

# The Four-fold Way of Forgiveness

To experience the joys of Orthodox Christianity, to truly ‘taste and see that the Lord is good,’ to really benefit from life in the Church, we must be *forgiving people*. It is not simply that we push a button and forgive when something happens. Instead, we must live out each day in such a way that we are free from past unforgiveness and ready to forgive in the present. If we pursue the spiritual life far enough, we can experience such a condition where we will have little to forgive simply because we will be so full of love that the offenses of others will seem insignificant.

Our ability to enter into and enjoy the fruits of the Kingdom of Heaven is directly limited or empowered by our spirituality. A spiritual person is someone who lives life according to God’s will and is freed from the bonds of sin. Unforgiveness is a sin, since God has forgiven all men of all sin, and our only task is to accept this forgiveness and put it into action in our own lives.

This requires each of us, in our spiritual journey, to begin with the Way of Forgiveness. This is the beginning of the journey, and there is no progress without first mastering the principles of being a forgiving person. By being a forgiving person, we become a conduit of God’s forgiveness to the world, and we are totally attuned to the will of God.

The first part of the Four-fold Way of Forgiveness is the **overcoming of past resentments**. This step can require a great deal of work, and involves careful introspection. Often, making a list of people we resent and for what ‘reasons’ is an important part. Then we must ask ourselves whether it is really worth carrying this unforgiveness and anger within us, or would we be better off giving this situation to God. To make things clearer, we may even add to each listed resentment a further category, one that describes how we ourselves behaved badly either in the actual situation or in our later dealings with others in which this memory surfaced.

By asking God to remove this resentment from us, and being *willing to forgive*, we give God a powerful tool to cleanse us of our suffering. Willingness is the key. Once it is there, God can reveal to us how much He desires us to abandon our resentments and live with Him in the present.

As we begin to overcome these obstacles from the past, we may find that our resentments drove us to inappropriate behavior, both to ourselves and to others. We realize that we have done harm, either intentionally or otherwise. Whether we meant it or not, the people we harmed can’t always tell. Does it matter?

We know that God forgives the world through us, and we know we are responsible for making God’s will a reality in the world. This is when we come to realize that we can start this process of Divine Justice through an effort to **make restitution** to those we have harmed or defrauded.

To make a proper restitution is not our own decision, but rather based on the needs of the people we have harmed. Sometimes it is as simple as an apology. Other times, we have to change our life so that we no longer cause the same kinds of harm to others. To know, we must first be

willing to listen to what the other has to say when we come to them in repentance. We must be willing to hear the other person's side. It is hard not to become defensive in such situations, but we must struggle against this urge.

By apologizing and offering restitution, we are offering the other person freedom from whatever burden they may be carrying. Others have burdened us with their bad behavior, but we choose to give freedom. By giving other freedom, we free ourselves from guilty consciences and draw closer to God.

The best way to do this is to come to the other and tell him that we realize the wrong we have done, and confess our wrong motives. Of course, there are situations where our motives were good, and we should communicate this if it is indeed true. However, we must keep focused on our part of the wrong: whatever our motives, the person still came out of the situation harmed.

Once we have made an effort to resolve the conflict, whether the other receives our repentance or not, we must turn the situation over to God. He will heal both us and the other. The devil and our egos will try to bring the situation back up and rub our noses in it. This is an opportunity to pray and to remind ourselves that God has control of the past. There is nothing we can really do to bring healing to the other. Our only choice is to bring Jesus Christ into the matter through our genuine repentance.

After admitting our resentments and making restitution wherever possible, we become free from the past! The memories no longer bring with them the agonies we once experienced in calling them to mind. We are ready to begin a new lifestyle, which involves conforming ourselves to the image and likeness of God. The past is what has kept us from this, but with the past eliminated, we are prepared to draw closer to God and follow His commandments to love and respect others.

This means curbing our desire to return like with like. We must **avoid retaliation**, and suffer insults to our pride without defensiveness. When someone does us harm, we seek God's protection and care rather than fending for ourselves. We see that the harm others do to us is out of their internal pain and agony. If God is with us, He will not let us come to harm. He is our defender, and by stepping back from moments of conflict we allow Him to enter into the situation. He will heal us from whatever wounds we may suffer at the hands of others, and use these opportunities to teach us more about ourselves and Him.

Retaliation is often what leads to resentments rather than to freedom. Even when we strike back at another, we often only receive a momentary peace until we come to realize that our vengeance has not undone the harm we have suffered. No one can undo his actions, nor the actions of another. This is the mystery of time, which is an unchanging record of the past. What has happened cannot be changed, but what we do now can be changed if we catch ourselves before we do it!

We do have control over the present, because our perception of the present is within our control. We can choose to be loving and patient. We can choose to wait and see what God will do. When our emotions run high, we can make an effort to avoid a hasty decision which we may later regret if more facts come to light with time. We can stop and ask questions. We can

remember the Almighty and His great love and care for us, and realize that He allows nothing into our lives that we cannot handle.

The hardest step in the Four-fold Way of Forgiveness is to follow Christ's command to **make peace with our enemies**. When we understand the world from God's perspective, we have only one real enemy: the devil. People we think of as our 'enemies' are simply those who, out of their suffering and fallenness, act as if they hate us. Certainly, we feel their hate, and to them their hate is real. Yet, it is actually their own internal suffering and hatred of their own sins. It usually has little to do with us.

The man who lashes out in anger does so because he feels threatened. He is a prisoner of fear. If we have any dealings with a fearful man, it should be to offer Him Christ and liberation from his internal torment. This is how we make peace: we give our 'enemies' no reason to hate us, and even go so far as to pray for them and show them love.

In most cases, our offers will be rejected. Part of our fallenness is to hang on to anger and resentment. Our enemies are no different from the way we were prior to our efforts. Are we utterly evil? Of course not, so neither are our enemies.

If the source of suffering is from within, then the only enemy we have other than the devil is our own stubbornness and unwillingness to change. If we can make peace with ourselves, receive our own forgiveness, patiently endure our own sins and mistakes, then we have made peace with the greatest human enemy we will even encounter. This brings us back to the first part of the Four-fold Way of Forgiveness: we must forgive ourselves as part of our renunciation of our resentments.

Self-forgiveness is not easy. Too often, we confuse excuses for bad behavior with self-forgiveness. This is a great spiritual delusion that has led many into the gates of insanity and death. Very often, we can't do it on our own. This is why a Spiritual Direction is absolutely necessary in order to live out the Four-fold Way of Forgiveness. Our confessor will help us through the maze of our own thought processes if we are rigorously honest, and lead us to Christ's glorious love.