

CHOOSING TO FORGIVE

As we look to God for the strength to forgive and set aside our pride, fear, resentment, and bitterness, we feel hope and peace.



By Benjamin F. Call

As a cardiologist, I attended a conference for physicians several years ago about the importance of forgiveness. I learned there of scholarly studies showing that choosing to forgive leads to better health, increased optimism, and better relationships with others.¹ In my study of the words of God, I have learned that forgiving others also brings great spiritual blessings, including peace and hope. Perhaps the most important of these blessings is that as we forgive others, we can be forgiven of our own sins. The Lord teaches us that forgiving others is a universal commandment—we are “required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10).

Yet even when we are aware of the importance of forgiveness, it may be difficult to forgive. Sometimes we allow pride, fear, resentment, or bitterness to discourage us and block our ability to feel hope. But the courage to forgive comes to those who put their faith and trust in the Lord. With His help, we can find the strength to forgive others—whether the wrongdoer has committed a serious sin or an unintended offense. Here are a few suggestions.

Understand what forgiveness is. To forgive is to pardon an offense. It is to let go of blame for a past hurt. It is to release a great burden. It is to move ahead with life.

In his last general conference address,

Failing to forgive magnifies our pain and increases our burdens.



President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, cited this definition of forgiveness: “Forgiveness is freeing up and putting to better use the energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentments, and nursing unhealed wounds. It is rediscovering the strengths we always had and relocating our limitless capacity to understand and accept other people and ourselves.”²

Understand what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness

does not require condoning a wrong, nor does it require allowing a harmful behavior, such as an abusive relationship, to continue. Also, forgiveness is not forgetting—if the offense wounded you enough to require forgiveness, you will likely have a memory of it. As author Lewis B. Smedes explained, “Forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.”³

Understand that failing to forgive magnifies the pain. Pain, disappointment, and injustice touch every life, often wounding tender hearts. At such times it may seem natural to blame another for things that have gone wrong. When we seek to place blame, however, we actually magnify our pain. This is because the act of blaming focuses our minds and hearts on the past, causing us to relive

the hurt and harbor emotional and spiritual injuries that might otherwise heal. Resisting the urge to place blame is key to our ability to forgive.

Elder Hugh W. Pinnock (1934–2000) of the Seventy taught: “Of course, heartache and pain can be spilled upon us by dishonest, manipulative, or unkind people. Accidents happen that can inflict terrible pain and sometimes lifetime disability. But to judge, blame, and not forgive always intensifies the problem. It pushes healing further into the future.”⁴

In order to fully heal, we need to accept responsibility for

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our reaction to whatever happens. Taking responsibility for the condition of our hearts allows us to regain control of our lives. Although we cannot always control what happens to us, we can always choose our response. Herein lies the power of our agency.

Pray for humility. Humility is the opposite of pride, which is the primary obstacle in our effort to forgive. Pride causes us to blame others for our misfortunes and to shift responsibility for what happens to us onto anyone but ourselves. But the Lord promises, “If they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). According to our humility and faith, the Lord will help us stop blaming others and truly forgive.

Leave the past behind, and focus your energy on accessing the power to choose to forgive today.

Express gratitude. Expressing gratitude invites the Spirit more fully into our lives, which can soften and change our hearts. Consider keeping a journal of things you are grateful for. Look for manifestations of God's love each day. As you cultivate an attitude of gratitude, you may find that you can even identify reasons to be grateful for your trials.

Be patient. Forgiving when your pain is great may take time. A woman who was recovering from a painful divorce received this wise counsel from her bishop: "Keep a place in your heart for forgiveness, and when it comes, welcome it in."⁵ You can make room for forgiveness through earnest prayer, study, and contemplation. Feasting upon the words of Christ daily will also help you draw closer to Him and will bring great healing power into your life (see 2 Nephi 31:20; Jacob 2:8).

Leave the past behind. The past is written in stone and cannot be changed. Focus your energy on today, for today you have the power to choose to forgive.

Write it down. When we hold grudges, we keep our wounds alive and fresh. Writing down your feelings can help you move forward. You may find it helpful to record your perspective on the situation and then rewrite your story by retelling it using a loving and forgiving tone. This practice invites the spirit of forgiveness and can bring a sense of closure to grievances and hurt feelings.

Trust that God will be the perfect Judge. The Savior said, "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (D&C 64:10). As we forgive, we must have enough faith to allow Christ's judgment to be judgment enough. He will bring both mercy to the humble and justice to the wicked. Rest assured that God's judgment will be thorough and fair.

Cast your burden on the Lord. Christ beckons, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Remember that in addition to taking upon Him the sins of the world, Christ took upon

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Do I have to forgive even if my antagonist remains cold, indifferent, and mean?

"A common error is the idea that the offender must apologize and humble himself to the dust before forgiveness is required. Certainly, the one who does the injury should totally make his adjustment, but as for the offended one, he must forgive the offender regardless of the attitude of the other. Sometimes men get satisfactions from seeing the other party on his knees and groveling in the dust, but that is not the gospel way. . . .

"If there be misunderstandings, clear them up, forgive and forget, don't let old grievances change your souls and affect them, and destroy your love and lives. Put your houses in order. Love one another and love your neighbors, your friends, the people who live near you, as the Lord gives this power to you."

Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball (2006), 91.

Him our pains and infirmities (see 2 Nephi 9:21; Alma 7:11–12; D&C 18:11). If you allow Him, He can make your burden light.

It can be difficult to find the strength to forgive, but the Savior and His Atonement make it possible. Truly, as we open our hearts to forgive others, we will be blessed with peace. Let us each embrace the healing power of forgiveness. ■

The author lives in Idaho, USA.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Michael E. McCullough, "Forgiveness as Human Strength: Theory, Measurement, and Links to Well-Being," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 43–55.
2. Sidney B. Simon and Suzanne Simon, as quoted in James E. Faust, "The Healing Power of Forgiveness," *Ensign*, May 2007, 68.
3. Lewis B. Smedes, *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (1996), 171.
4. Hugh W. Pinnock, "Now Is the Time," *Ensign*, May 1989, 10.
5. See James E. Faust, "The Healing Power of Forgiveness," 68.