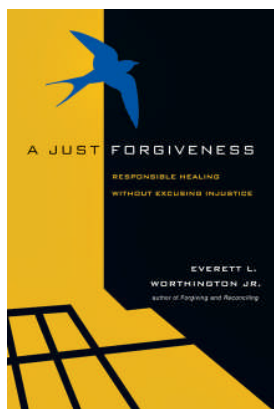


Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



*A Just Forgiveness:
Responsible Healing Without
Excusing Injustice*
240 pages, paperback,
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You have been studying forgiveness for nearly thirty years. What made you decide to specialize in this area of research?

Everett L. Worthington Jr.: I started to study forgiveness after doing marriage counseling. You almost can't see a troubled couple in counseling without dealing with many unforgiven hurts. Being a Christian, forgiveness was already high in my set of Christian virtues, so the marital counseling cases made it a slam dunk. I started studying forgiveness scientifically, not just clinically, a bit later, after writing an article in the journal *Psychotherapy*. Mike McCullough, a new graduate student in 1990, got interested in the topic, and he and the many talented graduate students following him dragged me into the scientific study of forgiving on their coattails.

How is *A Just Forgiveness* different from your previous books on forgiveness?

Worthington: After summarizing the understanding of forgiveness, justice and humility in individuals that we have developed over the years, I spend most of the book applying the ideas to larger units. I look at forgiveness specifically in marriages and families. I also write about forgiveness in church congregations that split or in churches where people hurt each other. I heard a pastor once say that Christians in churches are like porcupines snuggling together to get warm. Unfortunately, that is too often true. I wanted to write about some ways to help heal wounded congregations and the wounded people within those congregations.

I also discuss forgiveness in society, specifically looking at forgiveness in businesses and workplace settings and in the justice system. Perhaps surprisingly, most people who leave their job in frustration and anger don't do so because of unfairness of pay, perks or privileges. They leave because they have unresolved conflict with a coworker or boss. It just gets to the place where they don't feel like going to work and they start looking for a new job. I wanted to help people resolve workplace unhappiness and hurts.

I also discuss larger conflicts, even at the level of societal tensions between groups within a country—like liberals versus conservatives, different ethnic or racial tensions, or social class differences. And I examine relations between and among nations or other political entities.

Describe what you mean by the title *A Just Forgiveness*.

Worthington: The theme of the book is Micah 6:8, which most people are familiar with. Micah tells us what God desires of us—justice, forgiveness and humility. So I wanted to not just describe forgiveness, but also to look at each level of resolution of hurts and offenses—at

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Everett L. Worthington Jr. (Ph.D., University of Missouri) is professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and former executive director of the Templeton Foundation's A Campaign for Forgiveness Research. Worthington has studied forgiveness since the 1980s and has published more than two hundred articles and papers on forgiveness, marriage and family, psychotherapy, and virtue in a wide variety of journals and magazines.

the individual, couple, family, social system, church and nation level—and consistently ask how we can act to bring about justice and also forgiveness. The key, of course, turns out to be humility—walking humbly with our God.

What are the two different types of forgiveness?

Worthington: People make a decision about how they intend to act toward an offender, which I call decisional forgiveness. They might do so and still be angry, resentful and not fully at peace emotionally. That suggests that there is actually a second type of forgiveness, emotional forgiveness. I believe that Jesus calls us to decisional forgiveness. He said that if we do not make a decision to forgive those who harm us, God will not forgive us. That is a hard word. Some people try to include emotional forgiveness within decisional forgiveness, but that becomes almost impossibly hard. If we had to be completely emotionally at peace before our sins were forgiven, we would be in trouble. God certainly desires that we experience complete emotional forgiveness—and I think it is possible usually to move in that direction and often achieve it. But God requires decisional forgiveness.

What do you hope readers take away from *A Just Forgiveness*?

Worthington: I think people will take a clear understanding of forgiveness, practical strategies for forgiving, and ways to apply those practical strategies in their couple, family, workplace, church and national relationships.

What do you hope to yet accomplish/discover in your study/research of forgiveness?

Worthington: We are doing some exciting foundation-funded research projects on forgiveness. The Fetzer Institute is sponsoring several of the projects. I am coordinating a meeting of forgiveness researchers, each of whom is directing a research project that is worked on collaboratively. The network together is called the Fetzer Forgiveness Research Network—let me abbreviate it the FFRN. The idea is to get midlevel and highly productive researchers together with each other and with their graduate students to work collaboratively, feeding into each other's research and training the next generations of highly productive researchers. The project I am directing within the FFRN is to get sixteen Christian colleges to engage in a two-week forgiveness blitz, aimed at using multiple community interventions within the Christian college to raise the awareness of being a more forgiving Christian. We compare these colleges using a waiting list design, meaning that eight of the colleges try the forgiveness blitz in the first semester and the other eight in the second semester. We measure awareness of and practice of forgiveness at the community level, which is the first time such a research project has been attempted.

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Everett L. Worthington Jr. has appeared on *Good Morning America*, CNN and *The 700 Club* and has been featured in award-winning documentary movies on forgiveness such as *The Power of Forgiveness* and *The Big Question*. He is the author of seventeen books, including *Handbook of Forgiveness*, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* and *Forgiving and Reconciling*.

We also allow the sixteen colleges to develop some small-group intervention or other brief intervention to help their students forgive someone who has deeply hurt them. That intervention is compared to the Christian small groups that I have developed and tested in over ten controlled studies built on the five steps to REACH forgiveness, which is summarized in *A Just Forgiveness*. We compare both groups to students who don't go through the groups but are just exposed to the campus forgiveness blitz. For a group to be considered an efficacious—a technical term roughly meaning effective—treatment that can help people forgive, it must either (a) do as well as an established treatment, like my REACH model, or (b) do better than a control treatment. If the colleges can develop effective treatments and show them to be effective in the sixteen studies done separately at the different schools, then the Christian community will have new and exciting ways to promote forgiveness.

The Fetzer Institute is also funding one of my research projects that looks at forgiveness as married couples make the transition to being new parents. Those major life changes, like having one's first child, often strain the marriage, and we are looking at what happens across that life change.

We also are continuing to study forgiveness in couple relationships and in groups, considering things like (a) whether people can accept forgiveness when offered, (b) what happens if someone refuses to forgive when asked, (c) what happens when people who have been crime victims meet with their offender and the family of the offender in a restorative justice meeting.

Self-forgiveness is important, and we are looking at groups to promote self-forgiveness in families of alcoholics, women who have divorced, women who suffered a harsh break-up of a romantic relationship.

These topics really just touch the surface of the things we are examining. Forgiveness is so important to our spiritual lives, health, mental health and relationships. It is a privilege to study it.