



*God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones... Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish...Pope Francis*

## **Hurting others is easy, sadly**

Relationships can be messy, painful, fraught with misunderstandings, and a source of anxiety. Some People will always be such dorks. They can be entirely insensitive to us and our needs. They can outrage us with their rudeness and disregard for our wishes. They can annoy us with their grating personalities or frustrate us with their stubborn inflexibility. Grudges can be held. Tempers flare and words can be exchanged leaving wounds at which we can't stop picking.

The cruelty and wounds inflicted can be very real and our hurt justified. People are imperfect, and no matter how hard we strive to maintain peace, we *will* encounter relational strife. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun. That is why it is no exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the condition of all relationship. We simply cannot relate to anyone without having to forgive them to one degree or another, for they *will* wrong you.

## **The Necessity of Forgiveness**

Our Lord was no stranger to strife. Not only was he hunted and persecuted by the religious authorities of his day, culminating in the cruellest rejection of the cross, but he was also scorned and mocked by a great deal of the people who should have been his most devoted followers. Moreover, his disciples were constantly bickering about the pettiest things. Though they were grown men, they frequently acted more like quarrelsome, bleating children.

Despite this constant relational turmoil, Christ forgave with patience and love. Even when he was being hoisted on the cross, he cried out to the Father, begging him to forgive his executioners. His forgiveness, both then and now, was infinite.

Likewise, he taught his disciples to imitate his infinite forgiveness. One of his hardest sayings was the commandment to forgive. Even St. Peter found it hard to swallow. After our Lord taught about the importance of reconciliation with others, Peter came to him and

asked about the limit of this forgiveness. "Lord, should I forgive seven times?" he asked. That seemed extreme in his mind, but at least there was a limit to it. But Jesus' answer was even more extreme, "No, you must forgive until seventy times seven."

Saying seventy times seven, in the terms of his day, was equivalent to saying forgive infinitely, without exception. That was not what St. Peter wanted to hear. But to reinforce the point, Christ goes on to tell the parable of the unmerciful servant, who was forgiven an enormous debt only to demand that he be paid back a much smaller debt. His lack of mercy got him thrown in prison and punished severely. The point was clear: We must give mercy if we want to get it and forgive without condition and without end.

One of the most frequently offered excuses for unforgiveness is that an apology must be extended before forgiveness is given. The conditions for said apology are often unrealistic. In one sense, the desire for this detailed apology is understandable. We all want satisfaction. But the truth is such apologies are rarely if ever given and even then, they go no further than mere words. Nothing really changes. And even if they were common, Christ did not leave us loopholes for withholding forgiveness until we get an apology (or any loopholes for that matter). He simply tells us to forgive and to seek reconciliation, even if it is ultimately rejected. Even then, to forgive again.

## **The Choice**

Relational brokenness is a fact of existence. The outcome of this brokenness, however, is up to us. It is determined by how we choose to respond to it, for it can make us either bitter or better. That is not to say that forgiveness is always easy. Depending on the

depth of the wound inflicted, it can be extremely difficult and take a great deal of time, effort, and prayer. At times, it can be one of the most difficult things we do. Yet, our Lord does not make exceptions on a case-by-case basis. We must forgive. Baptism calls us to be healers to all.

Forgiveness is so essential, so fundamental to our discipleship that Christ tells us that we will not be forgiven by God if we do not forgive others. The degree of mercy we receive ***is in exact proportion*** to the amount of mercy we extend. If we want God to forgive us, we must forgive without end. Without limits. No exceptions. Do not expect great clemency if you will not extend it yourself. *As the Lord has forgiven you,*” says St. Paul, *“so you also must forgive.*

We all crave the benefit of the doubt from others. We all want others to forgive us and see the good intentions behind our actions. We are used to expecting full forgiveness and mercy from God for our sins and wickedness. Yet, despite these expectations, we so often judge others severely, hold petty grudges, and think the worst of them. It is simply wrong. God does not and will not accept it.

Jesus wants us to forgive but should we only forgive someone if they have asked for this forgiveness or must we forgive those who are not sorry for their sin?

In **Mark 11:25** Jesus says, *Whenever you stand praying forgive if you have anything against anyone so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.* This sounds like Jesus is saying we forgive whether someone has asked for forgiveness or not, whether they are sorry or not, we just forgive. If we are standing there praying we forgive. Then in **Luke 17:3-4** Jesus also says, *Be on your guard if your brother sins rebuke him and if he repents forgive him and if he sins against you seven times a day and returns to you seven times a day saying I repent forgive him.* Jesus on the one hand is saying, “if you are standing there praying and you realize there

is a problem with your brother then forgive him so that you will be heard in your prayers”. And then there is the statement of Jesus that says forgive your brother when he repents. And so how do we solve this apparent dilemma?

Jesus in **Mark 11** is talking about forgiveness as an attitude that we cultivate in our soul. When he says if you’re standing there praying forgive. He’s saying release that person from your anger, from your bitterness, from the penalty of your sin right there. He’s talking about cultivating an action in our heart. We might say that it is the willingness to extend forgiveness. But we settle the matter in our heart whether or not they are sorry, whether or not they are repentant, whether or not they have asked, or whether or not they have remained silent. We cultivate that attitude of forgiving, grow it.

**Ephesians 4:31**, says, *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you along with all malice.* This is a command to get rid of bitterness and all the rest that goes along and is listed there in **Ephesians 4:31**. We have to fight bitterness. But, if we are not willing to cultivate an attitude of forgiveness then by definition we are clinging on to bitterness and anger and that is a sin that will erode our soul, will damage our relationship with the Lord, damage our own soul, and harm our relationships with others. We need to let go of bitterness. This is the way Paul takes the argument in **Ephesians 4:31** and then goes right into **Ephesians 4:32** saying, *“Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other just as God and Christ also has forgiven you.”* This is vital because God demands it of us. It is a command that comes to us throughout the New Testament, a command from the heavenly throne.

In **Ephesians 4:32** believers are commanded to forgive. What is interesting is how the command to let go of bitterness and anger and malice and all the rest ***precedes*** the command to forgive. What we have in this text is the command to be cultivating an attitude of forgiveness, building our lives around the mercy God has shown to us. Without this there is no mercy, and we cannot lay claim to being disciples of Christ. No mercy-no eternal life. No mercy means God will return to us the level of mercy we gave to his children, to those he loves.