

When to forgive

Have you ever hurt someone, sought forgiveness, and received anger and refusal in response? Have you ever approached a person who wronged you, only to receive their indifference or rejection?



Michael Olmsted

The work of forgiveness is not easy, and Jesus never pretends it is routine for his followers. In his actions and words Jesus calls us to a very different lifestyle, based on God's grace. A broken relationship, hurt or betrayal can result in emotional scarring that causes lifelong suffering. Forgetting or pretending a broken relationship does not exist is no solution and will not result in healing.

Our text begins with the crucial question from Peter: "How many times should I (as a follower of Jesus) forgive someone who sins against me?" (v. 21). Peter pursues a topic most people avoid. Jesus knows restoration will not always result, but he teaches a mindset of love and generosity that offers the possibility of reconciliation.

Peter, given his no-nonsense and often confrontational approach to life, cuts to the chase. His suggestion of "seven times" to forgive seems generous, even perfect, since the number "7" represents completion in Jewish thinking. The words "how many times" may imply a person who has hurt another more than once. From a human perspective, forgiving a person seven times sounds way beyond what is reasonable or even possible!

Once again, Jesus turns common religious ideas upside down when he says we are to forgive "seventy-seven times" (v. 22, CEB). God's grace is not a matter of numbers, so Jesus is graphically reminding us that we must seek to be as forgiving of others

as God forgives us.

Jesus' shocking statement is illustrated by another of his challenging stories. Pay attention to his opening: "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (v. 23). There follows a scene where a slave owes the king "ten thousand talents," roughly equal to 150,000 years of work by a common laborer in that day! Obviously, the slave cannot pay and the king orders that the man, his wife and children as well as all his possessions be sold as payment. This will never pay the actual debt but it sends a warning to everyone that you don't mess with the king. But the king forgives the debt (v. 27).

Unbelievable! This is a quality of mercy never known. Then Jesus turns the parable to the reality of our world. The forgiven slave encounters a fellow slave who owes him "one hundred coins," equal to a hundred days' wages. The slave who has just experienced unbelievable forgiveness from the king grabs by the throat the slave who owes him money, ignores his impassioned plea for mercy and time to repay, and orders him thrown into prison. At this point the disciples were very uncomfortable.

Jesus moves from story to reality: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (v. 35). Forgiveness is a matter "of the heart," not a religious requirement. How many times do we find our New Testament writings speak of love and forgiveness as evidence that we are God's true children?

In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus teaches that we must not live by the pattern of worldly power, demanding that people obey us. Instead we are to approach others with a servant's heart. In Jesus' model prayer we ask God to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (NASV).

This does not guarantee that

Formations

August 30, 2015

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

forgiveness will work. But as recipients of God's forgiveness we should try to resolve hurt and broken relationships. I spent over a year trying to find reconciliation and a new beginning with a friend and fellow minister. Twice he professed to forgive and put the past behind us only to turn both times and try to destroy me.

Years later, when I learned his wife was dying of cancer, I called them several times to say I still loved them and to pray with them. After his wife died, I never heard a word. You cannot do the work of the Holy Spirit, or orchestrate reconciliation, but you can forgive and pray God's blessings on one who has hurt you.

You cannot be responsible for another person's feelings or actions. But to ignore them or refuse to attempt reconciliation is not Jesus' way. You may fear confrontation or the possibility of further suffering, but often your willingness to say 'I'm sorry' and seek a new beginning frees the other person to open his/her heart to healing and a new beginning.

Unresolved anger and hurt can eat away at your heart until you become bitter, hesitate to trust others, and approach life with bitterness. Unresolved hurt or conflict can adversely impact your physical health. But you always have the option to turn your pain over to our Savior, to ask him to bring healing and release into your life.

In the security and abundance of God's grace there is always room for God's forgiveness.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.