



Your

Catholic Coach

Be transformed! Rom 12:1-2

on forgiveness

Why is forgiveness so difficult for some?

It can be a complex issue, but in general, I believe two things are present: our deep desire for justice and our lack of trust in God. Let me explain.

We're wired for justice

God wired us to desire all that is good, true, beautiful; in other words God himself. He doesn't just possess every virtue; he IS perfect virtue, including the virtue of justice. Every person, thus, desires justice to be served in unjust situations.

How many times do we hear our children whine at early ages, "But, Mom/Dad, that's not fair!"? And—be honest—how many times do we catch ourselves thinking the same thing in this whiny voice, especially after the many injustices that occur in a divorce? God, this isn't fair! Any unmet desire, no matter how good, will usually result in some level of frustration, anger, and if unfulfilled long enough, the sin of bitter resentment.

Do you desire justice? Yes, some people, by reason of their natural temperament, desire that things be set right—right now! But others are willing to live with, or even overlook, injustice to keep the peace or to feel that they are getting along and being loved. Still, we all need to understand more about justice and its role in our lives after a divorce.

God's in charge of perfect justice—not us

God has always told us not to worry so much about justice. Yes, we must fight for it and, to the best of our ability (and with his help), bring it about here on earth the best we can. But after that, we must trust and let go.

In the Old Testament God promises to bring about justice to the enemies of his people, but that justice is reserved for God's time and in God's way. That's the hard part. We don't trust him to take care of our "enemies" in our time and our way. We don't want to wait—we want it now! And often we don't simply desire justice, we want revenge.

We don't trust God

When we demand what is fair and fail to trust God to do a better job of making things right than we would like, we are not bad people . . . but *parts of us* remain emotionally and spiritually immature people.

The wounded, traumatic, and unhealed parts of us are like children who often think God has ignored our unfair situation. Even good Christians must face the fact that they do not really trust God as they should.

This kind of trust means surrendering your life to someone you can't see, touch, or hear, and that can be scary. Like impatient little kids who just can't wait for anything, our vision is so short-sighted that the here-and-now trumps eternity. Instead, we must learn to let our "core self" (that part of us who is most clear, calm, and courageous) take charge. That part of us who is led by the Spirit.

God is justice and mercy

We can focus so much on justice that we forget MERCY. God is abundant, endless, loving mercy and he desires to pour it out on all sinners—including you and me.

But we resist granting mercy to another because we think that just lets the guilty off the hook. On the contrary, we more beautifully and perfectly image God when we are merciful. St. Anselm said, "When thou does punish the wicked, it is just, since it agrees with their deserts; and when thou does spare the wicked, it is also just, since it befits thy goodness." (Prosolog. 10)

Law professor Linda Ross Meyer says it beautifully, "Mercy should not be the crazy-woman-in-the-attic of the law, but the lady of the house."

Holding on too tightly hurts us

During and after a divorce, your “enemies” may be an ex-spouse, other family members who betray you, attorneys, judges, psychiatrists, and others—even your own children who may turn against you—who failed to be fair.

Not only that, but they also continue to be unfair and likely will long into the future. Even if they seem to be getting off scott-free for the rest of your life, you will be enslaved to them if you fail to forgive. The chains of anger and resentment will bind up your heart and choke the life out of it. So, for your own freedom’s sake, learn to forgive.

Some things to remember about forgiveness:

- It begins in your will; you don’t have to feel like forgiving—you freely choose to forgive. Feelings come and go, but the choice for good or evil is in the will.
- If you’re not sure you really want to forgive, ask God for trust in him and the grace to get there. Dear God, I don't even know where to start and am not sure I want to. But part of me wants to. Work with that, please.
- You may have to forgive past offenses and continue forgiving new ones. Someone who has hurt you in the past will probably hurt you again. Be prepared, learn to expect it, protect yourself as best you can against it, but keep a heart free of bitterness.
- It doesn’t mean letting them off the hook if that would cause them to remain in their own sinfulness. You should still file charges for civil crimes, go after the unpaid child support, and do what it takes to bring justice. But when your efforts are exhausted, let go and accept what is. If you are still in legal battles for years, it may be time to stop.
- It doesn’t mean allowing someone to continue to take advantage of or hurt you. You have every right to say “no,” to set and enforce boundaries, and to protect your personal space, time, and property. But not with an angry and stingy attitude.

- It doesn't mean pretending what the other person did or didn't do was okay. You can forgive and still call a spade a spade. It is not "Christian" to pretend you were not hurt or what another did was not wrong. Honesty is a virtue, and the truth will set you free from being a phony.
- It doesn't mean you forget the injustice; to be prudent you may need to remember so that it doesn't happen again. Some people are too quick to 'forgive' because they just want to get along and keep the peace. They may even be afraid that others will think less of them if they are not getting along with a betrayer. But they can set themselves, and those in their family, to be used, hurt, or violated again. Prudence—good and careful judgment—is also a virtue.
- It doesn't mean you have to like the other person. You do not have to socialize or be "friends." God commanded us to love the other person, not necessarily 'be friends' with them, especially if they continue to use or hurt us. If you can genuinely get along, great.
- St. Thomas Aquinas taught that love in its essence is desiring the greatest good for another. The greatest good you could want for someone is that they know and love God; that they get to heaven. When you desire that for them you are loving them. And praying for them is a way to love them, too.
- It does mean you must remain civil, polite, and rid yourself of any bitterness. Ex-spouses usually must remain in contact when they are still raising small children. If you catch yourself in a cycle of anger, unforgiveness, or bitterness, it is probably time to reevaluate how you may be unintentionally inviting this to happen. Boundaries may need to be set; change in your thinking may need to happen.
- It doesn't mean you have to trust the other person. It sure would be nicer, and much easier, to be able to trust someone. But trust must be earned, and some people will continually violate your trust. Out of naiveté and maybe even laziness, don't be a fool.

- It doesn't mean you can't be angry – but righteous anger should be short-lived and a passion that moves you to seek justice. Read what the Catechism says about anger and the passions. (CCC 1762 and 1866)
- Injustice can be a gift that brings forth your personal holiness. Christ endured hideous injustice, but he did so freely and knowing that he would offer it to God as a sacrifice to bring forth the fruits of endless grace upon all of creation for all time. If you intentionally unite your unjust sufferings with his—mingling your emotional blood with his—it will become a gift that blesses you and others. See Redemptive Suffering.

So what can you do right now?

(1) Pray. Ask for the grace to forgive the right way. Ask God to show you where you need his help. Develop the habit of acting from your core self, not the most wounded, needy, scared parts.

(2) Don't announce that you have forgiven the other person. This is not forgiveness, it's prideful arrogance if you use it to make them feel bad and to elevate your ego.

(3) Set their sins aside, for now, and take inventory of your own failings toward them. Then go and seek forgiveness from them.

(4) As St. Joseph taught Jesus, teach about forgiveness to your children!

Do you need help with:

- Processing your emotions?
- Wondering about the future?
- Helping the kids?
- Dealing with an ex?
- Dating right this time?

Get the wise, experienced support of a Catholic Coach!

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