

Forgiveness – what it is – and isn't – about:

God forgives. That's central to the teaching and life of Jesus. And so we are called also to forgive one another. One way of understanding what that means is by identifying some 'misunderstandings of forgiveness'.

[Edited from Myths of Forgiveness, Carroll Juliano, Bishop Gregory Aymond, Loughlan Sofield].

Misunderstanding # 1 – Forgiveness is easy:

Forgiveness is often not the normal human reaction. More often we want revenge, i.e., to get even with the person who has offended. Imitating Christ is never easy. Choosing to forgive is Christ-like. Forgiveness is a central message of Jesus to his followers. The challenge to forgive is one that Jesus repeatedly proclaimed directly and through parables.

Those who accept this invitation to forgive will find that this choice often runs counter to a strong societal value. "People of peace must not think about recriminations and retribution. Courageous people do not fear forgiving" (*Nelson Mandela*). Forgiveness is not the action of the weak but rather the virtue of the brave. The process of forgiveness takes time and patience and is never an easy journey. The fact that forgiveness is not easy demands that adequate time be given to work through the attending issues. Forgiveness is a slow process. If one rushes the process and tries to oversimplify it, the result can be an insincere forgiveness.

Misunderstanding # 2 – Forgive and forget:

The suggestion to "forgive and forget" is an unhelpful mantra. There are stories of people who reach the conclusion that forgiving is the right thing to do and a decision that would bring them peace and healing. Moving to that decision prevented them from being destroyed emotionally by the people who had hurt them, sometimes grievously. A woman whose son was killed in the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 lamented, "Those terrorists killed my son, and now I am allowing them to destroy and kill me." She was aware that the anger she was harbouring toward the terrorists was not affecting them. They were already dead. She realized, after much prayer and reflection, that this anger was destroying her spiritually, emotionally and even physically. Stored anger continually causes the body to produce hormones that can destroy the body and have physical consequences.

To suggest that people should forgive and forget would sometimes be ludicrous. There is no way they could forget, even if they wanted to. Those tragic events are indelibly etched into their hearts and souls for eternity. To suggest that people forget the atrocities they have experienced often places a burden of guilt on them.

Misunderstanding #3: Forgiveness and Reconciliation are the same:

Forgiveness is an act of the will. It is a deliberate choice to let go of the desire to get even with someone who has hurt you. Each individual has complete control over forgiveness, and no one can prevent another from forgiving. The decision to forgive or to hold onto the anger, which is detrimental to one's spiritual, mental and physical health, is a personal decision.

Reconciliation, by contrast, is something over which you have no control. You can seek reconciliation, but if the other party refuses to become reconciled, there is virtually nothing you can do except pray that the other will accept God's grace and see the value in reconciling. Frequently, we encounter Christians who experience guilt because they have not become reconciled. They have failed to see that in forgiving and attempting reconciliation they have done all they can to become reconciled.

Forgiveness does not take away the responsibility for justice. There is a need to differentiate between forgiveness and justice. Over thirty years ago Pope John Paul II went to jail to forgive his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. Agca was forgiven by the pope and from the report in *Time* magazine describing the event, the pope became reconciled with his attacker. Although there was both forgiveness and reconciliation, Agca remained in jail for another twenty years.

Misunderstanding #4 – Forgiveness must be communicated to the other:

If one desires reconciliation, then forgiveness must be communicated to the other. Forgiveness, however, is an act of the will. Forgiveness must be chosen, but not always communicated. Sometimes it is impossible to communicate forgiveness to another, i.e., when the offending person has died. Sometimes it may not be

appropriate, or in the best interest of the offended person to communicate forgiveness. If you desire *reconciliation*, then communicating your forgiveness is a necessary step – but it requires the cooperation of the other in order to be achieved.

Misunderstanding #5 – Forgiveness is a gift to the one who has offended:

The motivation for forgiving should be more than the mandate that we are expected to forgive. An important reason for forgiving is because we need to be healed. Forgiveness is both a Christian value and a gift to oneself. There are many reasons for forgiving. And forgiveness is in the best interests of the forgiver. We forgive because we need to be healed. We want to be whole and to be people of hope and life. Jesus said that he had come that we might have life and have it to the full. Retaining anger drains that very life from us. Some advice given to someone who has been hurt by another: 'I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable; it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding onto him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself.'

Misunderstanding #6 – Forgiveness approves of the behaviour of the offender:

Some individuals find it difficult to forgive because they fear that such a decision will convey the impression that forgiveness approves the reprehensible behavior of the offender. Forgiveness does not address the behavior of the offender. It speaks of the courage, compassion, wisdom and mercy of the forgiver.

When Pope John Paul II forgave his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, he never indicated that Agca's actions were justifiable.

Although it is sometimes very difficult, many people who have been hurt can arrive at the decision to forgive so that they may be free and healed.