

Forgiveness And Forgiving

One of the most wonderful things about the Good News of our salvation through Jesus Christ is that it is absolutely free!

We can't buy it, we can't earn it, and we don't have to search for it.

All we have to do is believe that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins and that God has forgiven all of them.

We now live in a state of grace, which means that in addition to forgiving our past sins: *God forgives our future sins even before we have committed them.*

It is the greatest gift anyone has ever received—or ever will receive.

And all we can do is say, "Thank you, Lord."

But once we have received this gift, God expects us to share it.

In fact He has said that either we share it or we will lose it.

And if we lose it, we are right back where we started: guilty of our past sins and for all those we commit in the future.

That is why the Lord included a warning in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US."

As we forgive others, so will He forgive us.

Then, to make sure we understand exactly what this means, he added: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Phew!

Did you know the Lord said that?

I don't know about you, but I have a way of sort of "skipping over"—or even blocking out—things in the Bible that I wish weren't there.

Things that stick in my craw.

This may be one of those things.

Would God really withdraw the forgiveness of my sins that He gave me so freely at my baptism?

You bet He would; He just said so.

So what do we do with this? Do we have a problem forgiving people?

Do you harbor resentment against someone who said something demeaning about you to a friend of yours?

Might you have trouble forgiving a drunk driver who slammed into your car and crippled your five-year-old daughter for life?

Can you forgive Adolf Hitler for exterminating six million Jews?

Forgiveness isn't always easy.

In today's Gospel lesson, the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus makes this point sharply.

A man who owes a prodigious amount of money to a king—the equivalent of millions of dollars—begs the king to be patient with him and let him have time to repay it.

The king takes pity on the man and forgives his debt entirely.

Then the man goes out and sees someone who owes him the equivalent of a few days' wages and demands payment.

When his debtor begs for time to repay it he turns him down and has him thrown into prison.

When the king hears about the harshness of the man's treatment of his debtor, he summons him back in, restores his huge debt, and tells him that he will be thrown into prison and tortured until he repays it.

That means that he will be imprisoned and tortured forever, since it's hard to earn money to pay back a debt while you're being tortured in prison.

The lesson is clear: we have been forgiven so much; how can we refuse to forgive each other so little?

Jesus sums it up: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

*"...if you do not forgive men their sins, **your Father will not forgive your sins.**"*

If you refuse to forgive those who sin against you—be they spouse or parent or child or friend or enemy—you are back in your sins.

And if you're back in your sins, you're headed for the fires of hell and all the Good News in the universe won't save you.

Refusal to forgive others will make your life in this world bitter and your existence in the next world agony.

But how can this be? Isn't the forgiveness of sins a free gift?

Yes it is.

But it's a gift that we are commanded to share with others—a gift that is intended to keep on giving.

God in heaven has forgiven us tens of thousands of our own sins so that we can forgive a few hundred sins of other people here on earth.

And if we refuse to share the forgiveness we've received we will be handed over to the Torturer **forever**.

It's that simple.

So *how* do we forgive? What exactly *is* forgiveness?

First of all, let's talk about what forgiveness is not.

First of all, forgiveness is not something we feel; it's not an emotion.

We can't get rid of our emotions by an act of our will; they have a life of their own.

All we can do is enjoy them or suffer with them as the case may be, and try to control them and live with them.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is an intentional act, an act of the will of which we—as creatures who have received forgiveness—are capable.

In the second place, forgiveness is not forgetting.

Forgetting is a passive process where things recede from our consciousness and finally vanish from our memory.

We can't just will ourselves to forget.

Forgiving, on the other hand, is an act of the will that involves a conscious decision.

Our model is God, who *chooses* not to remember our sins.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says: *"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."*

God, who is omniscient is also omnipotent, which means that He—and He alone—can choose to forget.

And God chooses to forget our past sins and overlook our future sins—all for the sake of Jesus' suffering and dying for them on the cross.

The Bible describes this metaphorically by saying that He has "clothed us with Christ's righteousness so that our sins are covered from His sight."

God can choose to forget: would that we could but unfortunately we cannot.

Finally, forgiving is not excusing.

It's not saying that what someone did to you is OK, that it's not really a sin.

Forgiveness is just the opposite: it's saying that even though what they did to you WAS a sin, you choose to forgive it.

You strive to look at the person who has offended you in the same way that God looks upon you: by looking at him through the eyes of Christ.

When you do this you are showing God's mercy, God's grace, God's love.

You are striving to love your enemy.

Now if forgiveness is not a feeling, and if it's not forgetting or excusing the sins of others, then what exactly is it?

Forgiveness is a conscious commitment that involves four decisions or promises we make to ourselves and to God.

First, we refuse to dwell on the offense that was given—to rehearse it over and over in our thoughts.

Second, we decide not to retaliate—to use it against the person who sinned against us.

Third, we decide to not tell other people about the offense.

And fourth, we strive to not let the offense come between us and the person who has offended us.

These are four decisions or promises that we have it within our power to make and, with God's help, to keep.

When we do this, we reject the world's way, which is the way of getting even, and we leave the judging and avenging to God.

Jesus has some practical advice for us when it comes to forgiving.

When Peter asked him how many times he was required to forgive a brother who sinned against him—even up to seven times?—Jesus answered, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seven times seventy times."*

Why is that good, practical advice?

Because if we strive to forgive someone, **no matter how many times they offend us**, and if we stick to that course, long before we ever get to four-hundred and ninety times, forgiveness will have become such a habit, such a way of life for us, that it will come naturally.

Forgiving people will simply become part of our Christian character.

Now I ask you to stop and consider what a joyful state that would be—to harbor no ill will, no grudges, no desires to even the score—with anyone.

To be able to look at someone who had offended you not as an enemy but as a person who needs your love?

I submit to you that if we could feel that way, we would have a foretaste of heaven.

And this brings us to the Gospel side of forgiving. *When it comes to forgiveness, the forgiver is even more blessed than the one he forgives.*

Let me give you an example of how that works. (I think I've shared this experience with some of you.)

Many years ago, when I was in the business world, I needed to hire an assistant to my secretary.

I knew that my secretary would have to work with whomever I hired, so I asked her if she would like to help interview candidates for the position.

She said that she would, so I included her in the interviewing process.

A few weeks later, after we had interviewed several candidates, another person in the department informed me that my secretary was griping about having to do the interviews.

Well, that frosted me.

In the first place I couldn't imagine why she wouldn't *want* to have some input to the hiring process since she was going to have to work with whomever I hired.

In the second place, if she hadn't wanted to interview applicants, why hadn't she just said so?

I hadn't brought any pressure to bear on her; I was offering it as an opportunity, not a duty.

Now I felt like I had gone the extra mile to include her and had the gesture thrown back in my face.

The problem was that there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I couldn't broach the subject with her because it would violate the confidence she had placed in the employee she was griping to.

So I was stuck with my own anger, stewing in my own juice and it REALLY HACKED ME OFF!

Then, an unlikely thought popped into my mind: what if I could just forgive her?

What a novel idea for a Christian!

Then it struck me that whether I forgave her or not wouldn't make any difference to her: she didn't even know that I had heard about her griping, let alone whether or not I'd forgiven her for it.

The only one who would be blessed by my forgiving her would be ME.

I would be rid of the rancor, the bitterness, the feeling of being betrayed and lied to, the anger, the hurt.

And that thought reminded me of something I had once heard about nursing a grudge—that it was like taking poison yourself and hoping it would kill the other person.

So I prayed to God to help me put the whole thing aside and he answered my prayer.

He reminded me that I had done the same kind of carping and gossiping myself, and may well have caused hurt feelings and anger in others just like my secretary had in me.

He reminded me of all the good qualities my secretary had, qualities which far outweighed this one offense.

Most important of all, He showed me that just as there is grace for us when we fail to obey his commands, there is blessing for us when we do.

Forgive someone four-hundred and ninety times?

No problem—after the first four or five times, it's a breeze

Amen.