

Forgiveness

There are many things that are out of our control in this world. We can't control what the weather will be like tomorrow. We can't control the car tailgating us while driving. We can't control how others treat us. But what we *can* control is how we react and interact with the world around us. Therefore, there's no such thing as "I can't forgive someone" but rather "I *choose not* to forgive them." Forgiveness is an incredibly powerful virtue that we can all harness. And if we learn to forgive "men their trespasses, [our] heavenly Father will also forgive [us]" our trespasses (Matthew 6:14).

St. Kosmas Aitolos teaches us that "If a man insults me, kills my father, my mother, my brother, and then gouges out my eye, as a Christian it is my duty to forgive him. We who are pious Christians ought to love our enemies and forgive them. We ought to offer them food and drink and entreat God for their souls. And then we should say: 'My God, I beseech Thee to forgive me, as I have forgiven my enemies.'"

Wow. Surely this is extreme. Surely God doesn't expect me to go this far. This is just St. Kosmas being a saint after all. As for me, I'm just a normal weak person. Yet, this is what God expects of all of us. This is what God means when He calls us to love our enemies. Saints who have achieved this level of love were not different from us. They all started their lives as regular people just like you and me but what gave them their titles of saints was their love and forgiveness. This means that we, too, can follow their steps.

Loving our enemies has nothing to do with our feelings. Love is an action. It's comprised of certain deeds that I'm do, like forgiving someone who wronged me or caring for someone who belittled me. We've all been hurt by someone at some point or another. Whether it be emotionally, physically, or mentally, we've all experienced hurt. But why should I accept this behavior from others? Why should I forgive someone? They don't even care about my forgiveness. They'll just keep hurting me unless I teach them a lesson. These are all thoughts that rush through our minds when we remember being wronged by others. Our emotions often distract us and prevent us from following God's teachings about forgiveness.

St. Peter once asked Christ, "how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). Here, Christ is acknowledging the fact that St. Peter might be hurt by his brother more than once and even repeatedly. Still, He tells him to be patient with his brother. We live in a time where it's easier to cut people out of our lives than to resolve our issues with them. We can just block them from all social media platforms, change our numbers, go to different churches, etc. But we're called to bear with one another. To forgive and be patient with each other.

If we really sit down and process the reasons why we choose not to forgive people, more often than not, the root of the problem is pride. How dare this person say/do this to me? After all I do for them, this is how they repay me? Why are they doing this to me? The problem is that we often have an elevated sense of self and don't tolerate anything that goes against this. Instead,

we're called to be "completely humble and gentle; to be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). So, when we get upset at someone, we should first try to examine ourselves and our actions. And if we are not at fault, we must still try to take the pain with meekness and forgive.

Furthermore, it's important to realize that forgiveness is a two-way street. It's as beneficial for you as it is for the other person. "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). Forgiveness, just like love, covers a multitude of sins so it's in our own best interest to forgive in order to receive salvation. Also, forgiving others is one of the best ways to witness for Christ. No other religion or belief system in the world teaches believers to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you... To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6:27-29). And this exactly what makes us, Christians, so unique. We're not called to live by the world's definition of how to treat people. We're called by God's commandments. Through this forgiveness and exemplary love, our persecutors will be transformed. They'll be shocked and, by the grace of God, their hearts will be moved. Thus, just as our hearts become purified when we forgive, their hearts will be purified too. It's a win-win situation.

Of course, this is all much easier said than done. However, here are some things to keep in mind which can help us attain the virtue of forgiveness and to love our enemies.

1. *Pray for the person who wronged you!* Don't pray that God makes them realize how awful they are or to take them somewhere else. Instead, we must pray for blessings unto them. Even if they spited us, harmed us, and annoyed us, God commands us to "bless those who curse you and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Luke 6:28). We don't always have to understand God's commandments to follow them, but this truly works. Even if, at first, we don't mean these blessings in our prayers, over time, God will really soften our hearts towards them and He will strengthen us.
2. *Allow yourself time and be patient.* Ecclesiastes 11:1 tells us to "cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it *after many days*." The rewards and fruits of forgiveness won't come instantly. Don't expect relief or a change of heart immediately just like how we don't expect a seedling to become a beautiful tree right away. Be patient with yourself and with your brother. After many days, in God's perfect timing, healing will come and love will avail. If you sow love and forgiveness, then you will reap love and forgiveness from your Heavenly Father.
3. *Don't hold onto grudges.* Abba Maccarius says that "if we keep remembering the wrong which men have done us, we destroy the power of the remembrance of God." Therefore, don't dwell on conflicts for too long. Occupy yourself with something spiritually beneficial, if you catch yourself remembering an issue that happened. Also, instead of getting angry again and falling into sin while the other person probably moved on, read a book, listen to a soothing song, or do a fun activity. Forgive so you can move on.

May God forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and strengthen us to follow His commandments with joyful hearts.

“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” – C.S. Lewis

References:

“Learning to Love my Enemies” by Fr. Benjamin Aboukheir

“Saying of Christ (Part 1) – Forgiveness” by David Nada

<http://www.orthodoxchurchquotes.com/tag/forgiveness/page/3/>