

Forgiveness Is A Tough Gig

"He that cannot forgive others, breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass." | George Herbert

They say, 'write about what you know'. Well, here's what I know: forgiveness is hard.

Like, really hard.

Forgiveness coexists in the same universe as injustice, loss, and the pain of deep physical, emotional or spiritual wounds. The need for forgiveness only exists because of the destructive impact sin has in our world and all the terrible ways in which humans hurt one another. The collective weight of this sin, against one another and, ultimately, against God, was borne by our saviour, in whose righteousness our pardon was secured.

Jesus tells a parable, recounted for us in chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel (Matthew 18:21-35), of an unforgiving steward who, despite being forgiven a large debt by his king, refuses to forgive a debt he was owed by a fellow servant. The ungrateful steward is then thrown into prison until he was able to repay the original debt he owed in full to the king. Jesus concludes the telling by clearly giving the meaning to his listeners, *"this is how my Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

These words are both sobering and challenging. It seems that the recognition of our own forgiveness, in the light of a debt simply too great to repay, is intended to convict us towards demonstrating a similar attitude of grace and forgiveness to one another.

This idea is reinforced further in the prayer of our Lord, in

which he teaches his disciples to pray in this manner, *"...forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors"* (Matthew 6:9-13).

It seems clear. Our own forgiveness is directly connected to our forgiveness of others, some of whom will deeply wound us and deal unjustly with us.

But *how* do we forgive? Forgiveness is hard. Like, really hard.

Forgiveness Is A Boat

We struggle with the mechanics of forgiveness. To forgive feels like we're saying what happened to us doesn't matter. That what happened to us was insignificant and not worth acknowledgment.

We hold onto the pain and injustice and betrayal because we're afraid that if we let it go, it will somehow be forgotten. We worry we'll still feel the pain of the phantom limb but be unable to recall the cause of the amputation. Perhaps we fear we'll never be the same person again, and so we hold onto the damaged and broken version of ourselves that is, at least, some reminder of who we used to be.

But there's not a single hair on our heads that hasn't been counted by our God, not a single tear that's fallen that He hasn't seen and which has grieved His heart. We have a God who breathed life out of chaos, who knew the way out of a darkened tomb, a God who can mend every broken piece of us.

He knows us intimately and we need to believe that He is a God of mercy and justice, He is sovereign over all, and that He loves us with all the love of a good, good Father. Our life, with all its joy and pain, is carefully held within His hands.

Some time ago, a beautiful Christian friend counselled me, *"forgiveness is a boat and you have to decide whether you want to get on."* (Thank you, Carolyn, for your wisdom and insight.)

I have thought a lot about this since then; about the implications of choosing not to get on that boat, and, in contrast, of the peace that would surely come from embarking and letting forgiveness carry me forward.

I was forced to acknowledge that if I truly believed and had accepted the grace of God shown to me, this same grace needed to be demonstrated by a life oriented towards forgiveness to others.

I began to understand that forgiveness of another person wasn't contingent on them demonstrating contrition, extending an apology, or even acknowledging the offense. In fact, forgiveness wasn't really even about them, it was about me.

I had to accept that choosing to forgive meant that the wrong against me would quite possibly never be named or that I might never receive justice in this life. Choosing to forgive didn't mean that my reputation would be restored to me, or that I wouldn't continue to carry the scars of that grievous wound for the rest of my life.

But I also began to understand that even though injustice might still remain, this would be dealt with by God, in His way and in His good time. While forgiveness wouldn't necessarily undo the pain, or restore what had been lost, God has promised that one day all tears will be wiped away and, again, in His good time and in His perfect way, this too He will accomplish.

And I was reminded, too, of the reality that in holding up to God the list of all my grievances, there was very likely another list being held up by someone else with my name on it. I hope to receive abundant mercy and grace for my own faults; undeserved favour which is intrinsically linked to the mercy and grace I show to others.

Forgiveness Is A Process

Forgiveness is a tough gig. It's important to acknowledge this reality. In acknowledging this for myself, I began to realise that I would perhaps need to wrestle many times with forgiving someone and that forgiveness is a process, not a one-time decision. I would need to ask for help, *supernatural help*, to forgive, and to keep forgiving.

The disciple Peter had asked Jesus about the process of forgiveness, recognising that one would possibly need to offer forgiveness more than once. Peter suggested that up to seven times would perhaps be a generous concession towards the one who had sinned against him (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus's reply was no doubt shocking and unexpected, "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*"

There is no limit to forgiveness, it must be practiced each and every time the occasion arises.

Does Forgiveness Mean Reconciliation?

Forgiveness is choosing to relinquish our hold on the grievance and pass it over to God. It is renouncing our responsibility to exact justice and acknowledging that there is only one truly righteous judge in all the earth. And it is trusting that God truly loves us and cares about us and will accomplish His good purpose in us, including mending our brokenness and drying our tears.

For every Christian, reconciliation should be the ultimate hope. We are, after all, ambassadors of the great ministry of reconciliation between God and humanity, implicit in which is the forgiveness secured in Jesus.

But forgiveness doesn't always result in reconciliation (although true reconciliation must always include forgiveness).

Forgiveness is given to another, irrespective of whether the other party acknowledges an offense has been committed. Forgiveness requires nothing from the person we're forgiving but requires everything from ourselves. Yet, *"to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was us"* (Lewis B Smedes). Forgiveness is the gift we give ourselves.

Forgiveness, however, doesn't require having or maintaining any relationship. Rather, this is what the process of reconciliation seeks to restore; a good relationship between two parties.

The process of reconciliation will acknowledge the brokenness of the relationship and that there is a desire by both parties to repair and restore it. It will require repentance, truth, the rebuilding of trust, and, ultimately, the grace of God to accomplish it.

There is also the reality that some offenses, while forgiven, permanently fracture the possibility of any relationship and make reconciliation impossible.

"There are powerful stories of reconciliation. This is because of the power of God to restore broken things. He can take broken relationships and mend them back together. He is capable of healing the deepest of wounds. Thus, we shouldn't automatically conclude that God isn't interested in reconciliation. It delights God to see enemies reconciled and for peace to reign in relationships. Consider that God reconciled us to Himself through the blood of Christ. He forgave us of our sins, but He also restored us to relationship with Himself. That reconciliation required our repentance. Repentance is the key to any hopes for reconciliation in our estranged relationships today." | Jesus Ministry Today

Forgiveness Is Unfair

Choosing to forgive, in the face of denial of blame or continued hostility, is an unnatural act that defies every primal instinct. Yet this is what lies at the heart of the gospel of grace.

Grace teaches that God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are. Therefore, we choose to show that same attitude of grace in our behaviour to others. Showing grace isn't because we *should* forgive, it's because we're reminded that we *have* been forgiven.

We're called to be like God, to resemble the forgiving Father and it's this very quality, "*the peculiar, the extraordinary, the unusual*" that sets a Christian apart from others (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

Yet forgiving is brutal and messy.

"I asked a few people if they'd ever forgiven anyone and what it felt like. They gave me answers so pious I knew they'd never done it. Forgiveness is a brutal, mathematical transaction done with fully engaged faculties. It's my pain instead of yours. I eat the debt. I absorb the misery I wanted to dish out on you, and you go scot-free." | Andree seu Peterson

Philip Yancey, in his best-selling book, 'What's So Amazing About Grace', has this to say about forgiveness: "Most ethicists would agree with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that a person should be forgiven only if he deserves it. But the very word *forgive* contains the word "give" (just as the word *pardon* contains *donum*, or *gift*). Like grace, forgiveness has about it the maddening quality of being undeserved, unmerited, unfair."

As William S. Stoddard comments, "*forgiving the unforgivable*

is hard. So was the cross: hard words, hard wood, hard nails."

The point is this, forgiving is hard, messy, painful, and ultimately *unfair* work. It requires us to take the initiative, to break the cycle of ungrace, and to defy the natural law of retribution and fairness. It requires us to lay aside our desire for justice and recompense and to absorb the pain and darkness that sin has rendered into ourselves.

Yet forgiveness is the bridge over which we must all pass. Forgiveness is the boat we must all choose to get on.

Forgiveness, not justice, is what will set us free, loosen the grip of resentment, and crush the thorny shoot of bitterness looking to take root in our hearts.

Henri Has The Last Word

"Henri Nouwen, who defines forgiveness as *"love practiced among people who love poorly,"* describes the process at work: "I have often said, "I forgive you," but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return – if only the praise for being so forgiving!

But God's forgiveness is unconditional, it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive.

One day I discovered this admonition from the apostle Paul tucked in among many other admonitions in Romans 12. *Hate evil, be joyful, live in harmony, do not be conceited* – the list goes on and on. Then appears this verse, “*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to repay,’ says the Lord.*”

At last, I understood: in the final analysis, *forgiveness is an act of faith*. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy.

When Joseph finally came to the place of forgiving his brothers, the hurt did not disappear, but the burden of being their judge fell away. Though wrong does not disappear when I forgive, it loses its grip on me and is taken over by God, who knows what to do with it. Such a decision involves risk, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want. (The prophet Jonah, for instance, resented God for being more merciful than the Ninevites deserved.)

I never find forgiveness easy, and rarely do I find it completely satisfying. Nagging injustices remain, and the wounds still cause pain. I have to approach God again and again, yielding to Him the residue of what I thought I had committed to Him long ago. I do so because the Gospels make clear the connection: God forgives my debts as I forgive my debtors. The reverse is also true: Only by living in the stream of God’s grace will I find the strength to respond with grace towards others.” | Excerpt from ‘What’s So Amazing About Grace’ by Philip Yancey, pages 92-93

*“Now I’m standing in confidence
With the strength of your faithfulness
And I’m not who I was before
No, I don’t have to fear anymore*

*So I'm thankful for the scars
'Cause without them I wouldn't know your heart
And I know they'll always tell of who you are
So forever I am thankful for the scars"*

Scars | I Am They

Scars | I Am They

If you haven't managed to read 'What's So Amazing About Grace' by Philip Yancey, I highly recommend you get your hands on a copy. Here's a link to one of my favourite online stockists: <https://www.bookdepository.com/Whats-So-Amazing-About-Grace-Philip-Yancey/9780310245650> or, if you prefer to shop in-store, your local Koorong store is more than likely to have it in stock.

The above lyrics are taken from a beautiful worship song, 'Scars', by I Am They and is particularly relevant to the themes addressed in this article. You can listen to it here: <https://open.spotify.com/track/72B10mo2kmEst4YK08v0B6?si=eaca97476fa04af1>