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What is Forgiveness?
A Discussion Guide

What is forgiveness? As this is a topic about how we choose to live our lives, we might start this conversation by looking to what some of the world's religions say on the topic. All great religions cherish and promote certain central practices such as loving God and loving one's fellow human being. One of the great obstacles to loving other people is the hurt that people inflict upon each other and the resentment—even hatred—which that engenders. What is a person to do who has been deeply hurt?

In the New Testament Jesus says, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.” (Luke 6: 37-38)

The Old Testament, famous for its stories of revenge and destruction, nonetheless plainly and boldly states in Leviticus, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Islam, widely misrepresented as a religion of revenge, consistently teaches love and forgiveness. As it says in the Koran, “He who forgiveth, and is reconciled unto his enemy, shall receive his reward from God.”

Confucius, the father of Confucianism and much of Chinese wisdom, wrote this adage: “If you would start down the road to revenge, first dig two graves.”

Gandhi said, “If you take an eye for an eye, soon the entire world will be blind.

Buddha and the many followers of Buddhism have suffered extreme torture rather than take revenge. Indeed, one Buddhist monk who was tortured by the Chinese every day for months later said that his greatest fear while he was enduring his torture was that he would lose his sympathy for his torturers and start to hate them and dream of revenge. He feared this because to do so would be to become as desolate as his tormentors.

Whatever religion or tradition you examine, you will find that the wisest minds always return to the power of forgiveness as a saving grace. They teach forgiveness as a daily practice and always place it above revenge.

And yet, we humans find it devilishly difficult to apply forgiveness in our daily lives. In this discussion guide I would like to raise three questions and stimulate your thoughts and conversation with some ideas related to each.

Question # 1: What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a word we all think we can define until we actually try to do it. If you poll a group of ten people, you will get ten different definitions. Does forgiveness mean you release a criminal from jail? Does it mean you love the person who hurt you? Does it mean you invite your enemy into your home? Does it mean you return to the man who battered you? Does it mean you offer your coat once a robber has stolen your wallet?

My own definition of forgiveness draws upon the Greek root from which the word derives. Originally to forgive meant “to set free.” As I define it, when you forgive someone else you set yourself free of the

hold that anger and resentment exert over you. It does not mean, by my definition, that you set free the criminal, or that you allow the batterer back into your life, or that you love or even like the person who hurt you. It simply means that you do all that you can to let go of the anger and resentment that have built up inside of you, thereby setting yourself free. In this sense, forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself.

Discussion questions:

- a. How do you define forgiveness?
- b. How is forgiveness different from absolution?
- c. How is forgiveness different from penance?
- d. Can you forgive without an apology?
- e. Can you forgive without restitution?

Question # 2: Why forgive?

It is much more natural for us humans to seek revenge once we have been hurt than to forgive. Indeed, a fundamental law of human nature might resemble one of Newton's Laws: For every hurt humans seek an equal and opposite hurt.

It feels good to get even. Revenge stirs our hearts and fires our imaginations. Why forebear? Why not settle the score?

In fact, medical science has proven to us that carrying grudges is bad for a person's health. It raises the levels of stress hormones and leads to inflammation which in turn leads to heart disease, stroke, and cancer, our leading killers.

And on a spiritual level, the chronically angry person is usually separated from whatever higher power he or she believes in. Short term anger is good; it is like a sneeze. It clears the air, and serves as a

protective measure. But long term anger pollutes the system of the person who carries it.

Discussion questions:

- a. Do you think forgiveness is preferable to revenge?
- b. Is there ever an instance when revenge is the better choice?
- c. How would you encourage someone to forgive who didn't want to?
- d. In your religious tradition, what are the specific reasons given in holy texts for the advisability of forgiveness?
- e. If a child asked you why he should forgive his brother for stealing his favorite toy, what would you say?

Question # 3: How does a person forgive?

Forgiveness is a process, not a moment. A person cannot snap his or her fingers and forgive then and there. The deeper the hurt, the longer the process can take. But, if you commit yourself to a path to forgiveness you will be much better off than if you commit yourself to a path to revenge. Even if you never get there, you will be better off on the path to forgiveness than on the path to revenge.

Forgiveness can be mysterious. It can come when we least expect it, or we can search for years but never find it. Each individual must find his or her own way to forgiveness, but I offer the following four steps to suggest a way: First of all, feel the pain. You must acknowledge how you have been hurt. Second, talk to selected people you trust and relive and reflect upon what happened. You need to talk it out to help put it into perspective. Third, ask yourself the question, "What do I want this pain to

turn into?” If your answer is something like peace or growth or wisdom, you are on your way. Now start trying to spit the hook of anger and resentment that is stuck inside you. This can take time. Keep talking to others. Consider how you yourself need forgiveness. Also consider how you might be acting like a fool by holding onto your anger. Keep working on it, and you probably will be able to spit the hook. Fourth, take stock, move on, and teach others what you have learned about how to forgive. This world needs help in learning the practical skill of forgiveness. Once you have learned it, teach others what you know. What worked for you will not necessarily work for them, but your example will most surely help.

Questions for discussion:

- a. Tell a story of how you forgave someone.
- b. What are the greatest obstacles to forgiveness?
- c. What are the mistakes most people make in organized religions when it comes to forgiveness?
- d. What does God—as you understand God—recommend as the best method of forgiving when forgiving is very difficult?
- e. What would you counsel a friend to do who was trying to forgive but just could not do it?

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