

# The Servant

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## FORGIVENESS IS SOMETHING YOU DO FOR YOURSELF

Fisher Humphreys, Ph.D.

Jesus forgave his enemies. While hanging on the cross, he prayed that God would forgive those who had crucified him. Jesus also called his followers to forgive their enemies. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In case we didn't quite get the point, Jesus added, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Forgiving the people who wrong us and hurt us, is one of the most beneficial things Jesus has called us to do. It also is one of the most difficult.

### What Forgiveness Is

Forgiveness is difficult because it is contrary to what we instinctively want to do. Forgiveness begins when you are deeply hurt by someone. Maybe it's a fellow church member or an entire church. You aren't perfect, but you did not deserve the hurt you have experienced. It's not fair.

How do you respond when you are hurt unfairly? You know that Jesus has told you to forgive. But what does that mean? It means, I think, that you suffer in a special way. In order to forgive, you must experience two distinct kinds of pain. First comes the pain of being treated unfairly. There is no way to avoid this pain. But in order to forgive you must experience a second kind of pain.

When you're treated unfairly, you become angry. No one has to learn to do this; it is a natural instinct. Even small children do it. Because you are angry, you naturally want to retaliate. This also is instinctive rather than learned. We want to hit back. We want to hurt those who hurt us. We want revenge. It is controversial to say this, but I believe that you are entitled to retaliate. It's only fair. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth - that balances the scales. That's justice.

But it's not forgiveness. Forgiveness goes beyond justice. It is an act of generosity and grace toward those who hurt you. In forgiveness you do not express your anger by retaliating. Instead, you voluntarily embrace the pain of your anger. You absorb your anger. You don't repress or deny it, but you accept it and then live through it, in such a way as to drain the poison off of it.

That is what forgiveness is: absorbing the pain caused by people who hurt you, and also absorbing the anger you naturally feel because you have been hurt, to neutralize your anger and end its destructive power in your life and in the lives of others.

Clearly this is not fair. You didn't hurt the other person; the other person hurt you. You shouldn't have to suffer; the person who hurt you should have to suffer. But in the real world of moral relationships, it is the injured party alone who can forgive, and that means that it is the injured person who must suffer.

### What Helps You to Forgive

Because forgiveness is so hard, we need all the help we can get if we're going to do it. One thing that helps is simply to decide, intentionally, that you want to forgive. Because the natural response to being hurt is to retaliate, forgiveness is a response we have to make intentionally. Here are some other things that help:

- Belong to a community that supports you as you attempt to practice forgiveness. Many communities do not believe in forgiveness. They think it is a sign of weakness or of moral indifference. Those communities will encourage you to seek revenge. The church, when it is faithful to the message of the Lord Jesus, will support you as you attempt to practice forgiveness. Of course, sometimes it is a church which has hurt you.
- Try to understand those who hurt you. Maybe they have been hurt themselves. Maybe they are having a lot of problems right now. You don't excuse them, but you do try to understand them, to see their humanity, and so not to demonize them.
- Think about the future, about what will happen if you don't forgive and what will happen if you do. If you don't forgive, you'll continue to live with your anger. It may take the form of hot rage or of cool resentment. Either way, it is still

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## Forgiveness *(continued from page 1)*

- anger, and you know what it will do. It will make you miserable. It may even make you physically ill. If you bottle up your anger, if you let it make you seek revenge, you can get hypertension, ulcers, lesions, headaches, and insomnia. And it will hurt others, too. As Gandhi said, if the world lives by the principle of an eye for an eye, it will become a world full of blind people.

If you do forgive you will neutralize the pain that is destructive to your health and happiness. Then you can begin to experience healing from your hurts. In this sense forgiveness is something you should do for yourself as well as for the Lord.

### Steps toward Forgiveness

Here are six small, practical steps that will move you toward forgiveness.

1. Name the person or group who hurt you, and name what that person or group did that caused you pain. You cannot begin to forgive until you acknowledge honestly that people have hurt you.
2. Live in such a way as to do your enemies no harm. Refuse to believe the worst things about them or to gloat over their misfortunes. Refuse to be rude to them or to say ugly things about them behind their backs.
3. Do not stoke the fires of your anger. Don't replay in your mind the events in which you were mistreated and hurt.
4. Ask God to help you to forgive.
5. Pray for your enemies. You may want to pray that God will punish them, but that's not helpful. Instead, begin by praying simply, "I pray for this person who hurt me." If you do this repeatedly, a time will come when you will be able to sincerely pray, "I pray that you will bless this person who hurt me." When you can do that sincerely, you are well on the way to forgiving the person.
6. Finally, be patient. Sometimes it takes a long time to forgive, but it's worth waiting and praying for. If you think you have forgiven and then discover that you haven't, don't blame yourself. Simply begin again to pray for your enemies.

### Abuse

I have been treating the experience of being hurt as a single, discrete event, and that is often the case. But sometimes the hurting we are experiencing is not a single, discrete event but a continuing pattern of behavior. Today we have a word for that; we call it abuse.

Our Christian faith calls us to forgive. It does not call us to accept abuse. If abusive behavior occurs, with few exceptions, you should take steps to get out of harm's way. The Lord Jesus, who in the end would lay down his life for his enemies, made it clear that he would do so only on his own terms, when he said: *No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back.* (John 10:18, TEV). So do you.

Forgiveness is hard work, but it is worth doing. We do it for ourselves, so that our anger will not ruin our lives. And we do it for the Lord Jesus, who suffered to forgive us all.

*Rev. Fisher Humphreys, Ph.D. is a member of the Central Alabama MTM Regional Board. He is a retired professor at the Beeson School of Divinity, Samford University, Birmingham, AL, and author of ten books and numerous scholarly articles.*

## MTM Needs Your Help!

With your support, we can continue to offer scholarships to ministers and spouses to attend one of the upcoming MTM *Healthy Transitions Wellness Retreats* in 2012.

***We need your support to make these retreats happen.***

You've read the stories about forced terminations and conflict within the church. It's painful. Friends, home and community are lost. Some are left without even a place to live.

Take a look at the comment from a recent retreat alumnus below. The relationships formed in MTM groups is powerful! Our programs reclaim God's wounded servants for service, equipping ministers as they redefine their sense of "call."

***MTM makes a difference!***

Go now to [mtmfoundation.org/support-us](http://mtmfoundation.org/support-us) and make your tax-deductible donation on-line, or get out your check book right now as you are reading this article and make your check out to MTM Foundation and enclose it in the remittance envelope which is provided. Your gift to MTM is so appreciated.

***Your donations make a difference in the lives of God's chosen but wounded servants and their families.***

## Coming Soon!



***Healthy Transitions Wellness Retreats  
for Ministers & Spouses***

**July 16-20, 2012**

Carson-Newman College, Jefferson City, Tennessee  
Co-Sponsored by Norton Institute for Congregational Health at Carson-Newman College

**July 30-August 3, 2012**

Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama  
Co-Sponsored by Samford University

**August 20-24, 2012**

Eastover Retreat Center, Spring Grove, Virginia

**October 29-November 1, 2012**

Comer Boy Scout Reservation, Mentone, Alabama

From previous Retreat participants:

*"When my wife and I returned from the Healthy Transitions Retreat last July we heard the Rascal Flatts song "I Won't Let Go." As we listened to the words we held hands and cried as we reflected on the power of commitment and companionship. Charles and the retreat friends had gathered around us on that last day and prayed for our healing and future. They were God's way of saying "I Won't Let Go!"*

## First Recipient of the Campbell-Wallace MTM Service Award

The initial Campbell-Wallace MTM Service Award was presented to William (Bill) J. Irvin, Esquire, at the September 2011 Board of Trustees meeting, by Dr. Ross Campbell. This award recognizes his commitment of time and expertise to the MTM Foundation. Bill, an attorney living in Richmond, Virginia, helped establish the MTM Foundation in 1994, as a direct result of being an advocate for his pastor who experienced a relationship crisis with his church.



Following those stormy days of transition in 1993 and 1994, his pastor shared with Bill a dream that began to grow with conviction in his heart. Bill used his legal expertise to help shape the dream and structure it in such a way as to involve many people from various walks of life, especially professionals with specific skills. Bill continues to do MTM's legal work pro bono. With the aid of the first board of trustees, and the help of many who shared the vision, it was transformed into reality. He has been active with the board throughout the Foundation's history.

Bill's life has been a life of vision, compassion, and an eagerness to think outside the box. He has a strong commitment to social justice, and his innovative spirit and willingness to risk have distinguished him in whatever group he finds himself.

For more information on the award and recipients, visit our website at [mtmfoundation.org](http://mtmfoundation.org).

## Welcome New Board Members

Lauranett L. Lee, Ph.D., Richmond, Virginia

Lauranett is a native of Chesterfield County, Virginia. She attended Pivot Point Cosmetology School then attended Mundelein College, both in Chicago, receiving a B.A. in communications. Lauranett was inspired to further her education and received an M. A. in history from Virginia State University and completed her Ph.D. in American history in 2002 from the University of Virginia.

Since 2001 she has been the founding curator of African American history at the Virginia Historical Society and Museum. Her interest in history enables her to share the study of the past in different and thought-provoking ways. Lauranett consults and lectures on a variety of independent projects, and in 2008 authored *Making the American Dream Work: A Cultural History of African Americans in Hopewell, Virginia*. She has taught at Old Dominion University, Virginia Union University and Virginia Commonwealth University.



## Vulnerable (continued from page 4)

a mixture of failure, guilt, and shame though most often no suggestions of misbehavior were involved. There's an enormous amount of anger, though suppressed, and the trauma often results in some level of depression. Ministers never expected to be treated so cruelly by those they came to serve.

The Apostle Paul, writing to a troubled church at Corinth, concluded I Corinthians 12 by saying, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." His exhortation on love follows in the next chapter.

I wonder what would happen if congregations were to take Paul's advice more seriously, that is, by embodying love?

For additional information on the MTM mission and ministry, for those who have experienced forced termination or conflict within their church, please visit our website at [www.mtmfoundation.org](http://www.mtmfoundation.org).

## Chair Board of Trustees

Tom Denham, M.Div., Alpharetta, Georgia

Tom Denham, was elected chair of the MTM Board of Trustees for the 2011-2012 term.

Tom earned a B.A. degree from Mississippi College and a Master of Divinity degree from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. During his career, he served as a pastor in Illinois, as a Pastoral Counselor in Alabama and Georgia, and as a Computer Programmer, and an Equity Options Trader in Georgia. An active member of the Alpharetta Presbyterian Church, Tom says, "The fellowship I have experienced while serving on the MTM board has been a big influence on reawakening my sense of call to ministry."



Ted Fuson, D.Min., Culpeper, Virginia

A native of Illinois, Ted Fuson is a fourth generation Baptist minister. He received a B.A. at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee and attended the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky for two years, then enrolled at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., graduating with a Master of Divinity degree. Ted served as a student pastor and ministry staff at churches in Illinois, Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina. After seminary graduation he served as pastor of three churches in Virginia: Beaver Dam Baptist, Lake Ridge Baptist and Culpeper Baptist. Ted received a Doctor of Ministry degree from Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, and studied Family Systems with Rabbi Edwin Friedman. He has facilitated Family Systems, and leadership laboratory groups throughout his career. Ted has been trained for Intentional Interim Ministry through the Center for Congregational Health and been certified as a Christian Leadership Coach by Valwood Christian Leadership Coaching. Today Ted serves as an Intentional Interim pastor in Lynch Station, Virginia.



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# Ministers are More Vulnerable than Most Realize

Charles H. Chandler, D.Min., Executive Director

Rod had been assured that his position as Associate Pastor for Youth and Families was secure following the senior pastor's retirement. The youth ministry had quadrupled during his four year tenure.



Things changed, however, after the board elected a new chair, a member of the church for only three years with limited leadership experience. Rod was blindsided when the new chair informed him that the board had voted to ask him to resign. He was offered three months severance, provided he sign a document agreeing not to discuss the termination with church members.

Rod and Judy were devastated! They had purchased a new house, had no savings, and one of the children had major health issues. Also, ministers do not qualify for state unemployment benefits, and they lived in a small town with very high unemployment. They did not know where to turn for help.

MTM reached out to Rod and Judy. They attended an MTM *Healthy Transitions Wellness Retreat for Ministers and Spouses* and discovered that their story was not unique. Their lives were transformed during the retreat and after giving themselves time to heal, they look forward to serving in a church ministry position again. In the meantime, they were put in contact with professionals who could help find temporary work during the transition. It is a painful journey, but Rod and Judy will land on their feet.

Some denomination executives have suggested that the trend of forced terminations of ministers is in decline. That is not evident in David Briggs' article, "Silent Clergy Killers: 'Toxic' Congregations Lead to Widespread Job Loss." His article is based

on studies by researchers from Texas Tech and Virginia Tech Universities published in the March Issue of the *Reviews of Religious Research*, as well as Duke University's 2006-2007 *National Congregation Study*.

The Texas Tech and Virginia Tech study shows that 28 percent of ministers have been forced from their ministry position at least once – about 1 in 3.67 ministers. *Leadership Journal* reported in their 1996 Winter Issue that 22.8 percent of ministers were pushed out of their ministry position at least once - about 1 in 4.5 ministers. This means the percentage of ministers being pushed out has increased from 22.8 percent to 28 percent in about a decade and a half - an increase of 22 percent. Only 54 percent of those terminated will go back into a full-time parish ministry position.

In the May 2012 issue of *Christianity Today*, the article, "Pastors' Fight and Flight," points to some interesting facts, based on the above mentioned studies, which include the following:

- Churches led by female clergy are nearly twice as likely to have conflict in which the minister leaves compared to churches led by male clergy.
- Both a survey of churches and a study of pastors found that no denomination is immune; all have fights.
- Ministers forced out score high on tests for post traumatic stress disorder, depression, and health problems.
- Two main predictors of future church conflicts are recent fights and shrinking congregations.

The amount of pain evident in one of our wellness retreats is overwhelming. Lives are crushed. Hopes and dreams are dashed. Self-esteem is eroded, self-confidence has evaporated, and the participants usually feel

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## MTM Mission Statement

The MTM Foundation seeks to be advocates for clergy and their families in all faith groups who are experiencing personal or professional crisis due to deteriorating employment or congregation-clergy relationships.



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