



Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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To Forgive is Divine

Forgiveness is a process, not a once and for all event. It involves remembering the offense and feeling resentment many times and forgiving each time. Perhaps this is Jesus' seventy times seven!

Brothers and sisters:

We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,
so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

For he says:

*In an acceptable time, I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.*

Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. 2 Cor 5:20-6:2

Forgiveness and gratitude are two basic virtues upon which a solid spiritual life can be built. Forgiveness repairs broken relationships and restores them to unity, and gratitude appreciates everything either allowed by or coming from the hand of a gracious and loving God, despite appearances to the contrary.

In the Lord's prayer we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." At first glance there seems to be an imbalance between the two parts of the prayer. We are asking God to forgive us our trespasses, a matter between ourselves and God. Yet the condition of that forgiveness is that we forgive others, a matter between ourselves and other people.

God tells us that He will show mercy to us to the extent that we show it to others, thus taking as done to Himself what we do to others. God identifies with the offender, it is He who appeals to the injured person for forgiveness, even if the offender cannot or will not ask for it. At the same time, identifying with the injured person, He extends forgiveness to the offender for having hurt him.

We can substitute the word debt for trespass in order to make the discussion clearer. We can then say, "forgive us our debts as we forgive the debts of others."

The spiritual states of people who are holding such debts are usually resentment and guilt. The holder of the debt resents the offender and the offender remains locked in the state of continuing obligation which defines guilt. It is a sorry condition, since it represents a moral chasm between them. They are inseparably joined to each other over the chasm of indebtedness. God finds that intolerable since He identifies with each of them and cannot bear to be divided against Himself. In order to repair the breach, He urges both parties to reconcile.

There are many places in scripture where Jesus commands us to forgive. Peter asked how many times he should forgive; Jesus replied seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22). That is followed by the parable of the unjust servant who was condemned because he was forgiven much and, yet, he held on to the much lesser debt owed him by a fellow servant (Matthew 18:23-35).

A powerful story of forgiveness is the parable of the prodigal son, whose father forgave him, and who older brother held onto angry resentment (Luke 15: 11-32). Also, there is the story of the penitent woman who loved much because she had been forgiven much (Luke 7: 36-50). Finally, St. Paul tells us to forgive the offenses of others because vengeance is the Lord's prerogative (Romans 12:19). The scriptures are very clear that a forgiving spirit is a central characteristic of a Christian.

Forgiveness is a process, not a once and for all event. The process of forgiving usually involves remembering the offence and feeling resentment many times and forgiving each time. Perhaps that is the seventy times seven to which Jesus referred.

A problem arises when either one of the parties does not agree to reconcile. The offended one can continue to harbor resentment and nurse a grudge, demand reparation and refusing to be satisfied under any conditions. Yet, that ill which is harbored and nursed is highly toxic to the soul. Someone said that harboring resentment is tantamount to drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.

Forgiveness means that the offended person simply lets go of the debt. The offender, however, continues to owe the debt in conscience, and retains the moral necessity to right the wrong. Forgiveness is not exoneration, saying that was wrong has now become right. It simply says that there is no longer an expectation that the offender will do anything about it.

Forgiveness is a process of unhooking from the bond that links people together around an offense. This does not necessarily involve a mutual agreement or reconciliation. It can be quite unilateral. Because of that option, forgiveness brings great freedom by letting go of the receivable but possibly uncollectable debt, while leaving the question of moral judgement and retribution to God.

Forgiveness is compatible with anger and other feelings. Oftentimes the appropriate feeling response to the offense is anger or outrage. Forgiving the offender does not bypass or eliminate feelings. Forgiveness is an act of the will. It is a decision based on spiritual conviction rather than emotions. The feelings can be screaming homicidal revenge, but the will can at the same be forgiving the offender. There is often misunderstanding on this point.

Some think that to forgive is to bypass or nullify feelings in a kind of leap to health. However, repeated acts of forgiveness usually have the effect of calming the feelings.

Jesus commands us to pray for our enemies and to do good to those who hate us (Matthew 5:38-48). That is a higher standard of forgiveness than simply absolving the debt. It means pursuing the debtor/offender with blessings, prayers and good actions. Christ requires that we forge spiritual bonds of charity even with our enemies to replace bonds of resentment and grudge which produce division.

Forgiveness is a difficult virtue, but one which lies at the heart of our faith, since it echoes the Heart of Jesus who extends mercy to all impartially. To forgive is divine, since only the Divinity could challenge us to something as outrageous as forgiving and doing good to our enemies.

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