

Forgiveness Is Hard... But Necessary

Would you agree with me that the ability to forgive is one of the most difficult aspects of being a Christian? In fact, it is one of the most difficult acts for any human being. Some people are better at forgiveness than others.

Take, for example, a grandmother celebrating her golden wedding anniversary. She was asked the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day," she said, "I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook." A guest asked the woman what were some of the faults she had chosen to ignore. The grandmother replied, "To tell the truth, I never did get around to making that list. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, "Lucky for him that's one of the ten."

Contrast that woman's generous attitude with the epitaph in an Atlanta cemetery that a woman had inscribed on the grave of her unfaithful husband. The epitaph said, "Gone, but not forgiven." Some of us can relate to that emotion.

In today's gospel, Peter has a question for Jesus. "Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive?" The rabbis instructed persons to forgive three times. Peter was

more generous. He doubled the amount and added one more for good measure. “As many as seven times?” he said.

Jesus replies, “Not seven times but seventy-seven times.” He then tells a story about a king who decided to collect the money owed him. He first contacts a man who owed an enormous sum: 10,000 talents. Let me give you some idea about the size of that debt. All the taxes collected annually by Herod the Great when he ruled over Israel amounted to only 800 talents. The amount of the debt, 10,000 talents, was probably close to the total amount of money on deposit in the largest bank in the Roman Empire. In today’s terms, the man owed the king somewhere in the neighborhood of a billion dollars.

There was no way the man could possibly come up with such a huge sum of money, but out of desperation he says to the king, “If you’ll just be patient with me, I’ll pay back everything!” But at the daily wage of the time, it would take one hundred million years to pay off such a debt. Nonetheless, the king took pity on the man and forgave the entire debt.

The debtor had been given a new life – but he still acted like his old self. He promptly went to a fellow debtor who owed

him about fifty dollars and demanded to be paid in full, immediately. When the debtor asked for a little time to get the money together, the man roughed him up and had him thrown in jail.

The king discovered how this man treated his own debtor. He was outraged. He reinstated the man's original debt, had him tortured, and jailed him for life.

Now here's the interesting thing about this story: the man who had been forgiven much had no legal obligation to forgive anyone who owed him money. He had every legal right to collect the debts owed him. When he insisted that the man who owed him fifty dollars pay up, he was acting within his rights. He was doing nothing illegal.

Jesus, however, goes beyond legality. Once we have experienced grace in our lives, Jesus is saying, that experience becomes the model for all our relationships with other people. Because we have been forgiven by God, we can and should forgive others. In other words, God's forgiveness of us makes our forgiveness of others possible.

Which brings us back to Peter's question: "How far are we expected to go with this forgiveness thing?" But that's the wrong question! The real question is, "How much do I forego

my legal rights in order to salvage a broken relationship? How do I stretch the limits of my patience – and my forgiveness?” That’s the issue I want to address with you. Let me suggest two steps.

First, you must recognize that something has happened that really deserves your forgiveness. Hurt may lead to forgiveness, but not every hurt requires forgiveness. Has anyone asked you to forgive them for something you never considered needed forgiving? It might have been a passing remark or some teasing or some inadvertent action. There are lots of things which happen to us – things which we ought to have the grace and the grit just to forget.

I remember C.S. Lewis making the distinction between excusing and forgiving. If someone jostles me accidentally and I drop my books or spill coffee or wine on my sleeve, I excuse the action because it didn’t hurt me very much and it was unintended. But if a person does something to injure me or my family, and the hurt will go on hurting for years, I can’t excuse it. I have only the option of forgiving or not forgiving.

So what needs forgiving? I think there are generally two kinds of things that require forgiveness: betrayal and disloyalty. After 15 years of marriage, a husband is unfaithful to his wife; a colleague who was going to recommend you for

a promotion backs out when he finds out the boss is favoring someone else; a sister refuses to help with the expenses of invalid parents while being highly critical of what you are doing; you tell a friend in confidence the deepest secrets of your life and the person thoughtlessly repeats them to the biggest gossip you know – these are acts which deserve confronting and forgiving.

After you recognize the difference between things that need to be forgotten and those that need to be forgiven, there's a second step. Someone must seize the initiative to restore the broken relationship.

On some occasions, the responsibility will fall on the offending party. "But that's the way it should be," most of us think. "People who hurt other people ought to apologize." Though you and I might agree that the offending party should be the one to apologize, Jesus says that among Christians the offended party should take the initiative. That's not the way we handle situations, is it?

Several years ago I talked with a young mother who was bristling with bitterness. Her husband's parents had said some nasty things to her; and there had been a terrible scene. She said to me, "I'll never feel the same toward my in-laws again. Even if they apologize, I'll never forget the

things they said to me.”

I felt sorry for that woman. She was the one suffering most from her hatred, not her in-laws. That’s the most dangerous thing about a refusal to forgive: it eats away at us like acid and eventually destroys our very souls. It embitters us and makes us miserable people who spread misery to others.

Dr. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist who wrote the book *The Road Less Traveled*, says that unless we are able to at least move toward the work of forgiving the person who hurt us, even the person who does not deserve our forgiveness, there will not be any mental or emotional health. While forgiving is not easy, refusing to forgive can take a greater toll on us than forgiving ever could.

Another one of my favorite psychiatrists, Leo Buscalgia, told a story of a young woman who was jilted by her boyfriend. She felt both hurt and rejected. As a result, she had these intense feelings to cause her ex-boyfriend harm in some way. She wanted to hurt the person who hurt her. It became an obsession with her and affected her relationships with other people, and even caused problems at her job. Eventually, though, she realized that for her own well-being she had to forgive. As she wisely put it, “I’m the one in pain, so I’m the one who has got to do something about it.”

She would have to forgive the ex-boyfriend for her own sake. She knew that if she wanted to go on with her life, and to enter into a new and healthier relationship, she had to forgive and forget. And she did forgive. The result was a new beginning to her life. She was able to move past her pain into a hopeful future. (1)

I am not saying that forgiveness is easy. I understand that some of us may have been deeply hurt in our lives. Given our intense pain, we may think forgiveness is not humanly possible. And yet, we who follow Jesus are always being commanded to do things we cannot do. We are commanded to love those who are not loveable. We are called to serve without counting the cost. But the hardest commandment is the commandment to forgive. We are bidden to do it, not because it is humanly possible, but because as we try to do what God commands us to do, the ability to do it is given us by the grace of God.

No one is a greater example of the ability to forgive the unforgiveable than the late Nelson Mandela of South Africa. He spent 27 years in solitary confinement in the notorious Robyn Island prison, yet he was able to lead a democratic, multiracial South Africa without a shot being fired and no one being killed.

When Bill Clinton met Nelson Mandela for the first time, he mentioned that he and his daughter had watched Mandela's release from prison. He then asked, "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed in your face at the time. That's not the Nelson Mandela I know today," Clinton said. "What was that about?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised that you saw that, and I regret that the camera caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day, I thought to myself 'They've taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they're releasing you, but there is nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into a prisoner!'"

It was then that Mandela realized the importance of forgiveness. You can't be free to be a whole person if you are unable to forgive.

When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated President of the Republic of South Africa, he invited the two white guards who guarded his cell for all those years to be with him at the ceremony.

Yes, it's hard to forgive someone who has severely hurt us, but what other hope for our world is there? If we insist on our legal rights, every one of us is doomed. "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" only leads to a blind and toothless world. Jesus invites us to move from the realm of claiming our legal rights into the realm of grace where we don't get what we deserve but something far better – mercy, acceptance and forgiveness. If we want to heal this violent, conflicted world, it has to begin with us. The song is right – "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

If you are feeling bitter or angry because someone has hurt you, then listen. There's no need to live like that any longer. If you have been hurt, forget if you can. And if you can't, then by the grace of God, forgive! Those are really the only two choices you have if you want to be a healthy, happy human being.

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Text – Matthew 18: 21-35

Proper 19, A

1. Leo Buscalgia, *Loving Each Other* (New York: Slack, 1984) 100-102