

There are at least three major spiritual benefits: the one who forgives is liberated from bitterness and resentment, the one who is forgiven receives mercy and a new beginning, and the community experiences conflict resolution and the restoration of harmony.

Jesus gave the great commandment: Love God and love your neighbor. Because of our flawed human nature and our propensity to sin, everyone who offends against love and relationships is harmed or broken. The way to return to love, mend relationships and heal offenses is to forgive. Forgiveness is the flip side of the love coin.

Jesus is the best example of forgiveness. As Jesus hung in crucifixion, he forgave those who falsely testified against him, wrongly condemned him and cruelly tortured him when he prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Lk 23:34). If God is love, if nothing is outside of God's mercy, and if Jesus is the son of God, then it was a spiritual imperative for Jesus to forgive those who had offended him. To do otherwise would have been to carry anger and resentment with him to the grave, which is no way to die, and it would have disproved his divinity. Jesus did what God does. He was "gracious and merciful ... abounding in steadfast love and relenting in punishment" (Joel 2:13).

Jesus demonstrated forgiveness again after his Resurrection. His disciples offended him when they abandoned him at the time of his arrest, and Peter further offended him with his denials. Jesus had every reason to be hurt and angry. Yet, when Jesus appeared to them on Easter Sunday night, his first words to them were, "Peace be with you" (Lk 24:36), which amounts to "I forgive you."

Jesus knew the importance of the forgiveness and stressed it in his teaching. He taught that we should forgive those who trespass against us (see Mt 6:12; Lk 11:4). Once Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?" And almost congratulating himself, Peter added, "As many as seven times?" (Mt 18:21).

Jesus, unimpressed, replied, "Not seven times but 77 times" (Mt 18:22), a symbolic number for as many times as necessary because forgiveness is a never ending, life-long process.

Jesus was well aware that those who have been offended can be consumed with anger, bitterness and resentment. It is natural to harbor a grudge and want to strike back, take revenge, retaliate, punish, or get even. As the saying goes, "Hurt people hurt people." It perpetuates a cycle of violence. It can be all-consuming and rob people of their happiness. It is no way to live. It does an immense amount of good to let go of our hurts and forgive those who have offended us. It gives release and freedom, and peace and joy.

Sometimes forgiveness seems unattainable, so far beyond us that it requires a superhuman effort. Whenever we face what appears to be an insurmountable spiritual challenge, it is time to turn to God in prayer to ask for help. God will provide divine assistance, as the psalmist explained long ago: "The Lord answered me when I called in my distress" (Ps 120:1).