

EXPOSITORY ESSAY: **Forgiving A Difficult Person** by Tina A. Coddington

In studying the topic of 'Approaches To Dealing With Difficult People', an intriguing subtopic is 'Forgiving A Difficult Person'. According to one source on this subtopic, ninety percent of psychological problems individuals have are rooted in unforgiveness (Lawrence). Therefore, it seems crucial that an individual learn how to forgive his difficult person. Forgiving a difficult person is a process of understanding: the harmful effects of unforgiveness; why a person should forgive; what forgiveness is not; how to forgive; and the spiritual benefits of forgiving.

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF UNFORGIVENESS

Unforgiveness affects an individual more than the difficult person (Fields). Unforgiveness controls and infiltrates every aspect of an individual's life. It eats away at the very foundations of faith, and hinders an individual's relationship with Christ (Fields). In effect, by hanging on to the unforgiveness, an individual is allowing the difficult person to hurt him repeatedly (*Why*). Unforgiveness does not remain buried but exposes itself against other individuals, hindering relationships that have nothing to do with the difficult person (*Why*). For example, Leonard Ross related that unforgiveness made him cynical about life and caused him to struggle with every area of his life (Ross, L). Nothing worked for him and everything seemed to go wrong because of his attitude. When Ross forgave difficult people in his life, the cynical attitude left and he experienced a new attitude in every area of his life (Ross, L).

Unforgiveness allows pain and torment to occur in an individual's life. According to Matthew 18:21-34, if a person does not forgive, he is turned over to the tormentors (Lawrence). 'Tormentors' is the Greek word 'basanistes', which means "one that applies torture, or an inquisitor" (*Strong's # 0930; Zodhiates 325*). The tormentors are not necessarily people or events (Lawrence). Tormentors could be fear, depression, frustration, anxiety, self-hatred, anger, and/or loneliness. When an individual is tormented, he deteriorates to a level of existence, which is characterized by fruitless, compulsive, and escapist activities. Forgiveness can break the hold of the tormentors that occurs due to unforgiveness (Matthew 18:21-34; Lawrence).

Unforgiveness can lead to anger, and unjustified anger gives a "foothold to the devil" (Ephesians 4:27; Lawrence). The word 'foothold' is the Greek word 'topos', which means a "spot, place, or room" (*Zodhiates 1390; Strong's #5117*). Therefore, unforgiveness will open a place in a believer's life where he can be troubled (Lawrence). No believer should desire the devil to have a foothold in his life. Forgiveness releases anger and therefore stops the devil from gaining a foothold (Lawrence).

Unforgiveness produces a "bitter root" in the life of an individual (Hebrews 12:15; *Strong's #5117*). The 'bitter root' of unforgiveness is like toxic waste that defiles an individual (Lawrence). Unforgiveness oozes and becomes a disease that causes unfathomable pain (Lawrence). The 'bitter root' of unforgiveness is like a thorn stuck in a person's finger (*Forgiveness*). If the thorn is not pulled out, it will fester, become infected, and eventually kill an individual (*Forgiveness*). Unforgiveness has the same devastating

effect on the spiritual, mental, and physical health of an individual (*Why*). Therefore, in order to avoid having a 'bitter root', a believer must forgive his difficult person (*Why*).

WHY FORGIVE

An individual should forgive a difficult person because God commands believers to forgive one another (Ephesians 4:25-32; Lawrence). Forgiveness is a choice a person makes, and should not be based on feelings. God gives clear directions that an individual should forgive others so that the Father will forgive his sins (Mark 11:25; Colossians 3:13; *Forgiving*). God does not qualify which sins of another to forgive because a person should forgive all sins. Not only does God command a believer to forgive but to forgive repeatedly. When Jesus answered Peter's question regarding the number of times a person should forgive his bother, Jesus answered not seven times but seventy-times seven times (Matthew 18:21). Therefore, when a person has continued contact with a difficult individual who constantly causes him pain, Jesus says to continually forgive that difficult person (*Forgiving*).

A person should forgive his difficult person because of Christ's example (*Forgiveness*). The Pharisees caused numerous problems for Jesus and His ministry. They were difficult people for Jesus. Jesus could not ignore them or pretend they did not exist. Every time Jesus went to the temple to teach, He had to face them. The Pharisees were instrumental in putting Jesus to death on the cross. However, when Jesus was on the cross He cried out to God to "forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The harm done to Jesus by the Pharisees far outweighs anything that could be done to an individual on this earth (*Forgiveness*).

WHAT FORGIVENESS DOES NOT MEAN

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what a difficult person has done (Ross, M). It is not realistic for any individual to forget what has happened to him or turn back the clock and try to undo the hurt. However, it is possible for an individual to use hurtful situations to help himself or others in the future (Ross, M).

Granting forgiveness to a difficult individual does not mean that a person is condoning the difficult person's actions (Ross, M). When an individual forgives his difficult person, he is not saying that the actions of the difficult person were correct. In addition, forgiveness does not minimize or justify the actions of a difficult person. However, forgiveness does allow an individual to deal more effectively with a difficult person (Ross, M).

Forgiveness does not absolve the difficult person from the responsibility of his actions (Ross, M). God is the only one who can grant an individual absolution. Each individual is responsible for his actions regardless of the actions of another. Forgiveness does not let the difficult individual "off the hook" (Ross, M).

Forgiveness is not pretending that everything is all right with the difficult person (Ross, M). Forgiveness does not mean repressing anger and pain, or an individual plastering a smile on his face whenever he sees his difficult person. Forgiveness is all or none. There is no halfway forgiveness (Ross, M).

Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness (Ross, M). An individual who forgives does not use the pain inflicted by the difficult person as a crutch. Therefore, forgiveness is actually a sign of inner spiritual strength and trust in God (Ross, M).

THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

Once an individual grasps the negative effects, the reasons he should forgive, and what forgiveness is not, he is ready to learn the meaning of forgiveness. According to the dictionary, to forgive means to “renounce anger or resentment against” (*American - 'forgive'*). 'Forgive' is the Greek word “aphiemi”, which means to “send forth or away, or let go from oneself” (*Strong's #0863; Zodhiates 299*). Therefore, forgiveness means that a person actively chooses to give up his grudge despite the severity of the injustice done to him (Carlson 126).

A biblical example that displays an exceptional illustration of the meaning of forgiveness is the father in the Parable Of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-20; Lawrence). In the parable, the youngest son came to his father and initiated the division of the estate. When the youngest son made this request, he showed “arrogant disregard for his father’s authority as head of the family” (v.12; Barton 320). The son was disrespectful and basically wished his father dead. The son was a difficult person for his father. The father gave his youngest son his share of the inheritance (v.13). Living a wild life, the son used up the money (v.14). In order to survive, the son had to feed pigs (v.15-16). The son decided he would be better off as his father’s servant and decided to return home (v.17; Barton 320). When the father saw his son returning home, he was “filled with compassion, threw his arms around him, and kissed him” (v.20; Barton 321). The father let go of any resentment or anger he felt toward his son’s actions (Lawrence). The father expressed his forgiveness of his difficult person by acts of mercy and love toward the offender (Lawrence).

HOW TO FORGIVE

Confession

Confession is an important step in granting forgiveness to a difficult person (Buch-Wagler 6A). Confession means to “disclose something damaging or inconvenient to oneself or to admit” (*American - 'Confess'*). Confession entails recognizing the problem and identifying all aspects of the situation (Hindson 11; Buch-Wagler 6A). This means that an individual should examine his actions, words, and attitudes, and the actions of the difficult person (Sande 126). During the self-examination, an individual should detail all of his offenses against the difficult person and the offenses of the difficult person (Sande 128). The confession could include a written list of all-negative feelings and situations involved with the difficult person (Robinson). In making the list, it allows an individual to examine all areas of the problem and make sure nothing is forgotten (Buch-Wagler 6A). After an individual has thoroughly examined all his actions toward the difficult person, through prayer he should confess his wrong before God (1 John 1:9; Sande 128).

Repentance

After a confession of sin and wrong-doing has been made before God, a person needs to repent (Buch-Wagler 6A). Repentance literally means to “change the way an individual thinks”. Therefore, a person who repents could be described as an individual coming to his senses (Luke 15:17). Repentance is more than an individual feeling bad about what has occurred. Biblical repentance entails an individual being sincerely sorry that he has disregarded God’s instruction (Sande 118). Repentance entails a change of heart about a given situation. True repentance will lead an individual to change his actions (Acts 26:20). Repentance necessitates turning away from any personal sin that may have or be causing problems with the difficult person (Buch-Wagler 6A). If there is personal sin involved, it needs to be brought before God and dealt with (Buch-Wagler 6A).

Prayer

A person needs to grant forgiveness to the difficult person through prayer (Baute). Forgiveness does not minimize the hurt inflicted by the difficult person (*Steps*). The hurt is turned over to Christ for Him to handle and deal with (*Steps*).

Restitution

After forgiveness is expressed through prayer, an individual should attempt to make restitution (Buch-Wagler 6A). An individual should go to the difficult person and find out if anything he has done has caused the situation to occur (Buch-Wagler 6A). When speaking to the difficult person, it is important to avoid the words, "if", "but", and "maybe" (Sande 127). These words, when used, can appear to minimize and make excuses for behaviors (Sande 127). An individual should use specific and detailed information when speaking to the difficult person to enable the difficult person to realize the sincerity of the individual attempting to make restitution (Sande 128). In addition, an individual approaching a difficult person should acknowledge any hurts that occurred in the situation and accept any consequences his actions may have done to the difficult person. These actions demonstrate the sincerity of the individual going to the difficult person (Sande 128). Lastly, an individual should attempt to make whatever restitution he can to repair the situation (Buch-Wagler 6A).

Reconciliation

Restitution leads to reconciliation (Buch-Wagler 6A). An individual should attempt to reconcile with the difficult person (Buch-Wagler 6A). Reconciliation should take place a short time after restitution (Sande 132). The time between meetings allows the difficult person to think about his actions and the actions of the person who came to him seeking a change in the relationship (Sande 132). Reconciliation does not mean that the hurtful or harmful behaviors of the difficult person are going to be repeated (Robinson). A person should look for positive aspects of the difficult relationship to assist him in continuing the relationship in a positive manner (Robinson). The difficult relationship could be looked at as an opportunity for spiritual growth and an opportunity to continue to grant forgiveness (*Steps*). If the difficult person does not alter his behaviors, the individual should attempt to live a peace with him no matter what his actions are (Romans 12:18; *Steps*).

RESULTS OF FORGIVING

After completing the process of forgiveness, an individual can do a self-check to see if he has truly forgiven his difficult person (Ross, L). When an individual thinks about his difficult person and he experiences a negative sting of emotion, it is possible that additional unforgiveness exists. Therefore, an individual should begin the process over again and see what he has not forgiven his difficult person for. However, if no negative emotions occur when thinking about a difficult person, it means that individual is free from unforgiveness (Ross, L). The freedom of that forgiveness brings peace in the life of the individual and allows that individual to enjoy the blessings of everyday life (*Forgiveness*).

According to Lawrence, forgiveness allows an individual to promote evangelism (Lawrence). Unforgiveness is a powerful obstacle to evangelism. An individual cannot effectively do ministry when they hold anything against another individual (Matthew 5:24). When an individual is at peace with others and forgives them, he can actively and effectively spread the gospel of Christ (Matthew 28:19; Lawrence).

The most personal benefit of forgiveness is that when forgiveness is granted, an individual's relationship with Christ improves (*Forgiving*). An individual's daily walk with God will be an experience that is looked forward to (*Forgiving*). Forgiveness will ease an individual's conscience and lighten his cares (1 John 1:9; *Forgiveness*).

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is not suggested by God but commanded by God. God does not command things because he thinks they are better for His people but because through His power and wisdom He knows they are better. Therefore, it is important for an individual to forgive his difficult person.

OUTLINE - Forgiving A Difficult Person

Introduction

I. The problems with unforgiveness

A. Emotionally tied to the difficult person

1. Manipulates
2. Taunts
3. Hurts again

B. Bondages

1. Tormentors (Matthew 18:21-34)

- a. Loneliness
- b. Depression
- c. Frustration
- d. Anxiety
- e. Self-hatred

2. Devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:27)

3. Unforgiveness becomes a bitter root (Hebrews 12:15)

II. Why Forgive?

- A. Commanded by God to forgive
 - 1. Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:25-32; Mark 11:25)
 - 2. Forgive many times (Matthew 18:22)
 - 3. Because God forgave (Colossians 3:13; Matthew 6:12)
- B. Follow the example of Jesus (Luke 23:34)

III. What forgiveness does not mean?

- A. Forgiveness is not forgetting
- B. Forgiveness is not condoning
- C. Forgiveness is not absolution
- D. Forgiveness is not self-sacrifice
- E. Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness

IV. What does it mean to forgive a difficult person?

- A. Everyday language meaning
- B. Greek meaning
- C. Biblical example of forgiveness

V. How to forgive?

- A. Confession (Matthew 18:15-20)
- B. Repentance
- C. Forgiveness
- D. Restitution
- E. Reconciliation (live at peace) (Romans 12:18)

VI. Results of forgiving a difficult person

- A. Brings healing
- B. Promotes evangelism (Matthew 5:24; 28:19)
- C. Brings peace
- D. Restores fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:9)

Conclusion

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File name: ForgivingADifficultPerson-Essay.____ (.htm, .rtf, .doc, .pdf)

Translation used: NIV, quoted or referred to in various places within this document

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