

How can I forgive them? (Avoiding Stairways & Porcupines)

Remember last week when I told you that forgiveness has three dimensions? It really does: The forgiveness God gives us; the forgiveness that we need to give to ourselves; and the forgiveness that we are supposed to give to each other. And that last thing is a hard one. Offering forgiveness to those who have hurt you in some way is really tough. But, I'm going to suggest two approaches that you can take when you find yourself in that position. One approach focuses upon what you are *not* supposed to do. The second approach is directed to something that we all should be doing—yet rarely do we take advantage of this.

Now before going further, it might be helpful to think about how we define this kind of forgiveness—the kind that we are expected to give to others. One way to do that is by defining forgiveness through its negative. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Forgiveness is *not* an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude.” D. L. Moody, that great preacher of the 19th century, gives a colorful description when he stated: “Forgiveness is *not* that stripe which says, ‘I will forgive, but not forget.’ It is not to bury the hatchet with the handle sticking out of the ground, so you can grasp it the minute you want it.”¹ But when it comes to defining forgiveness in an affirmative way, I like Mark Twain's very poetic description. Twain said: “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the flower leaves on the heel of the one who crushed it.”²

Whatever words you use to describe the forgiveness of others, one thing is for sure—forgiveness is not optional for a Christian. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus gives us the following command: “And when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive the wrongs you have done.” Mark 11:25 (TEV) In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us what the consequences are if we fail to heed this command: “If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.” Matthew 6:14-15 (TEV) And, with that being the case, our capacity to forgive others is something that we need to take very seriously. So, let's consider the first approach that will give us a chance to exercise forgiveness.

Under this first approach, we must discipline ourselves to resist the urge to strike back at those who do wrongful things to us. We must learn *not* to give in to our natural worldly desire to seek revenge against them. There is a very good reason that we should not give them revenge. You see, revenge isn't ours to give. If any element of vengeance is to be administered, it's to be done by God.

Paul in his letter to the Romans makes this clear when he writes: “Never take revenge, my friends, but instead let God's anger do it. For the scripture says, ‘I will take revenge, I will pay back, says the Lord.’”

Romans 12:19 (TEV) So what do you do if revenge isn't an option?

Well, you are supposed to do a couple things according to the Scriptures. If the hurtful conduct is done to you, face to face, you don't strike the other guy's face—you turn yours. Turn the other cheek, Jesus tells us: ³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Matthew 5:38-39 (ESV) What Jesus saying is that forgiveness requires that we not lash out with a fist, but that we reach out our hand in peace to restore our relationship with the offending person. That is really hard for the average Christian. What about preachers? Is it hard for them too?

Now just a minute ago, I quoted D. L. Moody. I cited his quote when he said to “bury the hatchet” in a way that you don't afterwards grab the handle and, in so doing, let anger take the place of forgiveness. Moody was a wonderful preacher—noted as one of the great evangelists of his time—but even he had trouble practicing what he preached when it came to suppressing anger and offering forgiveness in its place. One evening he was conducting two worship services, one right after the other. He had just finished up the first service and was welcoming people who were coming into the second one. Now apparently there was a man from the first service who lingered around because he was very unhappy about something Moody had preached. So while Moody was standing out in the hallway greeting the new crowd, this man stormed up to Moody and really let him have it—nothing but a stream of ugly, vulgar, personal insults, all right in front of everyone who was coming into the meeting hall. Now Moody and I have something in common—neither of us react too well to aggression, especially when it is unexpected and unjustified. Now I have gotten *marginally* better in dealing with such situations, but I am being somewhat generous to myself even to say I'm “*marginally* better”—but I am working on it. In any event, I may be a little ahead of where Moody was on that particular evening, because Moody's reaction to this unexpected burst of insults is not what our goal should be. The reason for this is that Moody reached out to the guy, grabbed him by the collar and then shoved him down the stairs. Fortunately, there were only a few steps to these stairs and this insulting fellow was not seriously injured. But, you can imagine the looks on the people's faces when the guest preacher, Rev. Moody, had just lunged out in such an angry and violent way.

But what happened next really does show that D. L. Moody was a genuine man of God. As he called the service to order, he approached the podium and addressed everyone with the following words that came from his heart: “Friends, before beginning tonight, I want to confess that I yielded to

my temper out in the hall, and have done wrong. Just as I was coming in here tonight, I lost my temper with a man, and I want to confess my wrong before you all, and if that man is present here whom I thrust away from me in anger, I want to ask *his forgiveness and God's.*" And then, he went to the Lord in prayer. As it turned out, many people were touched by Moody's confession and apology, and the night ended up being a success—several people came to the Lord that evening.³

Of course, I am not using Moody's initial behavior as a good example to live by—it is too much like the way I sometimes react. But what Moody does demonstrate here is the kind of exchange that we need to consider. The man that he shoved certainly insulted Moody in an inappropriate way and at a particularly inopportune time. Moody's anger was understandable, if not excusable. But, while Moody failed initially to suppress his anger, he was able to exchange it, right there in front of the crowd of onlookers. He made a double exchange, in fact, because he let go of his anger and sought both the man's and God's forgiveness.

In effect, Moody was offering an extended hand of forgiveness to the man, while showing him and all in the crowd, that no matter who you are—when you do wrong—you too must not only offer forgiveness to others, but seek forgiveness as well. It takes a pretty big person to do that. But, the goal for Moody is the same goal for me, and the same goal for you. The goal is to exchange forgiveness first (leave out the anger and the shoving part that sends people flying down stairs). Offer instead, the love of Christ even when subjected to such unjustified wrongs.

But what if the wrongdoer isn't in your presence when the hurt comes to bear on you? For example, maybe someone is spreading gossip and lies about you, what action do you take then—sue them for slander? Well, I would hope that you would try to make some constructive effort to be reconciled with them before doing something as drastic as that. Certainly, striking back with ugly words isn't an appropriate reaction—that is not a Christian response because it's completely contrary to "turning the other cheek." And what if that person who tells lies about you is a believer—someone who is a Christian, but isn't acting in a very Christ-like way? What do you do then? The Bible is clear on this—which brings us to that second approach that helps us to exercise forgiveness. It is an approach that Jesus directed us to use when He said: ¹⁵ "If a brother sins against you, go to him privately and confront him with his fault. If he listens and confesses it, you have won back a brother. ¹⁶ But if not, then take one or two others with you and go back to him again, proving everything you say by these witnesses. ¹⁷ If he pays no attention to them, tell the church. But if he doesn't pay attention even to the church, let him be like an unbeliever and a tax collector to you." Matthew 18:15-17 (TLB & HCSB)

Now, that's an interesting dispute resolution program—one that Christians don't use much anymore, if at all. And that's a shame because it has the great potential of reconciling so many people within the Church itself. Why?—because so many times a person doesn't go to their Christian brother or sister and lay before them what their perceived grievance is. And because of that, the alleged wrongdoer often doesn't even realize that the aggrieved person is holding them responsible for some wrongful act. Maybe it's just something that they said about them to another person carelessly over the phone, or by email, or on Face Book. Yet, they didn't mean it to be hurtful, or even if they did, they failed to realize just how much it did hurt that other person. What Jesus is telling us is to resolve these things quickly—get them out in the open—and deal with them before they poison both you and the person who committed the wrong. If that doesn't work, take prudent, conciliatory Christian people with you—let them hear what the problem between you may be. Perhaps they can mediate and resolve the matter right there—put an end to it for good.

If that doesn't work, then Jesus says something remarkable—something that sounds so very strange to Christians today. Jesus says to take this problem to the Church. Can you imagine that—taking a problem to the Church? You might even think that Jesus envisioned His people—the Church—as taking a vibrant and commanding role in the community! You know the reason that this process seems so strange to us? The reason is that the Church today has shrunk from its role of leadership in the community. The people of the Church in this country have been asleep too long. The Church is not just a place to gather once a week, sing a few hymns, read a little Scripture and then head home until whatever time is convenient to venture back again. The Church is the people of God—the followers of Jesus Christ. And we as that Body of Christ are supposed to be active in our community seven days a week, not just one. I wish people would do some Christian mediation through the Church—it would be a good sign that both they and we are aware of Christ's call to us.

So there you have two very good approaches that will help you in forgiving those who do you wrong. First, resist the urge to strike back, embrace the need to reach out and forgive. If you do that but are still not reconciled with that person, then go and tell them what is wrong and work it out with them with the end goal of forgiving them. If that doesn't work, bring it to those in the Church. I would love to be a part of that mediation process that Jesus lays out for us—the one that we seem to have ignored it for so long. These are good biblically based approaches, try them—you might be amazed at the results.

Now, someone might complain, “Well, that might would on someone who isn't so close to you, but what about when the wrong done to me comes from a loved one?—a very dear friend or close

family member? Those things will never work with them!” Yeah—they will. The problem is that too often we are hurt so very personally when a close friend or loved one in the family hurts us that we can’t bring ourselves to even try forgiveness. While it is hard to forgive a stranger, it seems so very difficult to forgive those we hold closest. Reflecting upon this, the 19th century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer compared the human race to a family of porcupines bunching closely together on a cold winter’s night. He then wrote: “The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.” Man that sounds so German—not to knock the Germans. (By way of full disclosure, I am pretty sure I’m way over half German—which probably explains a lot of things.) But, Schopenhauer makes a good point. If the lyrics of the once popular song is right and we do, in fact, “always hurt the one you love,”⁴ then it seem equally true that the ones who love each other often find it most difficult to forgive that hurt.

Jesus Christ provides us with an alternative to our tendency to continuously stick each other with our porcupine quills.⁵ It is the only alternative. It is the forgiveness that becomes possible if you make Jesus the Lord of your life. It is the alternative that the Bible tells us about again and again:¹³ “Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you.”¹⁴ And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity.¹⁵ The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful.” Colossians 3:13-15 (TEV) You know the secrets that allow us to forgive? They are given in these verses. Those two approaches that I have described—they are good, but even they will not work without these secret ingredients. What are they?

They are the love and peace of Jesus Christ that are mediated to us through the Holy Spirit. D. L. Moody would have just kept right on pushing people down stairways without the love and peace of Christ in his heart. We will all be like a huddled group of porcupines pressing our angry quills into each other if we have not given ourselves to Jesus. That’s the alternative that Jesus gives us. And, what a wonderful alternative forgiveness is! No more shoving people down stairs, but rather establishing and restoring the bond of Christian love with each other—lifting each other up, not pushing each other down. It’s the alternative that transforms us from the porcupines that we’d otherwise be, and that allows us to stay together and stay warm—stay friends, stay family, all within the Body of Christ.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
February 18, 2018
Pastor Darvin Satterwhite ©2018

¹ Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 219.

² Mark Twain. Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 4. Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today's Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "FORGIVENESS".

³ Peter Kennedy, *Preaching Illustrations Vol 1.*, WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 70.

⁴ *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, lyrics written by Allan Roberts, music arranged by Doris Fisher.

⁵ Wayne Brouwer, Holland, Michigan. Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 2. Elesha Hodge, comp., *Today's Best Illustrations – Volumes 1-4*, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1997), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "FORGIVENESS".