

Prayer Guide – Week 7

FORGIVENESS

**Be kind and compassionate to one another,
forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.
Ephesians 4:32**

The world is full of horrific wrongs: terrorism, rape, torture, abuse, betrayal, injustice, prejudice, ethnic cleansing and more. When saturated with pain, people coalesce around wrongs done. Seeking retribution or vengeance fuels more hatred, fear, self-righteousness and wrongdoing. Is it any wonder that forgiveness can seem more repugnant than retaliation?

Forgiveness is not a human idea – it's God's. True forgiveness is more than a high ideal. It is a costly, heart-rending process that refuses to ignore or minimize wrongdoing. It places blames. It condemns the wrong. But it also gives the wrongdoer a gift. Forgiveness separates wrongdoers from their wrong by refusing to label them as all bad. It refuses to add this one injustice to the injustice done to them.

A person who forgives joins his or her heart to Jesus' heart for sinners and hopes that love can lead a wrongdoer to repentance and into the arms of God. The Spirit of Jesus inhabits every Christian. The Forgiver is alive in you and me. Part of taking up my cross is following Jesus into the deeps of forgiving. It is allowing the Spirit of Jesus to forgive through me.

It's a serious and sobering thing to stand before "Our Father in Heaven" and pray "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." To say these words is to look at the state of our heart and ask for our love to never fail. It is a prayer to become like Jesus, who for love of us didn't hold on to His rights or His hurt. Jesus "loved His own to the end." And He has scars on His hands and feet to prove it. Scars that heal us and give us a fresh start over and over again.

When wrongdoing interrupts our life, we find places in our soul that didn't exist before; and God comes into these spaces with compassion, forgiveness, perseverance and long-suffering love.

Prayer Invitations

These exercises are suggestions to help you to pray through confession and self-examination. Remember to write your prayers and the place them in your prayer box.

- Talk to someone who has lived the reality of forgiving those that hurt them. Where did they get the courage, will and power to forgive? Pray to Jesus about this. Dear Jesus...
- In your imagination, sit at the foot of the cross as Jesus is dying. Watch Him holding the abuse, rage and sin of the whole world. Watch how He does not turn it back on those who deserve it. What does this mean to you in your relationship with him? With others? Dear Jesus...
- Prepare yourself for your next Communion by naming and listing your wrongdoing to God. Consider what you might actually deserve for this wrongdoing. When you eat the bread and drink the cup, savor the deliciousness of knowing that none of your wrongs stick to you. Pray a prayer of thanks! Dear Jesus...

Prayer Advice

I am constantly amazed that the petition “give” precedes the petition to “Forgive” and not vice versa. It is as if God’s graciousness in giving to us allows us to see the enormous debt we owe and leads us to cry out, “Forgive us our debts.”

Forgiveness does not mean that we will cease to hurt. The wounds are deep, and we may hurt for a very long time. Just because we continue to experience emotional pain does not mean that we have failed to forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean that we will forget. That would do violence to our rational faculties. Helmut Thielicke, a German pastor who endured the darkest days of the Nazi Third Reich, says, “One should never mention the words ‘forgive’ and ‘forget’ in the same breath.” No, we remember, but in forgiving we no longer use the memory against others.

Forgiveness is not pretending that the offense did not really matter. It did matter, and it does matter, there is no use pretending otherwise. The offense is real, but when we forgive, the offense no longer controls our behavior.

Forgiveness is not acting as if things are just the same as before the offense. We must face the fact that things will never be the same. By the grace of God, they can be a thousand times better, but they will never again be the same.

What then is forgiveness? It is a miracle of grace whereby the offense no longer separates. Forgiveness means that we will no longer use the offense to drive a wedge between us, hurting and injuring one another. Forgiveness means that the power of love that holds us together is greater than the power of the offense that separates us. That is forgiveness. In forgiveness, we are releasing our offenders so that they are no longer bound to us. In a very real sense, we are freeing them to receive God’s grace. We are also inviting our offenders back into the circle of fellowship.

God has bound himself to forgive when we forgive. Perhaps you have felt deeply the load of guilt at your offense against Heaven. You have been uneasy and unsure of your pardon from God. You long for some assurance that will give you peace. Well, here is assurance given by the highest authority. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, guarantees your acquittal: “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Mathew 6:14)

Resources:

Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home by Richard Foster

Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life by Marjorie J. Thompson

Spirit Windows: A Handbook of Spiritual Growth Resources for Leaders by Ann Z. Kulp

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun

The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives by Dallas Willard