

CHOOSING HAPPINESS: FORGIVING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

By Andrew Wilson
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Genesis 33:1-11
1 John 1:5-9

Someone recently forwarded to me a letter that provides an especially poignant example of forgiveness. The email is titled, "Letter to future son-in-law":

Dear Spike,

I have been unable to sleep since I forced my daughter to break off her engagement to you. I am ashamed of myself. I don't quite know where to begin this letter of apology.

It is my sincere hope that you will bring yourself to forgive [me]... I was much too sensitive about your Mohawk hair cut, tattoos and nose rings. I now realize that motorcycles aren't really that dangerous. I really should not have reacted the way I did to the fact that you are [27] years [old] and have never held a job.

...Sure, my daughter is only 17 and wants to marry you instead of going to Harvard on full scholarship... [But] after all, you can't learn everything from books. I sometimes forget how backward I can be. I was wrong. I was a fool. I have come to my senses. You now have my full blessings to marry my daughter.

Sincerely,

Your future father-in-law

P. S. Congratulations on winning the California Super Lotto Jackpot.

The First Letter of John assures us:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9]

That verse reminds us that salvation means a lot more than being forgiven of your sins. When we give our lives to God, God immediately goes to work in our hearts to root out everything that's keeping us from following him. Of course God is concerned with every kind of sin, and his goal is to do away with it all. But there's one area of disobedience, in particular, that the Lord zeros in on when we first come to him in faith. God knows that we won't grow in our faith and experience his joy until we learn to forgive ourselves and others.

Christian forgiveness sounds noble and beautiful – until you're face-to-face with your abusive ex-husband, or the woman who just smeared your reputation to get ahead of you, or the drunk who killed your child on the highway. But in these and a thousand other situations, forgiveness is the only means by which healing and wholeness can come.

The commandment to forgive is not negotiable. If there's to be any vengeance, we should let it come by God's hand, and in God's time. He doesn't need any assistance from us. Jesus told the

disciples plainly that if they refused to forgive others, God wouldn't forgive them. A similar warning is communicated in chapter 12 of the Letter to the Hebrews:

“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” [Hebrews 12:15]

The image of the bitter root is powerful because it reflects a reality we see in ourselves and others. Resentment is like a bitter root, first, because it grows deep within us, and second, because it has a toxic influence on everything we say and do. The bitter root of resentment inevitably produces more and more bitter fruit. The only remedy available to us if we want to kill that root is forgiveness. We have to let go of the poison from the past. We have to forgive so we can be made whole and experience the full and happy life that God intends for us.

Many people who struggle with a bad habit, a sour attitude or even poor health don't realize that the cause of their problem is anger in the form of resentment. We don't have a good understanding of why it's so hard for abused and neglected people to let go of their anger. What we do know is that, when we're young, there are many emotional challenges that we need to face. And if we don't face those challenges successfully as children or as teenagers because we've been abused or neglected, we'll become emotionally deficient as adults. We'll bury our anger deep within us so we won't have to face it, and our anger will take on a life of its own. It will grow, and fester, and manifest itself in all kinds of harmful ways.

When I was a youth minister I got to know many students whose lives were a mess. They cut class; they mouthed-off to adults; they stole their parents' cars; they beat up other kids; they smoked dope and dropped acid; they slept around; they shoplifted. I really miss those days! Over the years, I gradually learned that a lot of that behavior was caused by repressed anger. Many of those students had been deeply hurt when they were children by a parent, or by some other adult who was close to them.

Sadly, many of the parents of those students were either unwilling or unable to understand that anger and its source. As a result, they tended to react in predictable ways. They screamed at the students; they grounded them; they swore at them; they put them on probation; they smacked them around. In a few sad cases, they kicked them out on the streets.

In whatever form they take, anger and resentment are toxic. They're like cancer to the soul. That's why, as Ann Lamott explains, “not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.” We forgive, first, because Christ forgives us. But we also forgive so that the poisons of the past won't contaminate our lives.

I recently read a story about Rudy Tomjanovich, the former coach of the Houston Rockets basketball team. In 1973, Rudy was a 25-year-old superstar playing for the Rockets. In the middle of a close game, a fight broke out at center court. Rudy rushed in, running at full speed, to try to break it up. Just as he got there, a player wheeled around and swung as hard as he could. That punch was called the punch heard round the world because it fractured Rudy's skull, broke his nose and cheekbones, and nearly killed him. Although Rudy lost many months of play afterwards, he eventually recovered.

One day after Rudy had returned to the game, a reporter asked him: “Rudy, have you ever forgiven the player that hit you?” Without hesitating, Rudy replied, “Absolutely, I've totally forgiven him.”

The reporter shook his head. “Come on Rudy,” he said, “that guy nearly killed you. He stole part of your career from you! Do you mean to say that you don’t have any anger, any hatred or bitterness towards him?”

Rudy smiled. “I don’t have any at all.”

The reporter stared at him in disbelief. He finally asked: “Rudy, tell me how you did it. How could you possibly forgive that man who hurt you so badly?”

Rudy replied: “I knew if I wanted to move on with my life, I had to let it go. I didn’t do it for him. I did it for me. I did it so I could be free.”

God commands us to forgive others as he has forgiven us. When we obey that command, and we forgive people who have hurt us, we become the face of Christ to them. They experience Christ’s love as the result of our act of obedience. That’s why forgiveness is so powerful. And that’s why we should never underestimate the good that can come when we learn to love as Christ loves.

If the Western powers learned anything from the First and Second World Wars, it was that nations who seek retribution only sow bitterness and reap more war. Winston Churchill, who served as the English Secretary for War during the First World War, counseled against the course that was chosen by the victorious powers —that of punishing the vanquished German nation. Reflecting on that decision, Churchill wrote this:

“Neither peoples nor rulers drew the line at any deed which they thought could help them win. [Defeated] Germany, having let hell loose...was followed step by step by the desperate and ultimately avenging nations she had assailed. Every outrage against humanity... was repaid by reprisals – often of a greater scale and longer duration.”

The excessive vengeance of the victors, the United States included, flowed not so much from outright cruelty, as from righteous indignation against the Germans. Woodrow Wilson understood the dangers of such indignation. He had been reelected on a peace platform just before the First World War broke loose. Referring to our own nation, he warned, “Once lead this people into war and they’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance.”

Had the victors of the First World War understood the power of forgiveness, had they been able to let go of the bitter past, the German people might have been able to do the same. Hitler and his Nazi guard, who of course rose to power after the war, would likely have been dismissed as nothing more than a noisy gang of thugs.

We practice forgiveness because, so often, it’s the only force strong enough to shatter cycles of violence and retribution. In the act of forgiving another, we sever the cords that bind us to the bitter past. That allows us to direct our anger away from people and onto problems we can do something about. Our future opens up, and we’re liberated to lead happy, fulfilled lives.

Recently, as I was headed to Costco to pick up 600 rolls of toilet paper and a 250 pound bag of dog food, I tuned in to one of my favorite talk shows on AM radio. Normally I find myself agreeing with Dennis Prager, but on this particular morning Dennis said something that didn’t sit well with me. He was talking about the importance of forgiveness when one has been harmed in some way by another person. At one point he affirmed that forgiveness is necessary for

happiness. People who can't forgive, he said, bear grudges that eventually eat away at them and cause them to become bitter and unhappy.

"Well, naturally," I thought to myself. And just as I was congratulating Dennis in my head for standing up for one of Jesus' key teachings, Dennis qualified his words. "Of course," he said, "we can't forgive those who are *unrepentant* about their actions. It would be foolhardy to forgive people who don't feel sorry about the harm they've done, and who still bear ill will against us."

I regard Dennis Prager as one of the shining lights of our culture. It seems to me that he usually manages to say something helpful and profound about the great moral issues of our day. And I guess that's why I was so struck by what I was hearing that day. Dennis was articulating a philosophy of life that many serious-minded people hold. His main point was one that most of his listeners probably agreed with wholeheartedly: Unrepentant evil should never be forgiven. But that philosophy contradicts what we read in the New Testament about forgiveness and love. Of course, the Lord doesn't teach us to excuse evil, or to allow evil people to walk all over others. But that isn't the point. The point is that we can love and forgive sinners even as we hate their sin, and even as we oppose what they stand for. After all, isn't that exactly the way the Lord treats us?

It shouldn't surprise us that a person who is as wise as Dennis Praeger would stop short of saying we should love and forgive our sworn enemies. Dennis isn't a Christian, and his wisdom with regard to forgiveness is based on worldly experience. To him, and to most people who haven't given their lives to Christ, the idea that we should forgive an unrepentant evil-doer seems foolish. What they fail to see is that there's a huge price to be paid when we allow the root of bitterness to grow in our hearts. With just the tiniest bit of nursing, that root will grow. And as it grows, we will learn to live with it, and we may even become fond of it and nurse it even more.

There are times when we can't reason our way out of rancor and bitterness. No amount of clear thinking about the facts diminishes our outrage when we're attacked unfairly, or when we see innocent people suffer at the hands of tyrants. Those are the times when we need to put our trust not in human wisdom, but in the Word of God. Forgiving your enemies makes sense because Christ loves even the worst of sinners, but also because we just aren't equipped to handle bitterness.

If you were to drive out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and head to the northeast, you'd soon find yourself in the middle of coal country. The strangest and saddest town in the anthracite coal region – and maybe the strangest and saddest town in all of the United States – is Centralia.

For a century Centralia was reasonably prosperous. Though mining life was hard, the residents of Centralia built for themselves a sturdy, contented little town. By the 1950's Centralia had banks, churches, schools, an Odd Fellows Club and a town hall. None of the nearly 2,000 residents had any clue that Centralia was a doomed city.

In 1962 a fire in the town dump ignited a coal seam in the ground. The incident drew some attention because the fire kept reigniting even after firefighters had pumped thousands of gallons of water onto it. The authorities decided eventually simply to allow the fire to burn itself out. Unfortunately, Centralia was sitting on top of twenty-four million tons of anthracite. Very slowly, the fire ate its way along the coal seams. Smoke began to rise throughout a wide area. The highway nearby grew hot to the touch.

Then the U S Bureau of Mines was called in. They suggested several innovative remedies involving tunnels and explosives, but the cheapest strategy would have cost \$20 million – too much for a poor little mining town.

The fire burned on. Within a few years many residents found that their cellar walls and floors were heating up. Noxious smoke began seeping from the ground all over town. In 1981 a 12-year-old boy playing in a yard was nearly swallowed by a giant hole that suddenly appeared.

Eventually the Federal Government devised a \$42 million strategy for evacuation. As residents left, their houses were bulldozed to the ground. All that remains today of Centralia are a few houses and a couple of commercial buildings in what used to be the business district.

A mine fire authority told a reporter for *Newsweek* sometime around 1980 that, if the rate of burning remained steady, there was enough coal under Centralia to burn for a thousand years.

There's a big coal seam running through almost every one of us. There's a region in our hearts that contains enough flammable materials to burn for a lifetime. If we allow bitterness and resentment towards others to grow, there will come a day when an unquenchable fire will be lit, and we'll be destroyed from the inside out.

The residents of Centralia sat on top of their smoldering problems for almost two decades, ignoring sound advice, and hoping to the bitter end that things one day would come out right. We're no less foolhardy when we cling to our petty grudges, and pin our hopes on some future day of reckoning when our enemies will be humiliated at our feet.

It seems more satisfying, sometimes, to be a victim than a peacemaker. So often, we'd rather bear a grudge than let it go. But God has a better way for us. He wants us to let go of the bitter past and extinguish the fires of resentment that burn deep inside us. He wants us to learn to see the face of Jesus in all people.

Holy God, it's so hard for us to forgive others as you forgive us. We see all the harm that's done to us and to others when we nurse our grudges. Yet something inside us loves the idea of settling the score.

Help us, Holy Spirit, to seek reconciliation with all who have hurt us. Open our eyes to the ways we have hurt others, and help us to seek their forgiveness.

Lord Jesus, you call us to be your ambassadors in this world. Fill us with your reconciling love so that others will see you at work in us, and be drawn to our Father's heart. We pray in your holy name. Amen.