

GUEST COLUMN

To Forgive Is Human

Tommy South

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4).

The great English poet Alexander Pope once wrote, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.” The problem is Jesus said that we have to do the “divine” part, too, and forgive others. In other words, to forgive is not only divine, it’s also *human*.

Peter probably thought that he was being generous one day when he asked Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him; As many as seven times?” But Jesus replied, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22). He then told a parable about a servant who, although he had been forgiven an enormous debt, refused to do the same for a fellow servant, and was severely punished as a result. The parable ends with these words: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:23-35).

But forgiveness is more easily talked about than done, is it not? Even though Jesus said that *our own forgiveness depends on our willingness to forgive others*, it’s still not easy to do it. Sometimes in an effort to avoid the hard work of discipline we try to deny that it is even possible to do it. Others will even try to claim that it isn’t biblical to forgive someone unless they have repented and asked for our forgiveness. As a fellow sinner, I understand these very human tendencies. But they cannot be allowed to obscure the truth: Jesus says that to forgive is human, too.

At times forgiveness comes rather easily. When someone wrongs or offends us, realizes the error and apologizes, it's not that difficult to graciously accept the apology and put the whole thing behind us. But what happens when someone wrongs us and refuses to acknowledge it, perhaps even becomes defensive? Or if they know we are hurt but really don't care? Or if they say "I'm sorry," but then do the same thing again... and again? What if the one who has wronged us is no longer living? In an age when child abuse, divorce, dishonesty in business, and other sorts of evil are commonplace, there are lots of "walking wounded" out there – and you may be one of them. Where do you go from here? How do you find wholeness and healing and the assurance that you have done what Jesus says you **must** do?

I wouldn't dare claim that I have sorted this entire issue out in my own mind. But I think I'm getting a little closer to understanding how forgiveness works. Allow me to share with you a little of what I've learned. Maybe it will help you.

Why Forgive?

It might help to think about *why* we need to forgive those who have wronged us. It seems to me that there are basically three motives for forgiveness. One is that we need to do it *for God*. His Word says that we "ought" to do it, and so we should. While that is a perfectly valid motive, sometimes it's the only one we recognize, and it may not help move us toward forgiveness; in fact, it may make us resentful that God requires doing something we find so distasteful.

Another motive is to forgive *for others*, to "let them off the hook," so to speak. The literal meaning of the Greek word for "forgive" is to "let go" or "to release." Sport fishermen are familiar with the practice of "catch and release." Well, that's one reason we ought to forgive.

Those who have offended us may be hurting over it as much as we are, and it is a gracious thing to do to let them off our hook. The problem is, however, those who have hurt us may not even know – or maybe don't care – that they are *on* our hook. So whether or not we forgive them has no effect on them, unless they are penitent and seeking our forgiveness. What then?

That brings us to the third motive for forgiveness: *for yourself*. You see, the one person who is always hurt by your refusal to forgive is **you**. From this perspective **forgiveness is a divine gift that God has given as a means of getting free from a past that we can't change**. By being able to forgive, regardless of what our offender does or doesn't do, we can get on with our lives and not be shackled to something painful in our past. That's why we can (and must!) forgive even those who don't repent. When they don't repent our forgiveness may not be as full and free and as satisfying as we might like, but we can do it *for ourselves* nevertheless. Otherwise, the one who has hurt us determines when we can finally be healed. And that cannot be right.

Forgiveness as a Process

Rather than thinking of forgiveness as something that happens all at once, it might be more helpful to realize that it's often a process. Genuine forgiveness usually takes some time, whereas avoidance doesn't. Often when people quickly say, "I forgive you," they really don't; they just want to avoid the hard work of forgiveness. But to truly forgive someone may mean moving from active hatred or burning resentment along a continuum that passes through indifference and eventually ends up with true forgiveness and feelings of good will. It might even lead to restoration of the relationship, but as we'll see in a moment, that's something

beyond forgiveness. That's why it is important to pray for your enemies, even when you don't feel like it. More than anything else, this can help you move down the road from hatred to love.

Because forgiveness is a process, there may be occasional lapses in your feelings of forgiveness. Things you thought you had put behind you may pop into your mind unexpectedly. Old feelings that you thought were dead may suddenly spring to life again. But don't give up! This is just another reminder that you're only a human struggling to do something "divine."

It also helps to put a human face on those who have hurt you. When someone wounds us deeply, we tend to "demonize" them, to think of them as totally evil and without any redeeming qualities at all. Of course, that's seldom the real case. **What we need here is *empathy*, that quality of recognizing that those who have hurt us are only human like we are, that we have been guilty of hurting people, too, and that what *we* want more than anything is forgiveness from God *and from others* when *we* have hurt them.** Remembering that Jesus died on the cross for you and me, even though we didn't deserve it, and before we ever said, "I'm sorry," can and should go a long way toward softening our hearts toward others.

What Forgiveness Isn't

I'm convinced that many people who think they "can't forgive" misunderstand what forgiveness is. Sometimes this results from bad advice from well-meaning Christians who tell us what we "ought" to do without realizing what it is they're saying. This often happens when someone is advised to just "forgive and forget" and go right back into a bad relationship as if nothing had happened. I don't think so.

You see, *forgiveness is not the same thing as excusing or evading the wrong that has*

been done. Jesus said, “If you brother sins, *rebuke* him.” He didn’t say to act as if the wrong does not matter. It does. And we have to face that fact squarely and identify the wrong for what it is. Then – and only then – can we release our anger toward the wrong-doer.

Likewise, forgiving isn’t forgetting. Far from it! I might say to someone who has offended me, “Forget it,” or claim that I have forgotten it. But the truth is none of us has a “delete” key in our brains that allows us to forget **totally**. We all have numerous “back-up systems” that virtually ensure that our hurts are still in memory. “But,” someone might ask, “doesn’t the Bible say that God remembers our sins no more at all”? Yes, but not in the sense that He can’t remember them. He simply *chooses not to take them into account*, and that’s what we have to do.

And what about reconciliation? Some would argue that there is no real forgiveness until we have been completely restored in our relationship with the one who hurt us. This is a tough one. There is no doubt that *ideally* reconciliation will occur. But the ideal is not always possible. Lewis Smedes, in *The Art of Forgiving*, says it takes one person to forgive, but two to be reunited. And the other person may not be willing for that to happen. Or, they may not even be around any more. What then? We can still release our anger and refuse to be held hostage any longer by the wrong that someone else did. We can “forgive at a distance.” It may not be ideal, but sometimes it’s the only way.

One last thing: forgiveness isn’t the same as trust. Just because you forgive someone of something done in the past does not mean that you open yourself up to them as you once did and risk being wounded again. **Forgiveness is given as a gift; trust must be earned.** Trust would be a further step in restoring a relationship, but forgiveness can be extended without diving back

in before the depth of the water is tested.

Divine Help Is Available

Forgiveness is tough work, but it's also important. If you have been wounded by someone, healing is what you need most. And it won't just happen until you make the effort to forgive. But, because it's what God wants you to do, He will help you do it.

To be hurt is human. But, to forgive is human, too. And with God's help, you can do it.

Note: The title of this article is borrowed from the excellent book by Michael E. McCullough, Steven J. Sandage, and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (InterVarsity, 1997).