



THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CHURCH, before the term “Christianity” was coined, Christianity was simply referred to as *The Way*. The life of a Christian was seen above all as a way; a complete and comprehensive way of life, a way to a certain destination. True Christians are those who are on this way and who are advancing. When we examine our lives more closely, one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is: am I moving forward on this way? Am I making progress toward my destination, or am I paralyzed, unable to go forward? There are various things that can cause a kind of spiritual paralysis and which can present obstacles to our moving forward on this way, especially our sinfulness and our disordered affections for the creatures and comforts of the world. But I would like to consider just one matter that is frequently a source of a kind of spiritual

paralysis in a Christian’s life.

It is clear that we are not able to move forward on our path to God without receiving God’s forgiveness. But Our Lord teaches us that our ability to receive

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the forgiveness of God is dependent on our willingness to forgive others. When Our Lord taught His disciples how to pray, He told them to ask their Father in Heaven: “*forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*” (Mt.6:12). The Catechism begins its commentary on this passage of the Our Father by simply stating: “*This petition is astonishing.*” Then it goes on to make the observation that this pe-

tion of the Our Father is so important that it is the only one to which the Lord returns and which He develops explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount. Immediately after teaching the disciples the Our Father, our Lord goes on to say: “**For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will for-**

give you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt. 6:14).

In all the places where our Lord teaches us about forgiveness, He continually comes back to the same point, and the point could be expressed like this: Can't you see that it would be completely inconsistent for men to go before God in order to ask that He forgive the offenses they have committed against Him, if all the while they refuse to forgive those who have injured them? God, who is the truth itself, could never tolerate such an obvious double standard!

Still, even knowing and understanding our Lord's teaching, we find it very difficult to forgive those who have wronged us and caused us pain. It is not uncommon for those who have suffered some injustice to think they have a right to their anger and resentment and that they are entitled, in justice, to withhold forgiveness. They even see such an attitude as compatible with a religious spirit. You will hear Christians use many excuses to justify their continued hostility and ill-will toward someone who has offended them. They will say things like: “If I forgive, that would, in effect, mean that I condone what the person did and that would be false and encourage more of the same treatment.” Or “I am only required to forgive if the person repents of what he has done”—as if we are only bound to love some people and not all, including our enemies. It belongs to the very nature of supernatural charity that it extends to all without exception, since it is a participation in God's love which excludes no one. If you say you love everyone except such-and-such a person, it would mean that you love no one with supernatural charity.

Since some of these attitudes that one finds among Christians are often based on a false notion of what forgiveness is, it would be helpful if we stopped and considered the nature of Christian forgiveness, what it is and what it is not. To begin with, we could note some of the things that forgiveness *is not*.

Forgiveness is not the same as condoning or excusing. When we forgive someone we do not say that

what the person did to us was right, we do not overlook evil and pretend it didn't happen. Forgiveness does not mean denying the seriousness and the consequences of the wrongdoing. In fact, there is no true forgiveness unless we admit that what was done was wrong and should not be repeated. In his encyclical on the Mercy of God, Pope St. John Paul II wrote: “In no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean *indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult*”. Forgiving does not mean that we must open ourselves to further abuse. Forgiveness is also not the same as forgetting. We can forgive, but we should not expect to forget, though it is often the case that forgiveness will change the way we remember. Forgiveness is not the same as simply calming down. It is possible for us to calm down after we have been offended and to put the incident aside, but at the same time, withhold forgiveness. The mere absence of angry feelings is not the same as forgiveness. Finally, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Reconciliation takes two people, but we can and should forgive, even if the party that offended us does not seek reconciliation. Forgiveness opens the way to reconciliation, it is indispensable to reconciliation, but it is not the same as reconciliation.

So what *is* forgiveness? Forgiveness is above all *a choice*. It is not a *feeling*, it is *a choice*, an act of our *wills*. When we forgive, we choose to set aside our desire for revenge, we make *a choice* not to return evil for evil; we *choose* not to let our feelings of anger and resentment control us. Above all, forgiveness means *we wish that all things be well* with the person who has offended us; we wish that everything associated with the person may be truly good. The spirit of forgiveness could be characterized as a spirit of *unrelenting good will* toward those who have hurt us. Forgiveness is a participation in Divine Love, it means loving those who have hurt us with a divine love. In the words of St. John Chrysostom: “...nothing so likens you to God, as to forgive him who has injured you.” Perhaps you will say: “But that person who injured me has no right to such treatment”—to which

I would respond: *precisely!* That is precisely the point. “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8)

We live in a world where no one escapes suffering injustices. Some suffer larger ones, some smaller, but we all suffer. It should come as no surprise then that many people, and perhaps we ourselves, struggle with deep anger and resentment, bitterness and hatred towards those who have injured us or who have injured those whom we love. It is not wrong to feel anger when someone offends us; to feel anger, in a moderate way is, in fact, good and natural. The problem comes when we nurse the anger and keep it alive. It is possible to keep anger alive for a very long time. The real problem comes when we have an unforgiving attitude which is like a cancer that can spread and spoil and embitter the whole of our lives. To fail to forgive is to keep alive in our hearts the desire for revenge; to wish that evil befall the one who has hurt us. It is a terrible condition for the human heart to be in. It’s an especially fearful thing to see someone who is approaching death and who refuses to let go of old grudges and resentments. It is as if they are living in a prison from which they cannot escape; a prison of their own making. It is from this prison that Christ would like to set us free, He would like to show us that even in our world, love is stronger than sin.

If when considering the prospect of forgiving someone, you feel that it is beyond your power, that is a good sign and an understandable sentiment because Christian forgiveness *is something beyond our own power*. It is a work of grace, a participation in the divine. If we are having a hard time forgiving someone,

we should never stop begging God for the grace we need. It can be helpful to start small. Make some small effort to think well of the person, pray for him, bless him in your heart. That is the beginning. It may

take time and so we should be patient with ourselves. Those who have worked with people who have suffered greatly at the hands of others, helping them to forgive, have noted that a critical point in the process is reached when the person simply accepts the pain. Just as our Lord freely accepted the pain.

In the midst of our emotional turmoil, sometimes it is hard to know whether we have in fact forgiven someone. How do we know if we have forgiven? One clear sign is: *Do you wish the person well, do you sincerely want things to go well with him or her in their lives.*

If after much struggle and prayer we have come to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply, perhaps it will seem to us that we have accomplished a great work for God; but if we could see things clearly, the truth of the matter is, God has done something great for us. He has set our hearts free. He has freed us from a source of spiritual paralysis. He has given us a way to escape from this dark dungeon of hatred and resentment, from this evil that has darkened our souls and poisoned our lives and kept us from experiencing the light and warmth of God’s merciful love. We should not be surprised if we discover what many other people have discovered who have chosen the path of forgiveness: that *as we reach out to the ones who have hurt us, we will be the ones who are healed.*



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