

## The Sides of Forgiveness

By Rick Ezell

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21-22 NIV).

Forgiveness is the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you. Several sides are evident in forgiveness.

The practical side of forgiveness means that forgiving someone is simply a deliberate, singular and volitional decision by which one person chooses to consider another person no longer in debt. It’s like saying, “On February 26, 2003, I willfully and deliberately choose to forgive you of the wrong you did to me.”

The theological side of forgiveness means that you place the person’s case in God’s court. You are no longer responsible for the behavior of that person and are saying to God: “It’s your business. It’s between you and the person, because as far as I’m concerned, that person is forgiven.” Then it is up to God to deal justly with him or her.

The relational side of forgiveness means that you seek reconciliation with the person who has injured you. Forgiveness in the New Testament context is more synonymous with our word reconciliation than with love. The two Greek words for forgiveness are translated most clearly as “to release or set free” and “to offer a gift of grace.” This release or pardon is not detached or private. Take for example, God’s forgiveness in Jesus. He utterly and totally invested in incarnate involvement with us. There is no such thing as cheap and distant forgiveness. This does not mean necessarily that you will be best friends with the offensive person or that you will have a relationship with them, but you relinquish repayment for the wrong.

The transformational side of forgiveness means that since God has forgiven us we are to forgive others. Scripture comes very close to saying that if we want the forgiveness of God we had better forgive others. Take for example, Jesus said, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14-15 NIV).

Forgiveness is not a skill easily mastered. It never becomes second nature. We are always students in forgiving others. Forgiveness is difficult because it is costly. The cost may require us to risk further hurt by engaging the person who caused the hurt in the first place. The cost may be the pain of expressing our hurt and disappointment without any satisfactory release and restoration from the one

who did the offending. The cost may require us to accept further rejection when the other brushes us off, blames us further, burns us with additional anger, or blatantly refuses to talk.

Some Jewish rabbis taught their followers not to forgive beyond three offenses. Peter, no doubt, thought that forgiving seven times equaled going the second mile. Jesus responded to Peter's inquiry by noting that true forgiveness knows no limits. Go, therefore, and do likewise.

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