

# Advent: A Time for Reconciliation and Forgiveness



he whole purpose of Christmas is reconciliation. Through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ — His passion, death, and resurrection —

God's mercy flowed into the world, the breach of original sin was mended, and fellowship between God and man was restored. Each Christmas commemorates again this wondrous gift of reconciliation and love.

For us too, Christmas is about mercy and forgiveness. It is about letting go of past injuries, renouncing old judgments, giving up grudges. It is about renewing relationships, healing hurts, and making peace. It is about hope and new beginnings, restoration and renewal. But nowhere is it written that forgiveness is easy.

Forgiving someone who has deeply hurt us is a daunting task, and its difficulty is proportionate to the degree of injury we have experienced. The deeper the wound, the harder forgiveness comes. But Jesus tells us we *must* forgive — seventy times seven times if necessary. Why is forgiveness so important?

## Forgiveness: It's Good for You!

Medical science gives us a partial answer: Our physical, emotional, and mental health depends on it. Repressed anger causes high blood pressure, ulcers, heart problems, loss of memory, gastrointestinal disorders, increased susceptibility to infection, and clinical depression. Resentment breaks up

marriages, loses jobs, splits up friendships. Bitterness creates poor self-image, poor interpersonal relationships, and poor job performance. All in all, lack of forgiveness separates, isolates, and devastates. Life becomes a living hell.

A lack of forgiveness affects our spiritual health as well. If we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven:

*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt. 6:14).*

## Getting Started

How, then, can we begin to forgive? First we clear up misconceptions about it. Forgiveness does not mean:

- Condoning hurtful behavior,
- Denying our pain,
- Pretending everything is okay,
- Allowing ill will toward us to continue,
- Permitting ourselves or others to stay in abusive or harmful situations, or
- “Feeling” forgiveness.

Rather, forgiveness is a free-will action, prompted by grace, which sets us free from the consequences of sin. Forgiveness is a liberating, grace-filled



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decision. And, it most frequently takes place over time.

Psychologists have helped to identify the steps in the process of forgiveness. Basically, they all agree on certain fundamental actions:

- **Admit the anger.** For various reasons, many people do not admit they are angry. As long as this anger remains below the surface, it exerts a power that is difficult to control. Admitting it exists is the first way to loosen its hold.

- **Identify or name the emotions or hurt involved.** Ask the questions, "What did I lose?" or "What negative effect has the offense caused?" The answers to these questions point the direction to healing and help identify what needs to be resolved. Is it a loss of fidelity, the negative effect of rejection, a loss of good name?

- **Express the emotion or hurt.** Write it out in a journal, talk with a friend, confessor, or spiritual director, talk to the person who injured you, but get it out.

- **Exercise understanding.** This can be the most challenging step in the process of forgiveness. Psychologists call it "reframing." Essentially, it is choosing to reappraise what happened by considering other factors. For example, it may be easier to forgive someone who has inflicted pain on a loved one if we recognize his own deprived circumstances and personal limitations.

- **Forgive and cancel the debt.** Ultimately, the moment arrives to make the decision to forgive. It does not mean the pain will automatically go away, nor does it mean there won't be moments of regret or sadness. It does mean that in those moments we will admit the hurt and renew our commitment to forgive in spite of it.

## Three Spiritual Helps for Forgiveness

1. **Overcome anger before it overcomes you.** As St. Paul urges us, "...do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27). We must begin to forgive as soon as an offense has been committed against us. Anger that has taken root is much more difficult to weed out. Failing to forgive is choosing to hold on to evil rather than letting God's grace work within us. Failing to forgive, therefore, is sin.

2. **Pray for your persecutors.** As we enter into prayer for those who have hurt us, we begin to see our persecutor through God's eyes. We come to see that the one who injured us deserves our compassion. Had that person known the extent of God's love, he never could have committed the action. With this understanding, prayer becomes easier; anger is assuaged, and we begin to forgive. In the process, our intercessory prayer becomes a healing agent in our persecutor's heart that leads him to the love of Christ.

3. **Meditate on the Passion of Christ.** This can be a great source of healing. What emotional pain, suffering, or indignity did Jesus not experience? As we meditate on the Passion, we come to see that our every sorrow was nailed to the cross with Him. His blood has redeemed it. We have only to appropriate the grace He merited for us.

When we find it difficult to let go of resentment or bitterness, we should prayerfully look at the cause. Perhaps there is an unrelated area within us that needs to be healed.

- **A word about reconciliation.** The best-case scenario is that we are able to achieve reconciliation with the party who has injured us. However, in many cases, this is not possible. The injuring party may not be alive, may not want to reconcile, or may be emotionally or physically dangerous to us. None of these, however, diminishes our mandate to forgive.

Advent is the perfect time to offer forgiveness. In so doing, our Christmas will be marked by true peace and real

love. May we accept the grace of reconciliation that comes to us through Jesus Christ and then extend it to others.



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