

Choosing Mercy

Forgiveness is a non-negotiable part of the Christian life. Even a brief glance at the Holy Scriptures shows this as true. “For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive [them], neither will your heavenly Father forgive you your transgressions.” (Matt. 6:14).

Christ exhorts us to choose mercy because this makes us most God-like. Forgiveness breaks the age-old cycle of hate, a sequence of vengefulness that began with the murder of Abel by Cain. An 18th century Portuguese prince was lying upon his bed near death. A priest came offering confession and said, “My son, have you forgiven your enemies?” The Prince answered, “Father, I don’t have any enemies. I’ve killed them all.”

Our first reaction to the offenses we experience is perhaps not all that dissimilar. Because when injured we want retaliation. When hurt, we want payback: to send the hurt right back to its sender, as in an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This is really what it’s about - *the hurt that is lying deep down within*. It demands we settle the score. We’ve been wronged and now we have the right to exact our “just pound of flesh,” as Shakespeare once wrote. Yet the Lord teaches us that forgiveness is the only way to deal with the injuries and grievances of life we meet. Choosing to be merciful is the first step towards inner healing because it helps us to realize that hate is a trap of the devil.

Another benefit of forgiveness is that it cleanses the heart from resentment and ill will. Here again, we are speaking about inner wounds. The first step in this cleansing is the need to recognize that there are people in this world who know nothing but how to hurt others. “*Hurting people hurt*,” means that there are those who have failed to heal the hurt and have nothing to share with others - but their hurt. So we step back and stay out of their way as much as we can. There is no wrong in this. This kind of stepping back can happen emotionally, psychologically, and physically if need be. Loving and liking are two separate things. We love everyone unconditionally, but liking is a separate matter.

Along with this, we let the healing begin by letting go of anger and ill-will. When angry thoughts appear, we acknowledge them but refuse them an entrance into the heart. When St. Paul says, “be angry, but do not sin and do not let the sun go down on your anger,” he is speaking an anger that can be all-consuming. Yet forgiveness is healing because it is a renouncing of the hateful thoughts and feelings that would otherwise continually darken our hearts and minds. This is no easy thing. Forgiveness is a journey which takes time and involves the milestones of first wanting even to forgive, second, discerning and denying the demonic dark, malicious thoughts that assail us from the demons, and finally the decision to let go of the past.

This brings us to the importance of facing forward. St. Paul says, “Brethren, one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:13). Forgiveness is the miracle of how the past can stay in the past. This is why "remembrance of wrongs" is a sin in the Orthodox Church, to be acknowledged and confessed. Holding on to grudges is a sin because it means we're staying stuck in the past - by looking at life in the wrong direction. Forgiveness, however, involves a purposeful decision to let the past stay where it belongs so that we can focus on the wonderful, good and simple things God has given us in the present and His great promises that lie in the future.

Forgiveness is a miracle of grace. No one can make it happen on their own. By following the teaching of the gospel, we ask God to take that which is humanly impossible and make it possible by the grace of God. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

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