

## **Forgiveness a powerful virtue---but not always possible**

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Most ethical systems uphold forgiveness as a virtue. There are personal characteristics associated with forgiveness that are beneficial in order that forgiveness is possible. For example, compassion, mercy, pity, sympathy, kindness, and empathy are often closely aligned with forgiveness.

On the other hand, there are negative qualities that make forgiveness nearly impossible. If we are full of hate, envy, fear, jealousy, selfishness or mistrust, we will find forgiveness of others difficult.

When we feel that we have been wronged, we tend to carry feelings with us that burden us and hold us back from the joy and freedom accompanying forgiveness.

Most ethical systems promote forgiveness most of the time. Yet there are times when mistrust and misunderstanding cause even the best ethical desires for forgiveness to break down. Although we like to think that forgiveness means “wiping the slate clean” or “starting all over again,” to look upon others as though their misdeeds had never happened, these are rare occasions. Perhaps that is the way it ought to be. As John F. Kennedy said, “Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names”. We should forgive but not forget, just in case the one forgiven repeats the same transgressions.

If someone wrongs us or harms us, we find it much easier to forgive them if the same event is unlikely to be repeated. But if we can expect the same bad behavior will likely to be repeated, forgiveness itself may not be desirable or even a moral thing to do...but more about that later.

Forgiveness can help both the forgiver and the forgiven. For the forgiven, they can have a fresh start and new hope to act differently than in the past. The forgiven

can begin again, with new purpose, and perhaps with the idea that those who have judged them were not as harsh as they had originally believed. Maybe the world is not as condemning as they had previously thought. It may be, that they too, can find it easier to forgive others now that they, themselves, have been forgiven.

Good things can also happen to those who forgive others. They can enjoy a sense of freedom that comes from getting rid of feelings that they have been wronged. The forgivers can rejoice in the hope that they have set the forgiven on a renewed path of hope and optimism. The forgivers can lighten their own burden of being transgressed against. Like the forgiven, the forgivers, too, can view the world with a new spirit of optimism.

Unfortunately, there are times when forgiveness may not be possible, or even desirable. As Dr. Phil McGraw, of TV fame, said, "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior." In cases of repeated sex offenses, or violence and abuse, changes in behavior are often unlikely without special psychiatric help. Usually, simple imprisonment, or heavy fines, may temporarily confine and limit bad behavior, but it may not change these transgressions permanently.

In these difficult cases, forgiveness is not enough. In many cases of household physical abuse, women have repeatedly forgiven their partners. Unfortunately, this enables the partner to repeat the cycle of violence again and again.

There are some actions that are so horrendous they are simply unforgiveable. For example, there is very little accomplished by forgiving bad behaviour where the perpetrators have no remorse for their actions and no real intention to change their approach. There are also some cases of sexual misbehavior that require psychiatric help, but for which there are no known cures or treatment at the present time. In such cases, where public safety is at risk, confinement, rather than forgiveness, may be the best course of action. Fortunately, these cases are the exception.

On balance, the best course of action is to be as open as we can to the power of forgiveness. Two of my historic heroes, below, had some first-hand knowledge

about forgiveness, since both suffered, and ultimately died, at the hands of others. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong". My second hero, Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It is a constant attitude".