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By Robert J. Tamasy

FACING THE FORGIVENESS CHALLENGE

When was the last time you forgave someone for a wrong they had done to you? When was the last time you went to someone else and asked for their forgiveness?

These can be challenging questions, because among the many things we are asked to do in today's business and professional world, forgiving and being forgiven are often among the most difficult. So difficult, in fact, many people choose to avoid them entirely. We hang onto grudges and nurse hurts rather than attempting to reconcile relationships. Instead of requesting forgiveness, even if we realize we have said or done something wrong, we ignore it, hoping the offending party will forget over time.

C.S. Lewis, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century, summed it up well when he observed, "Everyone thinks that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until he has something to forgive." He might well have been saying that when it comes to forgiveness, it is more blessed to receive than to give.

Veteran consultants and executive coaches know a recurring issue their clients must confront involves forgiveness. Failure to forgive can destroy partnerships, leadership teams, even entire organizations. It might range from something simple, such as unkind words, to doing something in anger that we later regret, to total failure to fulfill a major business commitment.

It can be easy to say, "forgive and forget," but extremely hard to do. Often, to forgive feels like letting someone off the hook for wrongdoing without making amends. Instead, we decide never to forget the harm they have done to us.

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The problem is, we can become victims of our own unwillingness to forgive. Offending parties may not be aware of the pain we harbor, they may not care, or we may have lost contact with them, leaving no opportunity for reconciliation or restitution.

What then should we do about forgiveness? The Bible offers sound advice on this matter:

Be willing to forgive even more than necessary. Talking to His followers, Jesus dismissed the “eye for an eye” vengeance approach for correcting wrongs. Instead, He urged being the “bigger person” in the conflict. *“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well...”* (Matthew 5:38-40).

Consider how much God has forgiven us. In offering His model prayer as a guide, Jesus put special emphasis on forgiving others. *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”* (Matthew 6:12-15).

Failure to forgive can plant seeds of bitterness. Even if feelings are justified, being able to forgive can free us from a form of “emotional cancer.” *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you”* (Ephesians 4:31-32).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Reviewing the opening questions, when was the last time you forgave someone for a wrong they had done to you? What were the circumstances, and how did you go about forgiving that person?
2. When was the last time you went to someone else and asked for their forgiveness? What kind of response did you receive? How easy was it for you to ask that individual – or group – to forgive?
3. Are you presently struggling with circumstances in which forgiveness is needed? Have you reached a point where you believe that you should take steps to seek resolution, in one way or another? Explain your answer.
4. How should an awareness of how much God has forgiven us about our own wrongdoings toward Him – our sins – affect our thinking about forgiving someone else, or seeking their forgiveness?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Genesis 50:15-21; 1 Kings 8:47-52; Matthew 18:23-35; Mark 11:25; 2 Corinthians 2:10

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