

Jesus gave his disciples what we know as the Lord's Prayer. In it we ask God to *"forgive us our trespasses even as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Jesus also said: *"If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"*. (Matthew 6:14 – 15).

Forgiving is an action. It is something God does, and something we must do too if we want to please Him. Forgiving is our personal responsibility, an action we choose to do. We are equally capable of choosing **not** to do it. If we need to forgive, it is because someone has done something to harm us. We may have been treated unjustly, we may have been ignored, defrauded, disregarded or passed over. Maybe we have been profoundly abused, sexually, physically or emotionally. We are hurt.

Jesus, too, was hurt and abused by men, unjustly, even to his death on the cross. Yet, amazingly, he was able to pray: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Forgiving is choosing to act in the spirit of Christ. Stephanie Dowrick, in her book, *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*, writes that "Forgiveness deeply offends the rational mind". We are being called on to do something hard, that goes against the grain. It's not easy! We are the only species capable of forgiving: clearly God wants us to do it.

We may need to forgive relatives, friends, parents, children, siblings, our brothers and sisters in the meeting – any, in fact, who have hurt us.

Perhaps some people are easier to forgive than others: you might find it quite easy to forgive a child, but much harder to forgive a brother or sister in the meeting.

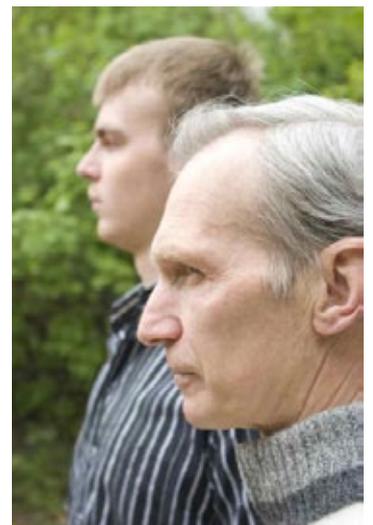
We may need to forgive dishonesty, thoughtlessness, slander, physical and sexual abuse, meanness, cruelty, lying, addiction – the list goes on. Maybe some offences are easier to forgive than others.

The will to forgive is essential, no matter how difficult that may be for us.

Forgiving may take a short or a very long time, but it needs to happen!

"Forgiveness can be discovered in a moment, but more often it takes weeks, even months or sometimes years. It is something we can open to, invite in, think about and desire." (Dowrick)

Forgiving is to be welcomed with joy, to be longed for. Hurt and hostility are gone. Our journey can continue. This process is not something we do once or twice: it needs to become a lifestyle. Jesus taught that we must forgive seventy times seven, that is to say, an infinite number of times.





Some problems with forgiving

- **Forgiving seems to condone the wrong**

Dowrick explains: “In forgiving you, I am not denying what you have done, minimizing it or making excuses for it.” Rather, forgiving says: “Though you have hurt me, I have no wish to hurt you in return.”

- **What about the saying “Forgive and forget”?**

Some people seem to think it is impossible to forgive unless we forget. For a victim of child abuse, or a battered wife, forgetting would merely mean that the same sorts of things could happen again! Forgiving is independent from forgetting. Perhaps we will never forget; we are still able to forgive. Forgiving *even as we remember* is essential.

- **I’m not ready to forgive**

Waiting can be a crucial stage in forgiving. We may need to create a distance from the hurt. “False forgiveness, forgiving because it is the ‘decent thing to do’, or because it is advantageous, does not bring healing. Forgiveness is God-given, spirit-given. It does not depend on who’s wrong or who’s right.” (Dowrick)

We can pray for forgiveness to come, knowing it may take time. When it does come, we can look forward to moving on, though never to life as it was. Because the pain and the healing have changed us.

- **It’s just too hard to say “I forgive you”.**

Forgiving isn’t about telling the offender he is forgiven. The offender may be someone we will never see again, even someone who has died. Forgiving is about us, not about the offender. It

is not about saying “I’m sorry”, it is not about reconciliation. It is about our letting go of the hurt.

- **What about forgiving ourselves? Is that just self-indulgence?**

If forgiveness is a real power working in our lives, forgiving ourselves is an important part of our journey in Christ. If God can forgive those who nailed His Son to the cross, He can forgive us; we acknowledge that by forgiving ourselves. In doing this we can better see the wonder and power of God’s infinite mercy.

Blessings of forgiving

In healing the man let down through the roof by his friends, Jesus first forgave the man his sins: here *healing and forgiveness go hand in hand*. In truly forgiving we move towards an inner “wholeness”. We will feel the freedom in mind and body. Dowrick names some of the benefits: “Your immune system lifts...Food tastes better. The world looks better. You are more available to other people and a great deal more available to yourself, yet you think about yourself less, and less anxiously.”

We have a choice. In choosing not to forgive, we disregard God’s gift of grace.

In choosing to forgive we honour our Heavenly Father and show gratitude for His infinite mercy.

Essential aspects of forgiving:

- The purpose of forgiving is to **release us from the past** and allow us to live more fully in the present.
- Forgiving may sometimes be very hard won, but its **healing power** makes the effort so worthwhile.
- Our willingness and determination to forgive are **necessary elements of our journey in Christ’s way**.

Reference: Dowrick, Stephanie: *Forgiveness and Other Aspects of Love*, Viking, 1997.