

Commentary on *What Is Forgiveness?*

By Allen Watson

Paragraph 1

Forgiveness recognizes what you thought your brother did to you has not occurred. It does not pardon sins and make them real. It sees there was no sin. And in that view are all your sins forgiven. What is sin, except a false idea about God' Son? Forgiveness merely sees its falsity, and therefore lets it go. What then is free to take its place is now the Will of God. W-pII.1.1:1-7

“Forgiveness recognizes what you thought your brother did to you has not occurred” (1:1). Forgiveness is a different way of seeing yourself.

I want to emphasize the words “you thought” and “to you” in that description of forgiveness. It does not say, “What your brother did has not occurred,” but rather “What *you thought* your brother did *to you* has not occurred.” It is not a denial that an event happened, but rather a different way of seeing yourself in relationship to the event. You thought that you were affected by it, hurt by it, damaged by it, whatever “it” was; in fact you were not affected by what your brother did at all! You are affected, so the Course tells us, only by your thoughts.

First and foremost, forgiveness means seeing yourself differently in relation to an event. It does not begin with seeing an event or another person differently. When you forgive, what happens first is that you recognize that you have not lost your peace or your love because of what happened; you lost it because you chose to lose it. You decided, at some point, to let go of the peace of God in your heart. The event then came along to justify your loss of peace. You projected the loss of peace onto the event and said, “That is why I am upset.”

Therefore, once your thought in regard to yourself has been corrected, you now can see your brother is innocent in spite of his action. He may indeed have done something despicable. You don't have to approve of what he did, or like it, or put up with it like a doormat. However, his action or words did not hurt you. It was not what he did that took away your peace. He did not affect you, he did not injure you. You now can see that “sin” did not occur, and that he has done nothing that warrants guilt. He has perhaps made a grievous mistake, but that hurts only himself, not you.

So much of what the Course talks about is implied in this simple statement, “What you thought your brother did to you has not occurred.” You think he injured you, your self, because you are identified with your ego feelings, with your body, with your possessions, with your family members and their bodies and possessions and feelings. The Course teaches that we have identified incorrectly. We are not our bodies. We are not our possessions. We are not the ego with all its hurt feelings. We are something much grander and vaster than that, something that cannot be touched in any way by external forces.

To fully forgive, our identification with our bodies has to be completely over. None of us has attained that, yet. That is why the Course so confidently implies that not one of us has ever, yet, completely forgiven anyone! That is why it says that if only one person completely forgave one sin, the world would be healed (see M-14.3:7). (That is what Jesus accomplished, and because of it, the world is already healed. We just haven't been ready yet to receive it.)

A large part of my dealing with the Course has been in recognizing that, far from having no one to forgive, I have everyone to forgive.

If, in your picture of any situation, you still see yourself—or someone close to yourself—as

having been in some way injured or hurt by the situation, you have not yet completely forgiven it in your mind. The Course teaches that if pain is real in your perception, you have not yet been completely healed (see W-pI.193.7:1-3).

Now, I haven't gotten past the first line on this page and probably I've got us all, including myself, feeling a little guilty about the fact that despite all our study of the Course we haven't yet learned to forgive. So I have to stop here, back off, and say: This is completely normal. Don't be surprised. And don't feel guilty about it! Before we can learn to forgive we have to admit that we are not forgiving! We need to recognize all the ways we still make pain real in our experience and belief, and just recognize that we are doing so. One lesson in forgiveness may be to forgive ourselves for being unforgiving.

"Forgiveness...is still, and quietly does nothing....It merely looks, and waits, and judges not" (W-pII.1.4:1, 3). Treat yourself that way! Get in touch with the part of you that does not want to forgive, that does not want peace. Look at it, and do nothing, just wait without judging. It will disappear (in time) and peace will come of itself.

"Forgiveness," it says, "does not pardon sins and make them real. It sees there was no sin" (1:2-3). This is the whole distinction between true and false forgiveness, which the *Song of Prayer* calls "forgiveness-to-destroy" (S-2.1:2). There is such a difference between seeing sin in someone and struggling to overlook it or to refrain from the desire to punish, and seeing not sin but a mistake, a call for help from a confused child of God, and naturally responding with love. When the Holy Spirit enables us to see the "sin" of another in this way, suddenly we can see our own "sins" in that same very different light. Instead of trying to justify our own errors, we can admit they are mistakes and simply let them go, without guilt.

Sin is simply "a false idea about God's Son" (1:5). It is a false self-appraisal projected onto everyone around us. It is the belief that we are truly separate, attackers of God's Love in our separation; it sees attackers everywhere.

Forgiveness is seen here (1:6-7) in three steps. *First*, we see the falsity of the idea of sin. We recognize that no sin has occurred; the Son of God (in the other or ourselves) is still the Son of God, and not a devil. He has been mistaken, but he has not sinned. *Second*, closely following on the first step and a natural consequence of it, we let the idea of sin go. We drop it. We relinquish our grievances, abandon our thoughts of attack. Only the first step depends on our choice; the second step follows as its inevitable result. When we no longer see attack, what reason is there to punish with counterattack?

The *third* step is God's part. Something comes to take sin's place; the Will of God is freed to flow through us unhindered by our illusions, and Love follows its natural course. In this we experience our true Self, the extension of God's own Love.

All we need do, then, if it can be called doing, is to be willing to see something other than attack, something other than sin. We need only to be willing to admit that our perception of sin is false. When we do, the Holy Spirit will share His perception with us. He knows how to forgive; we do not. Our part is merely to ask to be taught by Him. He does the rest, and everything flows out of that simple willingness.

Paragraph 2

An unforgiving thought is one which makes a judgement that it will not raise to doubt, although it is not true. The mind is closed, and will not be released. The thought protects projection, tightening its chains, so that distortions are more veiled and more obscure; less easily accessible to doubt, and further kept from reason. What can come between a fixed projection and the aim that it has chosen as its wanted goal? W-pII.1.2:1-4

The second paragraph is all about *unforgiveness*. The distinguishing characteristic of an unforgiving thought is that it “makes a judgment that it will not raise to doubt, although it is not true” (2:1). The distinguishing characteristic of a forgiving mind, then, is that this mind *will* be willing to cast doubt on its own judgments! The unforgiving mind is saying, “My mind is already made up; don’t confuse me with facts.” The forgiving mind is saying, “Perhaps there is another way to look at this.”

In the section discussing the ten characteristics of *advanced* teachers of God (Section 4 of the Manual for Teachers), the final characteristic is “open-mindedness.” It says:

As judgment shuts the mind against God’s Teacher, so open-mindedness invites Him to come in. As condemnation judges the Son of God as evil, so open-mindedness permits him to be judged by the Voice for God on His behalf. (M-4.X.1:3–4)

The willingness to let go of our own judgments and hear the judgment of the Holy Spirit is what makes forgiveness possible. An unforgiving mind “is closed, and will not be released” (2:2). The forgiving mind is open. Over and over the Course asks us simply to be *willing* to see things differently, simply to be willing to question what we think we know, simply to “do this”:

Be still, and lay aside all thoughts of what you are and what God is; all concepts you have learned about the world; all images you hold about yourself. (W-pI.189.7:1)

With judgment set aside, “What then is free to take its place is now the Will of God” (1:7).

The unforgiving thought “protects projection” (2:3). Our minds, tormented with their own guilt, have projected the blame for our condition outside ourselves. We have found a scapegoat, as Adam did with Eve: “The woman gave me the fruit to eat. It was her fault.” And so we cling to our unforgiveness, we *want* to find blame in the other, because to forgive, to let it go, would be to open the closet door that hides our guilt.

The more we cling to unforgiveness, the more we blind ourselves, the more solid our illusory projections seem to be, until we think it would be impossible to see in any other way. The distortions we impose on reality become “more veiled and more obscure” (2:3). Our self-deceptions become harder and harder to see through, “less easily accessible to doubt” (2:3). All we are being asked to do is to doubt them, to question our projections, to listen to a little reason. Unforgiveness blocks the way to this and tightens our own chains.

We see guilt in others because we *want* to see it there (2:4), and we want to see it there because it keeps us from seeing guilt in our own minds. Yet seeing the guilt in ourselves is the only way we can have it healed. If we deny we are wounded we will not seek the remedy. If we deny our own guilt and project it onto others, we will not bring ourselves into the healing Presence within, which is the only place it can be undone. If our mind is closed, if we are not willing to doubt our version of things, we are shutting the door to our own healing. Only in opening our mind, in loosening our determined grasp on finding others to be wrong, in allowing that “there *must* be a better way” (T-2.III.3:6), can we find our own release.

Paragraph 3

An unforgiving thought does many things. In frantic action it pursues its goal, twisting and overturning what it sees as interfering with its chosen path. Distortion is its purpose, and the means by which it would accomplish it as well. It sets about its furious attempts to smash reality, without concern for anything that would appear to pose a contradiction to its point of view. W-pII.1.3:1-4

In contrast to the stillness today's lesson speaks of, an unforgiving thought is frantically active. It has to be. It must be frantic because it flies in the face of truth, and attempts to make real an illusion. Frenetic activity is often the sign of unrecognized unforgiveness. Things that seem to oppose what we want to be the truth keep popping up, like gophers in the silly kids' game of "bang the gopher," and we have to keep bashing them down to maintain our version of reality.

Stilling our mind and becoming quiet, in and of itself, is often enough to begin dissolving our unforgiveness. Unforgiveness cannot exist in quiet. You cannot be peaceful and unforgiving at the same time. "Peace to my mind. Let all my thoughts be still" (W-pII.221.Heading). One thing that can foster this peace and stillness is focusing on the very exchange of love that is the center of today's lesson. The power of our affection for God, and His for us, can quell the stormy thoughts and bring, even if only briefly, a moment of quiet peace, in which unforgiveness simply dissipates.

We do not realize how much our unforgiving thoughts distort the truth (3:3). Unforgiving thoughts twist our perception of things which are not in accord with how unforgiveness wants to see things. They overlook any evidence for love, and find evidence of guilt. In the Text section "The Obstacles to Peace," in the subsection on "The Attraction of Guilt" (T-19.IV(A).i), our unforgiving thoughts are compared to scavenging messengers "harshly ordered to seek out guilt, and cherish every scrap of evil and of sin that they can find, losing none of them on pain of death, and laying them respectfully before their lord and master" (T-19.IV(A).11:2). That is, we find what we are looking for, and the ego is looking for guilt.

But distortion is not only the *method* used by the ego; distortion is also the ego's *purpose*. Thus, the purpose of unforgiveness is to distort reality. Unforgiveness furiously aims "to smash reality, without concern for anything that would appear to pose a contradiction to its point of view" (3:4). Reality is the hated enemy, the intolerable presence, because our reality is still the Son of God, never in the slightest separated from Him. Reality exposes the ego as a lie, and cannot be tolerated. So the way our minds work, when dominated by unforgiving thoughts, is designed from the beginning to distort reality beyond all recognition.

In contrast to this, the Course asks us to dream of our brother's kindnesses instead of his mistakes, and to not brush aside his many gifts just because he isn't perfect (see T-27.VII.15). It asks us to look for love instead of looking for guilt, and rather than finding fault, to try finding love instead. To begin with, we can simply start to question the way we see things, in awareness that our thought processes and our methods of making judgment have been severely impaired and simply are not reliable. It isn't that we *should not* judge, it's that we *cannot* judge (see M-10.2:1). We are operating at diminished capacity; we need a healthy mind to judge on our behalf. And that mind is the Holy Spirit.

Paragraph 4

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is still, and quietly does nothing. It offends no aspect of reality, nor seeks to twist it to appearances it likes. It merely looks, and waits, and judges not. He who would not forgive must judge, for he must justify his failure to forgive. But he who would forgive himself must learn to welcome truth exactly as it is. W-pII.1.4:1-5

“Forgiveness, on the other hand, is still, and quietly does nothing” (4:1). If we can understand these first few sentences we will have a clear grasp of what forgiveness really is. The words “on the other hand” refer to the preceding two paragraphs which described an unforgiving thought, especially in 3:1, “An unforgiving thought does many things.” Forgiveness, on the other hand, does nothing. Unforgiveness is highly active, anxiously trying to make things fit into its picture of reality; forgiveness does nothing. It does not rush to interpret or to attempt to understand. It lets things be as they are.

Notice once again the heavy emphasis on stillness and quiet. The practice of the holy instant, as the practice of forgiveness, is practice at being still, being quiet, doing nothing. Our usual state of mind is the product of the ego’s training—habitually active, constantly working. We need *practice* at being still and doing nothing. It takes a lot of practice to break the habit of frantic activity and form a new habit of being still and quiet.

One trick of the ego I notice, frequently, is that it will try to make me guilty about being still and quiet! When I try to take ten minutes to sit in stillness, my ego floods my mind with thoughts of what I ought to be doing instead.

The mental state in which forgiveness occurs is one in which we simply allow all of reality to be as it is, without judging anything. “It offends no aspect of reality, nor seeks to twist it to appearances it likes” (4:2). The appearance my ego usually likes is some form of “I am right and they are wrong.” Or “I am good and they are bad.” Or simply “I am better than he/she is.” Even more simply, “I am not like him/her.” All of these thoughts share one theme: I am different from others, and therefore separate from them. Any such thought is twisting reality, because the reality is that we are the same, we are equal, we are one. Forgiveness stills such thoughts and abandons all efforts to mash reality into a “more desirable” shape.

“It merely looks, and waits, and judges not” (4:3). It does not deny what it sees, but it puts no interpretation on it. It waits to be told the meaning by the Holy Spirit. “My mate is having an affair.” Forgiveness looks, and waits, and judges not. “My child is sick.” Forgiveness looks, and waits, and judges not. “My boss just fired me.” Forgiveness looks, and waits, and judges not. We are so quick to think we know what things mean! And we are wrong. We do not know. We leap to an understanding based on separation, and such understandings understand nothing.

The most salutary thing we can do when any such upsetting event occurs in our lives is—nothing. Simply to let our minds become still and quiet, and to open ourselves to the healing light of the Holy Spirit. To seek a holy instant. Let this become the ingrained habit of our lives, and we will see the world in an entirely different way, and Love will flow through us to bring healing instead of hurt to every situation.

In the last two sentences of this paragraph, notice that a contrast is made between judging and welcoming the truth exactly as it is. The opposite of judgment is the truth. Judgment, then, must always be a distortion of the truth. This section has already pointed out that unforgiveness has distortion as its purpose. If I do not want to forgive, I must distort the truth; I must judge. Judgment here clearly carries the meaning of condemnation, of seeing sin, of making something wrong. Forgiveness does not do that; forgiveness makes right instead of wrong, because “right” is the truth about all of us.

None of us is guilty. That is the truth. God does not condemn us. If I do so, I am distorting the truth. Judgment is always a distortion of the truth of our innocence before God. When I judge another, I do so because I am trying to justify my unwillingness to forgive. I have gotten very good at it. I always seem to find some reason that justifies my unforgiveness. But what I do not realize is that every such judgment twists the truth, hides it, obscures it. It “makes real” something that is not real.

Furthermore, in obscuring the truth about my brother or sister, I am hiding the truth about myself. I am substantiating the basis of my own self-condemnation. That is why the last sentence of the paragraph switches from my unforgiveness of another to the forgiveness of myself: “He who would forgive himself” (4:5). If I want to learn to forgive myself, I must abandon my

judging of others. If their sin is real, so is mine. Instead I must learn to “welcome truth exactly as it is” (4:5). Only if I welcome the truth about my brother or sister can I see it for myself. We stand or fall together. “In him you will find yourself or lose yourself” (T-8.III.4:5).

To a mind habituated to seeing itself as a separate ego, abandoning all judgment is frightening. It feels like the rug is being swept out from under our feet; we don’t know where to stand. How can we live in the world without it? We literally do not know how. Judgment is how we have ordered our lives; without it, we fear chaos. The Course assures us this will not happen:

You are afraid of this because you believe that without the ego, all would be chaos. Yet I assure you that without the ego, all would be love. (T-15.V.1:6–7)

When we let go of judgment, when we are willing to welcome the truth exactly as it is, love rushes in to fill the vacuum left by the absence of judgment. It has been there all along, but we have blocked it. We don’t know how this happens, but it happens because love is the reality, love is the truth we are welcoming. Love will show us exactly what to do when our judgment is gone.

Paragraph 5

Do nothing, then, and let forgiveness show you what to do, through Him Who is your Guide, your Saviour and Protector, strong in hope, and certain of your ultimate success. He has forgiven you already, for such is His function, given Him by God. Now must you share His function, and forgive whom He has saved, whose sinlessness He sees, and whom He honours as the Son of God. W-pII.1.5:1-3

Faced with this stark contrast between forgiveness and unforgiveness, what then are we to do? “Do nothing, then” (5:1). We are not called upon to *do*, we are called upon to cease doing, because there is nothing that need be done. To the ego, to do means to judge, and it is judgment we must relinquish. If we feel there is something that must be done, it is a judgment that affirms lack within ourselves, and there is no lack. That is what we must remember. To believe that something must be done is a denial of our wholeness, which has never been diminished.

“Let forgiveness show you what to do, through Him” (5:1). To forgive ourselves means to take our hands off the steering wheel of our lives, to stop trying to “make things right,” which only affirms that something is wrong. To forgive others means we stop thinking it is our job to correct them. The Holy Spirit is the One Who knows what we should do, if anything, and His guidance will often surprise us. Yes, there may still be something for us to “do,” but we will not be the ones to determine what that is. Our doing is so often deadly, quenching the spirit instead of affirming it, imparting guilt instead of lifting it.

The Holy Spirit is my Guide and Savior and Protector. In each situation where I am tempted to do something, let me stop, remember that my judgment is untrustworthy, let go, and give it into His hands. He is “strong in hope, and certain of your ultimate success” (5:1). How often in a time when I am judging, whether myself or another, am I certain of my ultimate success? Let me then give the situation into the care of One Who is certain. He will show me what to do.

“He has forgiven you already, for such is His function” (5:2). Each time I bring Him some terrible thing I think I have done, let me remember: “He has forgiven you already.” I do not need to fear entering His Presence. His function, His reason for being, is to forgive me. Not to judge me, nor to punish me, nor to make me feel bad, but to forgive. Why would I stay away an instant more? Let me fall gratefully now into His loving arms, and hear Him say, “What you think is not the truth” (W-pl.134.7:5). He will still the troubled waters of my mind, and bring me peace.

There is another part to forgiveness. Since the Holy Spirit has already forgiven me, carrying out His only function, I now “must...share His function, and forgive whom He has saved” (5:3).

Consider what we have said about the way the Holy Spirit interacts with us, how we can come to Him with our darkest thoughts and find them absorbed and dissipated in His Love. The utter lack of judgment. His gentleness with us, His acceptance of us, His knowledge of our sinlessness, His honoring us as the Son of God, unchanged by our foolish thoughts of sin. Now, we are to share His function in relation to the world. Now, we are to be His representatives, His manifestation in the lives of those around us. To them, we offer this same gentle kindness, this same conviction of the inner holiness of each one we deal with, this same quiet disregard for thoughts of self-condemnation in everyone we see, or speak to, or think about. "It is the privilege of the forgiven to forgive" (T-1.I.27:2).

What we reflect to the world is what we believe in for ourselves. When we judge, condemn, and lay guilt on those around us, we are reflecting the way we believe God is towards us. When we experience the sweet forgiveness in the loving Presence of the Holy Spirit, we reflect that same thing to the world. Let me, then, enter into His Presence, allowing Him to look upon me, to find Him quietly doing nothing, but simply looking, and waiting, and judging me not. Let me hear Him tell me of His confidence in my ultimate success. And then, let me turn and share this blessing with the world, giving what I have received. Only as I share it will I know, for sure, that it is mine.