

Roots of Forgiveness

Dub McClish

Jesus taught the disciples to pray for God's forgiveness as they were forgiving toward one another (Mat. 6:12). Then he added that God forgives us only if we forgive others (vv. 14-15). We need to understand the seriousness of praying this prayer. What it amounts to is that if we pray this prayer ("forgive us as we forgive others") while holding malice and a vengeful spirit toward others, we are asking God NOT to forgive us! Therefore, it is plain that human and Divine forgiveness are interdependent, indivisibly combined. John reflects on this principle: "If a man say, I love God and hateth his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20). This principle means that we must learn what true forgiveness is and we must make it a habit of life. There are three important roots of forgiveness.

Understanding. We should try to understand why people act like they do. Emotional stress can turn the calmest person into a rude, insulting crosspatch. Constant physical pain, one's home or work environment, etc., can affect behavior. An innocent word or deed may have been misinterpreted causing one to treat us with suspicion. Adults may behave the way they do because of emotional scars suffered in childhood. While many hurts and evils are intentionally done, we need to remember that many are not. We need to work at understanding why someone wronged us. God, through Christ, understands us because he has "walked in our shoes" (Heb. 4:15). We must learn the habit of "giving the benefit of the doubt."

Forgetting. Malicious recollection of injury prevents forgiveness. There is great danger in saying, "I'll never forget what _____ did to me." This prints it indelibly on our consciousness, making it impossible to forgive. God's forgiveness includes forgetting: "I will forgive their iniquity; their sin will I remember no more" (Jer. 31:34). When Paul said, "Forgetting the things which are behind" (Phi. 3:13), he may well have included his multitude of insults and sufferings at the hands of others. Admittedly, this is one of the most difficult things we will ever try to do; still, we must ever work at it.

Loving. The love that the New Testament so often urges upon us is the unquenchable spirit that extends helpfulness and blessing toward others, be they friend or foe. This is the love of God that sent Christ into the world (John 3:16). This is the spirit of Christ as he wept over impenitent Jerusalem (Mat. 23:37) and as he prayed

for those who caused his death (Luke 23:34). It must be our spirit, too, for love "taketh not account of evil" (1 Cor. 13:5) and "love covereth a multitude of sins" (I Pet. 4:8). Where love is found, mercy hovers near, in God and man alike (Eph. 2:4).

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