

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS
HAVE TAUGHT ME

ON FORGIVENESS

M. K. Doc Downing, PhD, LMFT

I do not believe in forgiving, for to forgive means
I first must have judged you.

You no-good low life; you hurt me. I'll never forgive you for what you did to me.

In our churches, as well as in the psychological community, we hear a lot about the importance of forgiving. We are told that we need to forgive because the Bible says we should and besides, if we don't, bad mental health things will happen to us.

Have you ever noticed that the people whom we need to forgive are the ones we have judged as having wronged us, harmed us, and destroyed our trust? They are the ones who often show no remorse for the pain they have caused us. Forgiving these people is not an easy process. Even therapists struggle with forgiving. Here is what one therapist wrote about her experience:

"I felt wronged, forever harmed, not just by the loss of our marriage but by his betrayal of our family life. Yet I kept a vision of the family I still wanted to share, a relationship that had enough love and trust to carry us through children's weddings and grandchildren. So I knew that I wanted to forgive. But how would I do it, how could I move on, detecting in him no regret for the pain he had caused?" Molly Layton from Family Therapy Network (Nov./Dec. 1998)

* * * * *

Those who accept the Bible as their authority may have trouble with these next two quotes: "Judge not, lest you are judged" and "Forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you." This creates a couple of problems because to forgive someone means you first must have *judged* them as having done something bad or wrong. Therein lies the conflict since the same authority, the Bible, states in at least two places that we are not to judge.

Now, you have two apparently contradictory statements creating a double-bind situation. To forgive implies that I must have judged the person and yet, I am not to judge others. How can I resolve this dilemma? One way is not to judge what the person did or said to you. If you can do this, then your feelings will not be hurt and there is nothing to forgive, but, that is easier said than done.

Here is a second problem. The Bible says that forgiveness should be done “. . . as **Christ** has forgiven you.” What does that look like? When **God** forgives, He removes our transgressions (sins) “as far as the East is from the West. . .” Is there a difference in how Christ forgives and God’s forgiveness?

For many people, forgiveness comes with strings attached. “I forgive you, but I won’t forget.” When I hear someone say that, I have a hard time believing any kind of forgiveness has occurred.

So, what about this forgiveness thing? It seems clear that you cannot forgive someone unless you have already judged them as having done something they shouldn’t have done against you or someone else. As a result, I hear people say, “I forgive you for having hurt me.” (Doesn’t that sound condescending to you?) When someone says to me, “I forgive you,” I’ve always been tempted to say, “Thank you, and I forgive you for judging me.”

The hurt done to you may be mundane or it may be horrendous, such as the Columbine High School shootings. It may be a real or a perceived grievance. In all cases, you have to have judged someone’s behavior as bad or wrong to be able to forgive them.

“But,” you say, “Someone really hurt me.” Are you sure that the person intended to hurt you? Or did you miss-interpret their words or actions? Seventy percent of the time when someone hurts your feelings, if you check it out with that person, you will discover that you took what they said the wrong way.

How is it possible to reconcile *not* judging someone with the need to judge that person so that you can forgive them? How do you forgive someone who does not believe that they have done anything wrong or that their behavior was justified because of your behavior towards them? What if your judging someone is your way of protecting yourself from being hurt again? Then, should you even consider forgiving?

* * * * *

To begin to answer some of these questions, first, let’s see what forgiveness looks like? Forgiveness is an abstract word. There is no correlation or parallel for it in the solid world of things you can touch and feel. So, when someone tells you that you should forgive your neighbor, what do you do? I don’t know about you, but I know I can not live up to the standard of forgiveness that God has set, “as far as the East is from the West to be remembered no more. . . .”

So, when I am told to forgive someone, what exactly am I to do? I don’t have a button that I can push and all is forgiven. I could ask God “to work a miracle in my life,” but what am I asking God to do? What would this miracle look like? Will I suddenly experience a wave of forgiveness coursing through my body?

May I suggest that forgiving someone starts with taking your judgments off their behaviors! In a similar manner, to forgive yourself requires that you stop judging yourself. It is not possible to remove one behavior without replacing it with a different behavior. Therefore, instead of judging the behavior (yours or someone else's) replace the judgment with ***"Isn't that interesting."*** For example, "Isn't it interesting that I just treated my spouse with disrespect. I don't want to do that again!"

This goes along with the second kind of forgiveness, "as Christ has forgiven us." When Jesus was confronted with the woman caught in adultery, He responded, "Let him that is without sin, cast the first stone." Then He bent over and started writing in the dust. When He looked up and they were all gone, He asked the woman, "Where are your accusers?" She said, "I don't have any." Then He said, "I don't accuse [*judge*] you either. Go and sin no more." He did much the same thing with the Samaritan woman at the well. Once she was honest, then He dropped the issue of her living arrangements and started talking about what was really important, "Living Water."

Someone has said that man shouldn't try to do what God does and God won't do what man needs to do. While I cannot forgive as God the Father does, I can forgive as Christ.

True forgiveness is a process. True forgiveness starts with taking judgments off offending behaviors. It is a matter of *accepting*, without judgment, another's or my own behaviors. But aren't there things that are done that are so horrendous that they shouldn't be accepted? **Acceptance does not mean approval.** In the case of yourself, acceptance is taking the responsibility for what you did and not blaming something or someone else. "You made me angry." Once you blame someone or something for your behavior, you have not accepted responsibility for it and you will not change (since it is not your fault).

Forgiving yourself requires one additional piece, ***repentance***. The original meaning of repentance is to stop going in the direction you have been going; turn around and go the other way. To forgive oneself needs a change in your behavior something like, "Isn't it interesting that I behaved that way. I will not do that again, instead I will do. . ."

When it comes to others behaviors, again, acceptance does not mean approval. "Isn't it interesting that Dad (mother, sister, brother, friend) acted that way." Then add, "I wonder what pain (anger, fear) he/she must be experiencing that would cause him/her to act that way?"

Many people don't forgive themselves because they don't trust themselves to not "misbehave" again. They have a fear that if they accept themselves, then they won't change. As a result, they beat up on themselves, "See how dumb I am; I'm so stupid." This type of self-manipulation does not work and only serves to lower feelings of self-

worth. I believe God does not make junk and you can trust what God has created as long as you operate your life as God designed it to function.

To forgive means, literally, to give up—judging yourself and judging others.

**Taking the judgments off frees you.
Frees you to forgive.
Frees you to get on with your life.**

M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., MFT
<http://www.DocDowning.info>
DocDowning@att.net