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Forgiving Oneself

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Forgiving Oneself

We know that we can remain angry with someone who has hurt us for a long time. Forgiving might not come easily or naturally. But if we continue going over the hurtful or unjust incident that occurred, we are the ones who suffer, not the ones who caused us injury. We have probably learned from experience that we do not have to waste our mental and emotional energies in the present on someone else's actions in the past. We can either confront the person in some way, or let the incident pass into the past where it belongs.

Many of us are better at forgiving others than we are at forgiving ourselves. We go over and over the terrible thing we did, the grievous mistake, and the awful consequences to some poorly-made decision. We remain angry and disappointed with ourselves to no good purpose. We fail to apply to ourselves, the practical insights we have learned about forgiving those who have hurt us.

Some might think that forgiving oneself would be very easy, because there is no confrontation to be feared, and there is no need for anyone else's approval. But it is not easy. We know what happened, and we remember. God knows, and we know that God knows. Because of the pain we feel, we might think that God is disappointed in us, or angry with us. We believe that God forgives us the moment we turn away from acting against our consciences. But we are liable to remain disappointed in ourselves, not having negotiated with either God or ourselves the humiliation of personal failure. What we did (or did not do) is a fact. The thoughts and feelings we experience afterwards must be faced if we are to forgive ourselves as God forgives us.

We are sometimes amazed and unpleasantly surprised to recognize that we could have acted totally opposite to some strongly held beliefs and solid reasons that have been ours for years. Apparently, we did not know enough about our vulnerability to emotions, and their power to sway reason. And so we might remain unforgiving of ourselves. To what end? We certainly do not please God by holding on to a miserable experience of the past. Honesty only requires that we admit what we did, not that we continue to ask "how could I have done such a thing?"

We can reflect on how it is that we acted against our consciences, so that we can learn about our weaknesses and deal with them, rather than remain in a state of self-accusation and pain, to no one's profit. Forgiving ourselves is not the same as avoiding responsibility or pretending it never happened. We act positively, choosing to seek

healing of our internal pain and turmoil, so that we can put our energy and resources into a purposeful life that opens out from the present into the future. God is much more with us in our present than in our past.

Because forgiveness of ourselves comes only after acceptance of our weaknesses, we are liable to become compassionate and understanding of the failings of others. For ourselves, we have a deeper awareness of our responsibility to make decisions carefully. Our practical question is: How shall we now live, in light of our painful experience? Positively, we can rely on prayerful reflection in our daily lives, being especially attentive to those events and thoughts that elicit strong feelings. If we deal with them in the presence of God on a day-by-day basis, we will have much less need to forgive ourselves in the future.