

## Preparation for Forgiveness

Spiritual guides, self-help books, talk show hosts, and advice columnists all sing the praises of forgiveness. They urge us to put down hatred, resentment, and bitterness after someone has hurt us and to get on with life. They point out that our negative feelings are not hurting the person who wronged us. Instead those feelings are impacting our lives. While that approach may make lots of sense in our minds, why is it so hard to forgive? Part of the problem is understanding what it means to forgive. Does it mean to let go of the anger or hurt, or does it also mean to absolve the person who hurt us? The origin of the word forgive from late Old English is to give up the desire or power to punish. The Merriam Webster dictionary definition of forgive is to cease to feel resentment against an offender. Forgiveness has a slightly different meaning than the word pardon, which implies excusing the offense.

The teachings of the world's religions deal with the idea of forgiveness. A verse in the Bhagavad Gita, sacred scripture of Hinduism, reads, "If you want to see the brave, look for those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look for those who can love in return for hatred." Buddhism emphasizes working with our own minds when confronted with conflict. The Buddhist teacher Kelsang Gyasto explains, "Problems arise only if we respond to difficulties with a negative state of mind. Therefore, if we want to be free from problems, we must transform our mind." Divine forgiveness is an important concept in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We are human and we sin and then we ask God to forgive us. Followers of these religions are also asked to extend the concept of forgiveness to those who have wronged them. The Quran (42:40) states, "And the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation – his reward is (due) from Allah." In the Letter to the Ephesians (4:32) Paul wrote, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

In our own lives we face a variety of situations in which we or someone we love has been hurt. Letting go of resentment can depend on the circumstances. It is easier to forgive someone who is truly sorry. We are more likely to forgive someone with whom we want to have a continuing relationship than someone we do not really care about. For some of us, it makes a difference if the person who wronged us has received a punishment and we can call it justice. It may be easier to forgive someone who has harmed you once than to forgive someone who continuously injures you. Being able to set boundaries so that you are not hurt again may make it more possible to forgive. Some of us find it easy to forgive naturally; others of us have to work hard to forgive.

Another aspect of this topic is forgiving ourselves. No matter how hard we try, we mess up. Sometimes we can remedy the situation. Sometimes we can ask for and receive forgiveness. Sometimes we live with guilt and self-recrimination that are both hard to let go. There are situations for which no good course of action is possible. Sometimes we have to take the least bad action and then forgive ourselves that the world is not perfect.

Here are some quotations that might help you think about different aspects of forgiveness.

To be angry is to let others' mistakes punish yourself. To forgive others is to be good to yourself.  
*Master Cheng Yen*

Constantly holding something in your heart against a person is a disease. Trust Allah and let it go, as the Prophet said, "Whoever gives up something for the sake of Allah, will have it replaced by something better." *Musnad Ahmad*

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor does it mean abandoning the claims of justice. It does mean, however, an acknowledgement that the past is past and must not be allowed to cast its shadow over the future. Forgiveness heals moral wounds the way the body heals physical wounds. *Rabbi Sacks*

In our society, forgiveness is often seen as weakness. People who forgive those who have hurt them or their family are made to look as if they really don't care about their loved ones. But forgiveness is tremendous strength. It is the action of someone who refuses to be consumed by hatred and revenge. *Helen Prejean, C.S.J.*

Sincere forgiveness isn't colored with expectations that the other person apologize or change. Don't worry whether or not they finally understand you. Love them and release them. Life feeds back truth to people in its own way and time. *Sara Paddison*

All of us, if we can learn to accept our own limitations and 'fess up to our wrongs, can and will be forgiven. First, we must forgive ourselves. I know I was taught at an early age that if I made a mistake I was somehow flawed. As I grow and change, I am trying hard to see that mistakes are life's way of teaching us. If we can't let go of guilt and shame toward ourselves, then why should anyone else forgive us? *Rev. Barbara Wells*

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this we are less prone to hate our enemies. *Martin Luther King Jr.*

Without forgiveness and love, you will live with resentment, bitterness, malice, and strife, which result in more pain. You can never love without forgiving. Forgiveness deepens your ability to love and frees you from pain. *Kemi Sogunle*

## Questions to Ponder

1. Think about incidences of forgiveness in your life: when you forgave someone who wronged you, or when you could not forgive someone who wronged you. How did that experience feel?
2. Think about a time when you were forgiven by someone else or a time when you forgave yourself. How did that forgiveness change things?
3. How do you understand forgiveness? How is it different from condoning or excusing?
4. What makes it easier for you to forgive another or yourself? What makes it difficult?
5. Have you been able to forgive someone but still keep yourself safe from future hurts?
6. What, if anything, do you feel is unforgivable?

## Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a situation in which forgiveness would make your life more positive. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "I would like to be able to forgive . . ."