



The Healing Power of Forgiveness

by Donna Authers

Throughout life there is nothing that creates more unrest, tension, inner conflict, and anxiety than an unforgiving heart. Forgiveness releases the control our past has on our present. Forgiveness is soothing balm to our spirits. Forgiveness facilitates inner healing. Forgiveness is an integral part of one of God's great commandments and its importance is underlined by being mentioned at least 139 times in the Bible. How can we love our neighbors let alone our enemies, if we are unwilling to forgive? The famous quotation by the English poet Alexander Pope says it all: To err is human. To forgive is divine.

If we believe that Christ gave his

very life for us and for all humanity in order that we may be reconciled with God, who are we to hold a grudge? The author and distinguished professor of theology Henry Nouwen spoke of the importance of reconciliation and its benefits, particularly before we have to face death. In *"Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith"*, he writes:

"How can we be prepared to die? By not having any unfinished relational business. The question is have I forgiven those who have hurt me and asked forgiveness from those I have hurt? When I feel at peace with all the people who are part of my life, my death might cause great grief, but it will not cause

guilt or anger. It will be easier for our family and friends to remember us with joy and peace if we have said a grateful good-bye than if we die with bitter and disillusioned hearts. The greatest gift we can offer our families and friends is the gift of gratitude. Gratitude sets them free to continue living without bitterness or self-recriminations."

Mental health professionals tell us that the number one inhibitor to finding peace is our inability to forgive. The longer and tighter we hold on to anger, resentment, pride or our need to be right, the more difficult it is to reconcile. More than anyone else, Jesus had legitimate reasons for not forgiving those who hurt him, even

killed him. He knows the hurt is even greater when someone in our own family is the source of our distress. His own people conspired against him, abandoned him, treated him unjustly, and tortured him. Even to those who crucified him, he said, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

We, too, will be able to forgive with God's help. When we do, we no longer have to be a slave to our feelings.

Rather than being a victim of an unforgiving heart, we can be a victor over the death of our relationships! Let me tell you a story about

a couple of winners who were able to reconcile just before one of them crossed the finish line.

Two days before he died, Cameron asked someone to get a message to his sister Ellen. He had just been released from the hospital yet again. They had been estranged for years because of Cameron's alcoholism, and his health was failing due to the collateral damage this disease caused. Ellen wrote her big brother a letter of love, forgiveness, and encouragement to finally beat his addiction to alcohol. He was so moved when he read his sister's letter that he called for an old family friend, a retired pastor he knew since childhood. Through this beloved surrogate, strengthened by the knowledge of Ellen's unconditional love, Cameron was able to reconcile with God as well as his sister—and made a decision to turn his life around. Sadly, this would be his final turn. Cameron was hospitalized again the next day and died.

On the day of his funeral, Ellen received the response to her letter when the pastor tenderly delivered Cameron's apology for "making sport" of her and his family all these years and he wanted her to know he loved her, too. They were reconciled at last.

Don't let your legacy to anyone be an unforgiving heart. Think of how many times you have prayed, "... And forgive us our trespasses [or debts], as we forgive those who trespass against us." Be careful what you pray for, you just might get it.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are closely related, but are not the same. You may forgive or be forgiven, but it requires both parties to restore the relationship. A bumper sticker I saw

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recently said: "Prayer doesn't change things: it changes people." Reconciliation happens when you work at

rebuilding trust, and it can be done unilaterally by acknowledging the role you played in whatever caused the rift in the relationship—and by making every effort to change your behavior. Whether or not the other party makes the same commitment is irrelevant. You will benefit from the exercise regardless. Pray the "Prayer of Abandonment" and feel a sense of relief when you finally let go of the situation.

If both parties work at it, lines of communication are restored and reconciliation is possible. Alternatively, harboring negative feelings can result in a toxic situation. We cannot survive for long in a toxic environment without becoming sick in body, mind, and spirit. The diligence we take in getting rid of hazardous waste, polluted waters, and the unclean air we breathe is out of proportion to time we should spend cleaning up our relationships with family and friends.

Many homes are equipped with a carbon monoxide detector to warn us of the toxic gas we cannot see that can cause physical death. A lack of forgiveness and an unwillingness to reconcile are our internal detectors warning us of hidden dangers that poison our spirit and our soul. If left unchecked, we are drawn closer to an emotional

or spiritual death from a heart that is turning to stone.

It's a bittersweet moment when someone waits until they are on their deathbed to restore a broken relationship. The sweetness comes from the beautiful release of a burden carried for so long. The bitterness results from the fact that you cannot recapture the past. Most people who reconcile after long periods of time are usually heard saying, "If only we had done this sooner." "We should have ... would have ... and could have ..."

Don't waste time fostering a festering anger. Make the choice to forgive and reconcile now. The six most challenging words in the English language are, "I admit I made a mistake." Use

Pray this prayer for yourself, your loved ones, and any situation over which you have lost control, "and the peace that passes all understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:7

The Prayer of Abandonment by Charles de Foucauld

Father, I abandon myself into your hands.

Do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you.

I am ready for all. I accept all.

*Let only Your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures.*

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

*Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
For I love you, Lord, and so need to
give myself,*

*To surrender myself into your Hands,
Without reserve, and with boundless
confidence, for you are my Father.*

Amen.

them. Forgive if only in your heart. Reconcile when possible. Then, leaving the past behind, enjoy the moment, the inner healing and peace that will surely come. I've watched many people grow stronger physically, emotionally and spiritually when they made the choice to work through disappointing relationships, hardships, and grief rather than turning away. When forgiveness, reconciliation and love reign, the fear of death disappears.

If you were not able to reconcile with a loved one before they died, inner healing is still possible. Your loved one is no longer angry with you, and from where they sit, they would want you to be happy. Write a letter to them and say what you would have wanted to say in person, or use a surrogate to talk to them. Be open and honest with your feelings. Accept your part of the problem with your past relationship, ask for forgiveness, and tell them that you have forgiven them, unconditionally. Do not wait any longer to reconcile and be at peace in the here and now.

One final note on this subject: we must remember to forgive ourselves. God has. Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Do you know how far the east is from the west? Scripture says that when we repent, God remembers our

sin no more. So, there is no reason to keep beating ourselves up over the past if we have a penitent heart. If we are harder on ourselves than God, we will be stuck in the past and unable to enjoy life to the full. With the advice we have been given, we can do better.

This article is an excerpt from the book "A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying" and is reprinted with permission.

Donna is an OSL member who has a passion for sharing the love of God and His word with hurting people. Since her mother's miraculous cure of an advanced stage of osteoporosis in 1979, Donna has witnessed repeatedly that God truly heals today. After retiring in 1992 from a successful business career in sales and marketing management, Donna assumed leadership roles in her church with an emphasis on pastoral care. The many stories of faith, healing, reconciliation and lessons learned from those coping with a life-threatening illness are captured in her book, "A Sacred Walk", which is on the OSL required reading list. She is regularly invited to speak at churches around the country and led workshops at OSL regional conferences and the 2013 North American Conference. To learn more about Donna and her work visit www.asacredwalk.com.



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