

Forgiveness From the Heart: Path to Interior Freedom and Peace

Part 1: The Desire For Peace

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

To begin our journey into forgiveness, let us imagine ourselves in the upper room with the disciples who have gathered following the crucifixion of Jesus. (Jn 20:19) Let each reader picture himself or herself huddled with them, fearful, tense, the doors shut, each wrestling with a pressing question: What will my future be without Jesus?

There is no knock at the door; such formalities are unnecessary for the risen Lord. Then suddenly, without announcement, Jesus is standing among them. He speaks, piercing the hushed silence, gazing tenderly into the eyes of his beloved ones: *Peace be with you* is his greeting. Following this, Jesus shows them his hands and his side, and we learn that the disciples “were glad when they saw the Lord” (Jn 20: 20).

In commenting on these passages, St. John Chrysostom explains that Jesus showed himself in such a full and open way, not only to strengthen the disciples but also, to reinforce what he had said to them at supper the night before he died: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). Obviously, Jesus desires his followers to have peace. During his Last Supper discourse, peace was his farewell gift. Following his resurrection, Jesus greeted his followers with peace.

Human beings desire peace. This desire derives from the fact that God, in his goodness, first desires peace for us. But how does a person go about acquiring this peace? How does one acquire the kind of peace Jesus describes in his Last Supper discourse, the kind that is not as the world gives? We find the answer in his own words during this same resurrection appearance in the upper room:

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20: 21-23).

The key to a peaceful heart and untroubled mind is forgiveness, what we will here call “forgiveness from the heart.” The mission of the Church is closely bound to forgiveness. Because of Jesus, we can have our own sins forgiven. However, we are also to forgive one another. There is no getting around it. Jesus insisted on forgiveness. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6: 14-15).

Later in the same Gospel there is an exchange between Jesus and Peter:

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matt 18: 21-22).

Also, in teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus placed “forgiveness” in the middle of the prayer, clearly showing an undeniable relationship between our willingness to forgive and having our own offenses forgiven: “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” Of course, Jesus himself was the greatest model of forgiveness, when from the cross, despite the gruesome agony and torturous conditions of crucifixion, he cried out: “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23: 34).

As Vincent Powell Harris states in his article *The Forgiveness Journey Ain't Easy*: “One of the most difficult demands of the Christian life -- one might even say the most difficult demand -- is Jesus’ insistence on forgiveness.”¹ Yet, as we see in the resurrection appearance above, Jesus gave us an effective tool both for obtaining forgiveness and for securing grace for forgiving those who trespass against us. This tool is the Sacrament of Penance.

When both types of forgiveness are practiced together -- seeking forgiveness for our sins and forgiving those who have sinned against us -- there is established in us a peace that is “not as the world gives.” However, before we examine the connection between forgiveness and sacramental confession, we’ll first look more closely at forgiveness itself.

Part 2: Learning To Forgive

What Is Forgiveness?

Broadly speaking, forgiveness “is the act of pardoning or excusing oneself or someone else without harboring resentment.”² Forgiveness does not suggest that the action in question was not hurtful or inappropriate. Psychologically speaking, forgiveness allows an individual to let go of the pain in one’s memory, so that while the memory remains, it no longer has the power to control one’s behavior and attitudes. A concern that forgiveness constitutes condoning actions of abuse or violence and that a person offering forgiveness will be vulnerable to continued abuse is a common misconception. Actually, the process of forgiving is meant to help individuals identify wrongdoing, call it wrong, then experience the internal transformation of letting go of the anger. This, in turn, opens one’s heart and mind to increased kindness, compassion, and unconditional love, to what researchers call “tender-heartedness.” In other words, an individual, while knowing that an action was wrong, can be tender-hearted enough to release the anger on the grounds that it is not beneficial to oneself or anyone else.

What Forgiveness Is Not!

According to Peter Murphy, Office of Family Life, Archdiocese of Washington, “We often carry around misperceptions of what forgiveness is, and these misperceptions impede our ability to forgive or be forgiven. It is important to know what forgiveness is not.

- Forgiveness is not forgetting. We often will not forget a hurtful event, but we can still seek and grant forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is not having resolved all the painful feelings. Often the hurtful feelings will last. But we can still seek and grant forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is not absolving someone from the responsibility of what he or she has done. It was wrong; you are simply choosing to not let it negatively impact you (and your relationship) anymore.
- Forgiveness is not accepting being continually hurt. If you are in an abusive relationship or one in which you are regularly being hurt, then that pattern must change. You do not deserve to be hurt. This may require staying away from the offending person to protect yourself.
- Forgiveness does not mean the relationship is always back to where it was before. If the offense is minor, you might be able to go back to where you were. If the offense is serious, it may take time (even years) to rebuild trust in the relationship. Forgiveness is simply starting this healing process.”³

What the Social Scientists Tell Us About Forgiveness

Research on forgiveness by social scientists can be looked at from a number of angles: the benefits of forgiveness upon one’s psychological and physical health, the effect forgiveness has on one’s relationship with others, the consequences of forgiveness on the offender’s well-being, and the intrinsic quality of forgiveness as a morally good act.

Dr. Robert Enright is a licensed psychologist and professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a founding member of the International Forgiveness Institute, Inc. In his book *Forgiveness Is a Choice*, he explains that anger due to an injustice is normal and healthy, that in the right amount

it can be beneficial, but too much can have serious consequences, affecting both psychological and physical health. It can even be addictive. Embracing forgiveness as a solution to anger, he tells us, can greatly reduce the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of this powerful emotion on one's overall well-being.

Dr. Enright goes on to explain that individuals who have learned to control the way anger is expressed haven't necessarily learned to deal with anger in a healthy manner. Such persons may not be screaming or lashing out physically, but they may have developed the habit of lashing out verbally, offering snide remarks, hurtful humor, or destructive criticism. Others may choose stony silence, they may withdraw, or employ passive resistance that is laced with hostility and noncompliance. A single painful event can have long-term consequences, but it is commonly understood that smoldering resentments are the result of a series of offenses. He recommends the forgiveness process for those whose anger is demonstrably visible, as well as for those whose anger has turned into the less visible, but ever so real, smoldering resentment. Both are powerful operators in the human psyche.

Frederic Luskin, Ph.D. is the Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Projects and an Associate Professor at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Dr. Luskin has completed extensive research on the training and measurement of forgiveness therapy. His research demonstrates that learning forgiveness leads to increased physical vitality, hope, greater self-efficacy, enhanced optimism, and conflict resolution skills. It also shows that forgiveness lessens the physical and emotional toll of stress, and decreases hurt, anger, depression, and blood pressure.⁴

Forgiveness As a Morally Good Act

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P., who has written extensively on the twelve-step recovery process, tells us that "a follower of Christ cannot carry in his heart hatred towards anyone and expect to grow in the love of God, which alone brings that peace beyond all understanding."⁵ Abuse, he tells us, "is a serious sin and the serious Christian does not tolerate it -- not in others and not in himself."⁶ Often, however, a person carries unresolved childhood anger into his or her adult life, and adult experiences which are similar to the traumas of childhood draw out defenses that aided in helping him or her survive the original trauma. Unfortunately, the self-destructive nature of these defense mechanisms often places an inestimable burden on one's heart, mind, and soul.

Recalling that God's Will for his children is peace, we can say that undertaking the path to forgiveness is a morally good act, not only for oneself, but also for those one regularly encounters and with whom one interacts, even for the world as a whole. Understanding forgiveness as something beneficial to the world at large is referred to as taking the *global* perspective. It expands one's scope of consideration beyond one's own household, workplace, or local community. The *global* perspective even includes the one who has done the offending. Through the forgiveness process, the offender is viewed as a member of the greater human community, one who erred, often with serious, long-lasting consequences, but who still possesses a humanity that is valuable in God's sight.

According to Dr. Enright, the vast majority of individuals he has guided through the forgiveness process eventually embrace a *global* perspective. In his book *Forgiveness is a Choice*, he shares the journal entry of a mother whose daughter had been kidnapped and murdered, and this personal reflection is a powerful example of why the *global* perspective, aided by God's grace, brings one to see that the offender is also a member of the human community and belongs in this world.

"I readily admit that I wanted to kill this man with my bare hands.... By this time, however, I had finally come to believe that real justice is not punishment but restoration, not necessarily to how things used to be, but to how they really should be. In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures whence my beliefs and values come, the God who rises up from them is a God of mercy and

compassion, a God who seeks not to punish, destroy, or put us to death, but a God who works unceasingly to help and heal us, rehabilitate and reconcile us, restore us to the richness and fullness of life for which we have been created. This, now, was the justice I wanted for this man who had taken my little girl. Though he was liable for the death penalty, I felt it would violate and profane the goodness, sweetness, and beauty of Susie's life by killing the kidnapper in her name.... I was convinced that my best and healthiest option was to forgive."⁷

Forgiving Oneself

Forgiveness should extend also to oneself. The process of self-forgiveness can free one from the pain and anger which has built up over time. The self-forgiveness process is an opportunity to change the lens through which one views the world. In other words, one's focus is altered. Instead of zeroing in on past hurts, one learns to focus on the present and develop a clearer understanding of how to move on with one's life. Not necessarily a one-time event, the choice to forgive oneself -- as it is with the choice to forgive someone who has caused deep hurt -- is an ongoing process worked out over time. Those who succeed in this process eventually find themselves free of the pain and interior suffering they had been shouldering.

There are, of course, consequences for rejecting self-forgiveness, opting instead to live with the pain, bitterness, anger, resentment, and self-loathing that come with this choice. In the article *Forgiving Oneself*,⁸ Peter Murphy outlines some of the consequences of failing to undertake this effort:

- Continually being hurt by unresolved pain, suffering, and ways of acting that harm oneself;
- Low self-esteem and low self-worth;
- Being overly defensive or distant in relationships;
- Unnecessary guilt and remorse that wear one down;
- Self-destructive behavior.

In comparison, he tells us, forgiving oneself can have far reaching beneficial effects:

- Learning to love oneself in healthy ways and no longer beating oneself up for mistakes;
- Seeing one's weaknesses and faults realistically, without exaggeration or minimization;
- Letting go of hurtful memories and painful events and developing an optimistic view for the future;
- Realizing one's value and self-worth, which opens one to loving others in new ways, often bringing an enhanced level of respect from others.

Part 3: Forgiveness is a Process

The process of forgiveness, as it has been developed and utilized by Dr. Robert Enright, is a journey. Just as a reliable roadmap is essential for any physical journey, in *Forgiveness Is a Choice*, Dr. Enright provides both a reliable roadmap and effective tools for one's journey into forgiveness. He tells us:

“Anger need not leave us helpless. Just as an antibiotic can be an effective antidote to infectious disease, forgiveness can be an antidote to dysfunctional anger and debilitating resentments. The research we have done at the University of Wisconsin-Madison demonstrates that people can forgive, and when they do, many find relief from the effects of harbored anger.”⁹

Dr. Enright's experience over many years of guiding people through the forgiveness process has provided a number of insights into the journey:

- For most people, change is a gradual process.
- The forgiveness process is rarely a one-time event. It is not uncommon that having completed the forgiveness process with one offender, other individuals or areas of personal weakness needing forgiveness surface.
- Injuries and injustices can happen at any time, therefore, the forgiveness process may be necessary again at any point.
- People are individuals with differences. Not all people forgive in the same way, nor heal at the same rate.
- The forgiveness process is not rigidly fixed. Individuals may progress, but later retrace certain steps.
- Deep anger and resentment are rarely caused by a single event. The deepest hurts usually involve destructive relationships that lead to other destructive relationships, and the layers of hurt have to be peeled away one at a time.
- Given the uniqueness of each person, each forgiveness experience is also unique, although there are often some similarities with the experiences of others.
- Forgiveness is a skill which takes practice, but the effort, practice, and time committed to the process pay big dividends.
- Forgiveness is an attitude of goodwill and a moral virtue that develops. It becomes a part of one's identity and has a way of transforming one's character and relationships for the better.

For those desiring to undertake this journey into forgiveness, it will be vital to go beyond the basic information offered here. Dr. Enright's book *Forgiveness is a Choice* presents the process of forgiveness with all its facets, providing a phase-by-phase format that is essential for reaching one's destination. Here is a brief overview of the four phases of the forgiveness process.

Phase 1 - Uncovering Your Anger: To forgive, one must be willing to examine how much anger one has as a result of someone else's unfairness. Realizing and coming to terms with anger can be very painful, but forgiveness is not about pretending that nothing happened or hiding from the pain. A person who has suffered needs to be honest with himself or herself about that suffering.

Phase 2 - Deciding to Forgive: A decision and a commitment are both required for the forgiveness process to succeed. Dr. Enright has divided this second phase into three parts: turning one's back on the past, looking toward the future, and choosing the path of forgiveness.

Phase 3 - Working On Forgiveness: It is not enough to simply make a decision to forgive. Concrete actions are necessary for the forgiveness to be real.

Phase 4 - Discovery and Release From Emotional Prison: Unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment, and anger are like the four walls of a prison cell from which escape requires the correct key. Forgiveness is the key, and with it, one is able to open the door of the cell and embrace a new level of freedom.

Starting the Forgiveness Journey

A starting place is necessary and in Dr. Enright's experience people choose various starting places for various reasons. Some start with childhood injuries, then work toward the present. Patterns of anger and resentment often begin in childhood. These can affect adult behavior and attitudes. Usually the deepest hurts occur within the family, from injuries by parents, close relatives, or childhood acquaintances.

For adults, relationships that come to an abrupt end, friendships that fall apart, commitments that are broken, and treatment that is unfair can be deep sources of pain, and these leave one vulnerable to heightened anxiety and psychological difficulties. So, while some people begin the process of forgiving by starting with childhood trauma, others start with injuries or injustices that are more recent and work their way back.

There are many similarities between the forgiveness journey and a 12-step recovery program, so next we will examine how forgiveness fits in with the 12-step process.

Part 4: Forgiveness and the 12-Step Recovery Process

This section is not meant to be used as instruction on a 12-step program. Rather, it is assumed that the reader is already familiar with these steps. Thus, the goal is to highlight forgiveness as a process that is not only similar to the 12-step process but also, integral to it. Therefore, for those working their way through a 12-step recovery process, the journey into forgiveness will resonate with their efforts overall. Some will recognize they are powerless in the face of the anger and bitter resentments that are the result of injustice and injury. This is the first step. Individuals undertaking forgiveness may also soon find that admitting their initial powerlessness positions them to embrace the second step of the recovery process: *We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* While the forgiveness process as it is outlined in Dr. Enright's book *Forgiveness is a Choice* remains neutral regarding specific religious practices, researchers have found that many people who undertake the path to forgiveness rely on the grace of God to sustain them throughout the process, especially during some of the more difficult phases of the forgiveness journey.

Wrong Is Wrong and Letting Go

Step Three: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

In speaking about step three in his 12-Step Series, Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P. states: "To attain the promise of peace that is Christ's farewell gift, we must be willing to turn our life over to his care on a daily basis. Jesus seeks to teach us the way to true inner peace, but our self-centeredness blinds us to the path of peace."¹⁰ Fr. Vogt goes on to say that "correctly understood, Christian surrender does not mean we're helpless, nor does it mean we surrender to abusive or intolerable circumstances. It means we acknowledge those circumstances for what they are and ask God in his power to care for us in those circumstances." The process of forgiving is meant to help individuals identify wrongdoing, call it wrong, then experience the internal transformation of letting go of the anger.

A Realistic Self-Assessment

Step Four: We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

In step four one strives to look honestly and forthrightly at oneself, with the aim of putting an end to ignorance of shortcomings, especially those weaknesses that have remained hidden from view. The goal here is to know oneself better, to uncover what really motivates one's actions and attitudes so that positive corrections can be made. As stated earlier, seeing one's weaknesses and faults realistically, without exaggeration or minimization, is also one of the goals and benefits of forgiveness, especially of self-forgiveness.

Not Hiding From the Truth and a Companion For the Journey

Step Five: We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

In the same way as those who undertake step five must honesty and humbly take responsibility for wrongdoing, those learning to forgive must not hide from their own culpable behavior. Throughout the process of forgiveness, although sometimes very difficult, the forgiver examines his or her own actions and, if necessary, takes personal responsibility for his or her part in the injurious situation. This does not apply, of course, to innocent children who have been victimized through no fault of their own. But for those whose bitter resentments were brought to life in adulthood, this principle of reciprocal responsibility often applies. Such an admission requires the same level of honesty and humility one must apply when working step five.

Additionally, a support person with whom one can share personal information, along with the intimate details of the injury, should be chosen as a companion for the journey. This person is not unlike a sponsor for those in a 12-

step program. Ideally, the companion for one's forgiveness journey will be someone who has successfully experienced the forgiveness process. If such a person is unavailable, the companion should be an understanding and trustworthy individual who recognizes all that forgiveness involves. However, this person should not be the one an individual is in the process of forgiving.

The Need For Change

Step Six: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of our character.

"Christian life is a response to a call from Christ to become something fundamentally different. This grace is not earned. It is freely given to us in baptism, but it will unfold, one day at a time, only with our cooperation."¹¹ For step six to work effectively, one must first possess the desire for change. Those who undertake the forgiveness journey must also have this desire for change, because forgiveness requires substantial change -- in attitude, outlook, and behavior. Forgiveness, when undertaken with this honest desire for change, complements well what one strives to accomplish through step six.

Humility Is Essential

Step Seven: We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

"The attainment of greater humility is the foundation of our spiritual edifice. If the edifice is built on the sand of self, it will eventually collapse. But with the strength of genuine humility, no storm is too strong, no wave too high to collapse the house built on rock."¹² Researchers admit that humility is necessary for the forgiveness process to succeed. Often, the one doing the forgiving must first admit to harboring anger and resentment, sometimes to harboring smoldering anger or seething resentment. Such a realization may come as a surprise, since he or she may have been unaware of the depth of the anger.

Additionally, when a person has been deeply wounded by another person, the resulting anger, bitterness, and resentment appear very justified, and in many ways they are. But the long-term physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual consequences of bottled-up anger can be very debilitating, and it is precisely these debilitating consequences that can be greatly reduced, even eliminated, by choosing forgiveness. This choice takes a great deal of self-awareness and humility, and it is not unlike the self-awareness and humility which are necessary when working step seven.

Sometimes the Forgiving Person Must Also Seek Forgiveness

Step Eight: We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make direct amends to them all.

This step is about taking responsibility for behaviors which have harmed another person. As stated earlier, sometimes the forgiving person must also accept some responsibility in the difficulty. Also stated earlier, this does not apply to those victimized as children, for children are innocent of culpability. Regarding adult behavior, however, any part in an injurious situation for which a person is himself or herself responsible should be acknowledged. Therefore, seeking forgiveness, as well as offering forgiveness, may both be part of the forgiveness journey.

Proper Timing

Step Nine: We made the direct amends to such people where possible except when to do so would injure them or others.

One of the dilemmas encountered early in the forgiveness journey is the desire to face the offender and offer forgiveness prematurely. On the surface such a person's gesture may seem generous and laudable, but lurking beneath the surface may be a tendency to splice into the offer a bit of rancor or to offer the forgiveness in a way

that is meant to subtly shame the offender. As Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P. tells us: “There is never a time when we cease acting in a Christian manner. Good behavior is healthy behavior. Unchristian behavior is devastating to our well-being.”¹³ Those working step nine learn that making amends is not to be done at the expense of another’s well-being. Likewise, prematurely offering forgiveness is not the best practice. A time does come, however, when the process makes genuine forgiveness possible. It is at this stage that forgiveness truly does come “from the heart.”

Ongoing Vigilance is Necessary

Step Ten: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

“No one can ever relax his efforts to grow spiritually. If the recovering person realizes this, he will maintain a daily spiritual program of honest self-awareness. The person who practices this recognizes the need for ongoing development.”¹⁴ This is what is at the heart of step ten. The practice of forgiveness should also be part of one’s ongoing spiritual development, especially since injuries and injustices can happen at any time. Once a person has experienced the freedom that forgiveness makes possible, he or she will maintain vigilance over one’s heart, watching for disturbances to the interior freedom and peace that were acquired through forgiveness. Such a person will be anxious to eliminate these disturbances as quickly as possible.

Growing in the Spiritual Life and Sharing the Gift

Step Eleven: We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for the knowledge of God's Will for us and the power to carry it out.

Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The remaining two steps in the recovery process stress the importance of ongoing spiritual development, growth in one’s relationship with God, and sharing with others what has been received. A deepening prayer life must be built on a firm foundation, such as the foundation one gets from living and working the earlier steps. This is the point at which one is ready to share the message with others, giving to others what has been received. Likewise, those who have done the hard work of forgiving and have experienced the interior freedom and peace that come with it will naturally want to recommend and share this process with others. *For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Galatians 5: 13-14).

In summary, we have seen that similarities exist between the forgiveness journey and the 12-step recovery process. In Part 5 we will examine the connection between forgiveness and the Sacrament of Penance.

Part 5: Seeking Forgiveness For Our Own Sins

The Exchange of Our Weakness with Jesus' Strength

Earlier, we focused on the importance of forgiving those who have wronged us. We also looked at the benefits of self-forgiveness. Next, we examined forgiveness as a process, providing a brief overview of the forgiveness journey. Finally, we established that forgiveness is integral to a 12-step recovery program. In this section we will turn our attention to forgiveness for our own sins, stressing an approach to sacramental confession in which Jesus takes away our weakness and replaces it with his strength. We call this "The Great Exchange." It finds expression in a revelation given to St. Faustina Kowalska.

Sister Faustina was a young uneducated nun in a convent of the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy in Cracow, Poland during the 1930s. She came from a very poor family that struggled on their little farm during the years of World War I. She had only three years of very simple education, so hers were the humblest tasks in the convent, usually in the kitchen or garden. However, she received extraordinary revelations from Our Lord Jesus. Jesus asked Sr. Faustina to record these experiences, which she compiled in notebooks. These notebooks are known today as the *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska* and the words contained within are God's loving message of Divine Mercy.¹⁵

One day while at a retreat and meditating on obedience, the Saint heard the priest comment that an obedient soul is filled with the power of God. Immediately, she experienced in her soul these words from Jesus: *"Yes, when you are obedient I take away your weakness and replace it with my strength. I am very surprised that souls do not want to make that exchange with me."* She replied, *"Jesus, enlighten my heart, or else I, too, will not understand much from these words"* (*Diary*, 381).

The Obedience Jesus Asks of Us

What is this obedience? Who, in understanding what Jesus meant by these words, would not want to make that exchange with him? Just for a moment, imagine what it would be like to exchange your weakness for Jesus' strength. Would anyone considering this not be like the merchant described by Jesus in Matthew 13:45-46, the one in search of fine pearls, "who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it?" Let us assume for our purposes that this particular pearl of great value is Jesus' strength in exchange for our weakness, and the price of this exchange is our obedience. Is there one among us not desirous of understanding what is meant by this? Let us turn to the Gospel of Mark and to a rich young man who was anxious to make this exchange with Jesus, and although a very good man, was unable to pay the price Jesus placed before him. In understanding the price Jesus is setting before each of us, we will not share in this young man's regrets, but rejoice with thanksgiving that this exchange is not only available to us, the price placed upon it is also completely within our grasp.

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10: 17-25).

Poverty of Heart

Jesus enjoins his disciples to prefer him to everything and everyone, and bids them "renounce all that [they have]" for his sake and that of the Gospel (CCC 2544). The *Catechism* calls this "poverty of heart." Such poverty "invites us to purify our hearts of bad instincts and to seek the love of God above all else. It teaches us that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement -- however beneficial it may be -- such as science, technology, and art, or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love" (CCC 1723). Therefore, let us look to the *anagogical* sense of this story about the rich young man in Mark's Gospel. In other words, let us look beyond the specific events in the story to the eternal significance hidden there (CCC 115, 117).

The young man in Mark's Gospel was a good man, having a love for the law of God and, from a legalistic point of view, a conscience free from worry as regards the commandments. Jesus recognized his obedience and his goodness. We learn this from the evangelist who tells us that Jesus "looking upon him, loved him." However, Jesus was calling this young man to a higher law, one that would bring him to greater perfection. This higher law is the "poverty of heart" mentioned above. If we understand "riches" as pertaining to more than an individual's material possessions, or as referring to more than the temporal goods of this world, but instead, as also extending to the possessions of body and mind, heart and soul -- anything in which one finds his or her consolation apart from God -- we arrive at the *anagogical* sense of the passage.

Thus, even those who are not "rich," or who do not possess an abundance of the temporal goods of this world, cannot presume they are automatically better off than the rich young man in the Gospel story. In this particular case, the challenge Jesus set before the young man was specific to his status in life. Jesus also calls each of us to Christian perfection, and the challenge he sets before us is a "poverty of heart" specific to each of us. We each need to inquire of ourselves, "What constitutes my particular *riches*?" Let us each also call to mind the words of Jesus in Mt. 6:21 and Lk 12:34: "*For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*"

And what of Jesus' words that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? St. Thomas Aquinas tells us:

... at Jerusalem there was a certain gate, called The Needle's Eye, through which a camel could not pass, but on its bended knees, and often its burden had been taken off; and so the rich [man] should not be able to pass along the narrow way that leads to life, till he had put off the burden of sin, and of riches, that is, by ceasing to love them.¹⁶

Keeping the Commandments: The Beginning of Freedom

In his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Blessed Pope John Paul II provides rich commentary on Jesus' encounter with the rich young man.

The commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbor; at the same time they are the proof of that love. They are the first necessary step on the journey toward freedom, its starting point. "The beginning of freedom," St. Augustine writes, "is to be free from crimes ...

such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one's head toward freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom" (13).

Therefore, if we look at the *anagogical* sense of these verses (Mk 10:17-25), we understand "riches" as being more than an individual's possessions, more than one's abundance of temporal goods. Like the rich young man in Mark's Gospel, we must obey the commandments of God, but the obedience Jesus asks of us goes beyond this. Keeping the commandments is not the summit of Christian obedience, but only the beginning of it -- the beginning of a moral and spiritual journey aimed at living the fullness of eternal life with God.

The *Catechism* tells us:

"The Law of the Gospel *fulfills the commandments* of the Law. The Lord's Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth. It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human acts, where man chooses between the pure and the impure, where faith, hope, and charity are formed and with them the other virtues. The Gospel thus brings the Law to its fullness through imitation of the perfection of the heavenly Father, through forgiveness of enemies and prayer for persecutors, in emulation of the divine generosity" (CCC 1968).

Becoming "Poor" in Vice and "Rich" in Virtue

Thus, we can understand the obedience Jesus is asking of us to include such things as letting go of unforgiveness, bitterness, grudges, resentment, or hatred; handing over faults, shortcomings, false loves, and worldly attachments; relinquishing self-serving attitudes and behaviors -- in short, becoming poor in vice and rich in virtue, thus progressing toward Christian perfection.

Does this sound astonishing? Impossible? The disciples thought so.

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (Mt 10: 26-27).

When we place our trust in Jesus and relinquish the "riches" that are incompatible with Christian perfection, we demonstrate our readiness to follow him unreservedly. As with the rich young man in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is asking each of us to "sell" whatever prevents us from following him with our whole heart. He stands ready to take away our "weakness" and replace it with his "strength."

To understand further how Jesus' words apply to the exchange of our weakness for his strength, there is an additional Gospel passage that needs attention. In all likelihood, you have heard this Gospel story many times. This time, however, we will look at the *anagogical* sense of the passage, going beyond the literal events to its eternal meaning.

The Cleansing of the Temple

And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers.'" (Mt 21:12-13).

St. Jerome tells us that each person should understand himself or herself as being the temple of God (2 Cor 6:16), and that in the depths of one's heart and in the abode of one's soul there should not be the spirit of bargaining, nor any desire which separates one from God. In other words, one's heart and one's soul should be free of "money-changers."

In *The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer* by Fr. John Bartunek, LC a meditation is offered on the Gospel passage above. Let each reader apply this in the spirit we have heard from St. Jerome, namely, that each of us is the temple of God.

Christ in my Life: What attitudes and habits are crowding, clogging, and distracting my heart, keeping me from loving you and my neighbor as I ought? Whatever they are, I don't want them anymore. I want only to seek and to do your will. You are the Lord, the Savior, the One sent to lead me to paradise. Jesus, I beg of you, come into every corner of my soul, not only the outer courtyard, and cleanse it through and through.¹⁸

Thus, we should invite Jesus to search the depths of our heart and to enter the abode of our soul. We should ask him to drive out the "money-changers," to remove anything that separates us from God's truth and goodness. In so doing, we give him permission to "cleanse" us of all that robs us of peace, all that stands opposed to the Gospel of Christ, and all that blocks the joy of God's presence and the fullness of his grace.

With this spirit of obedience -- willing to relinquish our "riches" and ready for Jesus to thoroughly "cleanse" us, -- we are in a position to initiate the exchange of our weakness for Jesus' strength. We are ready to enter "The Great Exchange."

The Great Exchange and The Sacrament of Penance

Earlier, in examining Jesus' resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room, we established that he desires his followers to have peace and that the key to a peaceful heart and untroubled mind is forgiveness, what we are here calling "forgiveness from the heart." We established the undeniable connection expressed by Jesus between forgiving others and having our own sins forgiven. We also acknowledged that when both types of forgiveness are practiced together -- forgiving those who have sinned against us and seeking forgiveness for our own sins -- there is established in us a peace that is "not as the world gives."

Through the sacramental gift of confession, we can know by experience the meaning of Jesus' statement that "with men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." Anyone who has endeavored to renounce even one deeply embedded negative habit and has suffered the painstaking agony of seeing it through to completion will know how difficult, sometimes impossible, it can be. How, then, can we be expected to possess true "poverty of heart," which means to renounce ALL that falls short of the perfection of Jesus Christ? Isn't that, humanly speaking, impossible? Yes, humanly speaking, it is! But anyone who has taken the definitive step of laying down a bad habit, a hard-to-part-with vice, a self-indulgent spirit, or an unforgiving heart at the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of Penance knows that what is impossible for human beings is not impossible for God. It is in definitively laying down one's riches (sins) in the sacramental context of confession that one experiences first hand God's power, and it is nothing short of astonishing. The struggle may continue, but the laying down of the sinful attachment is the beginning of one's inner transformation and freedom in Christ. "... *I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me*" (Ps 13: 5-6). "*Great peace have those who love thy law*" (Ps 165).

Entering “The Great Exchange”

Step 1: Prayerful Preparation

Upon reading this treatise, you might say, *I want to enter “The Great Exchange” with Jesus. What do I have to do?* As with any undertaking of importance, a degree of preparation is prudent. Therefore, the first step is to prepare prayerfully to initiate this exchange, keeping in mind, however, that even before you express your desire, Jesus already knows and has anticipated your decision. He has been waiting for you!

In the quiet of your heart, speak to Jesus. Tell him your desire to undertake this exchange. Tell him you are ready to hand over all sinfulness, weakness, unforgivingness, grudges, false love, worldly attachments -- everything that is opposed to true goodness and holiness, including all the weaknesses, shortcomings, or faults about which you yourself are unaware. Ask him to expose any darkness that resides within you, again, whether you are aware of this darkness or not. This is especially important because we are usually blind to our own faults and character defects. In essence, give Jesus permission to enter your soul -- his temple -- and to thoroughly cleanse it.

Those who have suffered grave injustice and injury because of someone else’s mistreatment and, as a result, are deeply burdened by anger, bitterness, or the inability to forgive, should seriously consider a formal path toward forgiveness such as the one Dr. Enright outlines in his book *Forgiveness is a Choice*. As stated earlier, Dr. Enright provides the essential guidance needed for individuals undertaking the forgiveness journey. That said, however, anyone harboring a grudge or even a minor degree of bitterness, resentment, anger, or unforgivingness should make the removal of these sins his or her first priority. After all, there is no doubt that Jesus himself made forgiveness essential for Christians.

Consider this excerpt from a letter of St. Francis of Paola, Hermit (Letter AD 1486):

Put aside hatred and hostility. See to it that you refrain from harsh words. But if you do speak them, do not be ashamed to apply the remedy from the same lips that inflicted the wounds. In this way you will show each other mercy and not keep alive the memories of past wrongs. Remembering grievances works great damage. It is accompanied by anger, fosters sin, and brings a hatred for justice. It is a rusty arrow spreading poison in the soul. It destroys virtue and is a cancer in the mind. It thwarts prayer and mangles the petitions we make to God. It drives out love and is a nail driven into the soul, an evil that never sleeps, a sin that never fades away, a kind of daily death.

Step 2: Prayerful Awareness

If something has become deeply united with your soul, you should not only regard it as your possession in this life, but believe that it will accompany you into the life to come. If it is something good, rejoice and give thanks to God in your mind; if it is something bad, grieve and sigh, and strive to free yourself from it while you are still in the body. -- St. Isaac of Syria

The timing will vary, but you will likely become aware of certain sinful tendencies soon after entering the exchange. Perhaps these involve issues you struggle with regularly. On the other hand, you may begin to recognize sinful thought and behavior patterns about which you had only a vague awareness. You may also experience a heightened awareness of thoughts and behaviors which, until now, you have been completely unaware, despite the fact that they have been powerful psychological operators all along. Pay particular attention to instances of anger, bitterness, grudges, resentment, and unforgivingness. If these are present, even

slightly or vaguely, these should be the first sins to bring to the exchange. Until these are dealt with, much else will remain blocked, so it is best to remove these poisons first.

Sometimes awakenings to formerly undiscerned sins, weaknesses, shortcomings, and faults will come during quiet times of prayer. They may also spring into conscious awareness as the result of hearing or reading a particular Scripture text. Or, they may come through circumstances of daily life. The key will be NOT to brush these off as casual or random self-realizations, but instead, to heed them as coming from Jesus and as being important material for the exchange. Truthfully acknowledge them. Make particular note of them.

Equally important, perhaps even more so, will be those self-realizations brought to conscious awareness but resisted. If you find yourself blocking, opposing, or arguing against an awakening or self-realization, this is a likely indication you have a strong attachment to a particular sin, vice, habit, or state of mind. Be especially alert for thoughts such as this: "Are you sure you want to give this up completely?" The Evil One is most astute at assessing individual vulnerabilities. Have no doubt that once you officially enter "The Great Exchange," you will experience serious opposition.

The personal awakenings or self-realizations which Jesus brings to your conscious awareness will be the "matter" needed for the next step in "The Great Exchange" -- Sacramental Confession.

Step 3: Sacramental Confession

"There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. There is no one, however wicked and guilty who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin" (CCC 982).

Once "The Great Exchange" is initiated, it is essential to trust Jesus and follow his lead. He wants to liberate you from all that blocks the fullness of his presence in your life. He has offered to exchange your weakness with his strength. However, he will not forcefully bring this about. You must be the willing participant. You must do your part. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells his disciples: "Come to me all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28-29). Here Jesus tells us he is ready to give us the rest (peace) we seek, but at least some of the responsibility falls to us. We must initiate this movement in his direction.

Difficulty to forgive with a sincere heart is an impediment to true freedom in Christ. As stated earlier, laying down any grudges, unforgiveness, bitterness, resentments, or anger at the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ through sacramental confession is essential. This is the place to start. From there it will be a matter of listening and watching, of remaining alert for the clues to your own sinfulness that Jesus will make known to you. As these are brought to conscious awareness, bring them to him and lay them at the foot of his Cross in confession. Once you lay something down, leave it there. If tempted to pick it up again, confidently state the powerful prayer of Divine Mercy: "Jesus, I trust in you."

Sin is often peeled away in layers, so the exchange must continue over time. In fact, consider that once you enter this exchange with Jesus, you will be an "exchange student" for the rest of your life. No matter one's progress in the spiritual life, perfect charity is still something one must continue to pursue for the extent of one's lifetime. Trust Jesus to lead you, to show you to yourself, and to expose whatever darkness resides in your soul -- in essence, to drive out the "money-changers." The more "riches" you relinquish, the more room you will have for Jesus' strength!

Endnotes

1. Vincent Howell Harris, *The Forgiveness Journey Ain't Easy*, Article from "The Power of Forgiveness" Project, www.thepowerofforgiveness.com.
2. Rev. Susyn Reeve, M.Ed. and Dr. Sheri Rosenthal, Co-creators of *WITHForgiveness*, www.withforgiveness.com, Article from "The Power of Forgiveness" Project.
3. Peter Murphy, Office of Family Life, Archdiocese of Washington, Article from "The Power of Forgiveness" Project, www.thepowerofforgiveness.com.
4. Excerpt from the Curriculum Vitae of Frederic Luskin, Ph.D., The Power of Forgiveness Website, www.thepowerofforgiveness.com.
5. Fr. Emmerich Vogt, Twelve-Step Series, Step Eight Pamphlet.
6. Ibid.
7. Robert D. Enright, Ph.D., *Forgiveness Is A Choice: A Step-by-Step Process For Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, Chapter 8: Gaining Perspectives, Electronic Version, n. pag.
8. Peter Murphy, Article: *Forgiving Oneself*, "The Power of Forgiving" Project, www.powerofforgiveness.com.
9. Op.Cit., Enright, Chapter 4: A Map and Tools for Your Journey, Electronic Version, n. pag.
10. Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P., Twelve-Step Series, Step Three Pamphlet.
11. Ibid., Step Six Pamphlet
12. Ibid., Step Seven Pamphlet
13. Ibid., Step Nine Pamphlet
14. Ibid., Step Ten Pamphlet
15. The Divine Mercy Web Site, <http://thedivinemercy.org>, Marions of the Immaculate Conception, What Is Divine Mercy?
16. Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Mark 10:25.
17. Fr. John Bartunek, LC, *The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer*, Christ in My Life Meditation, pg. 247.

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