

## Five Steps to Forgiveness

By Susan Gammage <sup>1</sup>

When I first became a Bahá'í, I read the following quote and thought that was all the Writings had to say about forgiveness:

If someone commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 453)

Over time, though, I came to realize that forgiveness is a process, which can be summed up in five Steps:

- Identify the hurt and the lies you told yourself
- Ask God to forgive you for believing the lies; and for acting in ways contrary to His will
- Ask God to forgive others
- Forgive the person who hurt you
- Forgive yourself

Let's look at each of these separately.

Identify the Hurt and the Lies You Told Yourself.

We all have tests and difficulties; often arising from other people. We've all had people who have broken our hearts. What causes problems for us are the lies we tell ourselves about an event, and it's helpful to learn to separate the two:

The event: I was fired.

The message: I'm worthless and unemployable.

The event: An argument with a spouse.

The message: She's divorcing me.

The event: You break a Baha'i law.

The message: I'm going straight to hell.

You get the idea! I'm sure you've got your own version!

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The biggest problem with what we tell ourselves is this: we don't know where the interpretations are coming from. We don't stop and ask:

- Is this really how God thinks?
- Is this thought coming from the kingdom of God or the kingdom of darkness?
- Is this truth or an idle fancy?
- Is this real or a vain imagining?

When we learn to pay attention to our thoughts; and sort out truth from falsehood, we're ready to take the next step.

Ask God to Forgive You

I don't know what your concept of God is, but mine is that He is:

- The God of Grace to the wicked
- The All-Forgiving
- The All-Knowing Counsellor
- The All-Merciful
- The Compassionate with all
- The Loving
- The Most Compassionate
- The Pitier of the downtrodden
- The Refuge of the fearful
- The Restorer

Does that sound like the kind of God that would condemn anyone for all of eternity? Yet many of us are afraid to turn to Him, fearing His wrath, condemnation, judgment and punishment. Beneath the fear is that we are going straight to hell for the things we have done or failed to do. This is a lot of negative thinking to overcome!

The truth is that despite the fact that we're told to fear God, nowhere in the Writings does it refer to God as the:

- All-Wrathful
- The Ever-Unforgiving
- The Never Forgiving
- The All Condemning
- The All Judgmental

There's no sin that's unforgiveable. God even forgives covenant breakers!

It is important to note that should a Covenant-breaker recognize his mistakes, become conscious of his transgressions against the Cause of God and find the urge to repent, the Centre of the Cause, when satisfied he is sincerely repentant, will forgive his past deeds and restore his credibility and status as a Bahá'í in good standing in the community. (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Child of the Covenant*, p. 240)

God forgives anyone who asks because His mercy exceeds His fury and once you've been forgiven, your sins are washed away!

Wherefore, hearken ye unto My speech, and return ye to God and repent, that He, through His grace, may have mercy upon you, may wash away your sins, and forgive your trespasses. The greatness of His mercy surpasseth the fury of His wrath, and His grace encompasseth all who have been called into being and been clothed with the robe of life...." (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 130)

It's like being born anew:

Say: Be not despondent. After the revelation of this blessed verse it is as though thou hast been born anew from thy mother's womb. (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 77)

Ask God to Forgive Others

Coming to forgiveness can be a process! Sometimes there's something someone has done to us that seems so big, and so bad, that we can't imagine ever being able to forgive. Perhaps the idea of forgiveness might seem intellectually worthwhile; but at a heart level, we aren't yet ready to let go and forgive. It's at these times we can ask God to forgive the person for us.

That's what I had to do with my parents.

As a child I was the victim of their sexual, physical and ritualistic abuse, for which they ultimately had their rights of parenthood removed. I knew from reading the writings that the standard was that I must "instantly forgive", and I wanted to be obedient. I just didn't know how. Coming to that place required a lot of little steps; and a LOT of

understanding of the Bahá'í Writings on the purpose of life; the nature of tests and difficulties; justice etc.

When I took my question to the House of Justice they said:

As a devoted believer you are urged to strive to develop forgiveness in your heart toward your parents who have abused you in so disgraceful a manner . . .  
(Universal House of Justice to this author, 9 September, 1992)

You'll note the date of this letter was 1992; and it wasn't until 2010 that I was finally able to let it go and forgive them completely. In the meantime, I was comforted knowing that I could "strive to develop forgiveness in my heart".

I was also comforted knowing that I could pray for my parents. As I learned from the Báb:

Thousand upon thousand of what thou hast asked for thy parents shall be thy recompense! (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 94)

Obviously I wanted forgiveness for myself; so I recognized I had to ask forgiveness for them, and I did.

God can see our sincerity. He knows what's in our hearts, and when we take one step towards becoming more in line with His teachings, He will take it from there; and start the healing and forgiveness process.

Here are two prayers you can use to ask God to forgive others:

O God, my God! Lowly, suppliant and fallen upon my face, I beseech Thee with all the ardor of my invocation to pardon whosoever hath hurt me, forgive him that hath conspired against me and offended me, and wash away the misdeeds of them that have wrought injustice upon me. Vouchsafe unto them Thy goodly gifts, give them joy, relieve them from sorrow, grant them peace and prosperity, give them Thy bliss and pour upon them Thy bounty. Thou art the Powerful, the Gracious, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting! ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Will and Testament, p. 19)

O Lord! In this Most Great Dispensation Thou dost accept the intercession of children in behalf of their parents. This is one of the special infinite bestowals of this Dispensation. Therefore, O Thou kind Lord, accept the request of this Thy

servant at the threshold of Thy singleness and submerge his father in the ocean of Thy grace, because this son hath arisen to render Thee service and is exerting effort at all times in the pathway of Thy love, Verily, Thou art the Giver, the Forgiver and the Kind! ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p.230, #770)

## Forgive the Person Who Hurt You

The House of Justice tells us that to nurse a grievance or hatred towards anyone else is spiritually poisonous:

To nurse a grievance or hatred against another soul is spiritually poisonous to the soul which nurses it. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 5 January 1992)

The antidote is to see the person who hurt you as a child of God, and attempt to overlook his sins, if we want to remove bitterness from our soul:

To strive to see another person as a child of God and, however heinous his deeds, to attempt to overlook his sins for the sake of God, removes bitterness from the soul and both ennobles and strengthens it. (Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 5 January 1992)

We learn how to separate the sin from the sinner by seeing our oppressors as captives of their lower nature, whose actions only lead them deeper into unhappiness and separation from God:

As a devoted believer you are urged to strive to develop forgiveness in your heart toward your parents who have abused you in so disgraceful a manner, and to attain a level of insight which sees them as captives of their lower nature, whose actions can only lead them deeper into unhappiness and separation from God. (The Universal House of Justice, 1985 Dec 02, Child Abuse, Psychology and Knowledge of Self)

It's not enough to forgive someone once, or even a few times. The Bahá'í standard is to forgive someone a hundred thousand times:

If a person falls into errors for a hundred-thousand times he may yet turn his face to you, hopeful that you will forgive his sins; for he must not become hopeless, neither grieved nor despondent. This is the conduct and the manner

of the people of Baha'. This is the foundation of the most high pathway!  
(Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v2, p. 436)

## Forgive Yourself

It's much harder to forgive ourselves, than it is to forgive others. We love Bahá'u'lláh and want to do the right thing, but it's hard when we live in a society whose behaviour is so at variance with the Faith.

It is often difficult for us to do things because they are so very different from what we are used to, not because the thing itself is particularly difficult. With you, and indeed most Bahá'ís, who are now, as adults, accepting this glorious Faith, no doubt some of the ordinances ... are hard to understand and obey at first. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights Of Guidance, p. 342, #1150)

God knows that in our weakness, we will repeatedly stumble when we try to walk in the path He has pointed out to us.

The House of Justice asks us to point out that the recognition of the Manifestation of God is but the beginning of a process of growth and that as we become more deepened in the Teachings and strive to follow His principles, we gradually approach more and more the perfect pattern which is presented to us. Bahá'u'lláh recognizes that human beings are fallible. He knows that, in our weakness, we shall repeatedly stumble when we try to walk in the path He has pointed out to us. (Universal House of Justice, 1993 Jun 05)

The key is to be patient with ourselves:

We must be patient with others, infinitely patient, but also with our own poor selves, remembering that even the Prophets of God sometimes got tired and cried out in despair

...

He urges you to persevere and add up your accomplishments, rather than to dwell on the dark side of things. Everyone's life has both a dark and bright side. (Shoghi Effendi, The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community, p. 456)

Don't think you're alone in beating yourself up – even Shoghi Effendi had his moments!:

Shoghi Effendi considered himself a failure to:

“Rise to the situation the Master’s passing had placed him in...” (Rúhíyyih Rabbání, The Priceless Pearl, p. 72)  
and this distressed him for many years.

Here’s a prayer we can say:

I beg Thee to forgive me, O my Lord, for every mention but the mention of Thee, and for every praise but the praise of Thee, and for every delight but delight in Thy nearness, and for every pleasure but the pleasure of communion with Thee, and for every joy but the joy of Thy love and of Thy good-pleasure, and for all things pertaining unto me which bear no relationship unto Thee, O Thou Who art the Lord of lords, He Who provideth the means and unlocketh the doors. (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, pp. 182-183)

I love it because it covers everything we might have done wrong! And then we need to let it go, trusting that God has forgiven us. We can more easily forgive ourselves when we truly believe God has forgiven us as soon as we turn in His direction.

He’s assures everyone who responds to His call of His forgiveness, and doesn’t want us to be afraid or sorry.

Fear not, nor be Thou grieved, for indeed unto such as have responded to Thy Call, whether men or women, We have assured forgiveness of sins, as known in the presence of the Best Beloved and in conformity with what Thou desirest. Verily His knowledge embraceth all things. (Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 55)

Sometimes when we can’t forgive ourselves, it’s because our ego and pride get in the way, as we believe we know more than God does. We’re back in our lower nature.

Verily, the breezes of forgiveness have been wafted from the direction of your Lord, the God of Mercy; whoso turneth thereunto, shall be cleansed of his sins, and of all pain and sickness. Happy the man that hath turned towards them, and woe betide him that hath turned aside. (Bahá’u’lláh, the Summons of the Lord of Hosts, p. 68, #1131)

Detachment from our self and ego is needed if we don’t want to remain far from God’s bountiful favours!

But as they were not detached from the things of this world and could not subdue their self and ego, they remained remote from His bountiful favours. (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* v 3, p. 404)

## Prayers for Forgiveness

God has given us prayers we can use when asking for His forgiveness:

Behold me, then, O my God, how I have fled from myself unto Thee, and have abandoned my own being that I may attain unto the splendors of the light of Thy Being, and have forsaken all that keepeth me back from Thee, and maketh me forgetful of Thee, in order that I may inhale the fragrances of Thy presence and Thy remembrance. Behold how I have stepped upon the dust of the city of Thy forgiveness and Thy bounty, and dwelt within the precincts of Thy transcendent mercy, and have besought Thee, through the sovereignty of Him Who is Thy Remembrance and Who hath appeared in the robe of Thy most pure and most august Beauty, to send down, in the course of this year, upon Thy loved ones what will enable them to dispense with any one except Thee, and will set them free to recognize the evidences of Thy sovereign will and all-conquering purpose, in such wise that they will seek only what Thou didst wish for them through Thy bidding, and will desire naught except what Thou didst desire for them through Thy will. Sanctify, then, their eyes, O my God, that they may behold the light of Thy Beauty, and purge their ears, that they may listen to the melodies of the Dove of Thy transcendent oneness. Flood, then, their hearts with the wonders of Thy love, and preserve their tongues from mentioning any one save Thee, and guard their faces from turning to aught else except Thyself. Potent art Thou to do what pleaseth Thee. Thou, verily, art the Almighty, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. (*Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 336-337)

Cast, then, upon me, O my God, the glances of Thy mercy, and forgive me my trespasses and the trespasses of them that are dear to Thee, and which come in between us and the revelation of Thy triumph and Thy grace. Cancel Thou, moreover, our sins which have shut off our faces from the splendors of the Day-Star of Thy favors. Powerful art Thou to do Thy pleasure. Thou ordainest what Thou wilt, and art not asked of what Thou wishest through the power of Thy sovereignty, nor canst Thou be frustrated in whatsoever Thou prescribest through Thine irrevocable decree. No God is there save Thee, the Almighty, the



Most Powerful, the Ever-living, the Most Compassionate. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 338)

O God, my God! Have mercy then upon my helpless state, my poverty, my misery, my abasement! Give me to drink from the generous cup of Thy grace and forgiveness, stir me with the sweet scents of Thy love, gladden my bosom with the light of Thy knowledge, purify my soul with the mysteries of Thy oneness, raise me to life with the gentle breeze that cometh from the gardens of Thy mercy -- till I sever myself from all else but Thee, and lay hold of the hem of Thy garment of grandeur, and consign to oblivion all that is not Thee, and be companioned by the sweet breathings that waft during these Thy days, and attain unto faithfulness at Thy Threshold of Holiness, and arise to serve Thy Cause, and to be humble before Thy loved ones, and, in the presence of Thy favoured ones, to be nothingness itself. Verily art Thou the Helper, the Sustainer, the Exalted, the Most Generous. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 4-5)

O Thou forgiving Lord! Thou art the shelter of all these Thy servants. Thou knowest the secrets and art aware of all things. We are all helpless, and Thou art the Mighty, the Omnipotent. We are all sinners, and Thou art the Forgiver of sins, the Merciful, the Compassionate. O Lord! Look not at our shortcomings. Deal with us according to Thy grace and bounty. Our shortcomings are many, but the ocean of Thy forgiveness is boundless. Our weakness is grievous, but the evidences of Thine aid and assistance are clear. Therefore, confirm and strengthen us. Enable us to do that which is worthy of Thy holy Threshold. Illumine our hearts, grant us discerning eyes and attentive ears. Resuscitate the dead and heal the sick. Bestow wealth upon the poor and give peace and security to the fearful. Accept us in Thy kingdom and illumine us with the light of guidance. Thou art the Powerful and the Omnipotent. Thou art the Generous. Thou art the Clement. Thou art the Kind. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 176, #62.10)

I beg of God to forgive thy sins and to illumine thy face with the light of forgiveness, so that thou mayest conquer the self which desires the earthly world and prevent it from its wishes and appetites. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá v1, p. 80)

And here's an easy mantra we can memorize and repeat often:

Forgive me, O my Lord, my sins which have hindered me from walking in the ways of Thy good-pleasure, and from attaining the shores of the ocean of Thy oneness. (Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 29)