

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION



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“GO AWAY, GOD!”

Around fifteen years ago, I received a phone call which struck me like thunderclap. One of our parishioners, a five-year-old boy, was in the final stage of cancer. His mother requested prayer, and so I visited the boy and his mother at the hospital. While in transit, I struggled to think of fitting words of consolation. While still driving I received a second phone call from the mother, informing me that her little boy was now unconscious, showing minimal brain activity. When I arrived in the hospital room, I found the entire family in tears. The doctors had battled to save the child's life but were unable to. When she saw me enter through the door, the boy's mother rushed at me, crying, *“Tell your God to go away! I don't want Him here!”*

Three years later, I met the mother again. This time, she just smiled, signs of deep sorrow etched on her face. *“I don't know whether you talked to God or not,”* she said, *“but I am sure that He never left me alone. He didn't go away. He was there, in the hospital...”*

A NEW MIND

Nothing hurts like losing someone you love to death. Similar feelings can also occur after a major life change, such as moving or divorce. It is natural to wonder how a loving God could allow such painful things to happen. Tragedy is unpredict-

able and none of us can escape separation, loss, and grief. As William Shakespeare wrote, *What's the newest grief? Every minute tunes a new one.*ⁱ

Even when we feel alone, God is with us always. In moments when you may not think He is near, He is still watching over you. As the Psalmist says, *"He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep"* (Ps. 121:3–4).

No one season, whether good or bad, lasts forever. During a season of grief, it is the time to weep, but it will eventually pass. A time to laugh will follow it. As one of the sages of ancient Israel wrote: *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4).

During our most challenging times, whether caused by grief, loss, separation, or illness, we are engaged in a sort of battle. We may not even notice that, like Jacob at Peniel (Gen. 32), we are wrestling with God. We ask, *Why is this happening to me? Why would God do this?"*

If we are to follow God, we need to first recognize our own faults and inadequacies. It is only through God's mercy that we can be forgiven, and His grace that sees us through to the other side of the night. Saint Paul, in one of his letters, said: *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:19). God never holds our trespasses against us, for He himself reconciled us to Himself and gave us the commandment to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven.

The Old Testament narrative about Jacob, one of the forefathers of Israel, carries an important message about forgiveness and reconciliation (Genesis 25:19–34: 27). Jacob, by means of an elaborate act of double deception, obtained his older brother's birth-right from their father. Jacob then fled from his brother's wrath, taking refuge at his uncle Laban's home, in the city of Haran, Mesopotamia. After arriving there, Jacob worked for his uncle for twenty years to obtain Laban's daughter, Rachel's hand in marriage (Jacob had previously married her elder sister, Leah). During his work at Laban's house Jacob amassed a large amount of property, then set out with his wives and children to return to Canaan. Returning home meant facing his older brother, Esau, who had vowed to kill him. Naturally, he was filled with anxiety and dread. *"So, Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (Genesis 32:24-30).*

It's significant that Jacob started wrestling with a mysterious man when he was completely exhausted. The quiet solitude of night made him face the fears he held in his heart. It was time for Jacob to see that he could no longer depend on his own strength. The

forgiveness he needed to survive was out of his control. However, after having wrestled, he was surprisingly changed: a mysterious man gave him his blessing and a new name, Israel. In fact, Jacob was granted a “new mind” with which he was reconciled with his own fear, with his brother Esau and finally with the Lordⁱⁱ. At the turning point of his life, Jacob wrestled all night with a dark and shadowy figure. He struggles. He fights. He is wounded, but... he is blessed. In the morning, after this violent spiritual encounter, he woke up a new man, saying, “I have encountered God face to face, and have survived”. This story is so deep and significant that even the greatest Christian and Jewish interpreters considered the wrestling match to be a dream in which Jacob was wrestling either with his brother Esau or with God.

The character of Jacob captures all the distinctive features of man, whether contemporary or ancient. Hosea, one of the first prophets of Old Testament, years later wrote concerning Jacob: *“In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his maturity, he contended with God. Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed; He wept and sought His favor. He found Him at Bethel and there He spoke with us, even the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord is His name”* (Hosea 12:3-5). Yes, Jacob wrestled with God all night until daybreak. Jacob had recognized his sinfulness, but he was not yet willing to yield or surrender completely to the Lord. In his life Jacob struggled with Esau and stole his birthright. He struggled with his father and fooled him into giving him Esau’s inheritance. He struggled with his uncle Laban, and, in the end, wrestled from Laban most of his wealth too. He had always done everything his own way and in his own strength and he thought this would be the same. Jacob was convinced that he was a child of promise, and most probably his

mother had been telling him this since he was a child. So, he decided to do it his own way.

The Lord needed Jacob not only to realize his sinfulness, but to yield and surrender to the Lord, asking for His blessing. Jacob won the harder battle, the battle over himself. Jacob prevailed in the hardest test, the struggle of all mankind, the issue of pride and self-reliance. He knew that the Lord could escape his grasp, but he did not want to let go of Him until he knew the blessing of forgiveness and reconciliation. By the time he met Esau the next day, he had already won this inner battle with the self and with the Lord and so it comes as no surprise that he was able to reconcile with his brother also.

FORGIVENESS IN ALL CASES

There are many moving stories in the Bible of people who, after being betrayed and hurt by others, were able to forgive and achieve reconciliation. Joseph was the son of Jacob (Genesis 37-50). He grew up in a large family with eleven brothers in the land of Canaan (today's Palestine / Israel). Jacob loved Joseph more than the other brothers and, as a sign of his love, gave his son Joseph a special colorful robe. The ten older brothers became jealous of Joseph, made worse when he had special dreams in which all the brothers bowed down to him. This led Joseph's brothers to sell him as a slave. After being a slave and convict under false charges, God elevated Joseph to become the second in command in Egypt (the largest empire of the day). Many years later, Joseph met his brothers when they came looking for food in Egypt during a famine. He recognized them but they did not recognize him. Instead of getting revenge from his

newfound position of power, Joseph reconciled with his brothers and did good unto them. He recognized that God had worked all things so as to save his family and many others from starvation.

The story of Joseph shows how people can experience God's presence even in the most difficult and unjust circumstances. Our church fathers recognized that Joseph is a foreshadowing of Christ, who also forgave and sacrificed his innocent life for those who did him wrong.

One of the pharisees, Simon, invited Jesus to dinner in his house (Luke 7:36-50). It was customary when a Rabbi was present for a meal in the house of a rich man like Simon for all kinds of people to come to listen to what wisdom he might impart. Present there was a prostitute who suddenly began to weep so profusely that her tears bathed the feet of Jesus. Letting down her hair, she then dried Jesus' feet, kissed them, and anointed them with costly scented oil. Simon was shocked by such a scandal. Simon thought to himself: *"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is touching him, for she is a sinner."* (Luke 7:39). Aware of what was in Simon's mind, Jesus shared a parable. It was such a simple story that Simon didn't suspect it would include a lesson in divine judgement and forgiveness. "Simon, I have something to say to you," Christ said. "Master, say it," Simon responded. Jesus said, "There were two men who were in debt to a certain lender. One owed him 20 pounds and the other two pounds. Since they were unable to pay, he cancelled the debt to both. Who then will love him the more?" Simon answered, "I presume, he to whom the greater favor was shown." (Luke 7:40-43)

Simon knew about debts and money but didn't know about grace and forgiveness. But the parable

revealed the discrepancy between his own relationship and the woman's relationship with God. Jesus then turned to Simon and said, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house — you gave me no water for my feet. She has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. You did not give me any kiss. But she, from the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil. She has anointed my feet with perfume. Wherefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven for she loved much. He to whom little is forgiven loves little." He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Those who were at table with him began to say to themselves, "Who is this who forgives even sins?" He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:44-48).

The story reveals two things about the human mind and heart. Simon was convinced of his own goodness in the sight of men and God. Because he was conscious of no need, he received no forgiveness. The woman was conscious of nothing but a clamant need, and therefore was overwhelmed with love for Him who could provide and grant her forgiveness.

This beautiful passage from the Gospel of Luke could have been called: "A Parable About Self-Sufficiency," or "The Greatest of Sins is to be Conscious of No Sin." Jesus' parable erases the line between righteous and sinners. Yet, even in exposing Simon's true position, Jesus didn't condemn. He was gentle. As one writer has said, it's as if Jesus was saying to him, "*Yes, Simon, I know that your sin may be small in comparison to this woman. But it is sin and separates you from God. You'll never know joy until you confess and are aware of forgiveness*"ⁱⁱⁱ.

FORGIVENESS IN OUR LIFE

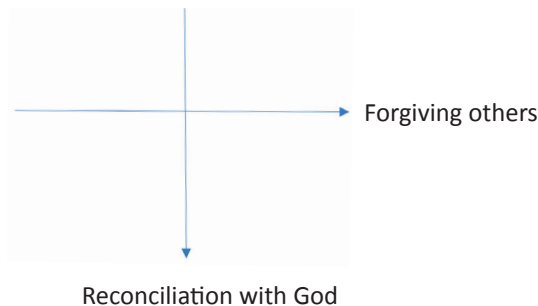
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” is the first and greatest commandment. The second commandment is similar: “Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Mathew 22:37-40).

When we trespass against the Lord, we put a roadblock in our way of loving Him. All broken relationships are like that: a wall comes between ourselves and those who’ve wronged us or whom we’ve wronged. Forgiveness is choosing to dismantle that wall and loving as Christ loved us. Jesus removed the roadblocks caused by our sin which separated us from God, and gave us the power to do the same to those who wrong us. But unless we demolish the inner wall separating us from God, we won’t be able to pull down the wall separating us from those who have wronged us. Therefore, forgiveness begins deep within our inner spiritual life, as the story of Jacob told above illustrated.

In his teaching Jesus told us to restore our relationships both with those who wrong us and with the people we have wronged. When Peter came to Jesus and asked “how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus shared a parable which is known as the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant: “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant

fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Mathew 18:21-35). This is a powerful message from Our Lord that we must take seriously in our dealings with our brothers and sisters.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to seek forgiveness from those who we wronged and only then to be reconciled with God: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." (Mathew 5:23-24) Reconciliation with God cannot be fulfilled if we are unreconciled with our fellow human beings. Symbolically, these two forms of forgiveness and reconciliation form a cross we ought to bear throughout life, like that worn around our necks.



In order to forgive others, we must cease being reactive and judgmental. The early Church fathers understood forgiveness of others after the model of God's forgiveness of us. God does not punish us, reject us, objectify us, or bear resentment toward us. Likewise, we are commanded to emulate God by forgiving those who acknowledge and confess their sins and ask for our forgiveness.^{iv} As in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mathew 18:21-35), recipients of God's mercy who have been forgiven this enormous debt must also forgive others, and by so doing we grow into the likeness of our merciful and forgiving God.

WHEN DOES FORGIVENESS LEAD TO RECONCILIATION?

Remember a wise saying of an old parish priest: "One person can forgive; it takes two to reconcile." Indeed, with God's help, we all have the power to forgive. Our capacity to forgive doesn't depend on anyone else's behavior or permission. Sometimes we

think that if we forgive, it must automatically include reconciliation. It is possible to forgive in one's mind or heart but that does not always mean that reconciliation will follow.

In the Lord's Prayer (Mathew 6:9-13) we ask our Father to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." The vertical-horizontal connection is crucial. We forgive as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness is something we can do regardless of the other person's actions. Forgiveness means that you cancel the other person's debt to you, that you release them and let them go. One of the greatest preachers in Christian history, St. John Chrysostom (347-407) defines the inward character of forgiveness with these words: "So that the beginning is of us, and we ourselves have control over the judgment that is to be passed upon us. For in order that no one, even of the senseless, might have any complaint to make, either great or small, when brought to judgment; on you, who are to give account, He causes the sentence to depend; and in whatever way you have judged for yourself, in the same, says He, do I also judge you... For you forgive in your need, but God, having need of none...Since He might indeed, even without this, forgive you all your offenses; but He wills you hereby also to receive a benefit; affording you on all sides innumerable occasions of gentleness and love to man, casting out what is brutish in you, and quenching wrath, and in all ways cementing you to him who is your own member"^v.

Reconciliation on the other hand is not one-sided, because it must include at least one other person. Sometimes reconciliation needs to include multiple people, such as pastors, parishioners, counselors, therapists, mediators, etc. Reconciliation often requires a community and takes place within that

community. This helps to ensure that the more powerful member of the duo is not dominating or abusing the other (i.e., the husband, the wife, the parent, the child, etc.).

Here are some Bible-based guidelines that can help you if you are hesitant to reconcile^{vi}:

1. **Be honest and humble in your motives and attitude.** Make sure that your desire is God-pleasing and not to exact revenge. Beware of pride.
2. **Actions, not words.** Your desire to reconcile must be visible through your deeds, not just your words. As one of the desert fathers teaches us: “One of the fathers asked his fellow brother, ‘*How did you ask forgiveness?*’; ‘*Not with my words, but with my tears,*’ answered the brother”. (Lives and Sayings of the Holy Fathers, 10:174).
3. **Pray for the one who hurt you.** Jesus taught us to pray for those who mistreat us: “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything

back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:28-36). Try putting our Lord’s words into practice and see what benefits will come to your life and relationships with others.

4. **God’s will above my own.** If you are not seeking the will of the Lord on your way toward reconciliation, it will be very easy to lose the right path and act selfishly. As St. Paul wrote, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (I Corinthians 10:13).

5. **Be patient and realistic.** Change often requires a lot of time and hard work. Periodic failure by an offender doesn’t necessarily indicate an unrepentant heart. There are times that only partial reconciliation is possible. We can’t control the behavior of others. If the person who hurt you is unwilling to change, we can still choose to forgive and experience inner peace, despite our circumstances or the people around us.

PRAYERS OF SOME CHURCH FATHERS ON FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

St. Clement of Rome (†101 AD)

We ask you, O Master,
to be our helper and defender.
Save those of us who are in affliction,
Show mercy to those who are humble,
Raise those who have fallen,
Show yourself to those who are in need,
Heal those who are sick,
Set straight those among your people
who are going astray.

(Excerpt from *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 59:4)

St. Augustine (†430 AD)

O Lord, our Saviour, who has warned us that you will require much of those to whom much is given; grant that we whose lot is cast in so goodly a heritage may strive together the more abundantly to extend to others what we so richly enjoy; and as we have entered into the labors of other men, so to labor that in their turn other men may enter into ours, to the fulfillment of Your holy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(From *Prayers of the Early Church*, ed. by J. Manning Potts, Nashville, Tennessee, 1908, p. 60)

St. Gregory of Narek (†1003 AD)

You who are all-compassionate, only merciful one, you created all and all are yours; even though they sin, they are yours, they are in your accounting, for they know your strength...

Though one may be tainted by the seven-fold sins, deserving of double punishment to set a proper example, he is still yours, is he not?

...I am never fit to judge correctly about who from among us earthly beings are predestined to be your heirs, for you alone reprimand impartially; differentiate rightly between the impious who thinks himself pure and the prostitute who is repentant, O Benefactor of all, only King, forever blessed in the heavens and in all things. Amen.

(Book of Prayers, 31.4)

St. Nerses Shnorhali (†1173 AD)

O Searcher of secrets, I have sinned against you,
willingly and inadvertently, knowingly
and unknowingly.

Grant forgiveness unto me a sinner;
since from my birth through
the holy baptism, until this day,
I have sinned before you Lord,
with all my senses and in
all the members of my body.

Have mercy upon your creatures,
and on me, a manifold sinner.

(A stanza from the prayer "I confess with faith")

NOTES

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- i *Macbeth*, Act 4, scene 3.
- ii **Melanie Campbell**, “5 Important Lessons from Jacob’s Wrestling Match with God”, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/important-lessons-from-jacobs-wrestling-match-with-god.html>
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- iv **Metropolitan Jonah**, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: How to Forgive Others and Receive Forgiveness*, Ancient Faith Publishing, Chesterton, Indiana, 2006, p. 2.
- v **Saint John Chrysostom**, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Mathew* (Homily XIX), coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. X, ed. by Philip Schaff, New York, 1888, p. 136.
- vi **Steve Cornell**, “How to Move from Forgiveness to Reconciliation”, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-move-from-forgiveness-to-reconciliation/>



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