



**Presentation
Ministries**

**The Book
On Forgiveness**

**By Father Al Lauer
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UNFORGIVENESS IS THE CAUSE...

“Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.” —Colossians 3:13

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” —Matthew 6:12 (our translation)

When I was first ordained a priest, I believed that over 50 percent of all problems were due to unforgiveness. After ten years in ministry, I revised my estimate and maintained 75 to 80 percent of all health, marital, family, and financial problems came from unforgiveness. Now, after more than twenty years in ministry, I have concluded that over 90 percent of all problems are rooted in unforgiveness.

THE NECESSITY OF FORGIVENESS

If most problems come from unforgiveness, we can understand why Jesus emphasizes forgiveness to an extreme degree. When Peter suggested to Jesus that we should forgive seven times, he was correct (Mt 18:21). “Seven” in the Bible stands for an indefinite number of times; so Peter was saying we should forgive indefinitely. This is the correct answer but not the correct emphasis. Jesus proclaims we should forgive “seventy times seven,” indefinitely times indefinitely (Mt 18:22). Jesus further emphasizes forgiveness by saying God’s kingdom is a matter of forgiveness and those who do not forgive are handed over to torturers (Mt 18:23-34). When Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray, He told them to pray that they be forgiven as they forgive (Mt 6:12). The Church calls this petition “astonishing” and “daunting” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2838, 2840). Prayer will hurt rather than help us if we do not forgive. This is the only point in the Lord’s Prayer on which Jesus immediately commented (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2841). He reiterated: “If you forgive the sins of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you” (Mt 6:14-15, our trans). Jesus insists on forgiveness. We must pass on the forgiveness He has given us by the shedding of His blood on Calvary.

THE POISON AND TORTURE OF UNFORGIVENESS

Jesus insists on forgiveness because unforgiveness is poison. It is toxic waste. It is a “bitter root... through which many may become defiled” (Heb 12:15). Unforgiving people are like the carriers of a deadly disease. They should be quarantined until they forgive. Otherwise, others may buy into this unforgiveness and be contaminated. Unforgiving people are like drug dealers. Anyone who drinks of their cup of unforgiveness will “get high” only to be handed over to the torturers (Mt 18:34) and eventually cast into the depths of hell.

The verdict we pass on others is passed on us (Mt 7:2). Unforgiveness is a fatal poison which cuts us off from forgiveness (Mt 6:12,15), healing (Sir 28:3), prayer (Mk 11:24-25), and worship (Mt 5:23-24).

Then, when we are separated from these graces, we are handed over to the torturers (Mt 18:34). These torturers are not people, but worse. They are such experiences as fear, depression, frustration, anxiety, self-hatred and loneliness. As these and other torturers work us over, we deteriorate to a level of existence which is characterized by fruitless, compulsive, escapist activities.

THE MEANING AND THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a decision to accept God's grace to let go of resentment due to sins committed against us and to express this by extending loving mercy to those who have sinned against us.

1. Forgiveness a decision, not a feeling.

When Jesus hung on the cross, He kept saying: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Jesus was gasping for breath and bleeding to death while the onlookers spit at Him and blasphemed Him. Jesus felt worse than any person has ever felt. He didn't feel like forgiving us, but He made the decision to forgive us.

2. Forgiveness is a decision to accept God's grace to forgive.

It is humanly impossible to forgive. "To err is human, to forgive is divine." Only God can forgive. To forgive another is more miraculous than healing many people in the most advanced stages of cancer. However, God will do this miracle for us.

3. Forgiveness is divine.

It is a supernatural response to being sinned against. Naturally, when we are sinned against, we hold on to resentments and let go of the sinners by getting away from them or at least emotionally distancing ourselves from them. In the act of forgiving, we hold on to, embrace, and reach out to the sinners and let go of the resentments.

4. Forgiveness is only in regard to sins (see Lk 11:4).

- a. Some Christians ask for the grace to forgive others for their attitudes, motives, and character. However, we sin when we judge others' attitudes, motives, and characters (Mt 7:1), although we must judge the morality of our and their actions (see Ez 3:18). If we are judging people rather than their actions, we don't need to forgive others. Rather we should repent of judging others. We need to be forgiven.
- b. Some Christians ask for the grace to forgive those who have hurt them. However, sometimes people hurt us without sinning against us. When we are hurt without being sinned against, we should overlook others' insensitivity, and should pray for healing.
- c. Some Christians ask for the grace to forgive others for their weaknesses, faults, and shortcomings. Weaknesses, faults, and shortcomings are not sins. They don't need to be forgiven. They should be overlooked. Moreover, others' faults can even be appreciated as opportunities for us to grow in holiness.

In summary, Forgive sins only. Repent of judging others. Be healed of hurts. Overlook faults.

5. Forgiveness is always expressed by acts of mercy, that is, by treating our offenders better than they deserve.

Even if those who have sinned against us have died, the Lord will bring people into our lives who will stand in proxy for those to whom we need to show mercy. The Lord calls us to forgive affectionately, generously, and mercifully, as did the father of the prodigal son (Lk 15:20 ff).



THE FIRST GRACE OF FORGIVENESS

We naturally don't want to forgive, but the Lord changes our hearts by reminding us that He has forgiven us of an overwhelming debt of sin. We not only celebrate the Eucharist in memory of Jesus (see 1 Cor 11:24-25) but also forgive in memory of Him. God's forgiveness of us is the basis for the grace to forgive others. We forgive because He first forgave us (see 1 Jn 4:19). The Lord forgave us before we had ever forgiven anyone else. However, from then on He expects us to forgive before He forgives us. Jesus told the parable of the man who had been forgiven by his master but did not pass on this forgiveness. The master said to the unforgiving, forgiven man: "You worthless wretch! I canceled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?" (Mt 18:32-33) Pope John Paul II has taught: "God's forgiveness becomes in our hearts an inexhaustible source of forgiveness in our relationships with one another" (*Message for the World Day of Prayer for Peace*, Jan 1, 1997, section 1). To know we have been forgiven by God is essential for accepting God's grace to forgive.

Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have lamented that one of the greatest tragedies of our time is the loss of the sense of sin. If we deny that we have sinned, then we deny our need for God's forgiveness and deprive ourselves both of the grace to be forgiven and the grace to forgive. Nevertheless, those who have lost the sense of sin and are permissive, are deeply hurt by others' sins. However, they have no way to deal with this. They can't keep denying they are hurt by others' sins. So eventually those who have lost the sense of sin contradict themselves and become extremely intolerant and dictatorial. Over a hundred years ago, Pope Leo XIII observed that moral relativism especially in the context of democracy would breed totalitarian dictatorships very abusive to human rights (quoted in *Splendor of the Truth*, Pope John Paul II, 99). The author of the Book of Wisdom made the same point. The secular humanists of his day had lost the sense of sin. They said: "Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are real, and use the freshness of creation avidly. Let us have our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no springtime blossom pass us by; let us crown ourselves with rosebuds ere they wither. Let no meadow be free from our wantonness" (Wis 2:6-9). Then these sinners who denied sin proposed: "Let us oppress the needy just man; let us neither spare the widow nor revere the old man for his hair grown white with time. But let our strength be our norm of justice; for weakness proves itself useless. Let us beset the just one" (Wis 2:10-12). By losing the sense of sin, we are losing the grace to forgive. Consequently, a permissive society is unforgiving and unmerciful. Let us admit that there is sin and we have sinned. Then we can repent, be forgiven, and pass on that forgiveness to others.



FALSE FORGIVENESS

When we remember God's forgiveness of us and accept God's grace to be willing to forgive, then we can accept God's grace to replace false forgiveness with true forgiveness. The world, our flesh, and the devil try to deceive us into thinking we have already forgiven others. To make forgiveness look humanly possible we are tempted to re-define forgiveness as politeness, civility, or the control of hostile feelings. Although it is obviously good to be polite, civil, and self-controlled, these do not constitute forgiveness. The following diagnostic questions can help us know whether we've deceived ourselves about forgiving others.

1. Am I conscious that God gave me the grace to forgive and that I did not do it myself?

If you are not aware that God did it, He may not have.

2. Can I picture myself embracing the other person? (see Lk 15:20)

3. Do I appreciate Confession (the Sacrament of Reconciliation) and celebrate it frequently?

If we are forgiving graciously and lovingly, we are being forgiven in this way in the sacrament. This would attract us to Confession.

4. Do I need to forgive myself?

Not forgiving ourselves is a symptom that we have not forgiven someone else, although we may be deceiving ourselves through false forgiveness

6. Have I forgiven but not forgotten?

We have neither the power to forgive nor forget. If the Lord has given us the grace to forgive, we also have the grace to forget. This does not mean we have amnesia but the healing of memories. Pope John Paul II has taught: " 'To forgive and to be reconciled means *to purify one's memory* of hatred, rancor, the desire for revenge; it means acknowledging as a brother even those who have wronged us; it means not being overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good (cf. Rom 12:21)' (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 7 October 1998, p. 2)." Pope John Paul II also teaches: "the truth is that *one cannot remain a prisoner of the past*, for individuals and peoples need a sort of 'healing of memories', so that past evils will not come back again. This does not mean forgetting past events; it means re-examining them with a new attitude and learning precisely from the experience of suffering that only love can build up..." (Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 Jan 1997)

If we have false forgiveness, we must replace it with true forgiveness.



FORGIVENESS AND MERCY

The essence of forgiveness by God's standards is the giving of mercy. Mercy means to treat others better than they deserve. When we extend mercy to those who have offended us, we kiss prodigal sons, give presents to offenders, and have special celebrations in honor of our enemies. These people don't deserve this, and that is what mercy is all about. We don't deserve the redemptive death of God's Son, the shedding of His blood, and the promise of eternal happiness, but He has given them to us anyway because of His mercy.

The Lord expects us to pass on to others the merciful forgiveness we have received from Him. We are reluctant to do this because of the high cost of extending mercy. Although Jesus has paid the price for mercy by His death on Calvary, He lets us share in His sufferings (see Col 1:24). For example, if someone hits your car, you can have mercy on them and pay for it yourself. That mercy may cost you \$800.00. That is some of the cheapest mercy you'll ever give. What if your husband told you that he had committed adultery but that he would never do it again? He wanted you to take him back and help put your marriage back together. If you have mercy on him, you will take a tremendous emotional, psychological, and spiritual loss. Even if you don't have mercy, you will suffer. But perhaps you feel like making your husband pay for his adultery as much as possible because you don't have to pay for it as much if you take it out on him.

Mercy is so expensive that we don't want to think of it. Pope John Paul II taught: "The present day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of 'mercy' seems to cause uneasiness in man" (*Rich In Mercy*, 2). In a world of gross injustices, we feel embarrassed to talk of mercy to victims of violence, rape, abuse, and racism. However, when we have mercy, we are not condoning sin but loving sinners. In fact, the more we love sinners, the more we hate the sin that degrades them. We must follow the example of Jesus, the most victimized Person Who has ever lived. He said: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Then He extended His mercy by promising the good thief that he would be in paradise that very day (Lk 23:43). Even as Jesus died, He poured forth the abundant stream of mercy.

In the Old Testament, the gold plate over the ark of the covenant was called the "propitiatory," or "mercy-seat." Here Yahweh sat in all His mercy. The New Testament fulfillment of the mercy-seat is the tabernacle. Come before the tabernacle, into the presence of the eucharistic Jesus. Ask for mercy to come to you and through you. You may even put out your hand and touch the tabernacle, the new mercy-seat. With that touch, you can receive what the hemorrhaging woman experienced when she touched the hem of Jesus' robe (see Lk 8:46). You will experience God's power and the miracle of mercy.



THE EMBRACE OF FORGIVENESS

The sign of forgiveness is outstretched arms. The forgiving father threw his arms around the neck of the prodigal son and kissed him (Lk 15:20). Jesus received the embrace and kiss of Judas, and forgave him (Mk 14:45). Finally, Jesus stretched out His arms on the cross and would have embraced us all if we had not nailed His arms to the cross. Right now, imagine yourself embracing each one you need to forgive. By God's grace and in His mercy make the decision to forgive each person for each offense against you. Now go, embrace these people. If this is impossible, call or write them without delay. If they are aware of problems in their relationship with you, apologize to them and ask them to forgive you for not forgiving them. Then give them a gift (see Lk 15:22 ff). Show the mercy of our forgiving Father.



FORGIVENESS, PASSIVITY, AND FREEDOM

Some people think that by forgiving others and showing them mercy we encourage them to continue to sin against us. They further think that by not forgiving others they can control these people and protect themselves. This very common, very wrong misconception is easily disproved by looking at our own lives. When we sense that someone is trying to control us by not forgiving us, do we refrain from offending him, or do we retaliate and act against him in ways that we wouldn't have done otherwise?

Then how do we protect ourselves from being sinned against? Like Jesus crucified, many times we should not protect ourselves but take up the cross. In doing so, we do not make ourselves "doormats," for the crucified Jesus was not a "doormat" but the strongest, most loving Person ever.

However, primarily for the sake of those offending us, and not only for our sakes, we sometimes need to stop a person from offending us or remove ourselves from this situation. We will make the right decisions and be acting with the right motives, only if we have forgiven. Unforgiveness puts a person in a self-made prison where they cannot act freely. Pope John Paul II has taught: "Forgiveness is the restoration of freedom to oneself. It is the key held in our own hand to our prison cell." Thus, contrary to popular opinion, many people become "doormats" not because of forgiveness, but because of unforgiveness. Unforgiveness results in co-dependence and in being trapped in abusive situations.

Forgive by God's grace, suffer with Jesus crucified, and be free to confront evildoers.



FORGIVENESS AND EVANGELIZATION

By forgiveness, we are not only free to make the right decisions for redemptive suffering and confrontation, but also for evangelization. For years I have taught seminars on evangelization. In my early seminars, I focused on information. I assumed that if we only knew that the Lord had commanded us to evangelize, we would evangelize, after learning a few techniques on how to share our faith. I was wrong. Next, I focused on motivation. I taught and participated in many seminars on evangelization where we were so fired up that we almost ran out of the upper room of Pentecost. But the enthusiasm wore off. Third, I realized the need to evangelize the evangelizers. If we can't share our faith, do we have the faith? This approach bore good fruit, as many shared their faith in Jesus. Nevertheless, there was not an "evangelism explosion." We did not see the Lord day-by-day adding to our "number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Finally, I stumbled on the most fruitful means of promoting evangelization. I discovered that when I gave seminars on forgiving others, more people seemed to be freed for evangelization. I discovered that unforgiveness was possibly the major obstacle to evangelization.

We all have a Jonah inside us. We often war against those we are called to evangelize (e.g. the Muslims and the Russians). We refuse to evangelize the Ninevites, not because of fear but because deep down we don't want them saved (see Jon 4:1-2). We all are tempted to be like the older brother of the prodigal son. We don't think it's good news when a certain brother or sister is forgiven and loved by the Father (see Lk 15:27-28). And if we don't think God's forgiveness and mercy are good news for everyone, then we have no good news to share with anyone. Most of us deny that there is a Jonah within us. This denial is part of the sin of unforgiveness. However, before dismissing the possibility of our unforgiveness we should ask the Holy Spirit to guide us to all truth and convict us of sin (Jn 16:13, 8). Many of us will be surprised in the near future, as the Spirit brings to mind people we haven't truly forgiven.

When we have forgiven and are reconciled, we will no longer need to leave our evangelization at the altar (see Mt 5:24) but can go and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).



“MINISTERS OF RECONCILIATION”

The Lord calls us to both forgive and to lead others to forgive. We must be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). The following fourteen questions can be used as a tool by which we can call others to forgive everyone immediately for every sin committed against them.

1. What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is our decision to accept God’s grace to let go of resentments due to sins committed against us and to express this by acts of mercy and love toward the offender (see Lk 15:20-24).

2. How often must I forgive?

70 x 7, that is, indefinitely, always (see Mt 18:22).

3. Are there any sins which I don’t have to forgive?

No, the Lord calls us to forgive all sins — even rape, murder, abuse, adultery, etc.

4. When I forgive, am I condoning sin?

No, the Lord forgives all our sins and condones none of them (see Jn 8:11).

5. Must I forgive if the person offending me isn’t sorry?

Yes, for-giveness is before-giveness — to give pardon before you are asked forgiveness or even if never asked forgiveness.

6. Must I forgive if a person continues to hurt me?

Yes, while hanging on the cross Jesus forgave His enemies while they continued to spit at Him and blaspheme Him (see Lk 23:34-35).

7. If I forgive a person, do I stay in an abusive situation?

No, you free yourself to obey God and remove yourself from an abusive situation until it is changed.

8. How do I forgive?

None of us can forgive by our own power. “To err is human, to forgive divine,” and we are not divine. However, the Lord promised us His divine power to forgive. Therefore, forgiveness is our decision to accept God’s grace to forgive.

9. What if I don't want to forgive?

We should pray to realize how much the Lord has forgiven us. Then by God's grace we must decide to accept the grace to pass on to others the forgiveness given to us.

10. How fast must I forgive?

Immediately (Mt 5:25). We're in a self-made jail and at a stand-still in our relationship with God until we forgive.

11. What if I forgive and not forget?

Forgetting sins committed against us is not to have amnesia. Rather, to forget sins means that there is no special sting in us when we remember sins committed against us. If it hurts us to remember these sins, either we need healing or have not truly forgiven.

12. How do I forgive myself?

Not forgiving ourselves is a symptom which will take care of itself if we truly forgive others and receive prayers for healing.

13. What if I don't forgive?

- a. We "give the devil a chance to work on" us (see Eph 4:27).
- b. We are handed over to the torturers (Mt 18:34). These torturers are such things as fear, loneliness, depression, frustration, anxiety, and self-hatred.
- c. We cut ourselves off from receiving forgiveness (Mt 6:12, 15), healing (Sir 28:3), prayer (Mk 11:25), and worship (Mt 5:23-24).
- d. If we persist in unforgiveness, we cut ourselves off from God forever and thereby damn ourselves.

14. How do I know if I have forgiven?

Forgiveness is not a feeling but a decision. Moreover, forgiveness is not only praying for those who have hurt us or treating them politely. We know that we have made the decision to forgive when we show it in acts of love and mercy to those who have sinned against us. For example, the father of the prodigal son threw his arms around his son, kissed him, gave him gifts, honored him, and celebrated his return (Lk 15:20-24). By God's grace, we must go and do likewise.



MARY, MOTHER OF FORGIVENESS

When Jesus was hanging on the cross and saw His apostles and disciples desperately in need of being forgiven and giving forgiveness, He told Mary to be the mother of all His disciples, represented by John. He told all of us to accept Mary as our spiritual mother. Mary is a minister of reconciliation (see 2 Cor 5:18) who will help us accept God's grace to forgive.

Mary is "Our Lady of Sorrows." However, she has been given a pre-eminent part in God's plan of salvation not merely through her sufferings but also through her loving forgiveness for those who have caused her Son's sufferings. Mary is the "Mother of Forgiveness." She prayed with her tortured and crucified Son: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). She forgave each of us for our part in murdering her Son. This made it possible for her to obey the dying Jesus' command that she be our mother (Jn 19:26-27). Mary is the "Mother of the Church" because she is first "the Mother of Forgiveness."

Addressing Mary as the "Mother of Forgiveness," ask Mary to be your mother and to pray for you. Promote devotion to Mary under the title of "Mary, the Mother of Forgiveness." Pray the novena of "Mary, the Mother of Sorrows" and invite others to do the same. Pray the following prayer:

"Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, I ask for the willingness to forgive and the grace to forgive immediately all who have sinned against me. On Calvary, You gave Mary the grace to forgive me for my part in killing her Son. Then you gave Mary the grace to become my mother (Jn 19:26-27).

Mary, Mother of Forgiveness, may I forgive others as you forgave me in imitation of your Son. Mary, take my hand and lead me as I decide to accept God's grace to forgive (name the person) for (name the sin), etc.

Jesus, thank You for giving me Mary, 'Mother of Forgiveness' to be my mother.

'Mary, Mother of Forgiveness,' pray for me."



DECIDE TO FORGIVE NOW

Right now, through the intercession of Mary, “Mother of Forgiveness”, decide to accept God’s grace to forgive all who have sinned against you in any way. Make the following statement: “By God’s grace, I decide to accept the grace to forgive _____ for _____.” Fill in the blanks and repeat this statement until you have forgiven everyone. Then thank Jesus forever for the miracle of forgiveness.

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