

Becoming a Merciful Spouse

The Way of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is central to the faith of Catholics. As he died on the cross, he gave the ultimate example of forgiveness when he said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

For those who follow Jesus Christ, forgiving others is a command. In the Our Father prayer we ask for the grace to forgive those who trespass against us. Jesus warns us that if we refuse forgiving others’ trespasses, “neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:15)

Unforgiveness not only undermines relationships, but it can also sabotage the positive emotions we seek to develop in our marriage. You learn about the value of positive emotions in Thrive chapter 8, and about ways to develop a productive positivity ratio.

“Unforgiveness can be defined as delayed negative emotions, involving resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, residual anger and residual fear.” (attribution?) These all work against having a productive positivity ratio and can feed on each other, leading to a downward spiral of increasing negative emotion, even negatively impacting the development or maintenance of secure attachment with your spouse.

Matthew 5:7

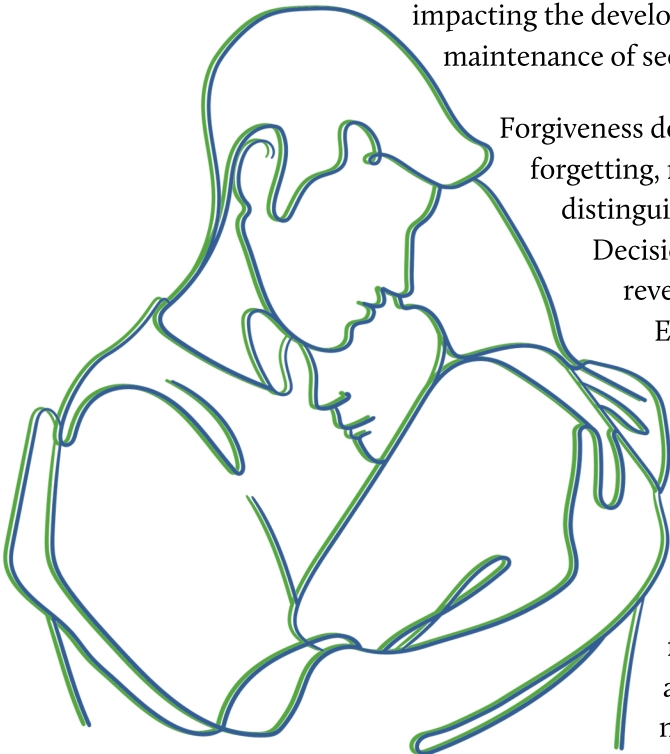
“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

Forgiveness does not necessarily include or lead immediately to forgetting, reconciling, or foregoing justice. Psychologists distinguish between decisional and emotional forgiveness.

Decisional forgiveness is the intentional resolution to forego revenge and behave kindly to the person who gave offense.

Emotional forgiveness involves letting go of negative emotions toward the one who did wrong.

Decisional forgiveness is the necessary starting point leading to emotional forgiveness and this may be a longer process. The journey to emotional forgiveness and healing involves replacing negative emotions with positive ones to find a new narrative of forgiveness. “The old story of unforgiveness reinforces an ‘I am a victim’ identity. The new story of forgiveness needs to emphasize the reality that we do have control



Catechism Note

Mercy is a fruit of charity along with joy and peace. “Charity demands beneficence and fraternal correction; it is benevolence; it fosters reciprocity and remains disinterested and generous; it is friendship and communion.”

—Catechism, 1829

over how we frame, interpret, and react to the events in question... We often cannot choose what happens to us, but we can always choose how to relate to what happens to us” (Kaczor, *The Gospel of Happiness*, page 121).

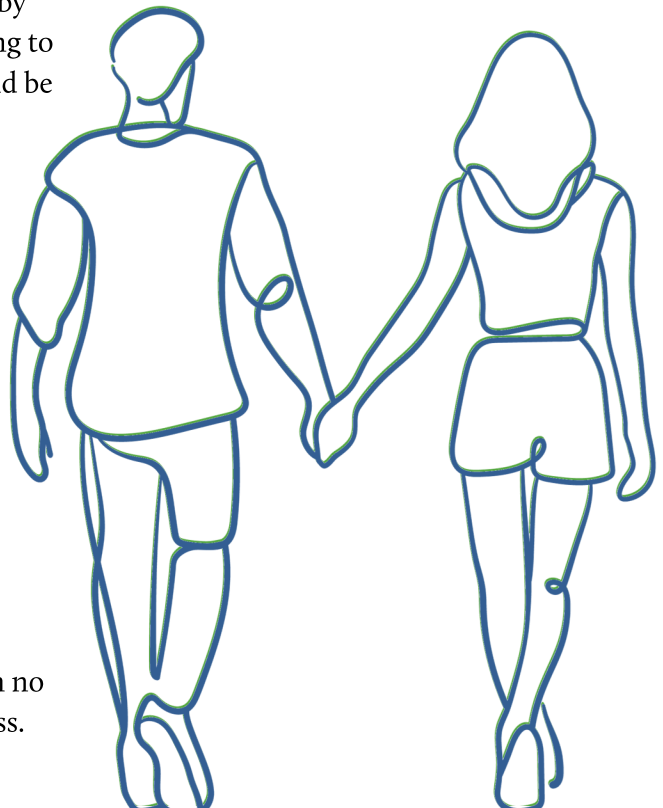
For Christians, this new story of forgiveness is possible when we approach our hurts from a supernatural perspective, from God’s view. This gives us the ability to see how our story is part of

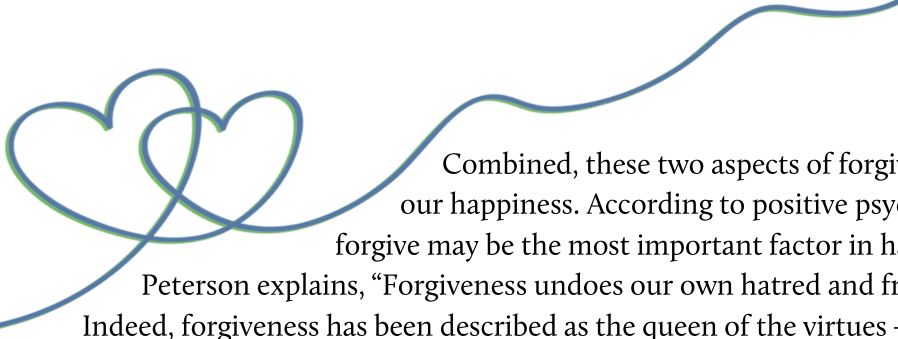
God’s story of providence and salvation. “Even negative experiences may be an opportunity for growth because, God, somehow, brings good out of our unfortunate experience... The Christian story is ultimately about God’s power to bring good out of evil, to bring healing to the sick, and even life to the dead” (Kaczor, *The Gospel of Happiness*, page 124-125).

One method for helping overcome unforgiveness in our life and write a new story of forgiveness is the method suggested by Kelly McGonigal in *The Neuroscience of Change*. She describes a process for writing an advice letter to yourself to help you deal with negative emotions, and in the case of forgiveness, write a new narrative.

The advice letter described by McGonigal is a three-part writing exercise. First, detail what you are feeling by identifying what the emotions are and how you are feeling them (intensity, physical symptoms, etc.). Second, universalize your experience by remembering that these emotions are common to human experience and that having negative emotions does not indicate that there is something wrong in feeling them. Conclude the letter by giving yourself advice as though you were a friend trying to offer wisdom and guidance. This may seem like it would be a silly thing to do, but research shows that “translating thoughts into concrete language has advantages over just thinking thoughts. We think much faster than we can write or speak. When you put your thoughts into words, either out loud or on paper, the thinking process is slowed down... Putting feelings into words can make a person feel better because doing so dampens activity in the parts of the brain associated with negativity” (Robert A. Emmons, *Gratitude Works!*, 59, 60).

Exercises like letter-writing and journaling can help us write a new narrative of forgiveness, enabling us to understand the struggle to forgive others from God’s perspective. Working towards emotional forgiveness in no way downplays the importance of decisional forgiveness.





Combined, these two aspects of forgiveness are part of God's plan for our happiness. According to positive psychology research, the ability to forgive may be the most important factor in happiness. Researcher Christopher Peterson explains, "Forgiveness undoes our own hatred and frees us from the troubled past. Indeed, forgiveness has been described as the queen of the virtues – that is, those who forgive are much more serene than those who do not and display many other positive strengths" (Kaczor, *The Gospel of Happiness*, page 115-116).

Unforgiveness is a poison that leads to an emotional state that harms us psychologically. Depending upon the intensity of resentment, unforgiveness harms us by putting us in a "fight or flight" response. Prolonged resentments can "tax the body, by placing it in a ongoing, endless 'battle mode' in which we plot revenge" (Kaczor, *The Gospel of Happiness*, page 119).

In marriage, spouses must work to avoid prolonged resentment and unforgiveness. It is not easy to forgive, but with God's grace it is possible. In the Sacrament of Marriage Jesus "gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens..." (Catechism 1642). Spouses have a responsibility to one another to forgive even when they bring to the relationship modern cultural norms that promote an erroneous understanding of freedom – a freedom without responsibilities – which causes many dire consequences.

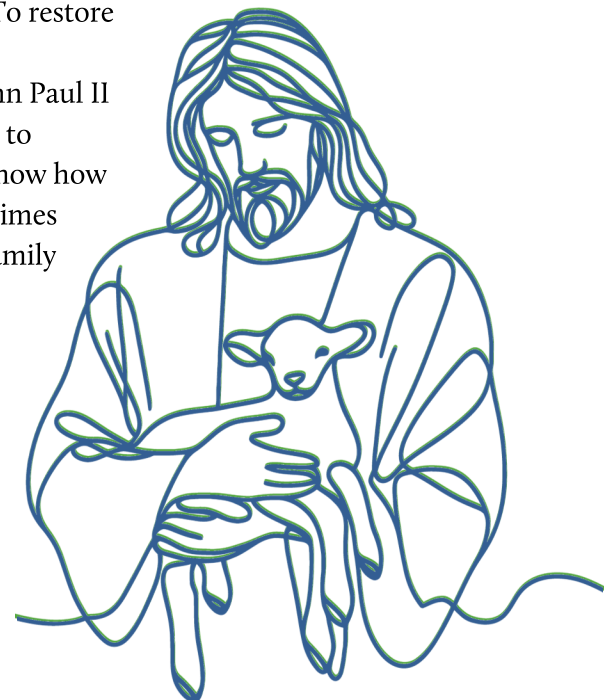
Colossians 3:13

**Forgiving each other;
as the Lord has
forgiven you, so you
also must forgive.**

In his Letter to Families, Pope St. John Paul II expressed concern about the effects of this false freedom "hidden in the hearts of men and women like painful, fresh wounds." He proposes that "the love of spouses and parents has the capacity to cure these kinds of wounds. This capacity depends on the divine grace of forgiveness and reconciliation, which always ensures the spiritual energy to begin anew" (Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 14).

In the Catholic home, disciples have many opportunities to live this command. When we fail to love as we ought, the proper response is to make a good Confession. To restore unity in our home we also must consider how to apologize, seek reconciliation with, and forgive our family members. Pope St. John Paul II called families to be both realistic and hopeful about the struggle to establish and maintain unity. "There is no family that does not know how selfishness, discord, tension, and conflict violently attack and at times mortally wound its own communion... At the same time, every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous and renewing experience of 'reconciliation,' that is, communion reestablished, unity restored" (Pope St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 21).

For many spouses this grace to forgive is not a cheap grace, easily achieved. However, it is always a grace on offer from God to those who follow him.





Letter to myself...

A large rectangular area with horizontal ruling lines, intended for writing a letter to oneself. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page.

