

# **Forgiveness - the Scientific Slant**

**A Sermon by Jerry L. Clausen, M.D.,**

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Last December I went to Harvard to study forgiveness as a tool of medical healing. I had been using it in my practice of psychiatry for a long time before that. Imagine my surprise to find that what I had been working with patients in New York, Dr. Fred Luskin had been doing exactly the same thing with students with research in California. As he wrote in his book *Forgive for Good*, the person who causes hurt can be irrelevant. What is relevant is that I can forgive a person because it's healthy for myself to do so. A person may not want to carry bitterness in his chest for the next 20 years of his life. If a person is an addict or an alcoholic, refuses or is unable to forgive, he will be at maximum risk for relapse. To forgive is a self loving act.

Louis Smedes is a professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. In his book *Dimensions of Forgiveness* he states, "Long considered the extra mile of mercy toward the offender that is required from a believer, forgiveness is now being rediscovered as a creative human faculty for overcoming estrangement."

Professor Enright, a professor of educational psychology, adds, "Forgiveness is not the same of condoning or forgetting wrong, nor does it preclude justice being done. It's a choice we make and often a challenging and lengthy process we go through to wipe away the negative consequences of an injustice to ourselves."

Admittedly this is different than I was taught as a child. I was taught to forgive and forget. With the newer way of thinking about forgiveness one can forgive and remember the problems that led to the pain and hurt, and try to avoid them. Professor Hart of Leeds University says, "People confuse forgiveness with condoning, justifying: they confuse it with forgetting and they confuse it with reconciliation."

"Forgiveness is something a victim does in relationship to a perpetrator and at its core is a shifting from a negative attitude to a positive one." Dr. Ken Hart is a principle investigator of a program in England that looks at the value of encouraging forgiveness in alcoholics. He says, " by encouraging them to let go of these (negative) feelings, even if the person forgiving is fully aware that the offender may not deserve it, they can be helped toward recovery. Forgiveness is a gift and like all gifts does not need to earned."

I find it a very valuable way of not getting caught up in any anger or hatred. Forgiveness is indeed a way of getting rid of anger and hatred. Forgiveness can be a powerful action one can take to be back in control of the world of power that has been taken away from us. The other person can do nothing to stop one from taking back the power.

Admittedly Solomon Schimmel in his book *Wounds Not Healed By Time* feels strongly that the offender must ask for forgiveness. This is also the Jewish perspective. It is my perspective that it is far more valuable to not require this request of the offender, since

often the offender doesn't think he's done anything wrong. You can get yourself into a serious power struggle trying to get the offender to think and/or admit he is wrong. For example, "She was asking for it." Or ... "He provoked me."

Let me give you a real-life example of how this works. Last fall I had to spend a great deal of money and time developing a contract with a professional who owns the building where I have my office. Some months ago my landlord had one of the staff approach me suggesting that I pay extra money for the support services. I was tremendously hurt that she would break this contract. However, since I work literally in the room next to hers - I forgave her. I told her I was sorry that we were at such a distance. -- She didn't notice it was not an apology --. The atmosphere changed and we were able to negotiate our way out of the situation without either of us being hurt.

I have forgiven patients whom I have made whole and healthy, even though they subsequently caused me severe pain by not reimbursing me, or reporting me to agencies. Having given this gift of forgiveness - having let go of negative feelings - allows me to meet each new patient with an open caring attitude and a sense that I can handle any potential hurtful situations.

An interesting thing happened after I had been using this technique of releasing my bitterness for some time. I sensed that I felt more forgiven for some of the things that I have done wrong. At first -- I thought I had just forgiven myself as part of the process. Then I realized it was something that happened to me. I'm sure my born-again colleagues would have said God had forgiven me.

Now that we have gotten a feel for what forgiveness is, let us look at the scientific research. Let me briefly introduce you to the pioneers in this new science. In ancient China there is a saying: "The man who opts for revenge should dig two graves". Johann Arnold wrote in his book *Seventy Times Seven* about people such as the New York City police detective who forgave the young man whose bullet paralyzed him. Lewis Smedes wrote the book *Forgive and Forget*, which excited the minds of a group of therapists including psychology professor Everett Worthington. Worthington struggled with anger and a desire for revenge after his mother was murdered in a home burglary. This happened shortly before he co-authored *To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past*. Robert Enright, was one of the first to realize an apology is not absolutely necessary. He said, "I think what is meant by forgetting is not literal. We forgive and we move on. We don't dwell in the past. We don't let resentment eat at us."

Enright said, "It looks like you're doing all the giving and the others doing all the getting and you're the biggest sucker the world has ever created. That's not true, because research shows that as you give these moral gifts, you are, in fact, the one who was emotionally healed."

He also said, "My biggest surprise is how powerful forgiveness actually is for emotional healing. I figured it would make a difference, but usually in the social sciences our results are mixed ... for the most part, our findings have been very strong and have withstood the test of time in people."

Michael McCullough, was the chief editor for the book *Forgiveness Theory Research and Practice*. I recommend this book to you for understanding the extensive research that has been done on the healing power of forgiveness.

---An additional use for this book is as cure for insomnia.

Some of the biggest names in mind body medicine - Dean Ornish, Carl Simonton, and Bernie Siegel among them - say that forgiveness is essential to physical and emotional well-being. Joan Borysenko, a cancer cell biologist and a pioneer in studying how emotions affect the body, goes so far as to say that forgiveness is the mind's most powerful healing tool.

We will see even more documentation that forgiveness works to heal people. Sir John Templeton Foundation of Pennsylvania is underwriting 60 forgiveness studies using \$5 million dollars.

Charlotte van Oyen Witivliet found that stress on the cardiovascular system is significantly greater when one considers revenge rather than forgiveness. She suggests that we may be drawn toward holding grudges "because that makes us feel like we are more in control and less sad." She found, however, her subjects indicated an even greater control, a greater sense of power and well being was involved in granting forgiveness. A person I saw recently told her ex-boyfriend she forgave him for having a girlfriend on the side for years. He was non-plused and confused. He finally recovered and apologized before they parted. She felt a more positive closure.

Forgiveness is a wonderful tool that can fill your life with serenity and peacefulness, as it has mine. How might you go about using it? The first step is to realize the difficulty. As Professor Evert Worthington says, "often this is difficult to do with a filter of anger clouding your vision". He suggests trying to recall your feelings of the hurt as objectively as possible. I tend to have people focus on how much they don't want the pain of the bitterness in their chest. Either way one must move on from anger.

A number of the researchers suggest that you empathize with the person who caused hurt, imagine what they were thinking and feeling. Others suggest recalling a time when you yourself did something wrong. Useful this can be, it is very hard to do.

Privately or publicly committing oneself to forgive in a letter or note, or in a conversation with a best friend is extremely valuable. There may well be times that you will slide back to anger. Thus you must review the commitment. Focusing on how you gained a sense of relief when forgiving in the past will be helpful in forgiving again.

In conclusion, what are the key elements of forgiveness? The act of forgiveness has changed. It is no longer condoning or forgetting. Research has proved it a powerful tool to help one heal emotionally and physically. The other person does not have to ask for or deserve forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way of moving on - to live in the present without bitterness and hate. Forgiveness is a difficult and ongoing process. It is important to concretely and repeatedly confirm your forgiveness. My experience is that a calm peacefulness comes from forgiveness where you love others and find a sense of being forgiven yourself. Consider trying it! Science says it will work.