

The Nature of Forgiveness

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Bible Reading

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if a brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy times seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

“The slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him, and forgave him the debt. “But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. Seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay me what you owe!’

“Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused. Then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

“When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (*Matthew 18:21–35*)

Sermon

And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; he poured out the coins of the money changers, and overturned their tables. (John 2:15)

Jesus laid tremendous emphasis on forgiveness. It is in his prayer. It is in his answer to his disciples, “Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven.” It is in his words, “First be reconciled to your brother; then come offer your gift” (*Matthew 5:24*).

It is so easy to pick up one concept and ride it to death—especially if it seems to agree with our point of view. We can even rationalize contrary data in order to maintain the position we hold. We urge absolute

forgiveness under all circumstances. But was this truly Jesus' way? Is it the right, helpful, useful, and constructive way in all circumstances?

For so many people, Jesus has been "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." But this generality makes a Christ who is not loving, but unkindly indulgent and weakly goodnatured—immorally so; a Christ whose great aim seems to be to "get us off the hook."

I submit that life is not like that; that we are responsible for our acts—and for the consequences that we meet as a result! As a matter of fact, we don't "get off the hook" unless we are frightfully lucky. If we neglect our health, we will pay for it in colds, earlier aging, greater exposure to disease. Carelessness with our income will bring severe problems: lack of provision for age, lack of funds for emergencies, lack of opportunities. We must not forget that one way or another, the price will be paid.

Some of the most pitiable persons I have ever met are ones whose parents always came to the rescue, from childhood through adult life. Forgiveness is not indulgence. Forgiveness is a two-way street. It involves a response on the part of the person who seeks forgiveness. Perhaps that response is an honest acknowledgment of confusion or bewilderment. But this is the foundation of growth: a willingness to accept limitations. It may be a confession of bad judgment or just plain wrongdoing.

Each of these presupposes a willingness to accept reality; to meet courageously the consequences of our actions, or our failure to act. There is no magic way out, even though overindulgence gives the appearance of magic solutions.

Kindness is expressed in firmness that helps us to face life squarely. Of Herod, Jesus said, "Go tell that fox." (*Luke 13:32*). The Pharisees he called "whited sepulchers" (*Matthew 23:27*). The scribes he labeled "hypocrites" (*Matthew 23:13*). And the money changers he drove out of the temple with a scourge.

Jesus could be angry. Jesus could exert force. Jesus could scourge with his tongue. It is not that Jesus must always be "meek and humble," nor predominantly angry and caustic, but that he knew when each was appropriate. You would not make pickles in a sugar syrup, nor would you preserve peaches in vinegar. You use vinegar or sugar, or both, where it is appropriate. So, too, we forgive when it is appropriate: when there is some evidence of a desire to change. But it may be better to withhold it when arrogance responds to tendered forgiveness.

Now I think we need to learn another aspect of forgiveness: we must learn to forgive ourselves.

How many people go through life doing penance for some long-forgotten misdeed? It seems to me that these are seldom willful acts. So often they are from ignorance, from lack of knowledge. Frequently they are from a combination of circumstances beyond our control. How long must we feel guilty over past deeds, whether willful or accidental? Is, as it were, hell eternal?

I don't know how long. But I do know this: there must be an end to it. It must be cut off. When the past is done, we cannot change it. We must see new goals, reach for them, and let the past be finished. Reinforcing our guilt by continual acts of penance and repeated confession only leads to frustration—for the past cannot be changed.

But this moment can be changed. And tomorrow may benefit from the errors of today. Yes, we need to forgive ourselves, and turn our faces toward the sun. Let the darkness of yesterday fade in the light of

each morning's dawn. And having forgiven ourselves, we will much more appropriately be able to forgive others.

How can we understand forgiving if we cannot forgive ourselves? Forgiving is not as simple as I once thought. But it is richer for its complexities. And it is more abiding when it comes from a deeper understanding.

Prayer

O God, many times we have asked you for forgiveness, and you have forgiven us as often as we have returned to you. Help us, we pray, to forgive others as you have forgiven us. When we feel anger rising within us at the hurts and wrongs and injustices done to us, help us to respond with a constructive understanding rather than harsh condemnation. Yet help us also to respond with realism and prudence, expressing our forgiveness where it will be accepted and returned, but withholding its expression when those whom we would forgive will only trample it under foot, and turn and tear us to pieces. Help us to show our forgiveness and our kindness with intelligence and thoughtfulness, not with unthinking indulgence, so that a greater good will come from it. Amen.

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