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WHY SEEK FORGIVENESS?

Once upon a time, as all good stories begin, a Mennonite farmer bequeathed his farm to his two sons. At first they worked the land together, sharing labor, splitting the profits. As time passed, they married, built separate homes, raised sons and daughters of their own, divided the land, and ran neighboring farms. Sadly, they grew apart, rarely spoke. Then one took offense, the other was outraged, and a bitter quarrel ensued.

One morning the older brother rose to see that a lake had appeared overnight in what had been the meadow between their homes. His brother's bulldozer sat where a great rock pile once stood. Now the rocks formed a curved wall that turned a meandering stream into a rising flood.

"Well, I'll be!" he said. "Then I'll go him one better. I'm calling the nursery and ordering a dozen twelve-foot pine trees to block his view." The day after the trees went in, the younger brother installed shutters to seal off his windows. The older brother angrily countered by moving six hog houses and a hundred sows and shoats upwind of his brother's house . . . who replied by cutting off the water pipeline to their common spring, which was on the side of his hill.

So the older brother went for the throat. The old wooden bridge on their shared private road would have to go. This would force his brother to take a long detour to the main road. He called for a wrecker to drop the bridge and a load of lumber to erect safety barriers.

The next morning he met the young carpenter that was sent out, gave him his orders, and withdrew to await the next move. That evening he went down to survey the wreckage. As he rounded the hill, there stood a newly rebuilt bridge—wider, more beautiful, with craftsman railings. And his brother stood in the middle, marveling at the workmanship. He turned and came toward him with outstretched hand.

“I can’t believe you’d do this for us, after all I’ve said and done to you. It takes a big man to take the first step. I’m sorry for my behavior.” They seized each other’s hands, then turned to see the carpenter swinging into his pickup.

“Hey, wait,” they both shouted to him, “not so fast. Please stay; we’ve got a lot of rebuilding to do around here.”

“I can see that you do,” he replied, “but how can I do anything else when there are so many bridges to build?”



Forgiveness, the interpersonal bridge that reconnects alienated sisters and brothers, friends, and enemies is so difficult to build. Is it truly possible? Can anyone actually forgive, or is “forgiveness” a special kind of denial that allows us to pretend that all is well again? Or perhaps it is a kind of memory fatigue that overwhelms our anger when we grow exhausted with resenting? Or is it a divine gift that allows us to finish the past and reopen the future? Is it a one-way action of ending the hot hostilities or calling off the cold war? Or does it take two to do that deep kind of reconciling called *forgiving* in the biblical story?

The more familiar stories of forgiveness are not two-way. They tend to be the individual stories of one person finding the mystery of a forgiving heart while the other person in the drama goes another way. The following story offers such a pattern of unilateral lonely movement from rage to a new beginning. Consider its deeper meaning to explore the alternate story of finding healing, which is the second of these two poles that form these contrasting understandings of forgiveness.

Betrayal and Bitterness

“This is it. I’m calling it quits with her! I’ve had it.” Having said it aloud to the barren desert, the man—lean, with that stringiness of muscle and etching of face that tell of hard work and time’s abrasion—stood up from his rocky seat and began picking his way down the butte to the ranch. A long night—in fact, a whole decade—of wrestling with anger lay behind him. Now he would wash his hands of his wife in the quietest way he could.

It had all begun so differently. The tenderness of courtship, those first expressions of love, the excitement when a little daughter was born, then their two sons. The ranch was building itself into security; friendships were knit into the fabric of community. Their shared faith and life in God lay beneath it all.

Then—the first night when she wouldn’t talk. So unlike her! The children chatted as usual; she smiled. But something gray and impenetrable, some distance that could never be crossed, had appeared between them. Her quietness stretched across months. It became too painful, so they turned for help. First to their minister, but nothing cracked the shell of silence. Then to their doctor, but nothing seemed clear. To a psychiatrist, but nothing opened communication.

Years passed, years in which the silent coexistence slowly embittered their daughter, driving her to a job in the East. The scars began to appear in the other children. He spent all the time he could with them, trying to make up for it all.

Then she found a new friend to lean on—a liquid friend. At times, the alcohol made things easier as she passed through the talkative stage and her words would begin a tentative response to the love and acceptance he’d given her through the bitter years.

One night, when she’d had a drop too much, she began to talk. Once started, there seemed no stopping. A wistful memory of happy recollections of those first years together. Then she froze in silence, groping for some opening, some crack in the wall of years past. Then, at last, the story surfaced.

There was a man who used to come by the ranch routinely in his work. He’d stop by the house too. For her, it was a friendly break in the lonesome daytime hours with the kids at school. For him, it soon became more. For a while, she laughed at his advances; but they grew on her, until in a moment of unexpected passion began the long

relationship. Years of festered fear and guilt spilled as she told it. “You will never know who it was,” she said, “Anyway, it’s the last person you’d ever suspect.”

“Who was it?” he demanded, feeling hatred begin to churn in his viscera. For ten years he had accepted it all; but now, knowing that his worst fears were true, that a betrayal had taken place, he could not stop the spread of anger through him. Day after day he prodded, until he got the name. His oldest, though not best friend. A man he’d trusted implicitly, one who had everything he himself had wished for his own family life. Something soured and died within him.

“I’ll get him; I’ll get him,” he said again and again. “I’ll burn him in front of his wife. She’s a proud one. She’ll rub him in the dirt until he’s face-to-face with another worm.”

All that night he had wandered bitter-blind over familiar trails. Now hot with rage, now chilled with hate. Morning found him frozen with revenge. And it was Sunday.

“Why I went to church that morning I’ll never know,” he told me later. “Something in me I could not hear must have been crying for help. I stepped through the door, and there he stood, hand out, the same old smile.

“My hand froze to my pocket. I struggled for what may have been seconds. To me it was eternity.

“‘I’ll never forgive that man,’ I’d vowed again and again. ‘He’ll pay for every painful moment I’ve suffered through ten miserable years.’

“But now, a heart full of hatred fought with a truth that broke over me as I faced the enemy.

“That truth I’d prayed automatically since childhood, ‘Forgive me my debts just as I forgive my debtors.’ And the echoing warning, ‘If you will not forgive, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your failures.’

“Then, somehow, I took the hand of the man who’d betrayed everything I loved. I began to understand how brutally hard it is to forgive. Slowly the residues of bitterness begin to drain out of me, and I found the first signs of courage to try again. It would not be easy to find a way through the massive barrier separating me from my wife. If, someday, we could say to each other, ‘I accept you just as I did that day we pledged to love and cherish until death,’ then healing could work its slow change.

“I thought I could never forgive, but I suspect that no matter what has been done against you, no matter what hurt has been inflicted, forgiveness is possible.”



This is a story of courage, of the slow discovery of a forgiving heart, of one man’s journey toward opening the soul, but is it a story of forgiveness? It is focused on the inner battle between rage at injustice and the realization that both parties are in need of healing. It says little about the pain of the wife, the suffering of the children, the blindness of the friend/enemy. It speaks only of the private inner movement of the betrayed.

Is this forgiveness? In the common language of Western culture, of common Christian piety, of most evangelical teaching, this is the heart of forgiveness. But in the teaching of Jesus, this is only the first step. It is the “restoring perceptions” step of the respect we call “love of neighbor” or “love of the enemy.” Both of these are the base of all forgiving, but they are not forgiveness. To forgive, one must go beyond the recognition that the other who has wronged you is a fellow human being who is of worth and value (the step that leads to restoring love for the other). That step beyond is the crucial step Christ called “forgiving.” It is a step that offers or invites repentance and that risks or trusts the self in restoring or reconstructing the central relationship and all the interconnected relationships that form the interlocking web of the story.

But before we can explore what it is that we truly mean by forgiving, how far we need to go, and what steps we might take, we must ask the prior question: Why would anyone seek to forgive when resentment feels so good, when anger seems so justified, and when healing would cost so much? That is the prior question. Why try? Why seek it at the outset? Why not take the safer paths of flight or fight?

Why Should One Forgive?

When the injury is so painful, who can avoid asking, Why should I forgive? What’s the point? Why shouldn’t the person who has wronged me be made to pay for his or her sins? Why shouldn’t he be punished? Why shouldn’t she suffer?

If any conviction about such things comes naturally, it's the deep-seated belief that "somebody's got to pay." Forgiveness seems too easy. There should be blood for blood. Eye for eye.

If it's a tooth in question, one can require tooth for tooth in retaliation. But what repayment can anyone demand from the man who has broken your home or betrayed your daughter? What can you ask from the woman who has ruined your reputation? So few sins can be paid for, and so seldom does the victim possess the power or the advantage to demand payment. In most cases, "making things right" is beyond possibility. How can you get back what another has taken from you emotionally, socially, relationally?

Repayment is impossible! (Although at first flush, it is desirable.)

What then of revenge? If you cannot get equal payment or restitution from the offender, at least you can get vengeance. If the one who wronged you cannot repay you, perhaps you can pay him back in kind, tit for tat. Serve the same sauce. Now "an eye for an eye" takes on new meaning.

But here, too, there is an intrinsic and insurmountable problem—as you try to get even, you actually become even with your enemy. You bring yourself to the same level, and below. There is a saying that goes, "Doing an injury puts you below your enemy; revenging an injury makes you but even; only forgiving sets you above."

Revenge not only lowers you to your enemy's lowest level; what's worse, it boomerangs; it continues the injury within you. Revenge is not its own reward; it is its own *punishment*. In effect, it aims the weapon of revenge at oneself in hope of hurting the enemy with the kick of the gun's recoil. Then it shoots the self in the foot—you have no moral leg to stand on—and it reloads and shoots the other foot in cyclical resentment. It spites the self in sustaining spiteful feelings toward the other. Revenge is a worthless weapon. It corrupts the avenger while continuing the enemy's wrongdoing. It initiates an endless flight down the bottomless stairway of rancor, reprisals, and ruthless retaliation. It accepts the foe's terms, tactics, and treachery and blindly repeats it.

Just as repayment is impossible, revenge is impotent! (Although it wears the mask of power.)

No repayment? No revenge? But what of the soul-satisfaction of resentment? In its raw form, resentment takes the soul hostage, holds itself captive to the offender, binds the bitter heart to the op-

pressor. Nursing a grudge until it grows into a full-blown hate—hoofs, horns, tail, and all—offers a sort of stubborn self-comfort, but when hatred is harbored, it grows, spreads, and contaminates all other emotions. Ultimately, hatred is the costliest of companions. The warmth it provides fuels deeper fires that sear the soul on both conscious and unconscious levels.

Hidden hatred turns trust into suspicion, compassion into caustic criticism, and faith in others into cold cynicism. Incubated hatred can elevate blood pressure, ulcerate a stomach, accelerate stress, or invite a coronary.

Hatred—the wish for another’s destruction—is self-destructive. It is more prudent to pardon than to resent. The exorbitant cost of anger, the extravagant expense of hatred, and the unreasonable interest we pay on grudges make resentment a questionable pleasure at the least and a costly compulsion at the best, or worst. It is wisest to deal with hatred before the sting swells, before a molehill mushrooms into a mountain, before a spark kindles conflagration.

What a strange thing bitterness is! It boils up within us when we need it least, when we’re down and in desperate need of all our freedom, ability, and energy to get back up. And what strange things bitterness can do to us. Like a permanent plaster cast, it slowly sets, perhaps protecting us from further pain but ultimately holding us rigid in frozen animation or rigor mortis. Feelings turn to stone; responses become concrete. Bitterness is paralysis. Parts of the personality no longer respond to signals from the soul.

A young man falsely accused and penalized by his high school principal turns sullen, angry, and bitter. His faith in justice and authority dies. He may wait years to begin to thaw.

A girl betrayed by a guy she trusted is forced, becomes pregnant, then turns bitter and withdrawn. Her faith in humanity ends. She may need a lifetime to come to terms with the evil done.

A woman deserted by her husband and left to be both mother and father to their two sons turns angry at life—at the whole universe. Her faith in God and everything good has ended. She cannot live long enough to let the fire burn out on its own.

Bitterness is such a potent paralyzer of mind, soul, and spirit that it can freeze reason and emotion. Our attitudes turn cynical, uncaring, critical, and caustic. Where we once ventured to place faith in others, now we trust no one. Turtlelike, we withdraw inside protec-

tive shells of distrust, burned once, twice shy.

Letting bitterness seal us in can be an excuse for acting irresponsibly. Being responsible in any painful situation usually calls for us to accept our part of the blame for the way things are. But being bitter about it can save us all that. We can scapegoat others. We may feel fully justified in blaming God for our troubles and difficulties.

Bitterness is a cyclical, repetitive, tightly closed circle of self-centered pain. It carries us around and around a senseless arc—around and around ourselves. Like a child learning to ride a bicycle, knowing how to ride but not how to stop, we pedal on and on, afraid to quit, yet wishing for someone to grab the bars, stop our circling, and let us off. Bitterness is useless. Repayment is impossible. Revenge is impotent. Resentment is impractical.

What Is This Forgiveness We Are Seeking?

When the forgiveness we understand is a private process of inner healing, not an interpersonal bridge that can stretch across the empty void between two injured persons to reconcile differences and restore relationships, it feeds and fosters acts of resentment, revenge, retaliation, or demanding repayment. Since these are not possible or practical, the solution is to cut off the connection with the offender, with the community that permitted or ignores the offense, and with all those who appear to be complicit in the offense. Rejecting all relationships that have failed us is the most common “solution” in our contemporary Western culture, among Christians and non-Christians alike. Cut off the old connections, withdraw from all interaction, live at a distance, avoid intimacy or involvement. Above all, do not risk working at forgiveness.

As common as this option is, it is destructive of human relationships, fragments personality, and it is inconsistent with the basic values of any faith commitment.

Only if you have no need of forgiveness yourself do you dare consider hesitating to forgive another. The two go hand in hand. Jesus linked these as two aspects of the one and same reality. “If you forgive other people their failures, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you will not forgive . . . , neither will your Heavenly Father forgive you your failures” (Matthew 6:14–15).

“I never forgive,” General James Oglethorpe, the governor of

Georgia, said to the young John Wesley.

“Then I hope, sir,” replied Wesley, “that you never sin!”

George Herbert, the English poet, hymnist, and pastor once wrote, “One who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which all must pass if they would ever reach heaven; for everyone has need to be forgiven.” Forgiving and being forgiven are all of one piece; in giving we receive, accepting those who have injured us we open ourselves to God’s acceptance. There is no sequence of time or priority. The two are one. Anyone who loves God shows it in neighbor-love. The rush of God’s strength, which brings forgiveness, gives in turn the ability to forgive—and forgive again. Paradoxically, the two are not two but one. Contradictory as this sounds in proposition, it is clear when seen in story. A story Jesus told is the perfect paradigm (see Matthew 18:21–35).



A certain poor man owed his king \$2 million. He couldn’t pay, so the king ordered the man, his wife, his children, and his property sold to pay the debt. The man, face in the dust, pleaded with the king, “Oh, sir, be patient! I’ll pay it all.”

“Two million dollars? Impossible!” said the king. But then, in pity, he forgave him all his debt.

The man, overjoyed, left the king. Outside he met a neighbor who owed him twenty dollars.

“Pay up,” he demanded.

“Just be patient, and I’ll have it for you next week.”

“Nothing doing,” said the man, and had him thrown into the debtors’ prison.

The king got wind of it all and summoned the man. “You evil wretch,” he said, “here I canceled that tremendous debt for you, and you have the colossal gall to be unforgiving of a few dollars. You have sentenced yourself! Jail until you pay \$2 million.”

Then said Jesus to His listeners, “God can do no other unless each of you forgives your brother from the heart.”