



Pilgrimage:

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FORGIVENESS

To forgive is one of the hardest things a human being ever has to do. In its fulness, forgiveness is only really possible for a Christian. Forgiveness is dependent upon the Cross of Christ; apart from the Cross it is impossible. There are, of course, many ersatz forgivenesses, many ways of dealing with the hurt of sin which do not really deal with it at all. This is only natural: that we should develop seemingly easier ways of dealing with a painful and difficult situation.

We try, for example, the denial approach. We deny that we have really been sinned against. We deny that there is anything to forgive. This has the advantage of delivering us from having to forgive. When he who has sinned against us comes and asks forgiveness, we say to him, "Whatever for?" making it abundantly clear that we have not forgiven him. This approach to forgiveness enables us to continue to nurse the hurt which goes along with the sin, while at the same time maintaining the illusion that we are not offending against the command to forgive. It is a commonly used technique of self-deception, especially by those proud of their righteousness. By denying that we have been sinned against, we deliver ourselves from the requirement of forgiveness.

Another, equally false, approach to forgiveness is the attempt to ignore the sin and its effects. In this case, when we are sinned against, we pretend that it really doesn't matter. We deny (to ourselves) that we have been hurt by the sin. We deny that there has been sin at all. Then there is nothing to forgive. If the sinner comes to us, we shrug it off as if nothing wrong had ever occurred. This amounts to a refusal of his apology, and so does nothing to repair the damage that the sin has done to the relationship.

Or we may admit the sin and refuse to forgive. It seems too hard for us; the hurt is too great. We console ourselves with the thought that eventually the hurt will pass, and we will forget what has been done. For the present, though, we see nothing that we can do about the situation. We think that while eventually we will forget, there is no possibility that we can forgive.

In fact, many Christians are frustrated by their inability to forgive. Even when we want to, it seems to be beyond our power. We know that there must be something more than waiting to forget, and yet we cannot quite seem to do it, whatever it is.

The key to Christian forgiveness (which is the only true forgiveness) is the Cross of Jesus. That is the way that we are forgiven for our sins against God. It is the way God forgives. It is the model for the way we are to forgive each other. There is a considerable amount of truth in the old saw, "To err is human, to forgive divine" -- at least in the second part of it. For we stand in need of that divine model of forgiveness. Left to our own devices, we would never (as fallen humans) discover that forgiveness was even something good, much less how to go about it. That is all to be found in the revelation of our human nature given to us in Jesus Christ.

How does Jesus go about forgiveness? The overriding factor is His love for us sinners. He first recognizes that our sin is an offence against God's holiness. It is serious, infinitely serious, since it is a violation of God's creation. It is serious enough to pervert creation, and to separate man from God by a chasm which cannot be bridged from the human side. The recognition of the seriousness of the sin is the first step in forgiveness. No glossing over. No pretending that it doesn't really matter. No pretending that the sinner meant well and therefore there is no sin. Sin is evil, and cannot be forgiven until it is recognized as such.

The second step is to overcome the sin with sacrificial love. This is the action of the Cross. Overcoming sin with love requires sacrifice. For the love must absorb the hurt which sin inflicts. Sin does wound the one sinned against. That hurt must be accepted, as Jesus did upon the Cross, in order for the sin to be forgiven. There is no cheap forgiveness. The hurt is accepted in love. Because Jesus loved us He was willing to bear the pain that our sin inflicted upon Him. When we are sinned against, our love for our fellow man must be our foundation for forgiving. That love will require of us sacrifice: the sacrifice of the Cross.

When we forgive, we are giving up all rights to be compensated for the pain that sin has caused. We are forgiving the debt, in other words, expecting no return or payment. This is not easy. Often we will want the other person to know how much he has hurt us before

we forgive him. We want him to suffer a little as well. We may tell ourselves that we are just putting off forgiveness a little while, but even so, we are not forgiving as Christ forgave us. Sin does entail a debt. We expect some compensation from the sinner before we are to put the relationship right again. But forgiveness requires that we pay the debt. The love which we have for the other person will make up what is owing. We do not always feel like doing this, and we justify our feelings by appealing to justice. "He is the sinner, he ought to pay." But this is not how Christ treats us -- He is our model, as we must always remember. He did not require of us that we should first come to Him and pay off what we owed by reason of our sin against God. Rather He forgave it out of the fulness of His love. It was free gift. We are to do likewise, whether we feel like it or not, and even if it costs us something.

Sometimes, we are slow to forgive because we enjoy having the other person in our debt. We like having him owe us and we may make use of the debt to be paid off in some other way. If our spouse has sinned, we may try to get a certain amount of attention and service out of her (him) before we forgive. That is, of course, not Christian. Christian forgiveness seeks no compensation, but forgives the entire debt, paying it not out of the sinner's account, but out of the love of the one offended.

Another obstacle to forgiveness is that we fail to recognize that forgiveness is what is called for in the situation. Sometimes this has the form of denial or ignoring the sin. Sometimes, though, we decide that the problem with the relationship is not ours but the other person's. "That's his problem," we are inclined to say. We justify this attitude by the knowledge that he is the one who has sinned, not us. So it is his responsibility to atone for the sin and put things right again. We are willing to forgive (we tell ourselves), but only if he will take the initiative by asking our forgiveness.

This has the appeal of a certain logic. But it is not at all Christian. Does Jesus say to us, "That's your problem?" If He did where would we be? The other person's lack of penitence does not relieve us of the responsibility of forgiving. If we are willing to accept that God has taken upon Himself our sin, then we've no excuse for abandoning another sinner to his. Thus we cannot dismiss a sin as "his problem." Until we have forgiven it, it is our problem as well as his. Our solution is to forgive the sin out of the love which we have.

We must recognize that sin against us cannot be left unforgiven. If it is it will interfere with our prayer. It will be a kind of block between us and God. Quiet will not come to us. Prayer will be vaguely unpleasant, and we will begin to avoid it. We may rationalize the situation (fatigue, slight illness, preoccupations at work),

but it will gradually become clear that something is wrong. The problem is that we are asking God in prayer to forgive us as we forgive others, and at the same time, we are failing in our part of the bargain. Then we find ourselves in the situation where even though we did not commit the sin in the first place, we are continuing its effects. It is manifestly not just the sinner's problem at this point. And we must take the initiative to deal with it, if we are to get on with our Christian lives.

Finally, we sometimes tell ourselves that the hurt is just too great to forgive. Even to think of what has been done to us is painful. Someday, we tell ourselves, we may be able to deal with it, but not yet. We use this as an excuse not to forgive. However convincing we may make it to ourselves, it is a poor excuse. Our pain is surely very small compared to the pain upon our Lord as He bore the weight of all the world's sins on His shoulders as He hung upon the Cross. Our excuse is a justification for our reluctance to let the sinner off the hook. Our pain may be real, but it is never so great that it prevents us from forgiving. God always offers us the grace to enable us to forgive, if we will but accept it.

We are called to forgive everything -- to forgive as we are forgiven. So we pray day by day in the Lord's Prayer. If the task seems too great for us, as it sometimes does, then we are to flee to God for help. We are to abandon ourselves to Him with the plea that He will supply what is lacking within us. We will ask Him to increase that love within us which will enable us to forgive. And we will not stop asking until He has granted the request.

True forgiveness is rarely understood, and even more rarely practiced. It is costly. It goes against the grain of our self interest, which wants to keep score of all hurts and offenses done to us. Forgiveness requires that we accept some responsibility for the redemption of others' sins, as Jesus took the initiative with our sins. In order to forgive, we must love enough that we are willing to share the Cross. With its necessary foundation in Christian love, forgiveness is a distinctively Christian activity. It is not easy, even for Christians. It takes practice and vigilance. But as we learn to forgive, we will also learn the extent to which we too are forgiven out of the bounty of God's love. It is the only way we can be drawn into the fulness of God's love for us.

