



How to Forgive and How Not to Forgive

Myths about forgiveness

When should we forgive? Can everything be forgiven?

These questions are always raised at seminars and the answer is simple: you can forgive anything. Yet there are many myths concerning forgiveness.

Myth 1: To forgive is to forget.

Some people (this is one of the myths) argue that forgiveness means to say that “nothing happened” and that we should “cover everything up.” Nothing terrible happened and we did not do anything serious at all. But what if you actually did do something? We often like to justify everything and call white what is actually black. This has nothing to do with forgiveness. To forgive does not mean to “erase” the sin or devalue the act. Forgiveness does not depreciate the harm or evil someone has caused us. We forgive a person or individual. Remember the saying: “Love the sinner but hate the sin.” This statement is entirely relevant here.

We should not close our eyes to sins, offences, and malicious acts towards us because of servility or the desire to save a relationship. Consequently, it is vital to distinguish between forgiveness and reproof. Moreover, when you reprove someone, you have to call things by their real names. It is not simply a matter of subjective feelings, but rather of an objective situation in which it is obvious that you have been deceived, betrayed, or that someone has really let you down.

Myth 2: “I will not forgive until you apologize.”

Another myth is that forgiveness is possible only if it has been asked for. This is not at all the case. We forgive not for the other person’s sake – we forgive for our own sake.



What is an offence? It is when I carry antipathy for the person who offended me in my heart. And this high degree of dislike literally lives physically inside me. The question of whether it is in my mind or my heart is a rhetorical one; the main thing is that I carry this feeling inside me.

Forgiveness does not depend on whether the other person recognizes that what he did was wrong or whether he wants me to forgive him. Forgiveness depends on whether I want to continue to carry this loathing in my heart. Moreover, not his loathing, but my own: my anger at him, my judgment of him, my rejection of him.

For the heart and the soul this anger at another person is a very heavy burden. When a person does not forgive there is an element of self-destruction. People can be resentful for decades, thinking that by so doing they are punishing those who wronged them, but in actual fact they are punishing themselves most of all.

Myth 3: Those who forgive are weaklings.

What are some more myths? That the act of forgiveness shows weakness. That if you forgive you will show yourself to be a spineless softie. Yet in actual fact forgiveness requires a great deal of courage and inner strength. After all, we need to make an internal effort to release the pain we experienced from the other person. That is, the pain may linger because it is sometimes impossible to forget. A painful trace may remain for life, but this does not mean that we did not forgive.

We do not remember the nail we stepped on as a child, but we have the scar for life. We may not grow angry or condemn, we may have long ago forgiven, but a trace of the incident may remain and occasionally make itself known. We must bear in mind that forgiveness does not always mean erasing the inner pain. If



there is a memory of what happened, or some pain, this does not mean that there was no forgiveness.

Forgiveness as simply a decision – “I decided and I forgave” – is impossible. Without feelings and inner emotional work forgiveness will not take place.

Myth 4: The pain will go away by itself.

Similarly, the opposite view that “when the painful feeling goes away, everything will be forgiven without my will” is untrue. Nothing will be forgiven on its own.

Forgiveness is a combination of will and emotion. I make the decision and then carry it out emotionally. On this basis, we can see that forgiveness is a process; it is not a matter of immediately “forgiving and forgetting.” In some situations it is a lengthy process, because it depends on the degree of injury and damage that was made. I really like the expression that forgiveness is one-sided responsibility and one-sided openness. Ideally, forgiveness does not expect reciprocity. And forgiveness does not automatically mean reconciliation or that I will continue to communicate wonderfully with that person. A person may do something that makes further communication with him impossible.

So if I forgive, it does not mean that we will continue to be friends as before or that our relationship will not change. Sometimes the relationship changes, and changes radically.

Forgiveness as a gift

Forgiveness is my free gift to someone. I forgive without expecting anything in return. Yet what is it we expect? We expect someone to change, to fix his mistakes, to repent. No, this is not required; it might not happen. But it might. By accepting the other person as he is, our forgiveness will help him a little. But this does not guarantee that he will change. Forgiveness is both generous and risky: it is generous because it really is an act of the soul and risky because you cannot guarantee where you will end up. The result of my forgiveness is unknown either to me or to the other person.

The benefits of being offended

So when we talk about being offended, it is important to remember that the essence of our offence is unjustified expectations. The first thing we should do when we feel pain inside is to ask ourselves: were my expectations adequate?

If the expectations were adequate, then we can try to understand what went wrong. If the expectations were inadequate, the question of offence is withdrawn. The expression “let not the sun go down on your wrath” is correct only if the offence is not so much an emotional reaction (and no longer performs a signaling function), but has become a way of life, a manipulative tool that we use to build relationships with others.

There are many benefits to being upset with someone. Being hurt and being a victim result in a “halo” or in “wings” spread behind our backs. This is self-assertion against the “bad” and “horrible” others who are so cruel and unfeeling.



An interesting sociological experiment was carried out. People were asked: “What would you like to change in others?” Most of them responded that we would like others to be more tolerant, friendly, sensitive, and understanding. “And what qualities would you like to cultivate in yourself?” Of course: confidence, commitment, perseverance, and strength – very different and opposed qualities.

When we act offended we often use others as objects of self-affirmation. And this becomes a way of building relationships.

What to do with grievances

How do you know that you have forgiven with all your heart?

To understand if you have truly forgiven, it is important to have internal criteria. Furthermore, these criteria are different for each person. The internal criterion is a sense that I do not hold malevolence in my heart. For one person this will be a feeling of lightness and freedom, in contrast to tension, gravity, and unpleasant feelings; but for another it will be the ability to talk freely with the offender without an unpleasant aftertaste or distorted perceptions.

For some, genuine forgiveness means ending that unceasing inner dialogue during which we constantly argue, justify, blame, explain, or judge the other. If these dialogues suddenly stop and there is peace of mind, then perhaps it means that you have sincerely forgiven.

It is imperative that each person find out for himself how he knows within that he has completely forgiven. There can be no external standard; no other person can help you find this criterion. This can be understood by self-observation and careful attention to your inner world. There is no other way.

Should we tolerate rudeness – for example, at the store or post office?

If we are talking about our reaction to the rudeness we face on public transportation, in stores, or in other places, here it is not offence that we feel. Offence is more related to personal relationships and emotional ties. On public transportation and in stores there is the fact of depersonalization: the insult may not be directed at me personally, but rather at me as a member of society, as a passenger, or as a customer. Therefore it is likely that there will be no offence, but rather a reaction of irritation or rejection.

It is quite normal to react negatively to injustice, bullying, and rudeness. What is important is how we react. Of course, being rude in response is unacceptable. We can also say nothing, because we are unequal in strength and we are scared. It might be that the risk is too great, that there is the literal physical threat that the person might hit or continue to insult you – and here it is wise not to ask for trouble. Heroism, naturally, is welcome, but not in all situations. In a violent situation it is best to ask for help if we are unable to cope on our own. Ask for the store manager or write in the complaints book. Do not leave the situation unaddressed.

Why not? Because by addressing the situation we can help that person. You may fear that we will offend or upset them. But if we do not react we give them impunity. They feel that they can continue to behave in this way, which leads them into temptation. By encountering no resistance to their negative behavior, they begin to think it normal. It sometimes happens that people do not consider their behavior to be rude.



I often give the following example during lectures. I was traveling by train, and next to me sat a husband and wife talking to each other using obscene words. They communicated this way. They were not intentionally cursing; they were just having a conversation. I was sitting next to them along with two young girls. Listening to this was awful, and I understood that if I did not say something right then I would have to listen to this for the entire trip. So I reminded them that they were in a public place and that they should not express themselves in this way. They were quite frankly surprised, agreed with me, and apologized. It turned out that they did know regular words. They just somehow forgot that they were not at home.

I do not want to discuss the moral character of these people or their way of communicating, but it is important to understand that sometimes people do not realize that they are breaking the rules. And then, indeed, we can just ask them to stop without any aggression, anger, or frustration.

True, this is not always helpful. You might hear something unpleasant in response. Nevertheless, we must expose sin. We are called to do this as Orthodox Christians. Do not leave this unaddressed, because someone might simply not see the problem.

Do we need to talk about our offence to others or is it a personal matter?

When we are offended, we are faced with the question of whether or not to voice our offence. It depends on the situation, because we are responsible for our emotions. And the other person may be deliberately hurting us. So blaming them for hurting us is not always possible.

The next question is how close our relationship with that person is and whether I am going to continue communicating with him. This will determine my reaction to his words and actions. If I want to continue our relationship, then I should let him know what is painful to me, what words can hurt me, or why I do not react. Of course, do this in the form of an “I-message”: “I want to say that when someone does this, I do not like it (or it hurts me, I feel bad, I detest it).”

What do we do when it comes to serious things like our health? Here is a simple example. A man sitting next to me, without asking permission, began to smoke. I get a headache from tobacco smoke. He did not intentionally want to hurt me. Should I sit and suffer, smelling the cigarette smoke, and then suffer a headache? Or should I say to him: you know, I have a headache, so could you please not smoke?

Such a response to someone’s actions is not judgmental; I simply stated that I did not like it. I am not saying that I was offended. Therefore, in this case we can talk about our feelings and our reactions, but we should remember that sometimes our emotional response is inadequate to the situation. This inadequacy may be due to our being tired. We might not have gotten enough sleep and we might feel unwell, which just increases our sensitivity at that particular moment. So sometimes we can overreact to a common situation: how could this be, why is this so? This, however, does not mean that the person actually did anything wrong.

How should you react when someone deliberately hurts you?

If I understand that someone is hurting me on purpose, then I begin to question our relationship. If a person offends and hurts me knowingly, then what kind of relationship is that?



Or perhaps I provoked this action? That is also possible.

But even if I did provoke someone, that is still no reason to respond with “evil for evil”; there are other ways to solve problems. I unintentionally hurt someone and he reacted. But it is needless to multiply hate; the problem can be understood and the negativity stopped.

In any case, if you are not related, but just friends, then the questions of distance, trust, and sometimes the discontinuation of the relationship come up. Why do I need be with someone who intentionally hurts me? That is, if I am not a masochist.

It is more complicated with relatives.

How should we deal with touchy people? Should I always be cautious and please them or can I directly express my point of view?

Often when we are dealing with touchy people we become hypocritical by trying to please them, thinking that we are displaying our virtue and showing care for that person. When we please them and serve their touchiness, we think we are doing a good deed for them. This is not the case.

Hypocrisy and servility cannot be virtues, no matter what our motivations.

What is the difference between tolerance and patience? Tolerance is when all my inner emotions feel squeezed. What are these emotions? They are feelings of discontent, to say the least, of rejection and sometimes even of hatred. I do not show these emotions; I nod, smile, and agree; I do not have anything against it. But this has nothing to do with the virtue of patience. Patience is an internal decision with no traces of indignation, anger, or condemnation of the other person.

The result of tolerance is often gossip. Because here I have kept my feelings to myself, but then I go somewhere where I feel more secure, and there I will say everything I think about someone’s behavior. Therefore this “servility” does not lead to a favorable outcome.

It is important to remember that one bears responsibility for one’s own emotions. I cannot offend someone and someone cannot offend me. I can take offence. It is my choice how to react and how long I will be offended. Either I analyze and react, or I take pleasure in the offence. We have already discussed how being constantly offended can be a wonderful means of manipulation and self-assertion. So it makes no sense to indulge in this.

Sooner or later, someone will find out that we did not really agree with him at all and that we were only tolerating him the entire time. Who will tell him this? We will. The period of tolerance will come to an end and we will passionately express all that we have accumulated within. For the other person this will be terribly shocking and disappointing. It seems like we are suffering for the sake of the relationship, but a relationship built on hypocrisy gradually destroys itself.

Translated from [Russian](#) by Sophia Moshura.