

Real Forgiveness is

RARE



MARGE STEINHAGE FENELON

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Chapter 1: What is Forgiveness?

Understanding the Opposite – Unforgiveness

To truly grasp the power of forgiveness, we must first examine its antithesis—unforgiveness. Unforgiveness is so destructive that medical literature classifies it as a disease. It fosters negative emotions, leading to chronic anxiety, which in turn has devastating effects on physical health. Studies have linked unforgiveness to increased risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, and weakened immune function.

Unforgiveness is also a heavy emotional burden. It consumes mental energy, keeping us trapped in cycles of resentment, anger, and stress. Studies in psychology suggest that harboring grudges contributes to emotional exhaustion and cognitive fatigue.

St. Paul's Teachings on Forgiveness

In Ephesians 4:31-32, St. Paul urges us to let go of bitterness and wrath, embracing kindness and tenderheartedness instead. When we fail to forgive, we close ourselves off to the workings of grace, draining our energy for good and diverting our focus from God's will. Unforgiveness does not just hurt the one who refuses to forgive—it poisons relationships and distances us from spiritual growth.

St. Augustine beautifully sums this up: "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies."

Questions for Reflection

In what ways has unforgiveness affected your emotional, physical, or spiritual well-being?

How does St. Paul's teaching on forgiveness challenge your current perspective on letting go of past hurts?

Chapter 2: Satan's Secret Weapon – Unforgiveness

Unforgiveness not only harms our physical and emotional well-being but it also makes us spiritually sick. It separates us from God's love, leaving us vulnerable to bitterness and resentment. When we refuse to forgive, we remain stagnant in our spiritual journey, missing the grace God wishes to bestow upon us.

Satan uses unforgiveness as a tool to keep us bound in darkness. By holding onto past hurts, we allow negativity to take root in our hearts, disrupting our peace and preventing us from experiencing God's full love. Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:15, "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "Nothing makes us so like God as our readiness to forgive."

Questions for Reflection

Can you recall a time when holding onto unforgiveness made you feel spiritually distant from God?

How can you actively combat Satan's tactic of using unforgiveness against you?

Chapter 3: The Crucial Question – Do You Want to Be Made Well?

Jesus posed this very question to the man at the Pool of Bethesda who had been ill for 38 years. His response—excuses and hesitation—mirrors the struggle many of us face when confronted with the opportunity to heal.

Healing and forgiveness require active participation. Jesus will not force wellness upon us; rather, he invites us to take a leap of faith and trust in his power.

Many resist healing because it means revisiting past wounds, facing their pain, or acknowledging hidden scars. Denial often keeps us imprisoned, preventing us from stepping into the freedom that forgiveness offers. The truth is that unforgiveness does not protect us from further harm—it keeps us shackled to our pain.

Questions for Reflection

What past hurts are you hesitant to bring to Jesus for healing?

What fears do you have about fully embracing forgiveness?

Chapter 4: A Guide for Healing – Mary

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, serves as a perfect guide in our journey of healing and forgiveness. As our spiritual mother, she leads us to her Son, who is the ultimate healer. Through her intercession, she brings comfort and aids us in our struggles. St. Bernard of Clairvaux eloquently describes her role: “In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary...” Her presence in our lives is a source of peace, and she reminds us that no wound is beyond the healing power of Christ.

Mary is not alone in this mission of healing. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 956) teaches that the saints intercede for us, strengthening the Church through their prayers. No one is closer to Jesus than Mary. She understands our pain as she stood at the foot of the cross, uniting her suffering with that of her Son. By turning to her, we find an advocate who deeply knows the wounds of the human heart and desires to bring them to Christ for restoration.

When we struggle to forgive, we can seek Mary’s help. Her gentle encouragement leads us toward the grace of true forgiveness. Just as she remained faithful and trusting in God’s plan even in moments of sorrow, she teaches us to surrender our hurts and trust in his mercy.

Questions for Reflection

How can Mary’s example help you in your personal healing journey?

Have you ever sought Mary’s intercession in your struggle to forgive?

Chapter 5: You Are a Child of God

One of the greatest struggles in embracing forgiveness is understanding our identity as beloved children of God. Many of us carry wounds from childhood—negative self-images shaped by experiences of rejection, criticism, or abuse. Yet, God’s love for us remains constant. Even when we do not feel worthy, we can trust in the truth of his fatherhood.

Fr. Joseph Kentenich said about God’s Love that, “No one loves us more tenderly and deeply than the Father. This is also and particularly true when we cannot understand his love.”

God created us, and so that makes us truly children of a loving Father. We belong to him, and recognizing our identity in Christ enables us to forgive more easily. When we see ourselves as God sees us—precious, redeemed, and deeply loved—we are less likely to hold onto resentment. Our security in his love frees us to extend mercy to others.

Questions for Reflection

How has your past shaped the way you see yourself?

How does knowing you are a child of God help you on your journey toward forgiveness?

Chapter 6: He/She is Also a Child of God

Forgiving others is often the hardest step in our journey. We must remember that every person, even those who have wronged us, is a child of God.

The Example of St. Paul

Before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christians. Yet, through God's mercy, he became one of the greatest apostles. In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, he acknowledges his past sins but emphasizes Christ's patience and transformative power.

Perspective and Mercy

We often do not know the full story behind someone's actions. And so, we cannot tell if the person who has hurt or harmed us is another St. Paul in the making. Someone who inflicts pain may themselves be a victim of faulty convictions or deep wounds. Seeking revenge does not lead to peace—only God's justice and mercy can truly heal.

St. Francis de Sales advises: "Let us run to Mary, and, as her little children, cast ourselves into her arms with a perfect confidence."

Questions for Reflection

How can viewing others as children of God change your perspective on forgiveness?

In what ways can you practice mercy toward those who have hurt you?

Chapter 7: God's Mercy in Catholic Teaching

The heart of the Gospel is God's infinite mercy. Catholic teaching emphasizes that God is always ready to forgive and embrace us when we turn back to Him.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

One of the most powerful illustrations of this mercy is found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In Luke 15:11-32, the Father welcomes his lost son without hesitation, demonstrating how God eagerly awaits our repentance and offers his unconditional love.

Divine Mercy and St. Faustina

Jesus also revealed the boundless nature of his mercy to St. Faustina, declaring, "The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to My mercy" (Diary 723). This truth invites us to trust in his love and extend that mercy to others, even when we feel undeserving.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Furthermore, the Church offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a channel of God's mercy. Through this sacrament, we receive not only forgiveness but also the grace to heal and grow in holiness. As St. John Vianny reminds us, "Our sins are nothing but a grain of sand alongside the great mountain of the mercy of God."

Questions for Reflection

In what ways have you experienced God's mercy in your life?

How can the Parable of the Prodigal Son inspire you to embrace repentance and extend mercy to others?

Chapter 8: Real Forgiveness is R.A.R.E.

Forgiveness is not about simply forgetting the past or making a quick decision—it is a process. The notion of “forgive and forget” can be misleading and even harmful. When we attempt to forget the wrongs done to us, we may inadvertently suppress our emotions and fail to address the underlying pain. This can lead to unresolved feelings of resentment and bitterness, which can fester and negatively impact our mental and physical health. True forgiveness involves acknowledging the hurt, understanding its impact, and consciously choosing to release the desire for retaliation. It is a journey that requires introspection, compassion, and trust in God. By embracing the process of forgiveness, we allow ourselves to heal and grow, rather than remaining trapped in cycles of anger and resentment. Below are the steps to reaching real forgiveness.

1. **Review** – Prayerfully look back at your past, facing the hurt without fear.
2. **Acknowledge** – Admit the reality of what happened and recognize how it affected you.
3. **Release** – Let go of the desire for retaliation and entrust the pain to God.
4. **Entrust** – Place yourself and your wounds into the hands of Mary and Jesus, trusting in their wisdom and love.

Questions for Reflection

Which step in the R.A.R.E. process challenges you the most?

How can you integrate prayer into each step of the forgiveness process?

Chapter 9: Forgiveness is a Lifelong Process

Forgiveness is not a single event but a lifelong journey. Healing takes time, and there may be moments when old wounds resurface. Each time we choose to forgive, we open ourselves to God's grace, allowing him to transform our hearts.

As St. Thérèse of Lisieux teaches: "A word or a smile is often enough to put fresh life in a despondent soul."

We must continually seek God's help in maintaining a forgiving heart. Prayer, sacraments, and acts of charity strengthen our resolve. True forgiveness leads to inner peace and freedom, reflecting Christ's love in our lives.

Questions for Reflection

Are you harboring unforgiveness toward someone? Who?

How can you reach real forgiveness for that person?

About the Author

Marge Steinhage Fenelon is an award-winning and best-selling author, international speaker, certified Spiritual Mentor, and certified Discernment Coach who has written several books on Marian devotion and Catholic spirituality. As a Certified Discernment Coach, she is passionate about helping others answer the “big” life questions, guiding them toward personal, professional, and spiritual life goals according to their God-given strengths and temperaments. She is especially equipped to help others remove the obstacles caused by wounds from the past. Her podcast, *Simply Holy*, airs on many popular podcast platforms.

Learn more about Marge at [MargeFenelon.com](https://www.MargeFenelon.com).

For a deeper dive into the process of real forgiveness, check out Marge’s best-selling book, ***Forgiving Mother: A Marian Novena of Healing and Peace.***

Find out more about coaching with Marge to answer the “big” questions in your life.

Contact Marge to speak about forgiveness for your parish, organization, conference, or book club.