

FORGIVENESS  
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How casually we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And yet immediately after this phrase in the Lord's Prayer, in the sixth chapter of Matthew, we read Jesus' clear teaching: "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

The story in today's New Testament lesson is spoken by Jesus to illumine this teaching. Forgiveness on our part is required if we are to receive the forgiving love of God. Consider the man in the story. He is an important official who has been serving a king. But, in doing so he has been so unfaithful to the trust put in him that when the king decides on an accounting or a reckoning, it is found that he has a debt of 10,000 talents. Now this is an enormous sum - 10 million dollars. And when he could not pay, the king ordered that he and all his family be sold into slavery and whatever he had, confiscated. There was no way the servant could pay the debt and so he fell on his knees and pleaded for mercy and time. And the miracle happened. Not only was he spared the cruel fate of slavery, the lot of insolvent debtors according to law, but also inexplicably the king cancelled the debt and he went out a free man.

And just as he leaves, he happens upon a man who owes him 100 dinari - a measly 20 dollars! And he takes this poor debtor by the throat, demanding payment. He, who has just been absolved of a debt of millions, insisting on his 20 bucks, and refusing to grant this poor wretch time to repay.

The mean official gets his reward, though. The king hears about his action and the unmerciful one winds up in bondage, with the original obligation facing him. For once the bad guy gets what he deserves. Justice is served.

But this story is not about justice. It is about love and forgiveness. Jesus tells it in response to Peter's question, "How often should I forgive someone who sins against me?" The old Jewish rule seems to have said three times. Peter asks up to seven times? -probably thinking to appear generous. But Jesus says, "Not seven times, but until seventy times seven". Forgiveness is not a matter of calculating spirit, but overflowing love. This is the spirit of Christ's promise of God's love. It is anticipated in the Old Testament. In Jeremiah, for example, the scripture lesson, we heard the promise of a new covenant where men will be freed from the burden of inherited sin, and a new law of love will be written in their hearts. And the law of love and forgiveness is pointed up in the story of the merciful king and the unmerciful servant.

If the king has forgiven so huge a debt for us, surely we can be forgiving with the minor debts owed us and trespasses against us. And if one does not forgive another, then the king, God, will not forgive him. This is the clear teaching. Let us look at it and see what it means for our lives.

Surely, on a simple level, forgiving and forgiveness make human relationships possible. Imagine what it would be like if we could not say, "Excuse me", or, "I'm sorry" and be reasonably confident to hear, "That's OK", or "No problem" as a response. Simple politeness expresses the respect and concern for another that reflects this rule of forgiveness on a basic level. If you accidentally bump someone, you apologize and expect a polite response - not a shove in retaliation. And we get along as well as we do driving in traffic because of mutual respect for one another's safety. Traffic safety engineers say simple politeness is the key to safe driving. If somebody cuts in on you or fails to yield, it does not help matters to try to cut in on him or to insist on your right of way. Forgiving the infraction will make for fewer fender benders. It might even save your life.

But, of course, there are deeper and more personal examples of hurt, pain, injury at the hands of another. And these are not wiped out by simple polite responses. What do we do when we are really hurt, betrayed, let down or abused? How can we glibly say "forgive" when the cost is so great?

Let us consider what happens when we cannot forgive or when we say, "I can try to forgive, but I can never forget what you have done." Consider first what happens to the situation. It is frozen in its irremediable state of injury. It remains as a permanent alienation. Its effect may remain when the actual occasion of the injury has been long forgotten - as when family feuds continue long after everyone has forgotten who started it, or whose cow got into whose cornfield. Sense of injury turns to resentment, to hate - and hate engenders more hate. It is not by hate that hate is overcome; hate is overcome only by love. This is an old law; so taught the Buddha and so lived Christ.

If we are honest with ourselves, so often we say we cannot forgive because we want to nurse the injury, perpetuate the offense, cultivate our wounded pride. So often it is the case that we have not tried the law of love and found it wanting, but that we have not wanted it and have not tried it. We wanted to nurse the grievance, perpetuate it, not heal it. And so it remains - a permanent cause and source of alienation: the situation cannot improve, but tends to worsen as it invites the spirit of revenge, retribution, and a general exacerbation of the rift, the injury, the alienation.

And consider what this does to you who cannot forgive. The injury is held closer and closer; your negative and hostile attitudes grow stronger; your health can become affected - a sour disposition leads to a sour stomach and all your other relations can become affected as your friends wonder what has come over you, to make you so bitter. We say revenge is sweet, but it is short-lived and turns sour. Revenge turns to bitterness and gall and leaves its mark on you. Revenge might well have been the spirit of the North after the Civil War, but Abraham Lincoln spoke of the task of healing, forgiveness and the binding up of the nation's wounds. The last words of his second inaugural address are famous:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Finally, consider what this unforgiving spirit does to the one who has betrayed you, or injured you, or offended you. No matter how he might feel about the act now, your implacable, unforgiving spirit fixes him with a perennial guilt and affords him no opportunity to make amends even if he wishes. How often we have regretted an unthinking, unkind remark! How terrible it is then if the other is so hurt he will not even hear our apology, our plea to be forgiven. How easy it is for misunderstandings to arise in even the most intimate of family relationships. How terrible it is then for one who feels aggrieved, misunderstood not even to hear the "I'm sorry - forgive me" of the other! How terrible to cut off irrevocably the spouse who is heartily ashamed of his fling, the child who deeply regrets his mistake! The unforgiving spirit is in some sense more guilty than the spirit of malicious injury that evoked it, because it fixes the other with a guilt he cannot remove, writes his sin in permanent ink that cannot be erased, condemns him to a perpetual memory of the offense.

This is what happens if we cannot forgive. But the story reminds us, if we cannot forgive, like that official who could not forgive the \$20 debt, then we cannot be forgiven either - and so the king countermands his forgiveness of the enormous debt owed him. General Ogelthorpe once said to John Wesley, "I can never forgive." And Wesley replied, "Then I hope, sir, that you may never sin." The unforgiving spirit hardens the heart and we bar ourselves from God. The thrust of the story, of course, is that the servant's mean, unforgiving spirit is the cause of his ultimate misery. And we who nurse our grievances, preserve the injury, embitter ourselves, condemn the other in permanent guilt, effectively close ourselves off from the redemptive love of God in ourselves, in the other, and in the situation.

But consider what happens when the path of forgiveness is taken. A creative act is set forth which bridges the gap between the injured and injurer, which heals the rift and overcomes the alienation. It requires going the second mile, meeting the other more than half - way and taking on oneself, absorbing the pain of the offense.

First of all, the focus is now upon overcoming the rift, not preserving it; healing the injury, not nursing the grievance. A possibility of creative change now appears. Forgiveness is a giving back, a restoring of the situation, a giving back to what it was before. When you forgive the thoughtless remark, the mean attempt to damage you, you have in a sense erased it from time, wiped out the sin, restored the situation to what it was before. When you forgive and refuse to

nourish your hurt, you are creatively redeeming the time. The grievance forgiven and forgotten wipes out the cause of the rift and not only restores the situation, but infuses it with a new spirit of love and understanding.

And consider what your creative act of forgiveness has done for the other. You have freed him from his sense of guilt - you have given back what only you can give: an assurance that the injury is forgotten, an erasure is made in the record of your lives, a black episode wiped out, and the old relationship restored. You have restored a relationship that only you could restore.

How can one really forget a deep injury through forgiveness?

Perhaps in a sense one cannot; the sears of memory may remain. But the act of creative redemptive love in forgiveness does not allow this to affect the new relationship. Hosea, the prophet, used the example of his wife's infidelity to serve as a symbol of Israel's faithlessness to God. The memory must have been agonizing. And yet, speaking in the name of God, he cries, "How can I give thee up? How shall I deliver thee, O Israel? I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger."

The ancient code of Hammurabi, 1750 BC, has an arresting provision giving legal status to forgiveness. If a woman is found guilty of infidelity, she and the guilty involved male are separately tied up and thrown into a river. The code provides that the husband has the option to save his wife before she drowns. If he does so, the other is also retrieved and both will go free, no longer be guilty.

One can imagine such a drama - a struggle like Hosea's. To forgive like this is to reach way beyond injury and hurt and to share in the redemptive love of God that restores, and heals, and saves.

And this suggests what forgiveness does for the one forgiving. A hurt is overcome, a burden of pain is faced and borne, a painful separation is bridged, and a restored relationship made possible. There is pain, there is hurt: but out of it comes something creative. And somehow one senses God's redemptive power at work in oneself.

Is it not wrong to step out of the court of the king having been forgiven millions and not forgive a debt of \$20? Is it not wrong to have received so much from God and his sacrificial love through Christ, and not give - and yes, sacrifice - in turn? But we have been deeply hurt, we say; the pain is great! And the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, was mortally wounded by the sins of man. The world He loved betrayed Him, drove great spikes into His hands and feet and sides. And yet He said, "Father, forgive." Can we, His servants, do less?

O God, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.