



FORGIVING THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST OTHERS

From time to time one hears people exclaim: "I can never forgive what x did to y !" Y is often a family member, friend or associate who has hurt someone close to us. It's a feeling we can also experience when some atrocity is reported, especially where children or vulnerable people are concerned. It's

said with great feeling and, in some cases, is one that stays with x for many years, unless it can be resolved. It can become like a weight x carries and usually causes pain and bitterness when recalled. The weight, usually, is that of anger which lies hidden within us, like some wild animal trapped in a cage which roars when approached and lashes out when released.

FORGIVE US OUR SINS

But the fact is that we cannot forgive x for the wrong they do to y . It's not in our power to do so for we are not subject to the wrong that has been perpetrated. We are, in a sense, 'collateral damage'.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray he taught them to ask that their trespasses be forgiven insofar as they were prepared to forgive the trespasses done to *them*, not to others:

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

In Matthew the word 'trespass' is usually interpreted as 'debt' (*Greek: ὀφειλήματα – ophellemata*) *Matthew 6: 12*: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtor"

and Jesus goes on to explain to His disciples: "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" (*Matthew 6:14*)

Luke, however, gives us this reading: "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." (*11:4*)

The change from 'debt' to 'trespass' in the Our Father first appeared in the Greek versions of the prayer by the 3rd cent. writer, Origen of Alexandria and this wording made its way into important English translations such as the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. Whatever the reason for the various interpretations it is clear that Jesus here is telling His disciples that they have the power to affect a change of heart for themselves. He does not tell them that they can forgive someone the sin done to another.

In Luke 17:3 Jesus tells His disciples: "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive." Jesus says we are to forgive him *if he repents and admits his wrong*, not regardless of whether he does so. "*If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive.*" But this concerns how to respond to someone who repents and asks forgiveness.

At the end of John's gospel when he recounts the appearance of Jesus to His disciples on the evening of the day of Resurrection Jesus says to them:

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20: 22/23) This verse has always been understood to give authority to grant forgiveness to those who repent and seek forgiveness for it needs to be held in the context of all other teachings about the matter which in the Scriptures.

But forgiveness does not cancel justice. In his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* John Paul II notes that the *“requirement of forgiveness does not cancel out the objective requirements of justice. . . . In no passage of the gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence toward evil, toward scandals, toward injury or insult. In any case, reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness” (DM 14).*

PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS

Christians are called to pray that someone who has committed a grave sin will realise that they have done wrong and seek to make amends, but when the act is particularly evil then this may be almost impossible: *“If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that.” (1 John 5:16)* However, when someone says: *“I can never forgive x for what they did to y”* they may be indicating that they cannot or will not let go of the anger they feel for what has been done and it usually concerns something that is acutely grave in character.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

A helpful article states:

‘St. Thomas Aquinas tells us love is “willing the good of the other” selflessly (cf. I Cor. 13:5). In a sense, this is all God can do, because “God is love” (I John 4:8). God can do nothing other than will to share the infinite good of himself with every single person ever created or conceived—even the souls who reject his love and forgiveness, because a God not loving would be a God contradicting his own essence, which is absurd.

Thus God’s love is unconditional, because in one sense it has nothing to do with the other. It comes from within, regardless of what happens outside of the godhead. This brings profound meaning to Jesus’ words: *“Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).* In essence, Jesus is calling us to love with that same unconditional love with which he loves as the God-Man. Regardless of varying situations and relationships in our lives, *“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5)* empowering us to *“will the good of the other”* regardless of what *“the other”* may bring our way.

On the other hand forgiveness is not unconditional. It’s a two-way street. God offers his forgiveness to all out of his unconditional love and, therefore, so must all Christians. But here’s the rub. Because forgiveness is dependent upon the other, it cannot actually take place until there are willing partners on both sides of the divide. *‘ (Tim Staples. Director of Apologetics and Evangelization at ‘Catholic Answers’)*

CARRYING ANGER

It might be that when someone feels they can never forgive another they are indicating that they carry a hidden reservoir of anger that erupts whenever they recall a particular incident. It may be that the incident concerned the abuse of someone they love or inflicted pain and suffering on innocent victims and they feel angry about the incident whenever it is recalled.

And anger, if not addressed appropriately, can have a corrosive effect on the person who carries it and those connected to them. People who have reflected on this matter have noticed that it takes less energy to love and forgive than it does to stay angry and hold a grudge. Forgiveness brings peace to your life. We need to forgive someone, not for their benefit, but for our own peace of mind. The burden of anger we can carry can be enormous and our anger often only affects the person who carries it – not the person towards whom the anger is directed. Someone has suggested that we should *“Shift the focus, feel the pain and think of the thousands of others in the world who are also feeling the same pain, then send a loving-kindness message to everyone to be relieved of this suffering.”*

One of the ways that this can be done is to direct a prayer, such as this, towards the object of our anger: *“May ... be filled with your compassion, O Lord. May your Mother’s love enfold them.”* The danger of holding anger have long been realised. S. Jerome said that *“Anger is the Door, by which all Vices enter the Soul”* and S. James had observed that: *“anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”* (James 1:20) But ‘anger’ against sin is may be ‘zeal’ and zeal is not a sin but is sometimes a duty. Zeal at its core is an expression of love; anger is an expression of hatred. So S. Paul tells us to *‘Put away from all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.’* (Eph.4: 31)

Righteous anger – or zeal – does not consume us but enables us to seek justice and mercy for all. As human beings we need to cultivate a forgiving spirit for the contrary spirits of anger, pride, bitterness etc... can easily find a home within us. Yet whilst we can cultivate a forgiving spirit we cannot forgive unless someone seeks to be forgiven, promises to refrain from sin and accepts the appropriate penance. Even then *‘Penance requires . . . the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction.’* (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1450) The Catechism goes on to observe that absolution concerns the: *‘remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. (CCC 1473)*

In the end it is God alone who forgives sin (CCC: 1440). Yet the path to our sanctification requires us to practice God-like acts and to learn how to cultivate a forgiving heart:

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But *love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.* Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6: 27-38)