

Love cannot exist fully where we carry unresolved and unreconciled grievances. Whether we hold grudges against others over small things or nurse a desire for revenge for enormous injuries, what we carry around unforgiven divides us from others, from God, and from ourselves.

Jesus teaches us to pray, *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. For Matthew it is not possible to distinguish between a sin against another person and a sin against God. Thus human relationships cannot be of less value than is one's relationship with God.

The king forgives a debt measured in today's money in the millions, if not billions. It is a debt that could never be repaid by his slave. The slave, in turn, refuses to forgive a debt that a farm worker could pay off in a year.

Just as God's love for us precedes and makes possible our love for God, so God's forgiveness precedes and makes possible human forgiveness. However, in the final judgment divine forgiveness presupposes human forgiveness.

For Matthew it is clear that God's forgiveness can be lost through human unkindness so that one's earlier guilt returns. The gift of grace negates neither God's freedom nor human freedom. We know that forgiveness that is unconditioned and endlessly repeated, that can be taken for granted, simply encourages evil people.

Why is forgiveness sometimes so hard for us? For some people it seems as though the power to forgive or withhold forgiveness is the only leverage they have in a relationship. To forgive means to give up power in that relationship. For others to forgive may seem weak, an injury to self-esteem. Sometimes people are simply embarrassed.

Often, however, inability or unwillingness to forgive stems from mistaken ideas about forgiveness. One such idea is that if we forgive someone, we ought to like that person. In fact it is often true that we may dislike another person very much while we are actually in the process of forgiving him or her.

Some people understand forgiveness or reconciliation to mean going back into a situation where they have been hurt in the full knowledge that the person who hurt them will hurt them again. For them forgiving means trying to believe against all evidence that the alcoholic or the abusive spouse really will stop this time. Forgiveness, so understood, demands that the forgiver lay aside his or her perception of reality to deliberately perform an act of self-deception.

Forgiveness as described by Roberta Bondi, is quite straightforward. It has two necessary ingredients. The first simply is not seeking revenge. Forgiveness means giving up a desire for harm to come to the person who has hurt us, either at the hands of God or at our own hands, in this world or the next. In most cases giving up the desire

for revenge is easy, but in other cases it may take some real work not to want the offender to pay for it in some way. In a few more serious cases, not returning evil for evil, at least in desire, may seem nearly impossible.

The second ingredient is actually and genuinely longing for the welfare of the person who has committed the injury. Forgiveness includes desiring the wholeness of the injurer. Wanting another's well-being is not necessarily wanting what he or she wants. It is wanting another to be able to live in the love God created us for.

Where do we begin? First, and often hardest, we must want to forgive. For some kind of hurts to be healed we need to spend a very long time, perhaps months or years, simply praying to want to forgive. Second, we need to understand, if possible, the pain and brokenness of those who wound us. Not understanding what has happened in and to ourselves prevents us from going on to something better.

Third, we need to see the consequences to others as well as to ourselves of our lack of forgiveness. Do I want to hold on to my resentments and insecurities arising out of those old hurts at the price of injuries I inflict on others? Finally, we must recognize that our wholeness and the wholeness of the other are found, not separately, individually, but in community.

Peter's question presupposes that he is the one who has been sinned against. He assumes that he is in the position of power against the one who has wronged him. The parable invites Peter and us to see ourselves as forgiven debtors living with and among fellow debtors. To be forgiven means to give up the power game of playing innocent verses guilty and to assume one's place in the community of forgiven sinners.