

PRAY YOUR WAY THROUGH FORGIVENESS

IN PICKING UP THIS BOOKLET, you are taking a step toward forgiveness and, ultimately, a step toward love. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice, a tool for living, that God gives you to heal the painful places in your life and bring forth deeper peace and greater love.

You may be aware of something in your life that needs healing. You may be aware of the pain you feel about a situation from your past and wish it would heal. Perhaps you tried to forget it or to rationalize it in your head. “It wasn’t that bad” or “It’s in the past; move on.” But you can’t move on. The wound keeps reopening, and uncomfortable memories resurface. No matter how hard you try to forget, you can’t seem to put it behind you. Alternatively, you may simply feel that “something isn’t right” in your life. You may not know what needs to be healed, but you are open to exploring.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS, a division of Bayard, Inc.
One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200 • New London, CT 06320 • (860) 437-3012
or (800) 321-0411 • www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-515-0 • Cover image: ©Shutterstock.com / Wang LiQiang
Printed in the U.S.A.

Everyone has wounding experiences

Everyone has something in their life that needs healing. Perhaps the last time you spoke with a friend or family member you said something you regret. Maybe you carry a loss or disappointment in your life, or a struggle with alcohol or food. Some nights you may wake up thinking about someone who hurt you at work or in childhood.

Our lives are full of moments in which we have caused harm or have been harmed. These are “wounding experiences” and they become little tears in the fabric of our hearts. When these wounding experiences accumulate, it may feel like you are unraveling at the seams. A deep wound such as abuse, exposure to combat in war, divorce, or another traumatic experience may leave you wondering if you will be able to repair your life or restore relationships with others.

If you carry around a deep wound or accumulate harmful experiences without engaging the process of forgiveness, the negative emotions may build up and further harm you, even though the original experience of hurt is over. For example, you may carry around a lingering feeling of anger or sadness. Perhaps the painful memories cause you daily stress and lost energy. Furthermore, you may unconsciously turn your negative feelings against others and extend the harm.

Forgiveness heals wounds

Thankfully, forgiveness welcomes God’s healing into the painful places of your life. Forgiveness helps you acknowledge and bandage your wounding experiences. It helps you stitch together relationships where there is rupture, or release ties that bind you to a distressing past. It transforms the way you live.

For Catholics, forgiveness is central to faith. Jesus points out the many wounding experiences— caused by individual sins or communal sins—that cause suffering. Jesus also shows how to help heal these wounding experiences through forgiveness and the deepening of love for yourself and others. Jesus forgives throughout his life, even in his last moments when he prays, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus' life bears witness that forgiveness is a radical trust in God's love. Forgiveness demonstrates that you believe that God's love, in you and through you, can heal some of the world's deepest pains and divisions. Forgiveness shows the world that you believe in the resurrection: that love will prevail.

Jesus invites you to forgive

After the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and reminds them that his gift of forgiveness is also their gift. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:23).

This powerful moment recalls the passage in Genesis when God breathes on the first human and imparts life. Just as God gave life to the first human, Jesus offers a way to new life. Part of this new life involves the spiritual practice of forgiveness. Jesus invites you to follow in his footsteps, to carry on his ministry of forgiveness. With the presence of the Spirit, you are empowered to forgive and be forgiven; to witness suffering and bring forth healing and new life for yourself and others.

Forgiveness is a path to love

With prayer and active healing, forgiveness can be a path to love. When you participate in forgiveness toward yourself or with another, you promote greater peace and strengthen God's love here on earth. Moreover, Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21b). It is not above you. It is not in some distant future. It begins here, and you can cultivate it by following the example of Jesus, including forgiving as he did. In practicing forgiveness, you participate in God's salvific work. You promote healing and, as a result, make love visible.

"And nothing
makes us so like
God, as being
ready to forgive..."

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

Whether you are the one who has been hurt or caused a hurt, the path of forgiveness is similar. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls the three steps in the sacrament of reconciliation contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Similarly, the steps on the journey of forgiveness may be remembered as “acknowledge, confess, transform.” A simple way to remember this is to think of the acronym “act.” Forgiveness is, indeed, an active process! In walking this threefold journey, God walks with you and, together, you heal the wounding experience.

First step: Acknowledge

The first phase of forgiveness can be compared to the first step of wound care: assess the damage and understand the impact. Think about a situation for which you need to forgive or ask forgiveness. You may choose to ask yourself:

- *What happened?*
- *How do I feel about it?*
- *What impact has it had on my life or the lives of others?*

The first step of forgiveness is to acknowledge the wounding experience, to truly admit to yourself what occurred. You identify it, name it, feel the emotions, and understand its impact. If you caused harm to yourself or another, you may feel remorseful for your actions and desire to be different in the future. If you were harmed, you may feel strong emotions from what you endured and explore the depth of its impact on your life.

Teresa and John are a sister and brother who rarely got along. They stood on different sides of politics and family discussions. As an adult, Teresa wanted a different relationship with her brother. At first, she didn't want to admit it, but she recognized that she was part of the problem. They had both said things they regret. She felt ashamed of her behavior and hurt over things John had said. She also wanted to set a better example for her children. Teresa was ready to engage in a journey of forgiveness.

Second step: Confess

The second step of forgiveness may be compared to a second phase of wound care: consider what treatment will bring healing and then start the treatment. Think about a situation for which you need to forgive or ask forgiveness. You may choose to ask yourself:

- *What will bring healing to that which is hurt or broken?*
- *What actions do I need to take?*

This second step of forgiveness is to confess, or speak the truth, to yourself or someone else and to seek to heal the wounding experience. For example, if you hurt someone else, some good actions may include acknowledging responsibility and regret, apologizing, working to set things right, pledging new behavior, and asking forgiveness. Similar steps can be taken when you are forgiving yourself. If you were the one who was hurt, some good actions may include sharing the impact of another's harm against you (such as saying, "When you..., I felt..."), expressing how you would like the relationship to be different in the future, and accepting the other person's apology. It is helpful to reflect on what would bring healing to your particular experience.

A few weeks before a Christmas family gathering, Teresa reached out to John. Over lunch at their favorite diner, she brought up their relationship. She apologized for her part in the conflicts and expressed contrition. Teresa felt awkward at first but also relieved to apologize. John was a little defensive but ended up saying he was sorry too. They agreed not to speak about politics at family gatherings and, instead, converse about the things that mattered even more to them such as family and faith.

Third step: Transform

The third phase of forgiveness may be thought of as the period when a wound heals: you may be left with a scar, but the intense pain has subsided; you may go about life differently. Think about a situation for which you need to forgive or ask forgiveness. For this step, you may choose to ask yourself:

- *What has changed in my life since I began this journey of forgiveness?*
- *How may I change my future actions to reflect the new path I have chosen?*

This third step of forgiveness is about giving witness to the transformation of your experience. When forgiveness has authentically touched your heart, it is reflected in how you live your life. There is a transformation in you or in your relationships; there is a deeper peace or love. Just as with the sacrament of reconciliation when you commit to say a prayer or take some action, with forgiveness you commit to a new way of being in the world. True forgiveness commits to change.

Before Teresa walked through the door of the Christmas family gathering, she reminded herself of a few neutral topics she could discuss with John. She greeted him with a warm hug and shared a story about baking cookies with her children earlier in the week. John started to mention a political news story, but remembered their promise to one another and quickly changed the conversation. Teresa understood it takes time to form new habits, but felt good that they were making a fresh start.

"It is the greatest step a human being can take. It is the step of forgiveness."

HENRI NOUWEN