

The Challenge of Forgiving



I was reading my devotional Scriptures this week and came across an interesting exchange between Jesus and His disciples. In Luke 17:4-5 Jesus says about forgiveness, *“If he [your brother] sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”* The apostles said to the Lord, *“Increase our faith!”* I see a clear connection between forgiving someone and needing more faith. It is a spiritual challenge for any of us to forgive someone else. It takes faith for miracles and, according to the disciples’ response, more faith to forgive someone.

This Scripture caused me to pause and reflect on a few reasons for forgiving others.

First, it is an attractive quality. Bitterness and unforgiveness can mar a person’s character and make him or her unpleasant to be around. We have all known people carrying offenses over past hurts and have seen how it hinders them from moving forward. They are chained to some event in the past and are missing the joys of a life free from resentment.

One day when Stan Mooneyham was walking with some friends along a trail in East Africa, he detected a pleasant aroma in the air. He looked up in the trees and around at the bushes in an effort to discover its

source. His friends saw what he was doing and told him to look down at the small blue flower growing along the path. Each time someone crushed the tiny blossoms under their feet, more of its sweet perfume was released into the air. His friends then informed him, “We call it the forgiveness flower.”

Second, forgiveness can keep us from destroying ourselves. I may think that I am punishing someone else by withholding forgiveness, but it is quite likely that my attitude doesn't faze that person. Gwen and I heard a Christian counselor say something to a group of pastors that I have never forgotten: “Unforgiveness is like taking poison and waiting for the other guy to die.”

A friend of mine who was skilled in personal ministry told me that more than 90 percent of the cases of oppression he dealt with were rooted in unforgiveness. Unforgiveness doesn't hurt the other person nearly as much as it will destroy you.

Another reason for forgiving others is that our forgiveness can help someone understand the forgiveness God has for him or her.

In the collection of stories, *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, the account is given of Father O'Malley. He served in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in a small town called Grass Valley, California. On a Saturday night he received a call from the Auburn hospital. A patient was dying and the nurse on duty thought he might want last rites. There was a fierce storm blowing and it took Father O'Malley until past midnight to make the 30 mile journey. No one passed him on the way, the roads were so bad.

When he arrived at the hospital, the nurse who had called met him and said, “I'm so glad you're here. The man I called you about is slipping fast, but he is still coherent. He's been an alcoholic for years, and his liver has finally given out. He's been here for a couple of weeks this time and hasn't had one single visitor. He lives up in the woods, and no one around here knows much about him. He always pays his bill with cash and doesn't seem to want to talk much.”

Father O'Malley went into the room and asked the patient, a man named Tom, “Would you like to make your confession?” Tom responded forcefully, “Absolutely not.” Then he added, “But I would like to talk with you a bit before I go.” They talked until dawn.

Just before the sun came up Tom said, “Father, when I was young, I did something that was so bad that I haven’t spent a single day since without thinking about it and reliving the horror. I worked as a switchman on the railroad all my life, until I retired a few years ago and moved up here to the woods. Thirty-two years, two months and 11 days ago, I was working in Bakersfield on a night kind of like tonight. It was two nights before Christmas and to push away the gloom of a stormy night the whole yard crew drank all through swing shift. I was drunker than the rest of them, so I volunteered to go out in the rain and wind and push the switch for the northbound 8:30 freight. I guess I was more drunk than I thought I was because I pushed the switch in the wrong direction. At 45 miles an hour that freight train slammed into a passenger car at the next crossing and killed a young man, his wife and their two daughters.”

Father O’Malley put his hand on Tom’s shoulder and said, “If I can forgive you, God can forgive you, because in that car were my mother, my father and my two older sisters.”

There is power in our forgiveness because it helps people understand that God is able and willing to forgive all our sins.

The most compelling reason for forgiveness, to me, is the example of what Jesus has done for us. He is willing to forgive all our sins if we simply ask Him.

Sir Walter Scott, the noted author (and Christian) had difficulty with the idea of “turning the other cheek.” But one day Scott was taking a walk when a stray dog began running toward him. Scott picked up a rock and threw it toward the dog to chase it away. His intent wasn’t to hit the dog, but to startle it. His aim was straighter and his delivery stronger than he had intended, however, for he hit the animal and broke its leg. Instead of running off, the dog limped over to him and licked his hand. Sir Walter never forgot that touching response. He said, “That dog preached the Sermon on the Mount to me as few ministers have ever presented it.”

No matter how we have sinned against God and no matter what we have done to offend Jesus, He forgives when we ask Him. That is what He wants us to do for others. And we say, when confronted with the challenge, (in the words of the New Living Translation) “We need more faith. Tell us how to get it.”