

70 x 7 (Matthew 18:22)

Introduction

During a weekend retreat, a man came to speak with me about the deep resentment he had toward his boss because of a severe cut in pay due to poor performance. I listened to his plight, and then explained to him a strategy of forgiveness that will help him overcome his bitterness. Then I prayed with him. I met him a year later and he seemed much more at peace. He thanked me for my advice and prayer, and said over a period of months things got better. Then he told me that he had already bought the gun to shoot his boss when he first spoke with me.

I We have all had crazy thoughts in our lifetime which could have led to violence. Daily we read about such tragedies that spring from anger, hatred and bitterness. But God has a plan to get us out of such a state of mind.

In Matt. 18:22. Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a person. (70x7) Since we have received God's mercy so many times, we need to find the way to do the same. Mercy is undeserved forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a two way street. While we often receive forgiveness, we need to offer forgiveness to others. Some people are better at doing this. What keeps us back? Pride.

II Forgiveness is a virtue by which we grant pardon for an offense against us or our loved ones. Forgiveness is an act of the will, it is not a feeling. "Father, forgive them..."

As disciples we are called to follow the Master: forgiveness is one aspect. Forgiveness is spiritual surgery – it is cutting out of one's life what is harmful. We allow God to be the surgeon.

It is OK to admit that we are hurt by someone's words and actions. How could we not be hurt? Denial is not healthy. We are tempted to seek revenge but that only complicates the issue. So the healthy alternative is to find the way to forgive. We do not need to be reconciled with those who hurt us. Keeping a distance may be the best course of action. We can try to be civil when we meet such people.

III There are three steps to forgiveness: choose to forgive; pray God's blessing upon the person; ask God to heal one's painful memory. As we employ these steps,

the wounds have a chance to heal. Inner peace is restored. Let me develop these points.

Matt. 5:44 “Love enemies, pray for your persecutors.” This is most difficult.

- 1 Desire to forgive a person or group unconditionally. You don't have to feel it.
- 2 Pray for God to bless those people. You need not be specific.
- 3 Ask God to heal your painful memory meaning to take it away. It will recede in your memory over time.

There are so many ugly, horrific tragedies in our world. How can we forgive a terrorist; drug dealer; a slave trader; Nazis in World War II? Only by God's grace. In our country there have been severe massacres that leave us speechless: in schools, movie theaters, office buildings, churches. We are numb.

There are examples of forgiveness which really inspire us. A few years ago there was a rampage in Charleston, SC. 21 year old Dylan Roof shot and killed 9 people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. The surviving family members forgave Dylan and prayed for him. That is God's grace.

IV Sometimes we need to forgive an institution for harm it has caused Christians. This is the case with the pedophilia crisis in the Catholic Church and others churches. The clergy abuse scandal has rocked the Church worldwide. So many youngsters were harmed.

Why did this go on for so long without correction? Guilt and shame were covered up and that caused more harm to youngsters. How is a Christian to react? Each of us needs to find the way to forgive the guilty priests and bishops who covered this up for decades. Can we forgive the sinful institutional Church for not being what God wants us to be? We can desire to do so, and pray God's blessing upon the guilty.

Pope Francis and the bishops are committed to removing this blight among us. The Pope met with victims of sexual abuse in Philadelphia in September, 2015. He asked forgiveness on behalf of Church leadership.

“Words cannot fully express my sorrow for the abuse that you have suffered. You are precious children of God, and you should always expect our protection, our care and our love. I deeply regret the fact that your innocence has been violated by those who you trusted. ...I promise that we will follow the path of truth, wherever it

may lead. Clergy and bishops will be held accountable if they have abused children or have not been able to protect them.”

V Concerning forgiveness, how good are you at forgiving yourself? It is not to our spiritual advantage to carry guilt and shame.

Self-forgiveness is not easy, but it is possible in all circumstances. There have been some great conversions in history that show the mercy of God to heal inner wounds. E.g. St. Paul the Apostle; St. Mary Magdalene; St. Augustine.

Dr. Bernard Nathanson had performed 60,000 abortions in his career. In 1974 he converted and repented of his deeds. He made a movie “Silent Scream” which depicted a live fetus in its mother’s womb to show that a human being truly exists there. Dr. Nathanson did something constructive to show people that abortion is murder.

Self-forgiveness is a choice. If God can forgive us, we should do the same. Give God our sins, mistakes, failures, and neglects. God wants us to let go.

We should refuse to dwell upon a past event unless there is a reason to do so. The devil lives in the past and wants to condemn us over and over again. Don’t help him out. It may

be helpful to reflect upon this principle: If I knew back then what I know now, things would be different. Give yourself a break.

VI Did you ever think of the need to forgive God for tragedies of life? This sounds awkward. But if we are angry at God and blame God for not intervening in the hardships of life, we really hurt ourselves. So many things are beyond our control. Let’s do our best to carry the crosses we have been given.

Personal heartaches come in all forms. We grieve the loss of loved ones, friends, a job, children and grandchildren who go astray; poor health. We want God to do something and nothing seems to happen. Now what?

It takes deep faith to believe that “for those who love God, all things work together unto good according to God’s purpose.” Rom. 8:28. God has a way of bringing good out of personal suffering.

We may not see the good that comes out of personal tragedy. But all of us have been edified how some people with strong faith rise above tragedy, e.g. family members who will forgive a murderer.

Conclusion – Our God is merciful and forgiving. As disciples of Jesus we are called to be merciful to others and to ourselves. May God give us humility and courage to do so.

Lord, God of mercy and God of second chances, shower your Divine Mercy upon us and upon the whole world. Bring healing and forgiveness to all your people. We desire to be merciful and forgiving toward those who have hurt us. Give us the heart of Mary who forgave those who murdered her Son. We choose to forgive ourselves for sins and mistakes that have caused harm to others. Free us from the burdens of the past in order to live more joyfully in the present. May your peace and serenity come upon us today and always. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.