

Forgiveness

To be forgiving is a fundamental trait for every Orthodox Christian. Christ commands us to continuously forgive “up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). He gives us the example of forgiveness as He declares from the Cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Because of this emphasis on forgiveness, Great Lent is bookended with themes of forgiveness. We begin the fast with Forgiveness Sunday, which climaxes in Forgiveness Vespers and the sometimes awkward but always meaningful exchange of forgiveness with the entire community. When we finally reach the blessed day of Pascha, one of the prominent hymns that we sing proclaims, “Let us call brother, even those that hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection!” In fact, while we seek forgiveness during Forgiveness Vespers the choir sings the Paschal hymns to remind us of the end result of living a life of forgiveness.

The following is an article by Fr. Stephen Freeman, author of the Glory to God for All Things blog and popular podcaster on Ancient Faith Radio.

Forgiveness – The Hardest Love of All Fr. Stephen Freeman

I cannot think that any of my readers is a stranger to forgiveness, either the need to be forgiven or the need to forgive. The need to forgive, according to the commandment of Christ, extends well beyond those who ask for our forgiveness: we are commanded to forgive our enemies – whom I presume would rarely want to ask for our forgiveness.

Of course, our experience of those who are truly enemies is that we do not want to forgive them. We do not trust them; the wound has been too deep; their offense is not against us but against someone we love who is particularly vulnerable. I could enlarge the list but we are all too familiar with it. The reasons we find it hard to forgive our enemies is endless.

But the commandment remains – not as a counsel of how to live a healthier, happier life – but with the added reminder that we will only find forgiveness as we forgive. Forgiveness is not optional – but a fundamental spiritual action which we must learn to use as though our salvation depended upon it – for it does.

Several times in Scripture forgiveness of others (including enemies) is linked with our becoming like God, being conformed to His image. Thus when I think of forgiveness I think as well of the whole life of salvation – for the path to being restored to the fullness of the image of Christ runs directly through the forgiveness of our enemies. It may indeed be the very key to our salvation (as it is worked out in us) and its most accurate measure.

Having said that, however, is also to say that this commandment to forgive is not of man – we do not have it in us to fulfill this commandment in and of ourselves. St. Gregory of Nyssa once said that “man is mud whom God has commanded to become God.” Of course it is utterly and completely impossible for mud to do such a thing (unless God make it so).

All that being said, grace is the foundation of forgiveness. We pray for forgiveness to enter our heart. We beg for forgiveness to enter our heart. We importune God for forgiveness to enter our heart.

Even as a product of grace – we do not begin with the hardest things but with the easiest. We do not begin fasting by tackling the most strict regimen. We do not begin prayer with an effort to pray continually for forty days (or some other great feat). Such efforts would either crush us with their difficulty or crush us with our success.

These are a few thoughts on beginning the life of forgiveness:

1. Begin by struggling to form the habit of forgiveness in the smallest things. With a child, with traffic, with little irritations. Do not struggle in a small way but throw yourself into forgiveness. It should become a habit, but a habit of grace, a large action.

2. Use this prayer for the enemies who seem to be beyond your ability to pray: “O God, at the dread judgment, do not condemn them for my sake.” This places forgiveness at a distance and even a hard heart can often manage the small prayer of forgiveness at such a distance.

3. Be always aware of your own failings and constantly ask for God’s forgiveness. “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

4. As much as possible cultivate in your heart the understanding that all human beings are broken and victims of the fall. None of us enters a world of purity, nor do we enter the world fully functional as a human being. It is the gradual cultivation of mercy in our heart. Many will complain that our culture already has a “cult of victimization” in which no one takes responsibility for their actions. The same people will imagine that the world would be better if only everyone took more responsibility. But they themselves will not take on the responsibility that belong to us all. As Dostoevsky says, “Each man is responsible for everything before everyone.” Thus the complaint comes out of our pride. We think we ourselves are not responsible for the state of the world as it is and that if only others were as good as we were the world would be better. This is a lie.

5. The proper response to taking such responsibility is to pray and ask forgiveness. Feeling guilty is generally another self-centered action and is not the same thing as asking forgiveness.

6. Make a life confession at least once a year – being careful to name as many resentments as you can remember (this last advice comes from Met. Jonah Paffhausen).