

# Forgiveness Begins With Me

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**By Joel Blunk**

Is forgiveness selfish? I was surprised to hear myself say so while being interviewed a while back on the subject in connection with the Jerry Sandusky child sexual abuse case and its impact on the State College community, where I've lived and worked for the past 20 years. I didn't mean it negatively, but it sounded that way, and I immediately felt like I needed some forgiveness myself.

Forgiveness isn't simple. We don't say "I forgive you" and that's that. It's a process that takes time. It isn't about forgetting the harm or offense either. Nor is it a free pass for another to keep harming, as if forgiveness condones another's behavior. Forgiveness holds others accountable while providing space for justice to occur apart from vengeance and revenge. It requires a strength and courage unlike most anything else.

Several years ago, I visited the home of Corrie ten Boom in the Netherlands. She and her family were arrested by the Gestapo during World War II and sent to concentration camps for stowing Jewish refugees in a hiding place they'd created in their house. Most of her family was killed as a result. Afterward, inspired by her faith and the example of Jesus, she devoted herself to healing wounds throughout Europe.

"Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality," she wrote for *Guideposts* magazine in 1972. "Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that."

She'd found that forgiveness most dramatically impacts the life of the forgiver, far more than the one being forgiven. While forgiveness may lead to reconciliation, that isn't a requirement, nor is it always possible. The immediate benefit of forgiveness is a freedom provided to the one who offers it. Ironically, as long as you hold a grudge, it holds you.

I'm convinced that forgiveness is key to ongoing growth and a deeper, fuller life. It opens us to love and may be the greatest act of love in which we can participate. It involves recognizing the humanity of others, regardless of their behavior (Luke 23:34), and accepting the paradoxical truth that God

makes the sun to rise on both good and bad (Matthew 5:45). Released from the desire for revenge and the weight of regret, those who forgive are free to interact with the world in new and generative ways. But it clearly starts with self-care.

Desmond Tutu, in his recent publication, *The Book of Forgiving*, says, in no uncertain terms, that forgiveness is not a choice you make for someone else; it's a choice you make for yourself. Self-interest is inherent in forgiveness. It frees us to go on living and loving others. "Forgiveness begins with me" sounds selfish, but it has to start somewhere. Perhaps "selfish" isn't always a bad word.