# Seminar: Power to Forgive

**Power to Forgive**

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**Introduction**

The need for forgiveness is woven into the fabric of our lives. It is so, probably because we all are sinners. Forgiveness played a remarkable role in the lives of Bible heroes too. People of Israel would not exist if Esau had not forgiven Jacob. Solomon would not be a king of Israel if God had not forgiven David. And neither you nor I would exist if God had not forgiven Adam and Eve. None of us would have any future if God stopped forgiving us. Interestingly, we may find it easy to accept God’s forgiveness, but most of us find it difficult to forgive others or to be forgiven by another.

Throughout our lives we will often need to forgive. And sometimes it is really hard to forgive. Many people struggle with this. They may want to forgive, but they don’t know how to do it in such a way that their memories and feelings do not come back again. Why is it so hard for us to forgive? What is forgiveness? What do I need to do to forgive a person? And how do I learn to forgive *and* forget?

What if we did not forgive? What if we preferred payback when someone hurt or harmed us? Mahatma Gandhi wisely points out that “An eye-for-an-eye and a-tooth-for-a-tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless.”

It is crucial to remember that if we are unforgiving, this harms not only the other person, it harms us. Research has shown that an unforgiving spirit can cause many health problems. On the other hand, when we forgive, we improve our own health.

Forgiveness brings many health benefits. It…

* Lowers blood pressure.
* Lowers stress.
* Lowers level of hostility and aggressiveness.
* Lowers risk of alcohol and other addictions.
* Lowers symptoms of depression and anxiety.
* Lowers pain.
* Keeps one’s heart healthy.
* Helps one to recover from various illnesses.
* Brings emotional balance and harmony.

So, people who practice forgiveness are happier and healthier than those who hold resentment and keep counting their hurts.

Interestingly, according to one research study by Gallup Organization in 1988 in USA:

* 94% of respondents said it was important to forgive.
* 85% said that they needed some outside help to be able to forgive.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The statistics probably change very little from decade to decade. People know they should forgive, but they fail; they need someone to assist them, someone to explain how to forgive. Nancy Van Pelt shares a good illustration in her book, *To Have and to Hold,* citing a brilliant answer from Ann Landers (pen name of newspaper advice columnist).

“Dear Ann Landers,

You must be made of stone. You tell every wronged husband or wife or daughter or son, sweetheart, friend, or neighbor to ‘forgive and forget.’ Did it ever occur to you that some people just CAN’T? They are too deeply hurt, too badly damaged. Please pull your head out of the sand, or the clouds, or wherever it is, and use it to think with. It’s preposterous to expect mere mortals to behave like saints.

Signed: NO SAINT”

Ann Landers answered as follows:

“Dear No Saint,

For those who don’t like my advice to forgive and forget, here’s an alternative. Don’t forgive and don’t forget. Keep alive every agonizing, torturous detail of the past. Talk about it. Dream about it. Cry a lot and feel sorry for yourself. Lose weight and look haggard so friends will worry about you. Build an ulcer. Get a migraine. Break a leg. Anything to create pain and serve as a reminder to what the dirty louse did to you. If you follow this advice, you are sure to end up miserable, sick, bitter, and alone.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Why is it so hard to forgive?**

Mother Theresa tells us, “If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.” But before we go into how to forgive, let’s look at *why* it is sometimes so difficult to practice forgiveness.

It is hard to forgive for several reasons:

* We believe some myths about forgiveness.
* We believe in the idea of a “just world” and want to bring justice.
* We don’t understand why God allowed the offense to happen and cannot accept it.
* We do not know the various stages of forgiveness.
* We do not understand the “injustice gap.”
* We don’t know what forgiveness is.
* We don’t know how to forgive.

Let’s look briefly at each of these.

1. *We believe some myths about forgiveness.*

There are several myths that people believe regarding forgiveness. They may think that to forgive means:

* To nullify the evil or damage that has been done.
* To forget and never remember it anymore.
* To say the offense was not important.
* To allow allow someone to do the same thing again.
* That there will be no consequences.

These myths suggest why it is so hard for some people to forgive, because they think that an offender will then think that the offense was not a big deal! It is important for us to understand the truth. Forgiveness is…

* Not a green light to repeat the same offense.
* Not amnesty.
* Not amnesia.
* Not a denial of the damage or harm done.
* Not an acknowledgement that we are guilty.

Forgiveness is none of the above. It is grace in action, and a bit later in this seminar we will clarify what it is. For now, we will continue looking at our list of reasons why it is hard to forgive.

1. *We believe in the idea of a “just world.”*

Another reason it is so hard for us to forgive is because we believe in the idea of a “just world,” and we want to bring justice. Perhaps we have this idea from the Garden of Eden and subconsciously expect that good things will happen to good people and bad things to bad people. But in reality this is not so. The world is not just; bad things can happen to good people, and it is not our responsibility to pay back and bring justice. Only God is the true judge.

The desire to bring justice and punish the offender sometimes is so intense we forget that God is the only one who can bring justice. We want to play the role of the judge ourselves, especially when we think that people were unjust to us. When we cannot do anything about it, we punish them by refusing to give forgiveness.

1. *We don’t understand why God allowed the offense to happen.*

Perhaps we can accept the idea that God is the only true judge, but we don’t understand why He allows such things to happen to us. This thought can be very painful and prevent us from forgiving. We need to learn to trust Him, to trust that in His wisdom. He knows why He chose to lead us through this experience. It could be that He wants us to develop His character or become His help to others. Often people who were victims of mistreatment later become powerful tools in the hands of the Lord, helping others to overcome the same circumstances or recover from similar tragedies.

1. *We do not know the various* *stages of forgiveness.*

We may find it difficult to forgive because we do not realize there are specific stages in the process of forgiveness. These stages are:

Hurt

Pain

Healing

Forgiveness

*and perhaps* Reconciliation!

It is usually hard to forgive when we are in stage one or two. We need some time to recover from our hurt before we are able to think clearly and calmly. It is also important to recognize that sometimes we can forgive but not reconcile, since reconciliation requires good will of both parties.

1. *We do not understand the “injustice gap.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

According to research on forgiveness, figuratively speaking each offence creates a “gap.” It is difficult to forgive when that “injustice gap” is very big. The offender can reduce this “gap” by offering an apology or doing something to reduce the harm done. Or the offender can increase the size of the “gap” by denying his or her fault or behaving in such a way that the hurt is increased. It is easier to forgive when the offender tries to decrease the “injustice gap,” but we need to remember that we should be able to forgive even when there is no apology or the “injustice gap” has not been decreased.

1. *We don’t know what forgiveness is.*

It is hard to forgive because very often we don’t know what true forgiveness is and how to forgive. As mentioned earlier, forgiveness is grace in action. Grace has a divine origin. As Alexander Pope said, “To err is human; to forgive, Divine.” Our ability to forgive depends on how we understand God’s forgiveness, how we treat ourselves, and whether we have experienced God’s grace in our lives.

“The remarkable thing is that we really love our neighbor as ourselves: we do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant toward others when we tolerate ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves. We are prone to sacrifice others when we are ready to sacrifice ourselves.” (Eric Hoffer)

We may think of the passage where Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness: “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" (or seventy times seven) (Matt. 18:21-22).

Jesus also added a parable about the unforgiving servant (Мatt. 18:21-35). In this story one person had a debt of 10,000 talents and he was forgiven. However, he found another person who owned him only 100 denarii and began to press him. Let’s look at how long it would take to earn 10,000 talents and 100 denarii.

“The denarius was one day’s wage for a typical day laborer, who worked six days a week with a Sabbath day of rest. Allowing approximately two weeks for various Jewish holidays, the typical laborer worked 50 weeks of the year and earned an annual wage of 300 denarii (50 weeks x 6 days). Therefore, 100 denarii was one-third of a year’s salary, or four months’ wages.

Now suppose you continued to work as a day laborer earning 300 denarii each year. After 20 years of such labor, you will have earned 6,000 denarii. At this point, the king would say to his debtor, “Congratulations. You have worked for 20 years and have now earned 6,000 denarii. That’s enough to pay back one talent. You owe only 9,999 more talents.”

From this, we can easily see that if it takes 20 years to earn one talent, then repaying 10,000 talents would require working 200,000 YEARS!”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus used this example to show us how small the hurts we receive from others are in comparison to what we all did and are doing to Him. Yet He forgives us—time and again.

So we see that forgiveness is:

* Grace in action. When we think about forgiveness, we surely will look to the character of God and God’s grace. Grace is unconditional; it is undeserved mercy.
* “Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it” (Mark Twain).
* Micah 7:19 tells us that when God forgives our sins, He casts them into the depths of the sea. Someone has added “and puts a sign there: ‘Fishing is forbidden!’” However, what we usually like to do is fish our own sins and mistakes. We also enjoy fishing the sins of other people. But we must remember, “Fishing is forbidden!”
* When it is hard for you to forgive yourselves or other people and the offenses are coming back again and again in your mind, remind yourself “Fishing is forbidden!”

Let us also remember that…

* If we are at war with others, we cannot be at peace with ourselves.
* Hurt people hurt people.
* Forgiveness changes us from prisoners of the past to the people of peace.
* Forgiveness helps us to reconcile with our past.

And you may want to include these quotations in your notes:

* “Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain but it takes character and self-control to be understanding and forgiving.” (Dale Carnegie)
* “To forgive means to understand.” (French proverb)
* “Only great people can forgive.” (O. Ozheshko)

The most beautiful thing about forgiveness is that it is all about FREEDOM!

* Forgiveness is about my personal freedom!
* Forgiveness is about freedom of my offender!
* Forgiveness is free!
* Forgiveness is unconditional!
* Forgiveness has power, even without repentance of the offender or reconciliation with him or her!
* Power to forgive comes from the Lord!

*“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).*

1. *We don’t know how to forgive.*

This leads us to the most important point: how do we forgive? People often don’t forgive because they don’t know how. The most important thing to remember is that forgiveness never happens without your personal, definite decision to forgive. It is true that it is easier to forgive when a person says he or she is sorry. But interestingly, it is not necessary to receive an apology in order for us to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice. We perform forgiveness in our head. It does not depend on the repentance of the other person. Forgiveness is our own decision. And we should be able to forgive even when we receive no apology or cannot be reconciled.

**Steps in the process of forgiveness:**

There are several steps that can help us through the process of forgiveness, especially when we find it hard to forgive.

***Step 1***

* Write a list of or think about people/events that have hurt you.
* Ask yourself:
  + Why is it so difficult to forgive this particular one?
  + How does this unsolved problem affect my life, my health, and my relationships with God and other people?
  + What kind of feelings do I have every time I remember this?
  + What would I like to happen to help me forgive?
  + What in particular do I need to forgive and forget?

Although the answers to each of these questions may vary, the reality is that there is nothing we need in order to forgive. We just need to make the choice, to decide that we will forgive.

***Step 2***

* Make your decision to forgive.
* Pray about it.
* Tell God about all your feelings, hurts, etc.
* Put the offender and the consequences in the hands of the Lord.
* Pray for your offender. (Matt. 5:44)

***Step 3***

* Think: Who was responsible for my feeling of hurt and pain? For my inability to forgive?
* Decide on a strategy: What would I do if the feelings of pain and hurt come back in the future? The best thing is to remind yourself of your decision and say to yourself: “Stop it! I don’t live in the past anymore! I live in the present, and I am going into the future a free person!”

Forgiveness releases others from our criticism and also releases us from being imprisoned by our own negative thoughts and feelings. As someone said “We cannot take the poison every day and expect someone else to die.” Remember also that when God sees gaps, He builds bridges (Robert Schuller).

In Mark 11:25, we read: *"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."* And Paul counsels us, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you"* (Ephesians 4:32).

*“The Bible teaches us to love our neighbors and to forgive our enemies. Maybe because very often they are the same people.”*

There is a difference between the decision to forgive and emotional forgiveness. They are not the same, and you can still feel some emotions even when you have made your decision to forgive. It may require some time to heal emotionally. Nevertheless, continue to remind yourself about your decision. Don’t allow negative thinking. The real healing takes place when your decisional and emotional forgiveness say the same thing: you forgave that person. How do you know you are there? “You know you have forgiven someone when he or she has harmless passage through your mind” (Karyl Huntley).

**Conclusion**

We cannot control certain things in our lives. People make their own right and wrong decisions; people are on different levels of maturity. They can hurt and offend others. However, forgiveness is a sign of maturity!

We can choose to be an agent of positive change no matter what. The power to do so and the power to forgive are available from above.

The story is told of a lady who brought a wonderful change to her landscape. She kept planting daffodils for many years and eventually five acres of land were transformed into a lovely garden! Everyone who visited that beautiful spot saw a sign with the following words:

“Answers to the Questions You Probably Want to Ask:

* 50,000 bulbs
* One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet, and one brain.
* Began in 1958."[[5]](#footnote-5)

What a delightful project! One bulb at a time. One step at a time in positive direction can eventually change the landscape of your life.

Let us remember that those who make other people happy are the happiest people!

Let us hurry up to give people happy minutes, because:

* Happy minutes make happy hours;
* Happy hours make happy days;
* Happy days make happy months;
* Happy months make happy years; and
* Happy years make a happy life!

**Choose to Be Free**

“One of the most lasting pleasures you can experience is the feeling that comes over you when you genuinely forgive an enemy—whether he knows about it or not.” (A. Battista)

To forgive or not? It is your choice! But your heavenly Father is ready to help you to practice divine grace in action and to go free into the future!

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