

The Healing Art of Forgiveness

Presented at the Orthodox Christian Association of
Medicine, Psychology and Religion.

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November 7, 2015

Abstract

Four basic themes about forgiveness are explored here: First, we explore the meaning of the term forgiveness and we evaluate some forgiveness myths. Second, we examine the benefits of forgiveness, based mostly on scientific studies of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Third, we examine how Forgiveness Education is implemented in the classrooms and how effective it is. Finally, we present the orthodox perspective of forgiveness that is in many aspects quite different from how the secular western thought presents it. This material is based on the presentation given by the author at the November 7th, 2015, conference of the “Orthodox Christian Association of Medicine, Psychology and Religion”, in Hellenic College-Holy Cross Seminary, in Boston MA.

Definition of Forgiveness

Psychological scientists offer several definitions of forgiveness. Enright (2001) defines forgiveness as follows: “When we are unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence and love”. In very simple words forgiveness is to offer mercy to those who hurt us and try to love them.

Forgiveness is a process of removing a durable, unpleasant and complex mental state that is called unforgiveness (Enright, 2001, Worthington, 2006). According to Worthington, a forgiving person becomes less motivated to retaliate against the offender and more motivated by feelings of good will, despite the harm that the offender has caused.

Forgiveness is a very old idea and virtue that has recently become very popular as a topic of scientific research. There is an explosion of studies on forgiveness. In 1998 there were only 58 studies regarding forgiveness, in 2005 the number increased in 950 (Feldmann, 2015) and now we have more than a thousand research studies. At the department of Educational Psychology at University of Wisconsin, one of the pioneer figures on forgiveness education is Professor R. Enright. Professor Enright has been conducting research on forgiveness and forgiveness education since 1985. The meticulous validation of his scientific procedures has put him in the forefront of the science of forgiveness. I am privileged to join his research team and implement the Forgiveness Education Program in Greece.

As stated before, forgiveness is a very old idea that has become popular the recent years. It has a long history in religious, political and legal thought and recently in the psychological therapy as well (Konstan, 2010). This important conception in the modern moral system has been scientifically proven to benefit those who are practicing it. It seems that we need scientific evidence in order to believe the value of some common sense virtues. Our “rationalistic way of thinking” expects proof in order to believe.

The etymology of the Greek word of forgiveness (Συγχώρηση), very specifically explains the meaning of forgiveness. It consists from two words, the preposition “syn”(συν) and the verb “choro” (χωρώ). Syn-choro in Greek means to make space so that we can both be together. It means to open my heart and accept everybody, so that anyone can fit in it, even with his weaknesses, deficiencies, misdeeds, even sins.

Looking further more into the meaning, in order to be able to accept and forgive somebody, one needs to do one thing first: to descent. There is another great Greek word: Συγκατάβαση (condescension), which means to move down, to be at the same level with the

other person, in order to meet him/her and then be together. So condescension is an important part of forgiveness.

Myths about Forgiveness

Although forgiveness has an indisputable value for most people, it is at the same time very difficult for many people to practice it. There are many reasons for that. Some people for example are afraid that forgiveness means pretending that nothing happened to them. Some think that by forgiving they are opening themselves up to being hurt again. Many are afraid that forgiving means letting people get away with it. Or others also believe that their feelings toward the offender will never change.

Here are some of the myths about forgiveness that we need to examine and evaluate:

Myth 1: To forgive is to forget.

To forgive does not mean to “erase” from the mind what has happened. One must separate the act from the person. We forgive the person, but we do not devalue the bad act, neither do we forget it. Forgiveness does not mean to condone or to excuse. We still recognize the pain or the evil that the harmful act has caused us. We will still remember, we might never forget, but if we forgive we will not keep those toxic memories that produce toxic feelings. Instead we might remember with some pain, but not hate and anger. This makes a big difference to the physical and emotional life.

Myth 2: To forgive means to reconcile

Reconciliation is distinct from forgiveness. Reconciliation requires a focus on at least two people that will reconnect. A key to the process of reconciliation is building trust, which is not always feasible. Sometimes communication becomes impossible and safety is the first priority in a relationship that is threatening. For example, one cannot expect that the child that has been bullied will become a friend with his/her offender, unless the bully repents and changes behavior. Otherwise it is obvious that this will be very dangerous for the victim. Forgiveness is a quiet mystical situation that happens in the heart and does not need to be shown to others if this is not necessary or if it is dangerous.

Myth 3: Forgiveness is an act of weakness

This is definitely not true. On the contrary, forgiveness is a choice and a decision someone makes that needs a lot of courage and inner strength. Many people want to forgive, but do not find the strength to do it. This is a hard process that has nothing to do with our mind, but with a lot of inner emotional work in our heart. Forgiveness is an act of inner strength because it does not expect reciprocity. It is also a heroic act, because it needs a lot of struggle not to listen to the crowd's call that asks for letting the offender pay and suffer for his/her actions. Forgiveness might seem absurd many times but it gives so much peace and freedom to the heart of the forgiver.

Myth 4: “If you apologize, then I forgive you.”

Forgiveness is possible, only if the person that harmed us is asking to be forgiven. We must remember that we forgive at first for our own sake. “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die (Meyer, 1994). My antipathy for the person who offended me stays as a toxic feeling inside me and I carry this feeling all the time, unless I forgive. People can be resentful for decades, mostly punishing themselves, although they might think that they punish the person that offended them. Forgiveness does not depend on whether the other person recognizes that what he did was wrong. It depends on whether I want to continue to carry my

grudges within my heart. To carry my anger, my judgment against the other, my hurtful past. This is a very heavy burden and can be very self-destructive.

Myth 5: The pain will go away by itself.

We say “time is the best healer”. This is not the case here. Nothing will be forgiven on its own. Forgiveness is a process that needs sometimes a long time, depending on the degree of damage and injury that was made. It is a combination of will and emotion that needs an open “clean heart and a right spirit” (psalm 50:10) in order to be accomplished.

The Benefits of Forgiving and the Consequences of not Forgiving

People forgive for various reasons. At the University of Wisconsin, in multiple studies, the research team of Professor Enright measured emotional and psychological health outcomes following forgiveness therapy, concluding that forgiveness elevates mood and increases optimism, while not forgiving is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and hostility (Enright 2001, 2006, Reed, 2006, Lawer-Raw & Piferi, 2006). The consequences of keeping the anger inside us, in a deep level and for a long period of time, affects our bodies, and affects our feelings (Enright, 2001, 2012, Hirsch et al., 2011). It also leads to family dysfunction and ruins many relationships, since it is based on a blaming and fault-finding pattern (Enright, 2012, Feldmann, 2015). By not centralizing around the past and by not covering the pain or transferring it to others, the forgiver starts building positive feelings, gaining new perspectives and seeing that we all share a common humanity.

An overview of some of the empirical studies at UW looking at the existence of a causal relationship between forgiveness and physical health can be found in <http://www.internationalforgiveness.com/>. Three of these studies will be very briefly described below.

In drug rehabilitation participants at a residential facility with substantial psychological depression who underwent forgiveness therapy the forgiveness group reduced in anger, depression, anxiety and need for drug use, compared to the control group that received standard therapy (Lin et al., 2004). They also improved in forgiveness and self-esteem. These positive findings held at the 4-month follow-up testing.

Another study examines the efficacy of forgiveness therapy as an intervention addressing the psychological treatment of dying patients (Hansen et al., 2009). Forgiveness therapy has been shown to be effective in improving psychological well-being and may provide a valuable addition to a terminal cancer patient's overall treatment plan. After four weeks of receiving forgiveness therapy, elderly terminally ill cancer patients demonstrated significant improvements on all measures. The psychological benefits for those patients may be an appropriate addition to their treatment plan.

Another study that was conducted with a team of researchers on cardiac patients (Waltman et al., 2009) found that when cardiac patients with coronary artery disease underwent forgiveness therapy, the rate of blood flow to their hearts improved more than that of the control group, which received only standard medical treatment and counseling about proper diet and exercise. The researchers did not claim that forgiveness therapy restored the patient's heart to normal but it reduced anger and therefore helped the heart function better than before (Enright, 2010). This study confirms the results of another study regarding the impact of forgiveness on cardiovascular reactivity and recovery (Friedberg et al., 2007)

Forgiveness can have a positive effect to the physical health. Several studies exist on the relationship between anger and health. More information about forgiveness empirical

studies at the University of Wisconsin can be found through the International Forgiveness Institute: <http://www.internationalforgiveness.com/>.

Angry people create angry families, angry families create angry communities. Anger gives birth to anger. Anger can be transferred to an entire group and then transmitted from one generation to another. The meaning of collective anger and revenge can be seen in the “vendettas” in several southern American and Mediterranean countries, in the gangs of the US cities or in violent acts between ethnic or religious groups like Israeli and Palestinians, Shiites and Sunnites, Catholic and Protestants in Northern Ireland and the list goes on. Forgiveness between Groups is an entire field of Peace Psychology that has arisen in recent decades.

Helping Children Forgive through Forgiveness Education

The Schools in Greece

Injured children that cannot deal with their harmful feelings and resentment during their childhood become angry adults. As many adults admit, many years of suffering would have been prevented if they knew how to forgive when they were children. It is for this reason that Dr. Enright’s research group at the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison created the Forgiveness Education Program; to prevent the emotional injury of the next generation by teaching children the healing art of forgiveness. This program has been implemented for 14 years to the schools of Belfast, Northern Ireland and in many other countries over the world.

In 2014, in collaboration with the International Forgiveness Institute, the research team started the implementation of the Forgiveness Education Program in schools in Greece. Due to the financial crisis in Greece there are high levels of anger, depression and anxiety among the students and their families compared to few years ago. There are close to one thousand students in Athens and Thessaloniki, enrolled for the school year 2015-2016, in Forgiveness Education classes. Since the Forgiveness Education curricula are based on Aristotle’s moral theory as presented at Nicomachean Ethics (Ηθικά Νικομάχεια), Greek history, heritage and culture give a unique opportunity for adaptation of the program into a specific “Greek version”. After getting the approval of the Greek Ministry of Education, preschool, middle and high school teachers are trained through series of workshops to teach FE to the Greek students.

The goal through Forgiveness Education programs, is to help children not only in Greece but in many other countries around the world, grow in character and live with their best self. Educators implementing the FE program in the Greek classes observed that students decreased their level of anger, and increased their cooperation as a result of learning about forgiveness. Teachers also experienced better classroom function and cooperation after the beginning of the forgiveness curriculum. Those results correlate with the evaluations done at schools in U.S and United Kingdom and will be published soon.

The curricula are based on Aristotle’s theory of moral education as it is presented in the Nikomachean Ethics. Aristotle reasoned that the four virtues we need to lead a good life are justice, wisdom, courage and temperance. Among those main Aristotelian virtues, students learn about inherent worth or personhood, unconditional love, kindness, respect and generosity. The process of teaching forgiveness in the Greek curricula builds up gradually. Through a clear understanding of those virtues and by starting to practice them, students begin to get a deeper sense of forgiveness that prepares them to become forgivers. If those virtues are also supported by their family at home, then it comes much easier and natural to them to practice in everyday life situations.

Our research has shown that students who receive forgiveness education are better off personally, relationally, and academically after such learning than before. More information about journal articles on forgiveness education at the University of Wisconsin can be found through the International Forgiveness Institute: <http://www.internationalforgiveness.com/>.

The Orthodox perspective of forgiveness

None of the ancient traditions explicitly defines forgiveness, but we can discern its meaning in the context of the stories offered. Maybe the oldest preserved story is the familiar story of Joseph (Genesis 37-45) who was badly mistreated by his brothers. Of course the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) offers the deepest, most clear and concise understanding and teaching of forgiveness. Both stories have in common the unconditional nature of forgiveness. Muslim, Confucian and Buddhist traditions all recognize forgiveness as a morally worthwhile activity and the compassion towards the unjust. Konstan (2010) argues that the meaning of forgiveness, as understood in our days, was not the same in the classical societies of Greece's and Roman's moral life. However, in the book of Aristotle's Rhetoric, there is an extensive analysis of the emotions of anger (οργή), calmness (πραότης), regret (μεταμέλεια), humility (ταπεινωση), whereas in Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle talks about pardon (συγγνώμη) and magnanimity (μεγαλοψυχία). Although this is beyond the scope of this presentation, we can assume that forgiveness is implied as a broad idea that includes all the above, even if it is conceived differently in the modern moral consciousness.

Although there is much written about forgiveness by Christian and non-Christian psychologists during the past 30 years, Eastern Christian tradition –the one of orthodox church– has not had much voice on the discussion (Gassin, 2001). There are critical differences in the understanding of some basic concepts regarding forgiveness between Eastern and Western Christianity. Some main ideas and differences presented by prominent orthodox authors are examined as follows.

It is important to understand how mercy and forgiveness are presented in the Orthodox Church. The word *eleos* (mercy) has a core place in the orthodox faith. "Kyrie eleison" (Lord have mercy) is repeated constantly throughout the liturgy, in psalms, in all prayers. Above all there is the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy upon me the sinner", also called "the prayer of the heart" that has a particular theological and spiritual meaning. To ask for God's mercy as well as to be merciful to others, are absolutely interconnected, as presented at Lord's prayer "forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12).

What does it mean to have mercy/*eleos*? How could we describe the merciful person? To be merciful does not mean to be tolerant of evil and iniquity, or to justify falsehood and sin. It does not mean to overlook injustice. To be merciful means to forego every self-justification and have compassion to those who do wrong. To empathize the wrong doers and forgive them without condemning them, because they first harm themselves and then others; to be able to see that each person is more than the evil he did. We all are more than our actions. We are all in the image and likeness of God and we need His and each other's mercy because we destroy His image. Since we are all to some degree faulty and weak, an act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how we find and fulfill ourselves as human beings made in God's image. (Hopko, 2003, p. 4).

I am merciful because I myself am in need of mercy. There is no one who can claim righteousness before God. If I want to be in union with God, I first need to acknowledge my sins and ask for His mercy. The gift of mercy has been offered first by God to us and we are

beholden to offer the same gift to others. When we say in Lord's prayer "Our Father," rather than "My Father," we are reminded that He forgives us as well as others.

We cannot claim God's mercy, but we can hope for it. We are asking for it. How do we ask for mercy? The best example of how to ask for mercy is given from the Gospel of Pharisee and the publican. We need to ask the same humble way the publican asks ("God be merciful to me the sinner"). God's mercy is expressed very explicitly also in the Gospel of the prodigal son. The son knew that he was not worthy of his father's mercy, but he was returning back, hoping that he will become one of his servants. And again, here is God's mercy. If we come with this attitude, with this feeling of worthlessness in our heart, he gives us all his abundant mercy.

Is this Orthodox approach of forgiveness consistent with the secular approach of forgiveness? What are the basic similarities and differences between the orthodox view and the secular psychology's view of interpersonal forgiveness? Since interpersonal forgiveness is related partially to our understanding in God's forgiveness there are some major differences in the theological ethos between Orthodox tradition and many western Christian traditions. More about those differences and about the Orthodox tradition can be read in Romanides (trans. 2007), Staniloae (trans. 1999) and Ware (1993, 1995). However credit must be given to those western therapists who have started to recognize in the process of forgiveness the importance of first focusing on our own misdeed in order to be able to forgive others. There are few recent articles pointing out that by focusing on our own misdeeds can cause a more forgiving attitude towards others. (Witvliet et al., 2011, Exline et al., 2008). By giving attention to our own misdeeds, and encountering the fallen nature of those around us and within us, it becomes easier to forgive the offender (Enright 2001, 2011). This aspect is fundamental to the orthodox perspective of forgiveness.

One of the basic differences in approaching the healing process of forgiveness between the orthodox and secular perspective is the aspect of "Humility". The importance of humility is fundamental to the process of our salvation and Orthodox Christian tradition gives strong emphasis on humility. Humility can be very simply defined as the opposite of "pride". Pride involves the elements of ascribing goodness to self rather than God (John Cassian, trans 1979), refusing to see one's own sinful nature and disobey to God's commands, assuming that one knows better (Gassin, 2001). As many older and recent orthodox writers confirm, we cannot forgive because of our pride (Sofronios, 2014, Staniloae, 1999). Pride comes out from our "philautia" (self love) as the fathers describe it, (Thalassious, trans. 1979). Philautia, "the mother of vices" as described by Maximus the Confessor (p. 75) impedes our struggle to forgive. Humility is an important element not only to forgive but also to ask for forgiveness. If it is hard to forgive those who hurt us, it is even harder to recognize our need to be forgiven. Although the humility as a fundamental virtue makes most individuals from a western culture feel awkward or uncomfortable, scholarly writers have started to discover that humility can be a crucial ingredient of forgiving someone and this is also supported by some social research studies. (Enright et al., 1991, 1996, Jordan Paul LaBouff et al., 2012 Worthington, 2007). Moreover, the virtue of humility and its benefit have been explicitly and thoroughly described in depth by numerous fathers of the Orthodox Church and eastern Christian writers.

Another important element in the forgiveness process is the way we react to the offense. "Anger" is the first feeling that comes immediately after an unjust event. Anger is an acceptable and generally permitted feeling in the forgiveness process by the academic psychological models. Sometimes we can find the expression of anger as even encouraged not only by scholars but even by western Christian professionals. Westerns accept and enforce anger, especially if this is addressed against injustice and defending individual rights. However, "there

is no theological foundation for claiming anger directed at others as appropriate” (Gassin 2001). Feeling angry in order to defend ourselves is not supported by the orthodox tradition. Anger is a passion and behind this passion is our pride and “philautia” (Sofronios, 2014, John the Climacus, 1982, step 23). The only permissible anger in the orthodox tradition is the anger that is addressed against our passions. The orthodox perspective accepts anger as a result of our fallen human nature. St. Paul’s “be angry and do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26) is explained by St. John Cassian in *Philocalia* (1981) as “be angry with your own passions and with your malicious thoughts, and do not sin by carrying out their suggestions” (p.83). This is another big difference between eastern and western thought. Orthodox writers are not afraid to use the feeling of anger towards “self”, that is aiming to rooting out the passions, as an essential way in our spiritual journey (Peter of Damascus, trans. 1984). On the other side, as Gassin (2001) supports, western secular models approach “anger to oneself” negatively, and see it as a major cause of depression.

Another key difference is the perspective on “Justice”. The Orthodox Christian perspective on justice is in many ways different to what the secular psychology suggests. The western emphasis on justice, that is of fighting for one’s rights, justifying his actions, and defending himself, is not expressed in the eastern orthodox tradition, based on St. Paul’s admonish “why do you not suffer injustice instead of going to the civil courts?” (1, Cor. 6:7). This does not mean that Christians will always be submissive, with no voice at all. On the contrary, a person needs more strength to distinguish when and how to speak apart from emotional pressure. “Living in this world, we must do according to our measure in each situation, having as the highest model and reference what the Lord Himself showed to us” (Archim. Zacharias, 2008, p. 86). However it is also important to recognize that we live in a society where the consolidation of rights, the assertiveness of words, the protection of personal boundaries, and the individual achievement are overemphasized and become our priorities. All the above are again connected to “philautia”, to an extent. This emphasis on protecting individual rights does not give space to the relational and experiential orthodox view, where everything that God permits in our life is for a good reason and no matter how bad and how suffering it is, it can be transformed to a blessing and contributes to the process of our salvation (Archim. Zacharias, 2008). Suffering cannot be “justified”, but it can be used, accepted—and through this acceptance, transfigured (Ware, 1995).

According to the orthodox perspective, it is important to be able to transform the reaction to injustice, from the psychological level to the spiritual level. Archimandrite Zacharias (2012), explains in details this transformation as St. John of Climacus (1982) describes it. He says that “the infallible criterion to our spiritual ascent is our reaction to reproof or correction. We are on the first step of the ladder to perfection when we force ourselves not to answer back when we are admonished. The second step is not only to keep quiet, without reacting negatively, but also to realize that we are wrong and blame ourselves, the third step is to give thanks to God for this injustice, because this is for a great benefit to our soul and our correction. The last, higher step of the ladder of perfection is to pray for the person who harmed us and to consider him also as a benefactor” (p.150).

This really sounds too challenging for us in our days. The revenge, a natural reaction of our human nature, is totally abolished. How can we apply this in our lives, especially when there are unspeakable injustices that bring deep lifelong dramas? There are indeed situations in life where forgiveness seems impossible, even insane in practice.

However, this is exactly what the Gospel tells us to do. “ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who

persecute you” (Mathew 5:44). How can someone possibly love his/her enemy and even more see him as a benefactor?

Are those ideas applicable in our days? Another saint, St. Paisios, who lived in the 20th century (1924-1994), says exactly the same: “If all men were unjust to me, it would be a blessing! I tell you sincerely, the sweetest spiritual joy I have felt has been through injustice” (Spiritual Struggle, p. 77). The chapter about Righteousness and Justice Church in the book “Spiritual Struggle” by this recent saint of the Orthodox, explains in details how the right attitude towards justice should be for those who want to follow an orthodox theological perspective on forgiveness. St. Paisios says nothing different from what St. John Climacus said fourteen centuries ago. Someone may argue that he was a monk, and now a saint, and that everyday laity people, who live in the world and deal with hard life-situations, cannot think, feel, and behave this way.

However there are hundreds of examples of everyday people who could overcome their anger of unjust acts that affected them personally and their families, who could not only overcome the pain that a person caused to them by cruel and incomprehensible deeds, but also transformed those unspeakable deeds to a blessing to themselves, others and society.

Victor Frankl (2006), for example, the Jewish psychiatrist who was a victim of the Nazis, lost all his family in concentration camps in Germany and spent several years suffering, is a great example of forgiving, finding meaning in the suffering and offering love to others. Alexander Solzhenitsyn could find meaning in a Siberian labor camp and helped others find courage and dignity. Archbishop of Symferoupolis Saint Lukas, a Russian surgeon of the 20th century, who became a bishop after his wife died, has similar stories of dealing with faith, courage and forgiveness first in his work at the hospital, and then in Siberian camps. Nelson Mandela, the towering figure of South Africa gives a strong example of overcoming injustice and forgiving those who hurt him when he said “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” Those are well known people practicing forgiveness. But we also have everyday people that give us a silent example of humble, loving and forgiving heart that goes beyond our imagination.

The history of the Orthodox Church has hundreds of examples of forgiveness that go beyond personal justice and protection of rights. One example is St. Dionysios of Zakynthos, who lived in the 17th century. It is incomprehensible to today’s man’s secular mind to explain the covering of his brother’s murderer from the police when they asked him to reveal him so that they could arrest him.

It is also hard to today’s logic to comprehend and accept all the injustices and false blames that St. Nektarios, of the past century (1846-1920), has suffered, without complaining or trying to fight back. There are hundreds of stories that someone can find in the Synaxari (Book of the Saints) that will seem to today’s modern way of thinking so wired and inapplicable. However this is the spirit of the Christian faith. This is the ethos of the orthodox tradition. This is the way, the only way: the way of forgiveness. A paradoxical way for today’s world, but it is the way that brings the spirit of God in the heart by joining ourselves with Him and restoring his likeness within us. This is not an easy way. As St. Isaak the Syrian (1985) says, “no one ever ascended to heaven with comfort”. Did not those people feel the pain of rejection and injustice in their life? Of course they did. However, as Archimandrite Zacharias (2008) explains on how suffering of injustice or rejection in life can be endured in the framework of the orthodox and Christian spirit, “those in whom the heart is full of the consolation of incorruptible grace, can endure all external deprivations and afflictions, transforming them into a feast of spiritual joy” (p.3).

Forgiveness takes place in the heart

The Heart is the deepest inner part of a man where God reveals himself. And God reveals himself only to a humble heart. According to the theology of elder Sophrony (Σωφρόνιος, 2014), a humble in Christ heart is always free from the burden of its attachments. This heart is full of love and freedom and when we get in touch with such a person we feel this freedom in his heart and we want to stay with him. This person has discovered the deepest heart and is capable to truly love and empathize to the hurt of others.

It is not always easy to focus on our wrong deeds. How can someone find forgiveness in his/her heart? It is important to understand that forgiveness is not an emotion. It is a decision, a voluntary act with many practical consequences. It happens in our heart and in our mind. As elder Sophrony, again, said, “even one bad thought against our brother causes a crack in our spiritual stronghold” (Αρχιμ. Σωφρονίου, 2014, also in Archim. Zacharias, 2011, p.21). The forgiveness process is therapeutic for the person that offers it and for the person that receives it. It can transform life. Even if it is hard most of the times to go directly and ask for forgiveness, there are secure starting ways that help someone who is willing, to uncover the deeper parts of his/her heart and find his/her real and authentic self, by recognizing its strengths and shortcomings as well.

One way of coming in touch with the heart is by attending the liturgical life of the church. Personal meaning can be discovered through the prayers, the psalms, the hymns, the examples of the life of the saints. Liturgical practices give light to interpersonal forgiveness and give us opportunities to practice it in a deeper level. At the Divine Liturgy our communion with God is absolutely dependent on the way we commune with each other. Through forgiveness our common human nature remains in unity. The request for forgiveness from God and from each other is offered daily in every single service. Eastern Orthodox Church also has a special service, on the Sunday of forgiveness, the last Sunday before Holy Lent. The church has wisely set this day, where we start the preparation to celebrate Pascha, to express our will to forgive and to be forgiven not only in a personal level but also in an “ecclesiastical” level.

Another therapeutic way to realize the authentic human nature is the sacrament of repentance. Through repentance and confession someone has the chance to come in touch with the deepest levels of the heart. Through repentance, the presence of God remains alive in our heart and the power of His presence transforms human existence. Many people are afraid of confession or don't realize its value and reject it. Orthodox theology emphasizes that church is not a court and God is not a judge in this life. Church is a hospital that restores human wounds and helps people live a healthy life, emotionally, spiritually and even physically. Christ is a physician who takes good care to those who willingly go to him for healing (Ware, 2012). Through the healing path of recognizing our shortcomings and trying to transform our passions, the image of God in the person starts being restored. By finding the strength to accept our shortcomings, and asking for God's mercy, we can much easier forgive those “who hate us”. By realizing our own fallible nature, how can we then not understand the fallible nature of others and forgive their wrongdoing?

Prayer can be a crucial key to the forgiving process. Standing before the icon with a broken and contrite heart (psalm 50:17) may be useful in the process to forgive. Pride takes love away, while humility makes space in the heart for everyone, even enemies. Everything takes place in the heart. By connecting strongly with God, any other horizontal relationship with our human fellows also becomes stronger. By getting in touch with the merciful love of God, empathy and forgiveness for the other person arise. In every relationship, a third person is needed, and this person is the presence of God in our heart, in order to teach us to love unconditionally and to see the heart of the other person as precious, unique and respected. It is

a fault to expect from other human beings to fulfill this inherent need for love, since this love can be fulfilled only by Him who put this need for love (Αρχιμ. Σωφρόνιος, 2014).

Forgiveness is a virtue that breaks the chain of resentment and self-destructive bitterness. Forgiveness is a divine virtue that is not easily understood in depth because of our secular view and our rational way of thinking. The heart is the center of our spiritual life. There are some things that transcend the human mind, and work through mystical ways only in the heart. The space of our heart can be much broader than the space of the mind. All those feelings like love and hatred, are not merely subjective feelings that reside in the heart and affect only the person that is experiencing them. They are objective forces that have a great influence to others and can alter the world outside ourselves (Ware, 1995).

Final Thoughts

In this article the process of forgiveness has been scientifically and spiritually examined. Beyond any scientific or religious instructions, we are all invited to make everyday choices in our lives, sometimes hard choices. It is easy to love someone who loves us. It is a challenge to love someone who is indifferent to us. It is a real struggle to love someone who hurt us.

Humanity is trying to find love and happiness in a world that changes very fast and is sometimes very cruel and unforgiving. There is a lot of suffering around and this world can bring many wounds in our heart. Many of us use our wounds as an excuse to cause suffering. We feel easily victims, but very rarely offenders. We need to dig deep inside and see what we are also responsible for, and this is really very scary to most of the people. However the process of forgiveness has to start with our self-consciousness. If we don't focus on our own vulnerability, then forgiveness has the danger to become a selfish act of superiority; "I am the good one who forgive you."

Depending on the glasses someone wears, he/she can see the same things differently. Then we can see more easily the human qualities that lead people to do violent or bad acts. We can still keep ourselves safe, but without hate and anger in our heart. The way we look at the people makes a great difference. Do we look at them as persons that are the image of God? This is something that needs everyday practice with the persons around us.

Human love can be easily betrayed and trust can be easily broken. If that happens, especially to innocent and vulnerable children, this is heartbreaking. Abuse, neglect, broken homes, crime, poverty, violence, terrorism; so many injustices causing anger and fear. How can we protect ourselves, our families, our children?

Even if we cannot prevent bad things from happening we can give our children the tools they need to deal with rejections, disappointments and injustices in life. By teaching them through our example how to forgive and break the cycle of fear, of revenge and of resentment, we make them stronger and emotionally healthier. If we can equip ourselves and our children with forgiveness, we prepare them to confront injustice, and keep it from spreading through them to others.

Empathy and forgiveness can be learned and practiced. It is simple. It's the thankful way of thinking and feeling about everything, good or bad around us, that brings peace and joy in the heart. By humbly accepting our failures, we can also accept the failures of others. This attitude of a forgiving person with a humble, thankful and compassionate heart, is the best gift we can give to our fellows, our family, our children and the future generations.

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