

Fawcett: What does it really mean to forgive?



Galatians 5:22-23 is a passage I heard a lot in Sunday school as a boy. It lists what St. Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” I can remember many a Sunday where I and my peers would draw on or colour in worksheets depicting bowls of fruit. These bowls would be filled with apples that had the word “PEACE” printed on them, or bananas with the word “GOODNESS” printed on their peel.

The way those verses are normally translated into English looks something like this:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (*New International Version*)

But I have seen it suggested that we should render it slightly differently; that, instead of putting a comma after the word “love”, we should put a colon. If we do so, Paul instead says:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love: Joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, goodness, and self-control.”

In other words, all these virtues would be examples or manifestations of the one key fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit: Love. Joy is love celebrating God’s blessings; peace is the effect of love between ourselves and others;

kindness is love in action towards others; and so on.

Every good deed we are called to do, despite the pluriformity of names for what seem to be many different actions, are all really just different ways to fulfil the single admonition to love. I can't say for certain if this is what Paul meant, but Scripture does repeatedly say that the entire law can be summed up in the command to love, so maybe there's something to it.

I bring all this up because I have a suspicion that forgiveness is also just another expression of love. This may seem a bit obvious, but I bring it up because, for a long time now, I have struggled with forgiveness – not (I hope) with the act of forgiving someone in my life, but with understanding the concept of forgiveness itself.

We are explicitly told that, if we want God to forgive us, we need to forgive those who have offended us; the Lord's Prayer takes it for granted that we have done exactly that. Our salvation, in other words, depends on whether or not we forgive others. But I don't think we talk enough about what that actually looks like.

Is God really commanding us to feel a certain way?

The first definition you'll probably find for "forgive" is that it means to "stop feeling angry or resentful" towards someone who has wronged you. But I have trouble believing this is what Scripture is ordering us to do. Is God really commanding us to *feel* a certain way?

It seems wrong to say that a feeling can be either virtuous or sinful. This is why we always distinguish temptation – which often takes the form of a desire, which is also a feeling – from sin, which involves a conscious act of the will. After all, our feelings are largely involuntary. *Feeling* anger, more often than not, is as involuntary as feeling hungry, or feeling pain when you stub your toe.

It is hard to understand how God can withhold His saving forgiveness from someone who experiences anger rising up spontaneously in their hearts when they see someone who hurt them badly. If we are commanded to forgive, forgiveness must be something we deliberately and intentionally choose to do – something we do *even though we still feel angry and resentful*. Probably it involves heroically striving to resist that anger, or at least to control it, but not to feel it at all? That can't be right.

Perhaps forgiveness means to treat the person who offended me as if nothing had ever happened. Possibly it means that I may still *feel* anger, but I won't let it affect the way I relate to this person. But that doesn't quite seem right, either.

Surely, forgiveness can't mean we act "as if nothing had happened," that we choose to forego any consequence for the person who has harmed others. I may

have to forgive the drunk driver who killed a loved one with his car, but does this mean we don't force him to confront his alcoholism and take away his licence until he does so?

There is a distinct and chilling possibility that the reason certain abusive priests were allowed to re-offend was because their superiors had exactly this mistaken notion of mercy; that, for some bishops, "forgiveness" meant to give these priests another chance, to put them in a situation where they could fall into molesting minors again as a way of "forgiving and forgetting" and pretending the past had never happened. No: This can't possibly be what "forgiveness" means, either.

Does it mean that I need to be reconciled to the person who hurt me? This is, to some extent, the meaning of the Sign of Peace, which we normally exchange almost immediately before receiving Holy Communion. It is a public and communal declaration that I am reconciled to those around me, and thus that no blemish of unforgiveness darkens my soul and prevents me from receiving God's forgiveness. Sadly, of course, reconciliation with the one who hurt me is not always possible, and the Bible is filled with examples of holy people forgiving enemies who nevertheless remained obstinate and unreconciled right to their deaths.

But if forgiveness doesn't mean to stop feeling angry towards someone who hurt me, and it doesn't mean acting as if nothing had ever happened, and it doesn't necessarily mean reconciling to those who hurt me, then what exactly does it mean? Just what is this action of forgiveness that I must perform if I ever hope to be saved?

This is where I think we need to go back to the supreme commandment: Love one another. As Catholics, we are familiar with the definition of love, paraphrased from St. Thomas Aquinas (*ST* I-II.26.4), that "to love is to will the good of the other." Love isn't a feeling; it's an act of the will, a choice to hope for and intend the highest good for another person.

Love is a gift of the self

In a related sense, love is a gift of the self. This is seen in the consecrated life and in the married life, both of which are supreme acts of love in which a person gives themselves over completely; it is seen in friendship, where we give of our time and our joy to each other (St. Gregory of Nazianzen said of his friend, St. Basil the Great, that the two of them seemed to be one spirit in two bodies); it is seen in the Church, in the Communion of Saints, where we give of ourselves to each other in community and in our gifts taken up in the offering; and it seen supremely in the Trinity, where the three Persons exist entirely as total gifts of mutual love to each other.

There is a clue in the English word "forgive" that this idea of love is contained in the act of forgiveness. Etymologically, "forgive" means "to give completely." This sounds just like what our faith teaches us about the nature

of love.

In the New Testament, the word “forgive” often translates the Greek word *aphiémi*, which has the connotation of “leaving” something behind (it appears both in the Lord’s Prayer’s “forgive us our debts” and in the story of the Apostles “leaving” their nets behind them), but “forgive” can also translate the word *charizomai*. *Charizomai* has a range of meanings, such as “to show grace”, “to give freely”, or “to do a favour to” (it comes from the word *charis*, meaning “grace” or “gift”). We see it in Ephesians 4:32: “...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving* one another, as God in Christ has *forgiven* you.”

But it also shows up in verses like Luke 7:21, where Jesus “gives” (*charizomai*) sight to several blind people. There is a clear idea that God wants us to think of forgiveness as a gift, a total, unreserved blessing we bestow on others, like Christ’s miraculous and seemingly impossible gifts of physical healing.

Therefore, it seems that we have to view forgiveness as being our self-denying, self-giving love towards the people who hurt us. It means praying for their salvation, asking God to grant them to have a transforming experience of His love, and hoping that they will become saints.

We have to pray this even as we feel our throats tighten up with anger at them; perhaps even as we watch them suffer the legal consequences of the damage they have done. Even as we do all this, we must pray for their salvation; and if we have to impose external punishment on them, it must be in the hopes that it brings them to repentance, not simply for the sake of “getting back at them”.

Many of the imprecatory psalms, which ask God to bring down misfortune on the Psalmist’s enemies, make more sense if you see them, not as a way for the Psalmist to get revenge, but as a prayer that God will find ways to bring evildoers to turn back to Him. “Fill their faces with shame, so that they may seek Your name, O Lord” (Psalm 83:16). No matter what, we always have to will our enemies’ highest good. Otherwise, we do not love them, and if we don’t have love, we have nothing.

We must be very careful here. Praying for the repentance and salvation of our enemies can never be a thinly veiled excuse to hope for our own personal vindication and satisfaction. Our prayers should never be a roundabout way of asking God to hurt those who have hurt us, like God is some cosmic Don Corleone. We should never seek vindication by “getting even”. Our vindication comes from God; this is what it means to be “justified by faith through grace”. We are vindicated because God loves us and chooses us, not because we manage to one-up those who have hurt us.

But this is the real lesson here: Those who have offended us often don’t

realize how much we are hurt by what they have done. Remember Christ's prayer from the Cross: "Father, forgive them, *for they know not what they do.*" Not only should this help us find ways to forgive those people, but it should also humble us – and slightly horrify us – with the realization that we, too, have probably hurt people far more badly than we realize.

We have probably inflicted terrible pain on others that we barely recognize, if we recognize it at all. This is why the Church holds forth the crucified, innocent Lord before our eyes and reminds us that *we have done this*, and need to ask forgiveness for it each day.

Need to ask forgiveness each day

Catholics are sometimes accused of beating ourselves up too much, or having some sort of guilt complex. After all, we weren't *really* there at Golgotha nailing Christ to the Cross, were we? But, in an important sense, we were, and we are, every time we carelessly and thoughtlessly hurt others with our little selfish acts and petty egotisms, and the fact that people have hurt us without apologizing should make us realize that we have hurt others and have forgotten to apologize.

In this life, we will probably never be able to make amends for all the harm we have done (that's what Purgatory is for), but the Lord and His Cross remind us that we are guilty of it all the same and invite us to repent. Better still, they remind us that forgiveness is available to us; love is greater than our selfishness.

But we must choose to accept that forgiveness, which means choosing to live by the system of love, and the way to do that is by extending love and forgiveness to others, to see the wounded Christ *in* them and to be the loving and forgiving Christ *to* them. This, I think, is what we are called to when we are commanded to forgive.

"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

"And unto many who were blind, He gave sight."

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