

**Book Club Bonus Resource:  
What Should We Do When We Can't Forgive?**

*Jesus says in more than one place in the Gospels that we are forgiven "as we forgive those who sin against us." But what can this mean in cases where a wrong so egregious has been committed that the thought of forgiveness seems almost obscene?*

*Lutheran pastor and author, Walter Wangerin, tells a difficult but powerful story about a woman who could not forgive the father who sexually abused her from the age of 12 to the age of 16. Wangerin encountered this woman at a conference and ended up hearing her story over coffee.*

*The woman shared many of the details of her abuse, and while most of them have been omitted here, please be aware that this story could be triggering. We'll join the story in the middle—I pray you find it helpful.*  
- Carolyn Arends

... She said: Only this one thing did I do over and over, as if it were the Pilgrim's Jesus prayer. I prayed: *Love me, love me—Jesus come help me. Amen.*"

"Did Jesus come?" I asked. "Did he answer your prayer?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "and sooner than I knew."

"This is the sequence," my friend said, as if she were laying down a hand of cards. It must have been a hand she'd played often before. "In my sixteenth year my father stopped coming to my bed. I believe he had begun to fear that my brothers were not sleeping during his midnight visitations. But I don't pretend to understand my father's motives then. He just stopped.

"No one spoke of the secret after that, of course, and I remained estranged in in the midst of my family.

"No one spoke of it, I say, until my youngest brother graduated from college. Shortly before he moved away for good, he took me out for a country drive. He pulled off the road into a little wood, then asked if I remembered our father's visits to our bedroom at night. I was stunned. I could only stare at him. There had never been words for this thing before—never!

"Well, he took my hand and started to cry and begged me to forgive him for never doing anything.

"He knew! My brother had known. How many others had known? Surely my mother knew! All at once the whole ocean of my grief poured out of me with a tremendous roaring. It was enough to drown my brother!

“The fact that he was apologizing caused a switch to turn in my soul, filling me with a brilliant light of understanding: *No! It had not been my fault!* And I was furious. I hit him. He bowed his head and didn’t fight back. I screamed and slapped my brother in his face. In a high, bloody jubilation, I cursed all of them, my father for hurting me so much and so long, my brothers just for knowing, my mother for her silence.

“Why didn’t you *do* anything?” I screamed.

“But all he said was, ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’

“So, I threw myself out of his car and walked away. My whole body was strong with anger. Anger felt so good in me.

“That was three years ago—the second event in the sequence. In the next months I confronted every member of my family and told them what they had done to me. I gave voice to the child they had wounded. I approached my father with a wild freedom. I mean, I didn’t care what he did, whether he’d confess his sin, or deny it, or blame me. I didn’t care, because my fury had set me free.

“But I wanted to crawl back into my own self again. Oh, I yearned for the consolations of peace. So, I began to talk with a counselor, a calm Christian, a man clear regarding fault in the matter. It was not my fault. He repeated the message a hundred different ways, it was not my fault.

“But something kept troubling me.

“‘I can’t forgive them,’ I told my counselor. ‘I just can’t. I mean, I am not able.’

“‘I understand that,’ he said.

“‘But am I wrong *not* to? Am I still an evil person after all this if I don’t? Do I *have* to forgive them?’

“And then this dear pastor preached for me a sermon I had never heard before. No, he said, I did not *have* to forgive them.

“He told me that forgiveness is of grace. It is a free gift, freely given, whose source is in the Lord. He said that an enforced forgiveness is no grace at all but a law which someone is demanding the victim to keep. Forgiveness which must be commanded is not forgiveness at all. Yes, they *needed* forgiveness, but let them go to its true source. Let them confess their sins unto the Lord Jesus Christ, whose forgiveness is their salvation. But I, he said, I did not *have* to do that which I *could* not do.”

“Now I will tell you the truth,” she said. “Jesus was there all along. I believe that it was Jesus who needled the soul of my younger brother until he confessed. And through that year of confrontations and counseling—the third event in my sequence—Jesus granted me first the anger of separation and independence, and second the peace of his grace.

*Love me, love me—Jesus come and help me. Amen.*

“But it was not until the fourth event in my sequence,” she smiled, “that I saw the full evidence of it.

“One morning last December, I woke up and discovered that I had forgiven my family. All of them. That’s it.” She smiled, spreading her fingers flat on the table. “Maybe I forgave them in my sleep. I don’t know. Only know that I woke up with true forgiveness in my heart.

“Or perhaps I should say that forgiveness was given me to give to them. You see? I was free of their sin. I was free of the pain it had caused me, free of hatreds and blame and keeping accounts. And here’s the kicker, Walt: I loved them. My parents are no beauties. My poor parents scarcely know what a blessing I have for them whenever they’re ready to receive it.

“It’s right here,” she said, touching her chest. “Blessing is right here, completely free and pure for them.”

The woman suddenly grew sober. She began to blink rapidly, for the thing she was about to say was so important.

“It is Jesus here,” she said. “Here in me is Jesus, my dear Lord and the answer to my prayers. Because,” she whispered, “*I could never have forgiven them on my own*. It simply was not me. Even now it isn’t me. It is Jesus who grants me my freedom with their forgiveness. It was Jesus all along.

“Do you understand?” she said. “How Jesus answered my prayer was by causing me to do the thing that only he could do: miracles!” She giggled. “You are looking at a miracle-worker.”<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Excerpted from Walter Wangerin, *Whole Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 138-141.