

Forgiveness



FORGIVENESS : EXPLORED

Finding Freedom in Forgiveness

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Disclaimer

This handout is not the final word on forgiveness. There is a lot to say, and a lot to write about forgiveness or unforgiveness. These are simply some of my thoughts after reading widely on the topic from a variety of sources from sacred Scriptures to secular Stanford research. It is all useful and potentially powerful.

Please read it carefully and even take notes as you read it. If you would like to discuss it further, please feel free to set up a time to meet with me. And always feel free to consult with your pastor, rabbi, or other wise people about seeking the freedom and peace that can come from forgiveness.

Nothing contained in this handout is intended to replace face to face counseling, therapy services, or medical advice.

Introduction

The concepts in this handout are neither new nor original with me. They represent a collection of wisdom and research from around the world and across human history.

As I have been on my own journey of finding the freedom that comes from forgiving those who have hurt us, I have come across a variety of sources that I have learned from. Much of their wisdom is included in this handout for you.

Among these sources are the wisdom of Biblical sages such as Joseph and Moses, the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the original concepts of cognitive therapy as penned by the Apostle St. Paul.

There are also contemporary sources including British Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England and now professor at NYU, Yeshiva University, and also King's College of London; David Konstan, Ph.D., now the Professor of Classics at NYU; and Fred Luskin, Ph.D., the Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project at Stanford University.

It is my hope that as you read through these pages that you will find something that will spark an idea within you that will help you on your own journey into freedom from the hurts of the past. Let's move forward.

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Forgiveness Explored : Two Kinds of Forgiveness

Forgiveness was born 3800 years ago in Egypt.

At least the very first recorded moment in history of one person's gracious act of forgiveness toward another is recorded in the Torah – in the book of Genesis. An Egyptian “Minister of Economy” named Joseph had suffered a tumultuous life before being appointed by the Pharaoh to oversee the economy of the nation:

- He had grown up in a foreign land;
- His father loved him, but his brothers envied and hated him;
- His own brothers sought to kill him, but instead decided to sell him into slavery so that they wouldn't be “murderers” of their own brother, and besides, they could pocket some cash;
- He was again sold as a slave to an Egyptian land owner;
- He was falsely accused of an attempted rape, and was thrown into prison for many years.

But now as a man elevated to power, Joseph was in the position to bring vengeance upon his brothers, if he had wanted to. His brothers, because of a famine in their own country, came to Egypt to buy food, and in doing so their paths crossed with the one of the most powerful men in Egypt – their brother Joseph.

Joseph had many options.

With just a word he could have had them arrested and imprisoned, and he could have had his day of retaliation and vengeance. After all, isn't this what they had done to him so many years before? Wouldn't it only have been “fair” for them to have suffered as Joseph had suffered?

The former Chief Rabbi of England, the Lord Jonathan Sacks, calls this encounter “The Day Forgiveness was Born.” He writes that this moment has arguably had a greater influence on the course of history than any human discovery, invention, technology, or achievement. It was the first recorded moment of one man forgiving others.

Forgiveness is not just mitigating punishment, or delaying punishment or anger for a later date. In David Konstan's book, *"Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea,"* Professor Konstan argues that there was no concept of forgiveness among ancient civilizations such as the Greeks. Instead there was only the appeasement of anger.

In these other ancient cultures revenge was the expectation and the norm. When someone harmed someone else, either the victim or his family sought revenge out of either anger or duty. The perpetrator might try to appease the victim to delay his retaliation, or to seek absolution from the victim to avoid the punishment to come. This might be done by doing rituals or performing other actions to humiliate one's self in order to restore the victim's dignity – making the act of revenge of no value.

Konstan points out that the Greek word that is sometimes translated "forgiveness" really means "exculpation or absolution." This word *sungnome* is the concept of the victim turning off their anger because they understand why the perpetrator did what he did at the time he did it. It's a subtle difference, but it is not "forgiveness."

This first kind of forgiveness is illustrated for the very first time in all of recorded history in this account of Joseph and his brothers. This is forgiveness that follows repentance, taking responsibility for the harm caused, and having true contrition.

In the course of their interactions the brothers are brought to the place of "repentance" where they humbly live through the following steps:

- The first step in this process of repentance is that they admit that they have done wrong, and have harmed Joseph deeply.
- The second step in this process of repentance is that they "confess" their wrongdoing and they take responsibility for having done it. There are no excuses, there is no passing off the responsibility to another. They admit their guilt.
- The third step in this process of repentance is what the ancient Rabbis called "complete repentance," where when life has handed the perpetrator the opportunity to repeat the crime again – he does not do so – because he has now changed on the inside. Because of his repentance he has become new.

Because his brothers have admitted their guilt, and have confessed their wrong doing, and have changed their behaviors, choices, and hearts, now Joseph is free to fully and finally forgive them – once and for all – forever. Both Joseph and his brothers can be free to move forward into the future without anger or bitterness, or fear of retaliation.

This kind of forgiveness only exists in places where repentance exists. This kind of forgiveness is preceded by the repentance of the perpetrator who has taken complete responsibility for his actions, for the pain he has caused to the victims, and had changed in his heart so that everyone knows that he will never do such a thing again.

This process of forgiveness – this first kind of forgiveness – can transform people, and families, and even nations. In this kind of forgiveness everyone has a change of heart. Our feelings change, our attitudes change, and our thoughts change. Each one involved, perpetrator and victim, change for the better through the process.

The Second Type of Forgiveness Can Be Much Harder

But what happens when the perpetrator does not confess or repent?

What happens when that person, or those persons, refuse to take responsibility for their actions – or even blame the victim for all of the pain that has resulted?

“Blaming the victim” is a common phrase in our culture for a reason – it happens a lot.

What is the victim of abuse, rejection, a crime, or betrayal to do when the perpetrator laughs at the pain, or blames the victim – playing the role of the righteous one and refusing to take any personal responsibility, or continues to abuse others, or has died in his shame and sins?

How do we *forgive* that person?

Or what does the victim do when the best apology offered is, “I’m sorry that you are bothered, or hurt, or angry.” What kind of apology is that supposed to be?

It is still just a subtle form of blaming the victim – because the victim hasn’t yet “gotten over it” as the perpetrator has done. “It doesn’t bother me, so why should it bother you?” becomes just another way for the perpetrator to say that the victim is still as flawed as they were in the past, and that because of their flaws they deserved the abuse in the past just as they deserve the pain in the present.

Why would someone forgive the perpetrator when there is no repentance?

The reason to forgive those who have hurt us, even when they are unrepentant or uncaring, is so that we can be free of the bitterness, anger, or rage that can be planted in our hearts and souls when we are deeply hurt by another person, or by life’s circumstances themselves.

Forgiveness results in freedom. We do not have to be victims for the rest of our lives. We can leave the abuse, the crime, the lies about us, the pain caused to us, in the past.

Forgiveness allows us to disconnect from the past like unhooking bungee cords from our pants – emotional bungee cords that keep pulling us back in to the past and have kept us from moving forward into the future.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

What If I Just Cannot Forgive Them?

There is an ancient religious practice called “consecration.” Consecration is “the act of declaring something sacred,” and that something is then devoted to God for the sake of His Kingdom or honor in a solemn ceremony. People will be inducted, or consecrated, or ordained, into a religious office such as the priesthood or the ministry. Sometimes valuable items such as property are consecrated to God for the use of ministry or service.

But once something is consecrated, it is set aside and never picked back up again. It is given as a gift to God. It has become a sacred offering or gift to God. It is no longer ours to own.

People only consecrate things of great value. It is an act of sacrifice, as well as an act of worship and devotion. When a man enters the priesthood he is giving his years and ambitions to ministry. When another person sets aside and consecrates his land, he is giving up the future value or uses of that property, as well as the property title.

What is the most important thing that you have, that you think about every single day? Is it your hurt, or bitterness, or anger over what someone has done to you to hurt you? You may have never thought about this as something valuable. But if you think about it – ruminate over it – daily or weekly, then it is in fact very important to you.



There are some people, or some things, that we just cannot forgive – at least not yet, not right now. But we can set aside and “consecrate” anything that we have and hold. We can give the hurt, bitterness, anger, betrayal, and pain, over to God as an offering. We can give it to him knowing that it is in fact very valuable to us. The pain that we have experienced matters to us.

So we can bring it to God and lay it down as a sacred and precious offering. We can consecrate it to God – and walk away from it. Let Him carry it.

Whether we are able to forgive the person, or are willing to consecrate our pain as an offering to God – either way we are free. We no longer have to carry the emotional burden. Sure, we may have to still suffer the consequences of what they did to us, but we don’t have to carry the emotions that are constantly activated and weight us down. Freedom is the goal.

Ten Power Steps Toward Forgiveness

The first step in any problem solving process is typically taking the time to clearly define the “problem” that needs to be solved. The clearer the description of the problem, the better the solution usually is.

Define and Describe It:

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The same is often true in the process of forgiveness. The better that one is able to describe exactly what happened, and by whom, the better this process will work. So then, as we begin, please take a few minutes to describe exactly what happened in your life, and describe exactly how you feel about what happened.

Be able to articulate what about the situation or event was not OK - what about it hurt so very much. Then, it's sometimes a good idea to talk to a few trusted people about how you feel about the event, and exactly how the event hurt you, just to get a little more clarity about it.

And this process might need to be repeated over and over. There may be a long list of people to forgive, events to get free from, or hurts to heal. Take your time, sit down with a pad of paper, and begin making your list of people or events to forgive so that you can move forward.

Now that you have identified your feelings about the situation or event, or person who caused the hurt, please move forward into the healing phase. The goal is forgiveness, which leads to peace and freedom.

②

Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to have peace, and to have freedom. As you move forward in forgiveness you will feel better. Forgiveness is for you. Forgiveness is not for anyone else.

We want you to feel better, and to find peace and freedom.

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Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you have to reconcile with the person who hurt you. Forgiveness does not mean that you must condone what was done to you.

What you are seeking through forgiveness is to have peace. Forgiveness helps to heal these hurt feelings.

Forgiveness can be defined as:

- the peace and the understanding that can come from spending less time and effort blaming the person, or the situation, which has hurt you;
- taking the event that hurt you a bit less personally;
- or changing the story of your pain to a better story – perhaps to a story with greater perspective, greater meaning, or as a part of a larger purpose.

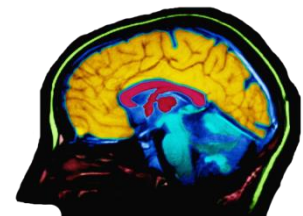
Perspective is a Gift

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It is important to have the right perspective on what has happened, and what is happening now.

Realize that your primary pain, distress, bitterness, or anger that you are experiencing right now – today – is coming from the hurt feelings, thoughts, and physical upset that you are suffering right now – today.

Your brain is generating these thoughts and feelings right now. What hurt you, or offended you in the past - whether five minutes ago, or ten years ago, is not generating these thoughts and feelings in your brain at this moment.



Your brain is generating these thoughts and feelings right now - not your past.

So let's begin to change your thoughts and feelings that you are experiencing right now, and start feeling better today!

Thinking About Our Thinking

Here is a quick exercise to help you pay attention - to your own thinking: Close your eyes and imagine a coffee cup for about 10 seconds. Try to hold that image in your imagination. Just ten seconds will do.



Now notice what happened. For most people they can hold that image of a coffee cup in their "mind's eye" of the imagination for about three seconds, then their mind starts to wander off, and we have to "re-set" that thought to stay focused on the coffee cup for a bit longer.

For most people, in most situations, we can really focus our thoughts for about three seconds, then we have to purposefully "re-set" that thought in order to stay focused long enough to finish whatever task we have set out to finish.

But what this means for us is that every three or four seconds we have the opportunity to change what we are thinking about. Every three or four seconds we have the chance to shift our thinking away from the hurt that makes us bitter or angry, and think about something else - perhaps something that is healing or motivating or healthy.

*"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable –
think about what is excellent or worthy of praise.
These are the things that we should always think about."*

At the moment that you realize that you are upset, and that you are thinking thoughts that lead to bitterness, anger, rage, or slander - shift your thinking to kind, compassionate, and loving thoughts - toward anyone. Think about things that are pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy, or that bring you peace and joy.

Expectations

⑤ The next step toward peace and freedom is to give up your expectations that the people who have hurt you are going to ever make things right - to “balance the books” or to “pay their debt” to you. The longer you hold on to this “hope” or expectation, the longer you will be in pain. Let it go, release it.

This is a true definition of “forgiveness” :

It is the cancelling of a debt - the writing off of something that somebody owes as a debt. If you owed someone \$10,000 and they just wrote it off and said that you don't have to pay them the money, the word that would be used is that they have “forgiven” the debt.



⑥ Give up expecting things from other people - or from your life - that they do not choose to give you. Give up your expectations about how other people should act toward you to make things right. It is unlikely that they have any intention to “balance the books.”

⑦ Seek peace. Shift your thoughts toward seeking peace, and freedom. Seek health, and prosperity, and love, and do the hard work that it takes to achieve them. Focus your thoughts and energy on what is good and healthy for you. Remember that commitment that you made to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better and to have peace.

Be grateful for the good people and good things in your life. Practice gratitude each morning. Simply get a pad of paper at the beginning of each day, and write down five people, places, or things for which you are truly grateful. Take time to appreciate each

that you have written down. Take more time. Thank God for them, and now move forward into your day. This can be a very powerful way to begin a day.

"All people desire to have peace, but very few are willing to do what is necessary to be at peace."
- Thomas a Kempis c.1450 AD.

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Focus your energies into looking for another way to get your positive goals met than through the experience that has hurt you. Instead of rehearsing the things that have hurt you over and over in your imagination, shift your thinking to imagine new ways to accomplish what you want in life.

Choose to live today well. And tomorrow.



Who Has the Power to Rule Over Your Life?

Sometimes we allow the people or events that have hurt us badly in the past to live in our heads right now - in the present. And not only do we let them live there, but we even let them rule over us as if they were Kings and Queens. We become mere servants to people from our past, or events in our history. They reign over our todays, and they will rule over our futures too, if we let them.

There is a better way.

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Instead of thinking about your wounds and hurt feelings everyday - and instead of giving the person who hurt you any space or place in your head and thoughts - have a bit of a "rebellion" and take away their power to generate bitterness, hurt, or even anger inside of your head and soul.

Instead, focus your thoughts on the beautiful things and blessings in your life.

There is ancient wisdom that says that if one begins to purposefully drive his or her mind to think about things that are purely good, things that are noble and virtuous,

things that are right and pure, things that are beautiful and lovely, things that are worthy of your admiration and praise because they are so excellent – that purposefully thinking these thoughts will quickly begin to change both one’s mood, and the way that one feels about others – and even one’s self.

So let love rule your life and thoughts.

“Give up all bitterness, rage, and anger - brawling and slander - along with every form of malice. Instead, be kind, and compassionate. Be forgiving toward others...Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love - just as Christ loved us...” - St. Paul c. 70 AD.

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Update your personal “grievance story” to include the next chapter where you act as the hero who forgives people - even people who don’t deserve it.

And update that story to include the part where the hero of the story becomes a person of inner peace, and has achieved freedom from the chains of the hurts from the past.



Focus your efforts to seek the peace and freedom that comes from forgiveness.

*Someone once wrote, “There are two kinds of forgiveness;
the kind when you forgive and you [keep moving forward in life with them],
or the kind where you forgive but you move on without them.*

Use them both wisely.”

My Forgiveness Worksheet

Here's my list of people that I know I have not yet truly forgiven. I want to write them down here so that I can consider what I want to do about them in the near future. I want to move into the freedom and peace that can come to me by forgiving others who have hurt me.

Consider the past five years, who do you need to forgive?

Consider the past twenty years?

Looking back, even to childhood, who do you need to forgive?

Douglas Cowan, Psy.D.

Dr. Douglas Cowan is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (M24381) with over 30 years of experience in helping children, teenagers, and adults to be more successful in school, at home, and in their relationships.

If you would like help in moving forward to a place of peace and forgiveness, and would like to work with Dr. Cowan on the journey, feel free to visit his website at <http://DouglasCowan.me> or call him directly.