



Some questions about "Forgiving."

Of the many things people ask me, questions about "forgiving others" are some of the most-often asked (second only to questions about heaven.). So here are a few reminders about what forgiving is - and what it isn't.

How can I forgive when I don't feel like forgiving?

Forgiving others is not a feeling that comes upon you. Forgiveness is a choice you make. If you wait until you "feel like" forgiving, you may never do it. (Just like if you waited until you "felt like" going to work or school - or even getting up in the morning - you may not often make it to work, school or out of bed.) So, don't wait for a "feeling of forgiveness" to come over you. Forgiving others is a conscious choice we make.

Why should I forgive?

Forgiving is a conscious choice we make, because just like choosing to go to work or school or get out of bed daily - it needs to be done. Quite simply "forgiving others" is not optional for us. The ability to forgive - even huge, deep hurts - is absolutely essential for your mental and physical health. Corrie ten Boom, survivor of Nazi war camp atrocities, established a "half-way house" for other survivors of the Holocaust, to help them make the transition from the horror of the camps back into mainstream society. She made an observation about the people who were never able to get out of the half-way house. She said that she noticed those people who never were able to get back into life all had one thing in common: they were the ones who never forgave. As I noted in the "Give Your Spiritual Life A Lift" article, the ability to forgive is necessary to keep something in your past from poisoning your future with bitterness and hatred. Forgiving others is necessary for your physical and mental health.

Of course, the ability to forgive is also not optional for our spiritual health. Remember Jesus' own words:

"But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matthew 6:15.

And in the prayer we speak every Sunday, the petition "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" literally means "forgive us our sins *as much as* we forgive those who sin against us." So, when you pray that portion of the prayer without forgiving someone else, you are praying for God to *not* forgive you. Forgiving others is necessary for your spiritual health.

What does it mean to "Forgive"?

The word literally means "to cancel a debt." When someone "wrongs" you, they "owe you" whatever it will take "right the wrong." You have the right to "settle accounts" with them by getting them back. When you forgive you are saying "I give up the right to get you back for what you did. I give up the right to get revenge. I cancel the debt you owe me." That does not mean that you have removed all consequences they have to face as a result of what they did to you. It simply means that you are leaving those consequences up to God and have made the choice not to hand them out yourself.

The other person does not need to ask for forgiveness before you give it. Remember the example of Jesus on the cross? "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." His killers hadn't asked for forgiveness. Or Stephen's last words in Acts 7:60 "Lord, don't hold this sin against them." The people who stoned him to death never asked for his forgiveness. We give up the right to hold a sin against someone not because they ask for the debt to be cancelled, but because it is simply what followers of Jesus Christ must do.

To sum up, when you say "I forgive you," you are saying, "What you did is not "ok" and it's not "alright." It still hurts - a lot - and maybe always will. But I will not ever try to get you back or "hold it over your head." It's done. And I must put it behind me and go on. I can't begin to heal until I let this go, so I forgive you."

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net