

The Limits of Forgiveness

By Jimmy Akin

Every year of mankind's fallen history witnesses countless sins, large and small. When they are committed against us, it raises the question of forgiveness, since Jesus made it clear that we must be willing to forgive. The prior two years witnessed particularly heinous crimes. The year 2001 saw the terrorist attacks, and 2002 saw the priestly sexual abuse scandal. In the wake of both of them, people were pondering the subject of forgiveness.

I remember, in the days immediately following 9/11, people calling *Catholic Answers Live* confused because their priests had told them that the U.S. must not strike back against the terrorists because of the Christian duty of forgiveness. After the sex scandal broke, there were many—even those who had not themselves been abused—vociferously declaring that they "could never forgive" the priestly abusers for what they had done.

There's something wrong with both of these views of forgiveness. The latter reflects the all-too-human tendency to not forgive no matter what the circumstances. It's the attitude toward which Christ's teachings regarding forgiveness are directed. The former attitude reflects the opposite extreme, insisting on all forms of forgiveness regardless of the circumstances. Though this attitude of hyper-forgiveness seeks to cloak itself in the teachings of Christ, in reality it goes far beyond what Christ asks us to do and even what God himself does.

Christ's most famous injunction regarding forgiveness is found in the Our Father: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12—and it is *debts* in Greek though the common English translation uses the word *trespasses*). Just to make sure we get the point, Jesus singles this petition out for special commentary: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14–15).

So that's it. You have to forgive if you want to be forgiven.

Forgiveness and Feelings

This creates the urgent question: What does it *mean* to forgive someone? This is a sticky issue because there are certain things that commonly go under the name of forgiveness that are difficult or impossible for us to do. For example, we often think of forgiving people in terms of not being angry with them anymore, of having warm, positive feelings toward them. When we tell people that we forgive them for what they did, we often smile and try to convey the impression that we have warm feelings even though we still may feel angry.

Since our forgiveness before God is conditional on our willingness to forgive others, a person with a feelings-based understanding of forgiveness could conclude that he isn't forgiven by God until he has rosy feelings about everyone in the world. This would lead him to try to manufacture positive feelings for others. When these feelings are not forthcoming, it can make him scared for his salvation, emotionally dry, frustrated, or even angry with God for making his salvation contingent on what kind of feelings he has when he doesn't have full control of them. That way lies despair.

But the feelings-based view of forgiveness is wrong for precisely the reason that the previous two scenarios turn on: We don't have full control of our feelings. Sure, we can influence them. If a particular subject makes us angry, we can try to think about something else. We can ask ourselves questions like "Was it really that bad?" or "What good can come from this?" or "What can I learn from this?" to put the subject in perspective.

But these efforts dance around the anger itself. They attempt to influence it from the outside. There is no way for us to reach into ourselves and flip a switch that causes the anger to vanish and be replaced by rosy feelings. What we can't control we are not responsible for. Since we have only indirect influence on our feelings, we can be responsible for how we strive to *manage* them but not for *having* them.

Anger and Sin

Anger isn't sinful in itself. In Ephesians 4:26, Paul tells us, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." But this passage speaks of our responsibility to manage our feelings. Paul doesn't mean that we literally have to get rid of our anger before sundown. He means don't nurture it. Let it pass. As before, that's something we can't guarantee since we can only influence our feelings.

Paul makes the exhortation "Be angry" because anger is part of human nature. It isn't just something that we inherited from Adam. Even Jesus himself got angry (cf. Mark 3:5). Anger is something God designed into us, just like he designed it in certain other creatures. It plays a useful function. It motivates us to protect things that need protecting, whether they are tangible (like family) or intangible (like reputation).

Thus Thomas Aquinas notes that "evil may be found in anger, when, to wit, one is angry, more or less than right reason demands. But if one is angry in accordance with right reason, one's anger is deserving of praise" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II:158:1).

Anger and Forgiveness

The problem is that we often experience too much anger, or anger over the wrong things, and, motivated by anger, we can unjustly harm rather than help. Overreacting in anger leads us to hurt both others and ourselves.

If humans didn't practice forgiveness—if we stayed angry over each past offense and determined to exact retribution for each one—society would fall apart. People wouldn't be able to work together. Society depends on a substantial amount of forgiveness, of "letting things slide" in order to function, and individuals who don't display the necessary level of forgiveness end up isolating themselves from others.

Consequently, we need to partition our anger, to not act on it. This is part of what is involved in forgiving a person. It means a willingness to let go of the anger someone has prompted in us, even if it's going to take a while before the feeling goes away. This is frequently what we are after when we ask others to forgive us: that they be willing to let the anger go.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Of course, what we would really like in getting someone's forgiveness is for things to be just as if we had never offended him. We'd like things to go back to exactly the way they were. That may not happen. Even if someone's ill feelings for us go away, prudence may dictate that he will not treat us in exactly the same way. This is particularly the case if we have broken trust with him. Consider the extremes we mentioned earlier: If someone is a terrorist or a child molester then—no matter how penitent he may be—he simply cannot be treated as if he had never committed his crimes.

Most of us have committed offenses nowhere near that bad, but the principle still holds. We sense it in our interactions with others. If someone has violated our trust, we may be able to let go of our anger, but that doesn't mean that we're going to put our trust in him again. Our trust will have to be earned. Forgiveness thus does not mean treating someone as if they had never sinned. That would require us to let go of our reason as well as our anger.

The Church acknowledges this principle. In his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II notes that the "requirement of forgiveness does not cancel out the objective requirements of justice. . . . In no passage of the gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence toward evil, toward scandals, toward injury or insult. In any case, reparation for evil and scandal, compensation for injury, and satisfaction for insult are conditions for forgiveness" (DM 14).

Preemptive Forgiveness?

We aren't obligated to forgive people who do not want us to. This is one of the biggest stumbling blocks that people have regarding the topic. People have seen "unconditional" forgiveness and love hammered so often that they feel obligated to forgive someone even before that person has repented. Sometimes they even *tell* the unrepentant that they have preemptively forgiven him (much to the impenitent's annoyance).

This is not what is required of us. Consider Luke 17:3–4, where Jesus tells us, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Notice that Jesus says to forgive him *if* he repents, not *regardless* of whether he does so. Jesus also envisions the person coming back to you and admitting his wrong.

The upshot? If someone isn't repentant, you don't have to forgive him. If you do forgive him anyway, that can be meritorious, provided it doesn't otherwise have bad effects (e.g., encouraging future bad behavior). But it isn't *required* of us that we forgive the person.

This may strike some people as odd. They may have heard unconditional love and forgiveness preached so often that the idea of not indiscriminately forgiving everybody sounds unspiritual to them. They might even ask, "But wouldn't it be *more spiritual* to forgive everyone?"

I sympathize with this argument, but there is a two-word rejoinder to it: God doesn't. Not everybody is forgiven. Otherwise, we'd all be walking around in a state of grace all the time and have no need of repentance to attain salvation. God doesn't like people being unforgiven,

and he is willing to grant forgiveness to all, but he isn't willing to force it on people who don't want it. If people are unrepentant of what they know to be sinful, they are not forgiven.

Jesus died once and for all to pay a price sufficient to cover all the sins of our lives, but God doesn't apply his forgiveness to us in a once-and-for-all manner. He forgives us as we repent. That's why we continue to pray "Forgive us our trespasses," because we regularly have new sins that we have repented of—some venial and some mortal, but all needing forgiveness.

If God doesn't forgive the unrepentant, and it is not correct to tell people that they need to do so, what is required of us?

What Forgiveness Is

Jesus calls us to be like God in the showing of mercy "that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:45). So how does God forgive?

Scripture tells us that he "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4) and that he is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). We should have the same attitude. We should will the good of every soul, even the most evil ones. No matter who they are or what they've done, we need to will their ultimate good, which is salvation through repentance.

What if they don't repent? One may hope that they were not culpable for their actions and so can be saved, that they were affected by mental disorder, intense pressure, ignorance, indoctrination, or *something* that affected their judgment so that they weren't responsible for their actions at the time they committed them.

But what if they were? We may hope that they are brought around to repentance. In fact, we ought to hope this even for those who weren't responsible for their actions. But to be brought to repentance often requires suffering the consequences of one's sins.

This is where righteous anger comes in. It is often said that anger is a desire for vengeance (cf. ST II-II:158:1). This puts it a little more harshly than many today would want to say it, but anger does involve a desire that the offending person experience the consequences of his sins. Without this desire, the feeling would be something less than anger, such as simple frustration.

Anger is righteous—in keeping with justice—if it is still fundamentally directed toward the good. Thus one may wish that a person experience the consequences of his offenses to sufficiently understand how he has hurt others, and teach him to not commit them in the future.

However, "if he desires the punishment of one who has not deserved it, or beyond his deserts, or again contrary to the order prescribed by law, or not for the due end—namely the maintaining of justice and the correction of faults—then the desire of anger will be sinful" (ibid., 2).

It is so easy for us in our fallen state to slip into sinful anger that Scripture repeatedly warns us against it, but anger serves a fundamental purpose.

If a person with whom we are angry repents, then the obligation to forgive kicks in. This means that we must be willing to set aside our anger because he no longer deserves it. We may still feel it for a time, and it can even be advisable to let him know this in order to underscore the lesson he needs to have learned. But we do need to manage our emotions so that we let the anger go and, to the best of our ability, encourage it to fade.

And what if a person doesn't repent when all is said and done? At some point we need to let our feeling of anger fade, not for his sake but for ours. It isn't good for us to stay angry, and it poses temptations to sin. Ultimately, we have to let go of the feeling of anger and move on with life. Frequently we have to do so even when a person has not repented.

But for the person himself, what should we hope? With regret, we recognize that it is appropriate that he gets what he chose, even if that was hell. This is, after all, the attitude taken by God toward those who choose death rather than life.