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FORGIVING FOR GOOD (Part 3 of 3)

THE HIGH COST OF FORGIVING

A year ago a milk truck driver in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania entered a one room Amish school house and shot ten girls, killing five of them before killing himself. Within hours of the shooting family members of the victims were at the murder's house comforting his wife. Over four million dollars have been donated to these Amish families. They have shared the money with the murder's wife.

In reporting the story, Byron Pitts of CBS News says for the Amish, forgiveness is not a teaching, it is a way of life.

Yet, genuine forgiveness is never easy. It always costs us—sometimes tremendously—to forgive.

Forgiveness cost God His Son. Forgiveness costs the Son His life. What costs did the Father and Son bear to make forgiveness possible to all humanity? We can never know the full extent of the costs they bore.

Forgiveness costs us, too.

Forgiveness costs us pain and suffering.

If someone owes you \$5000 and you forgive the debt, it costs you \$5000. Forgiving someone who has sinned against us or offended us costs us mentally, emotionally, and spiritually much more than can be measured in dollars and cents.

How much debt is incurred when someone lies about you, defames your reputation, or betrays your friendship? What is the cost of someone slandering your name or that of your spouse or

children? These kinds of debts far exceed monetary value.

Nevertheless, when we forgive, two things happen. First our attitude must be, "You no longer owe me." In our hearts, we release the person from any indebtedness to us. If a bank forgives a debt you owe, you no longer owe the bank anything. Just so, when you forgive someone of a sin or offense they committed against you, that person no longer owes you. You have forgiven the transgression.

But a second critical thing happens when we forgive: *we carry in our heart the cost of the debt.* We choose to bear in our heart the pain their sin caused us.

Lutheran theologian, William Hordern has written:

"The injured parties who forgive must *bear within themselves* all the hurt, anger, resentment, and pain that comes from the injury that they have received." (Emphasis mine.)

Isn't this exactly what Jesus did on the cross? Peter 2:24a says, "And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross." Similarly, when we forgive, we bear in our heart and soul, conscience and subconscious, the hurt the sin has caused us.

Philip Yancey says forgiveness:

"... is no sweet platonic ideal to be dispersed in the world like air-freshener sprayed from a can. Forgiveness is achingly difficult, and long after you've forgiven, the wound lives on in memory. . . . Behind every act of forgiveness lies a wound of betrayal, and the pain of being betrayed does not easily fade away."



The idea “If you forgive, you forget,” is both unbiblical and unrealistic. Our minds and emotions don’t work that way. We remember, and we continue to suffer long after we have forgiven.

Did Joseph suffer even though he had forgiven his brothers? He did. Read the Genesis accounts of how often he wept over all that had happened. Did David feel the pain of Absalom’s betrayal long after he had forgiven him? He did, and one of the most pitiable and tragic laments in all literature is David’s grief over Absalom’s death:

“And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And thus he said as he walked, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33)

Did Paul suffer after he had forgiven those who hurt him? He did. Yet in the latter verses of II Timothy we can sense the agony of Paul’s heart over the betrayal and abandonment at the hand of his Christian brothers.

When we forgive, we bear in our hearts the pain—sometimes enormous pain—and suffering over the sins and offenses committed against us. Jesus’ pain didn’t stop when He forgave; it increased—costing Him His life. Forgiveness and pain are inescapably linked.

Forgiveness costs us revenge, justice, and fairness.

When evil has been done to us, our natural reaction is to respond in kind. W. H. Auden wrote:

*I and the public know
What all school children learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.*

We want to exact our pound of flesh and get even. We want the one who has hurt us to get what’s coming to them, what they deserve. We want those who have caused our suffering to suffer the way we have.

We may even have a legitimate right of redress. We want justice and fairness. Such predilections make forgiveness both unnatural and unpleasant. When we forgive, we must agree to forgo justice and *bear in our heart the injustice done to us.*

When a reporter asked how the Amish could forgive someone who had killed their children, the answer was, “Forgiveness is giving up my right to revenge or retaliation.”

Forgiveness places justice and revenge in the hands of God. Paul said it in Romans 12:19, “Never take your own revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

Nonetheless, because we do forgive, we still carry two burdens. First, the hurt stays with us. Phillip Yancey writes:

“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.”

Remembering the offense and feeling the pain doesn’t mean we haven’t forgiven. It means we are humans trying to do an inhuman thing.

Second, the wrong or injustice stays with us, though as Yancey says:

“...it simply no longer holds me as an emotional prisoner. 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. Such a decision involves risks, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want.”



Forgiveness is not forgetting either the hurt or the injustice. It is an act of faith, trusting God to be a better judge than we. We release our right to get even and leave the issues of justice and fairness in God's hands. He, not we, holds the scales that balance justice and mercy.

Forgiveness costs us our life.

Just as forgiveness caused Jesus His life, similarly forgiveness will cause us a kind of death as well. Frequently in the New Testament we are confronted with that most unpleasant concept of dying to self in order for Christ to live in us. No where is this more necessary than when we try to forgive.

Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

Dying to self is a precursor to forgoing vengeance. We die to our desire that the one who offended us be punished. We die to the desire to exact our pound of flesh and have our legitimate rights restored.

When we forgive, the issue is no longer "they owe me," or "they deserve to be punished." Forgiveness means that we have died to our right to get even. The issue now is: *I HAVE FORGIVEN.*

It is in dying with Christ that we find new life. Forgiveness overcomes the anger, resentment, and bitterness that always accompany unforgiveness, and in time, the painful memories do fade—I promise. The liberating, consoling, and healing life of Christ flows into us and then it flows out from us.

To truly forgive, there are many things to which we must die—vengeance, justice, fairness, etc. Most of all we must die to self.

Take the initiative to forgive. It is a mistaken idea that someone has to ask our forgiveness first. Nonsense. We can forgive even when the offender never asks our forgiveness. Then, when the memories of the sins or the pain of the offenses return we must remind ourselves, "I have forgiven." The late, great preacher, Ron Dunn, had a sermon on forgiveness titled, "What to Remember When You Can't Forget." When you can't forget the sin, what you remember is that you have forgiven it.

Though it costs us a great deal to forgive, such grace breaks the back of unforgiving unforgiveness. At no time are we more Christ-like than when we, like the Amish, quietly bear in our own hearts the costs and pains of sins committed against us because we choose to forgive—just as God has forgiven us.

Grace be with you,
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