When Would it Be a Sin to Forgive?

Luke 17:1-4

Introduction:

1. The events of the past week have stimulated my thoughts on forgiveness.
2. “The Sin of Forgiveness,” WSJ, Monday, December 15, 1997, page A22, by Dennis Prager:

The bodies of the three teenage girls murdered by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., were not yet cold before the students of the Christian prayer group that was shot at announced, “We forgive you, Mike,” referring to Michael Carneal, 14, the murderer.

This immediate and automatic forgiveness of a murderer is not surprising. Over the past generation, the idea that a central message of Christianity is to forgive everyone who commits evil against anyone, no matter how great and cruel and whether or not the evildoer repents, has been adopted by much of Christendom.

The number of examples is almost as large as the number of heinous crimes. But one other recent example stands out. In August, the pastor at a Martha’s Vineyard church service attended by the vacationing President Clinton announced that it was the duty of all Christians to forgive Timothy McVeigh, the murderer of 168 Americans. “I invite you to look at a picture of Timothy McVeigh and then forgive him,” the Rev. John Miller said in his sermon. “I have, and I ask you to do so.”

The pastor acknowledged: “Considering what he did, that may be a formidable task. But it is the one that we as Christians are asked to do.”

Though I am a Jew, I believe that a vibrant Christianity is essential if America’s moral decline is to be reversed, and that despite theological differences, there is indeed a Judeo-Christian value system that has served as the bedrock of American civilization. For these reasons I am appalled and frightened by this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness.

This doctrine undermines the moral foundations of American civilization because it advances the amoral notion that no matter how much you hurt other people, millions of your fellow citizens will immediately forgive you. This doctrine destroys Christianity’s central moral tenets about forgiveness – that forgiveness, even by God, is contingent on the sinner repenting, and that it can only be given to the sinner by the one against whom he sinned.

These tenets are unambiguously affirmed in Luke 17:3-4: “And if your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if seven times of the day he sins against you, and seven times of the day turns to you saying, I repent, you shall forgive him.”

This flies in the face of what passes for Christianity these days – the declaration, often repeated, that “It is the Christian’s duty to forgive just as Jesus forgave those who crucified him.” Of course, Jesus asked God to forgive those who crucified him. But Jesus never asked God to forgive those who had crucified thousands of other innocent people – presumably because he recognized that no one has the moral right to forgive evil done to others.

You and I have no right, religiously or morally, to forgive Timothy McVeigh or Michael Carneal; only those they sinned against have that right – and those they murdered are dead and therefore cannot forgive them. (Indeed, that is why I believe that humans cannot forgive a murderer.) If we are automatically, forgiven no matter what we do – even if we do not repent – why repent? In fact, if we are to forgive everybody for all the evil they do to anybody, God and his forgiveness are entirely unnecessary. Those who forgive all evil done to others have substituted themselves for God.

When confronted with such arguments, some callers to my radio show offered another defense: “The students were not forgiving Carneal for murdering the three students,” these callers argued, “they were forgiving him for the pain he caused them.” Let us summarize this argument: You murder my classmates, and the next day I announce that I forgive you for the pain you caused me! That such self-centered thinking masquerades as a religious ideal is a good example of the moral disarray in much of religious life.

Some people have a more sophisticated defense of the forgive-everyone-everything doctrine: Victims should be encouraged to forgive all evil done to them because doing so is psychologically healthy. It brings “closure.” This, too, is selfishness masquerading as idealism – the argument being, “Though you do not deserve to be forgiven, and though you may not even be sorry, I forgive you because I want to feel better.”

The rise of the theology of automatic “forgiveness” is only one more sign of the decline of traditional religiosity and morality. As Yale Prof. David Gelernter, who was severely injured by the Unabomber, notes in his thoughtful recent book, “Drawing Life,” the 1960s made making moral judgments the greatest sin. He points out that none of his pre-1975 dictionaries contains the word “judgmental.” Today, judging evil is widely considered worse than doing evil.

Until West Paducah, I believed that Christians will lead America’s moral renaissance. Though I still believe that many Christians are repulsed by the demoralization and dumbing down of religion – the day those students, with the support of their school administration, hung out that sign I became less sanguine. If young Christians have inherited more values from the ‘60s culture than from Judeo-Christian culture, where can we look for help? (*Mr. Prager, host of a daily radio talk show in Los Angeles, is the author of “Happiness Is a Serious Problem, “due out in January from HarperCollins*).

1. Let us examine what Jesus taught about forgiveness.
2. Jesus tells me to forgive those who repent, who say, “I repent.”

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him” (Luke 17:3,4).

* 1. Should I forgive my brother before I rebuke or instead of rebuking him?
  2. If I rebuke my brother and he does not repent, should I forgive him?
  3. **Forgive**: Human forgiveness is to be strictly analogous to Divine forgiveness, e.g., Matt. 6:12. If certain conditions are fulfilled, there is no limitation to Christ’s law of forgiveness, Matt. 18:21, 22. The conditions are repentance and confession, Matt. 18:15-17; Luke 17:3 (Vine, W. E., *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell) 1981.

1. Jesus tells me how to deal with someone who has sinned against me.

“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

* 1. Suppose I have worked through this process that Jesus recommended.
  2. The brother has not repented.
  3. I am to treat him like a heathen and a tax collector.
  4. If I then forgive him without him repenting, I treat him and regard him as if nothing has happened.
  5. How can I do both?

1. Paul tells me not to eat with a person who continues in sin and has been disciplined by the church.

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner — not even to eat with such a person (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

* 1. If the church has tried to restore this person and no godly sorrow has been demonstrated, I am not to keep company with him.
  2. Can I then forgive him – while he still does not want it and treat him as if the sin and rebellion have never occurred?

1. I am to forgive others as God and Christ have forgiven me.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do (Colossians 3:12,13).

* 1. Do God and Christ forgive me without repentance?

“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3).

Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30,31)

* 1. Since God and Christ do not forgive without repentance, how can I forgive just as God forgave me when people are unwilling to repent and don’t want forgiveness?
  2. Should I be “better” than God?
  3. Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who were crucifying Him.

Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And they divided His garments and cast lots (Luke 23:34).

* 1. It is my understanding that prayer was not answered until Pentecost when the people who crucified Him repented and were baptized. Acts 2
  2. Stephen prayed for those who were stoning him.

Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 7:60).

* 1. Evidently, that prayer had not yet been answered and Saul had not been forgiven when Ananias told him:

‘And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord’ (Acts 22:16).

1. Observations:
   1. From the account of the prodigal son in Luke 15, I think for my spiritual well-being and following the example of the loving father, I need to work on being ready to forgive. I need to remember the forgiveness that I enjoy from God. Matthew 18:21-35
   2. I need to be ready to treat them as I want to be treated. I don’t want people forgiving me before I ask or change my mind about the wrong I have committed. If they do that, I may never know I have hurt them. I might continue to hurt them and not have the opportunity to correct that since I have not been confronted, “rebuked.”

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

* 1. Therefore, I can be preparing my heart – the robe, the ring, the sandals, the fatted calf while my brother is (or is not) preparing to repent.
  2. If he gets ready to repent before I get ready to forgive, we can’t have a party because I have not been letting God work on my heart to prevent/remove resentment, bitterness.
  3. If he doesn’t repent, I cannot find Jesus or the Holy Spirit in the word instructing me to send the robe, the ring, the sandals, and a carry-out of steak and baked potato to the pig pen.
  4. The following is Barber – not Bible: It has been my observation and experience that I am inclined to make “rules” that remove the necessity of talking and confrontation.
     1. One way to do that is not to forgive. I have already decided. I will not forgive. Since I have come to that conclusion, I do not have to talk to the offender because I have already decided not to forgive him regardless of what he says or does. That gives me some immediate relief because confrontation is painful to me.
     2. But there is another way. I can decide to forgive everyone every time they sin against me (or God). Again, I do not address the transgression. That is much more comfortable for me since my anxiety rises in anticipation and in execution of confrontation.
  5. Although either of these “rules” brings short term relief, it is my understanding that neither are biblical.

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him” (Luke 17:3,4).

Conclusion:

1. When would it be a sin to forgive?
2. Would spouse abuse be a sin to forgive without repentance?
3. When the forgiveness would give a person a false sense of cleansing that exists in the mind of man and not in the mind of God.

“Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them,

Everyone is given to covetousness;

And from the prophet even to the priest,

Everyone deals falsely.

They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly,

Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’

When there is no peace.

Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?

No! They were not at all ashamed;

Nor did they know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;

At the time I punish them,

They shall be cast down,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 6:13-15).

1. I am to bind and loose only what God has bound and loosed in heaven.

“Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).

“I solemnly say to you, whatever you forbid on earth must be already forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth must be already permitted in heaven” (Matthew 18:18, Charles B. Williams).

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