

The Hard Work Of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an active process that requires confronting what pains us. Without addressing our wounds, we will either seek relief by withholding forgiveness or choose the “righteous” way and “forgive” quickly. Either way, forgiveness becomes another strategy to deal with our pain. Forgiveness is a process that involves reflecting on ourselves and connecting with God.

Phase 1: Reflect. Look inward to understand your responses to the offense. Below are a few questions to explore your inner process:

How did you feel in the moment of being hurt? Or when you think about that moment/event, what feelings come up for you?

Select from the list below or choose your own words.

Feeling disregarded Feeling rejected Feeling devalued Feeling unloved
Feeling disapproved Feeling disrespected Feeling abandoned Feeling alienated

When you felt hurt, what message did you get about you?

Select from the list below or choose your own words.

I am unworthy I am bad I am worthless I am hopeless
I am a failure I am unimportant I am inadequate I am defective
I am unacceptable I am useless I am unlovable I don't matter

Identify the events/relationships, the feelings of hurt you've experienced, and the message that you got.

More than likely, multiple events/relationships have conveyed a similar message about you.

| | Events/Relationships | Feelings of hurt | Message about the self |
|-------------|----------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Past year | | | |
| Adulthood | | | |
| Adolescence | | | |
| Childhood | | | |

What is your tendency when your wounds are triggered and you need to soothe the pain of the message about you?

Human response to pain is to be self-protective. Although there are numerous ways and we engage in more than one way to protect ourselves, we may exhibit a tendency toward one over another. Two main self-protective modes are described below:

Avoidant mode is when you suppress the pain

- Deny, minimize, rationalize the pain: “I’m not hurt”, “not a big deal”, “I’m sure he/she didn’t mean it.”
- Distract from pain by being preoccupied with other activities: watch TV, clean, drink, binge, or party.
- Forgive quickly

Blame mode is when you hold another responsible in order to ease your pain

- Justify yourself by vilifying the other: pronouncing judgment against another makes you feel better or more righteous (“You are so messed up! I would never do that!”)
- Holding a grudge; displaying aggression as a way of seeking justice. (“You hurt me! Now, I’ll hurt you! You should hurt like me!”)
- Never Forgive

Does your response to the offense make sense to you?

Continue to look inward until you can make sense of your response. Looking inward expands your awareness of the wounds triggered which reinforces the shame message about yourself, and your self-protective tendencies. This awareness provides a bigger story to understand what to forgive and what to be forgiven for.

Phase 2: Connect. Talk with God and hear from him. Forgiveness is a supernatural act. You can’t go back and change your experiences of hurt. Because the shame you feel is ultimately spiritually rooted when sin separated us from God, you need to connect with God and hear from him personally to receive his comfort, to be forgiven and be affirmed of your identity in Christ. The following outlines the process of deepening your bond with God:

Talk to God

- Tell him what happened: Do not censor your experience.
- Tell him about your hurt feelings and the message about you.

Receive his comfort: (Hebrew 4:15) Christ identifies and sympathizes with your pain. Listen for his personal words of comfort to you:

- What do you imagine him saying to you about what happened?
- What do you imagine him saying to you about your hurts and messages about you?

In this process of receiving his understanding and empathy, you will be comforted and the intensity of pain will diminish. You will also experience joy as you are affirmed of your worth in Christ and your defenses will relax without the urge to cover up your flaws. As a result, you will see your flaws more clearly and without them affecting your identity.

Rejoice in your relationships with God: (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20; Is 43:1-5)

Listen for his assurance of his bond with you and your identity in Christ:

- What do you imagine him saying about your union with Christ? How does he assure you about his presence with you; that he is for you; and he is in you?
- Who does he say you are?

His kindness leads us to repentance.

Repent of your own ways: (Isaiah 53:5) Remembering Christ on the cross that justified you weakens your shame and frees you to:

- Confess and own your self-protective mode
- Grieve your inability to be like him even with good desires/intentions
- Ask for forgiveness and be cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)

When you experience his grace in this way, you also receive a forgiving heart, whether it took weeks or just hours, you should notice a change within you. The urge to avoid or blame should subside and something magical should have occurred: your perception of the one who wronged you changes, not because he or she is innocent of wrongdoing. You are changed and can see him/her as another broken, weak person like you. At this point, if it's possible, you are ready to confront your offender without vengeance, but with empathy, willing to restore the relationship.