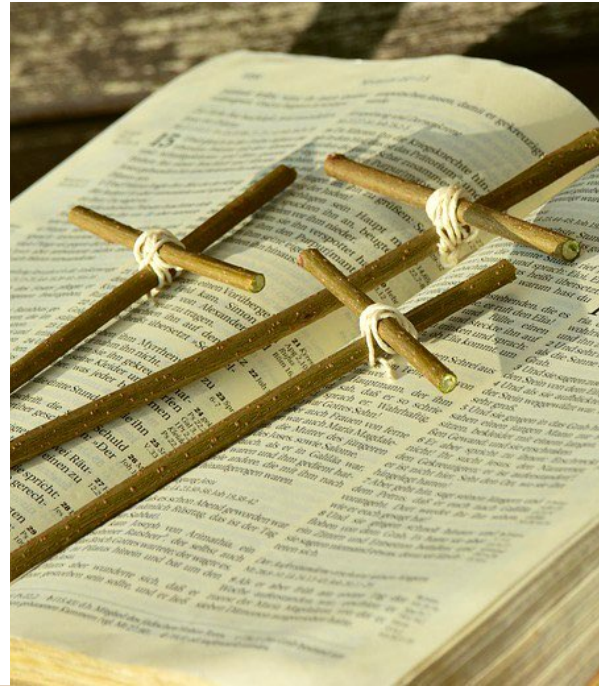


# Forgiveness

thoughts from Joanna Collicutt



## What is forgiveness NOT?

Forgiveness is sometimes understood to involve forgetting the offence, condoning the offence, excusing the offender, resuming or beginning a close personal relationship with the offender or developing positive feelings for the offender. In fact, neither biblical nor psychological understandings of forgiveness involve these things.

*Pages 1-3 of this leaflet summarize material from Joanna Collicutt, The psychology of Christian character formation (© SCM Press 2015 <https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk>), used with permission.*

*The Biblical references to forgiveness, which are easily found, have been omitted for the sake of space.*

# Key features of forgiveness

- a recognition that one has been wronged
- a voluntary decision to forego justifiable retribution
- active communication of this decision to the offender, with the objective of restoring or establishing improved relations
- the letting go of negative feelings towards the offender

*Unlike compassion, forgiveness is not a feeling but a process or transaction*

When people forgive they experience a decrease in negative feelings towards the offender over time, but they do not experience a comparable increase of positive feelings. **Forgiveness is about cancelling a debt, not giving a bonus payment.**

Although we might feel inclined to forgive, **we don't *feel* forgiveness in the way that we might be said to feel compassion.**



# Forgiveness and safeguarding

- The Christian requirement to forgive can be misused by abusers
- Women have been wrongly advised to remain in abusive marriages
- Religious people who are suicidally depressed sometimes believe they have committed the 'unforgivable sin' or the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'

Genuine forgiveness happens when we feel safe (or 'safe enough'). Forgiveness is about the liberation of the weak by the strong.

The mistake that the Church has repeatedly made has been to require the weak to forgive the strong, when it should have been liberating the weak and supporting them to become strong (e.g. helping people to escape from abusive relationships).

**If I am to achieve the first step in forgiveness - the recognition that an offence has been committed against me - I will need time and a safe place to process events. I will then need to be in a position of strength if I am to set what is due to me aside. This may take many years.**

As a Christian, working out when I have been wronged, when I am in the wrong, whether I am in a position to forgive or instead need to find a physically and psychologically safe place to think through what is happening, is an enormously complex task. I cannot go through it alone. I need the help of friends and advisors inside and outside the Church.

# Repentance and forgiveness

'Forgive us... as we forgive.' This can make Christians feel guilty because they are not able to forgive yet, although they want to.

The previous pages showed that **forgiveness is a process**. Even getting to the first step can take years. **If you want to obey God and forgive, then you can be reassured that God forgives you** when you repent of your own sins.

It can be a horrible experience to suffer flashbacks, recurrent anxiety and anger against the offender. Of course you want to be set free of this suffering. You resent the fact that the person takes up so much space in your head and heart.

Forgiveness begins with forgiving yourself for not being perfect, for needing time to go through the process of forgiving the offender. Perhaps you also need to forgive God for not 'fixing' you immediately although you have prayed hard.

Learning to trust that God *will* heal you, and that you *will* be able to let go and forgive freely one day, will take time. Collicutt says that we need to be in a position of strength in order to forgive. So **working on yourself, feeling good about yourself, strengthening your friendships and your sense that God loves you, will all contribute to reaching the point of forgiving**. One day you will notice that you are free at last; for nothing is impossible with God.