

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

(3) LEARNING TO FORGIVE

Luke 15:11-32

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PROLOGUE

Attitude is an important part of our emotional well being. According to *The Hope Health Letter* (4/96), "Cheerful people resist disease better than glum ones." In other words, the surly bird catches the germ!

SCRIPTURE

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. {12} The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. {13} A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. {14} When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. {15} So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. {16} He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. {17} But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! {18} I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; {19} I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" {20} So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. {21} Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' {22} But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. {23} And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; {24} for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. {25} "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. {26} He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. {27} He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' {28} Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. {29} But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I

have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. {30} But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" {31} Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. {32} But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found'" (Luke 15:11-32 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The story of the prodigal son is the third of three similar stories that are told by Jesus in response to the criticism, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (15:2). The first story is the story of the lost sheep and the second is the story of the lost coin. Each story involves something of value being lost and then found: a sheep, a coin, a person. In each case, that which is lost represents people who have lost their way in life, who are far from God. Consequently, there are three lessons these stories have in common. People who are far from God matter to God. People who are far from God merit an all out search. And when people who are far from God are found by God it means it's time to celebrate.

The story of the prodigal son is not an allegory. In an allegory, every part of the story is meant to represent something else, to convey some important truth. But the story of the prodigal son is what we call a parable. A parable paints a picture in the mind, out of ordinary happenstance, that leaves the listener with a single idea or theme. In this case, the idea is that God is incredible gracious and does, in fact, welcome sinners.

Nevertheless, as we examine the dynamics of the story, there are certain things here that can help us learn how to forgive. Remember, forgiveness does not mean you condone the action nor does it necessarily lead to reconciliation. Forgiveness means you give up any notion of revenge and you get rid of your resentment.

At the risk of over-simplifying, we can say that there are basically four things that the father in the story says to or about his children that suggest the steps we need to follow to learn how to forgive:

1. RECOGNIZE THE HURT - "He was dead"

The first thing that the father says about his younger son is, "He was dead." That is quite a serious diagnosis! Notice that the father does not say, "my son has been going through a difficult phase" or "we have some issues we need to work on." No. He says, "He was dead."

Of course, the son did not literally die. But he had cut himself off from his family and we can only imagine the kind of grief the father felt. It must have been a feeling of great loss not unlike a death.

The father's macabre expression about his son does underscore the first step in learning to forgive. We need to recognize the hurt that has been done to us. Denying our experience prevents us from moving forward.

A perceived injury will usually trigger anger. Anger is a normal emotion. There is nothing evil about feeling anger. But there are dangers. It can lead to something destructive if we let it.

Before we are tempted to translate our feeling of anger into hostile behavior we can often resolve our anger if we simply recognize it. We need to admit that we are angry. More than anything else, anger wants to be recognized. Responding to anger with hostility is the wrong way to recognize it. In almost every case, anger can be resolved by giving it verbal recognition. "I am angry about this."

The best way to resolve anger is to think about it when you are not angry and work to reduce the causes. Most anger is unnecessary. There are very few times when we are in life or death situations. We must learn to challenge our irrational beliefs and expectations. Allow for imperfection. (No one is perfect.) Learn what the Bible calls forbearance. And most importantly, live in reliance upon the grace of God.

If someone hurts us we can also experience loss. It may be the loss of a particular object, the loss of a friendship, or even the loss of esteem, to name a few examples. But in order to grieve a loss we need to acknowledge the value of the loss. We do not grieve in response to the loss. We grieve in response to our interpretation of the loss. Let us say there is a clock in my house. I see it as junk because it is old and broken. My wife sees it as a treasure because it is an antique from her grandmother. One day the clock is gone. It has been lost or stolen. Will we grieve the same way? No. I will get over it in a couple of minutes. My wife will take quite a bit longer. It is the same clock but we have different interpretations of its value. The point is, grief must be in proportion to the value you place on what is lost.

Recognizing the hurt is the first step in learning to forgive. Recognizing the hurt means we acknowledge our anger and we acknowledge the value of what we think has been lost. If we do not do this then our anger will turn into bitterness and our grief into despair.

2. GAIN PERSPECTIVE - "He was Lost"

The second thing that the father says about his younger son is, "He was lost." He was not

only lost from God but he was also lost from himself. He did not understand himself. He was missing direction in his life. He had lost his identity and was searching for a new one in all the wrong places.

This second comment from the father is more empathetic. It is an attempt to understand why the younger son behaved the way he did. This leads us to our second step in learning to forgive.

After we recognize that we have been hurt, it is helpful to try to understand why the person did it. We need to (metaphorically) step back and try to see the situation from their perspective. I remember visiting a family some years ago. We were in the backyard enjoying the beautiful summer weather. At one point an older man, who was visiting them, threw a ball at me at great speed from a short distance and I got hurt. At first I was quite upset. Only much later did I discover the man had a serious illness that caused intense pain. He had not meant to throw the ball so hard. Once I understood the situation it was easier to give up the resentment.

Everett Worthington, the researcher I mentioned last week, says:

“People who hurt or offend us often do so because they’re conditioned by their past.”¹

Looking at the offender as a whole person, with a history that led them to behave the way they did and immediate circumstances that may have fueled their behavior, allows a seed of empathy to be planted. When we can see others’ vulnerability, pain, and difficulties, it’s easier to build a context for their actions and, perhaps, see that all of us are capable and guilty of hurting others in some way at some time.²

Sometimes it is not possible to know the other person’s circumstances or understand why they did what they did. When that is the case, Christ followers have both an advantage and an obligation. The advantage is, even if we do not know why the other person did what they did, God does. God understands all about that other person and understands all about us.

¹Worthington, Everett L., ed. *A Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Brunner-Routledge 2005) and *Conversations about Forgiveness Facilitator Guide*, p. 18.

²*Ibid.*

We also know that in the history of forgiveness, God went first. God is the first forgiver. He paved the way. He is our model and inspiration. We learn to forgive by following his example and relying upon the presence and power of his Holy Spirit.

The obligation is that we look at people the way God looks at people. All people matter to God and they need to matter to us. By looking at people from God's perspective, it becomes easier to forgive.

Our obligation is also seen in the prayer Jesus taught his followers:

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (Matt 6:12).

Don't you sometimes wish he hadn't said that? But the truth is, mercy shown to others is evidence that we have, in fact, experienced the mercy of God. And because we have received mercy we are to show mercy.

3. MAKE KNOWN YOUR COMMITMENT - “Let's Celebrate”

The third thing the father says is, “Let's celebrate.” The father's forgiveness of his son was not a feeling he kept hidden in his heart. It was a decision that he made known to others.

By telling a third party that you have forgiven someone, you add power to the decision. Because at least one other person knows you have forgiven, it becomes a lot harder to take it back.

Reconciliation does not always follow forgiveness but in this parable it does. The father gives three gifts to his younger son to show others how they are to treat him: a robe for honor, a ring for respect, but most importantly sandals because only family members were allowed to wear shoes in the house.

4. BEWARE THE OTHER PRODIGAL - “This Brother of Yours”

The fourth thing that the father says is not directed to the younger son but to the older one. The older brother was not happy his younger brother had returned. He became angry and refused to go to the feast. He focused on his brother's past sins, even some he may not have committed, and refused to forgive him as his father had. He tried to distance himself by saying to his father, “But when this son of *yours* came back...” (15:30). But the father pleaded with him saying:

“But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found (15:32).

Notice how gently the father refutes the older brother's attempt to disconnect himself from his younger brother. The older brother says, "This son of *yours*" but the father says, "This brother of *yours*." I am reminded of Paul's words to a conflicted congregation in Corinth:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21 NRSV).

The truth is, we really do need each other.

The parable of the prodigal son was originally told by Jesus to reprove the religious people of his day for their uncaring and unforgiving attitude toward others, especially those they considered to be "not as good as they were." The message that they were intended to receive from the parable was that they were acting like the older brother.

Two thousand years later not much has changed. People who sit in pews and stand behind pulpits still act like the older brother. We need to understand that some prodigals never leave home. Our bodies may be present but our hearts have wandered away. So if we want to develop a more caring and forgiving spirit, we need to beware of the other prodigal brooding inside of us.

CONCLUSION

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most popular and best loved of Jesus' parables. It shows us the heart of God toward people who have wandered away from God. In addition, as we explore the dynamics of the story, four practical steps emerge that can help us to learn how to forgive:

- Recognize the hurt.
- Gain perspective by trying to understand the other person. (Or at least look at that person the same way Jesus would look at that person.)
- Make known your commitment to forgive.
- Beware the other prodigal inside of you.