



If Thy Brother Sins Against Thee

By Janice Allred

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).

If Peter had asked, "Till eight times?" Jesus might have answered, "Not until eight times, but until eighty times eight," and his answer would have been the same, a paradoxical expression of the principle of forgiveness, for numbers are antithetical to forgiveness,

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the essence of which is to do away with a strict accounting, to go beyond the calculations necessitated by justice.

Jesus' answer is not a strategy to get us to always forgive based on the assumption that most of us are likely to lose count before we reach 490. A really clever and vindictive person would not have too much trouble tallying up the required number against his enemy. One good argument alone could conceivably contain dozens of offenses. And who hasn't committed at least 490 sins? (Sins of omission add up particularly rapidly.) The insight that should be obtained is the realization of the absurdity of counting offenses. What should count as an offense?

If we try to formulate Jesus' words into a straightforward commandment, it seems that the rule "Always forgive your brother's sins" will do justice to the principle. The *always* simplifies understanding the commandment, though it may make it more difficult to apply. If we were commanded to sometimes forgive our brother then we would have to deliberate as to which occasions were covered by the commandment. The *always* seems to make deliberation unnecessary; we have been commanded and need only to do.

But still the *always* is not absolute because the imperative contains a condition; in fact, it might be restated as a conditional, "Whenever (or if) your brother sins against you, forgive him." So deliberation is at least required to determine if the antecedent obtains. Of course, we don't usually respond to offenses by asking ourselves, "Did my brother sin against me," and then, if we decide he did, by reminding ourselves that we are required to forgive him. We respond with our own particular patterns of self-defense: retaliation or withdrawal, a frontal attack or subversion, confrontation or sulking, accusations or excuses. If we are to ever forgive, then we must have the commandment well enough entrenched in our minds to cause us to question our normal unforgiving habits. Perhaps this is why the Lord included an invitation to reflect upon whether or not we are forgiving those who trespass against us in his pattern for daily prayer. Those who do this often find that a serious attempt to apply the rule "always forgive" to all situations gives rise to serious questions.

Does forgiving wrongs mean not defending rights? Does turning the other cheek mean submitting to whatever maltreatment is offered? Does it mean teaching our children to let the boy down the block bully them? Does forgiving our brother his sins mean letting him use us because he knows we won't retaliate? Does "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone" mean that a Christian society should forgive criminals rather than punish them?

In these cases forgiving seems not merely difficult, but may even be wrong. If forgiveness is good, there must be some confusion in our understanding of forgiveness. Some deliberation will lead to the insight that what is involved in forgiving in each of these cases is not exactly the same; thus it might be profitable to separate out the different senses in which *forgive* is sometimes used and ask ourselves what is involved in forgiving or not forgiving in each sense. There seem to be three distinct meanings.

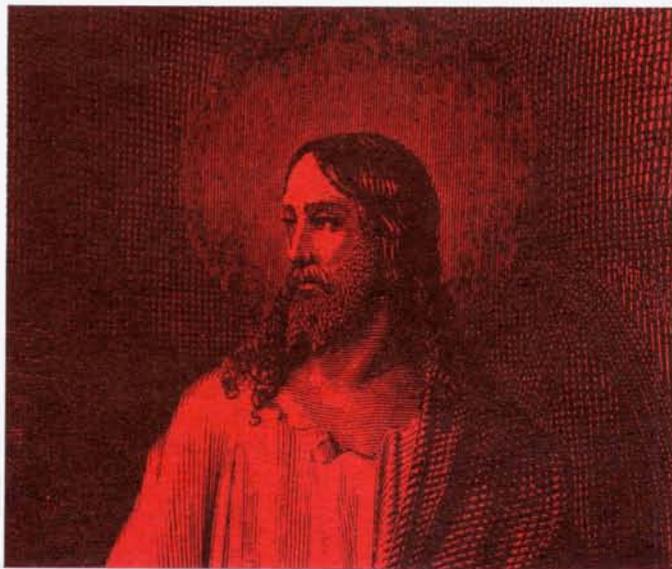
1. *God forgives us of our sins if we repent.* What is the meaning of *forgiveness* in this sense? Involved here is the concept of justice. To sin is to disobey God's laws, for which punishment must be exacted. When the Lord forgives, he revokes through mercy the punishment which justice requires. Mercy does not rob justice because Christ himself paid the penalty for those who believe in him and repent. To forgive in this sense means to pardon. Another example of *forgive* being used similarly is "He forgave me for my debt of \$200." Something is owed but not required; the punishment or debt is cancelled without being paid by the debtor. To forgive in this sense, a man must be in position of authority, in a government, institution, family, or society that gives him

the prerogative of judgment and/or exacting punishment or pardoning offenses.

Does God want us to *always* forgive in this sense? We have clear indication that he does not; Peter's question concerned forgiveness of his brother's sins against him. We know of God's great respect for justice, law, and order. As Alma wrote to Corianton, "Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if so, God would cease to be God" (Alma 43:213), and Joseph Smith wrote, "And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions" (D&C 88:38).

To be orderly, and perhaps even to exist at all, governments, societies, institutions, and families must have laws and rules, and for these to be meaningful they must prescribe punishments and penalties for those who disobey them. In Mosiah 26 the Lord explains to Alma the procedure the Church should use in judging and punishing transgressors. (They should be forgiven if they were to repent, and they should be cast out of the Church if they did not.) In section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants some rules and principles for rendering judgment in Church affairs are given. These instructions would not be necessary if we were to *always* pardon those who transgress the law.

Does Jesus' statement "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" proclaim a contrary concept—that those breaking constituted laws should not receive the prescribed punishment? It is important to understand the circumstances of the utterance. The scribes and Pharisees were seeking to trap Jesus into either defending the strict Mosaic law requiring that adulteresses (and adulterers) be put to death, thereby defying the existing Roman authorities, who retained the power of capital punishment, or dishonoring the Mosaic law by not adhering strictly to its demands. Jesus avoided both alternatives, focusing his response instead on the hypocrisy of the questioners. They were not seeking understanding of criminal justice, and Jesus did not answer the question they put to him. They claimed that the woman had been taken in adultery, but, if so, where was her partner in crime, whom the law also condemned? That he was not brought forward



casts doubt on the integrity of her accusers. Jesus' words "He that is without sin" should not be taken to mean (as those to whom they were addressed obviously did not take them to mean) that judges and accusers must be totally without sin. For that requirement would make a travesty of man's justice. But it is reasonable to request that judges and accusers not be involved in the particular crime they are judging. It was Jesus' revelation of their hypocrisy, not only in misrepresenting their motives in questioning him, but also in being themselves guilty of the crime of which they accused another, which caused them to slink silently away.

It also seems clear that Jesus is not asking us to release all those in debt to us through contractual obligation. This would be to effectively negate the concept of contract for Christian societies.

All of which is to say that justice is as important a principle as mercy; indeed mercy has no meaning unless justice is established and a mercy that eradicates it willy-nilly is of no benefit.

2. *To retaliate or not.* When Jesus tells us, "Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek turn to him the other also," he is commanding us to forgive by not seeking revenge. This is the second sense of "to forgive" that we will consider.

To forgive in this sense is to not retaliate. To retaliate is to return like for like, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a blow for a blow, an angry word for an angry word, an insult for an insult, a deception for deception. A concept of justice is also involved here. An injury is inflicted and a like injury is returned. This is sensed to be an evening of the score, a reestablishment of equality, a reconciliation or righting of a wrong. The victim owes something (which happens to be negative) to the offender and comes into an equal relationship with him by returning something similar. A symbol for this principle is the slap on the cheek which is returned. The justice of this seems almost axiomatic and universally intuitively grasped. Children playing together seem to observe it naturally, with no prior instruction on the nature of justice.

More complicated offenses than the unprovoked slap make the principle difficult to apply. A parent who has attempted to establish justice in the seemingly simple affairs of two fighting children can appreciate the difficulties. The question "Who hit first?" is an appropriate one but not always simply a factual one. The first blow is usually viewed by the one giving it as a return for an injury (the other's playing with something he had his eye upon or knocking over his tower) so that he feels the return of the blow as a new offense to which he must, to restore justice, respond. Motives and knowledge are important and such questions as "What is or should qualify as an offense? Is it always possible to return like for like? Is the victim always capable of doing so? What was the first offense?" need to be considered.

One purpose for government is to answer these questions and thereby establish laws that govern justice in human relationships. The laws define offenses, specify punishments, and set up a machinery for calling offenders to account, determining their guilt, and exacting punishment. Obviously justice cannot be institutionalized on all levels. The distinction between insti-

tutionalized justice and noninstitutionalized justice marks out the areas in which each of the two senses of *forgive* which we have been discussing is appropriate, although, of course, it is possible for someone to blur the distinction by trying to "take the law into his own hands", seeking revenge through extra-legal means. Comparing these two senses of *forgive* will clarify the distinction.

Basically it can be seen that the two meanings are the same: both senses concern the breaking of the law and the administration of justice. They differ, however, in their spheres of application and in the position of the one administering justice or exonerating the offender. In the first sense the individual exacting punishment is one in a position of authority requiring him to see that the law is honored. In the second meaning he is the one who has received the injury. In the first sense the laws broken are institutionalized, in the second they are moral or ethical principles governing the relationships of individuals.

Now we are ready to ask ourselves, "Does 'always forgive' mean 'never retaliate'?" Is there anything good about retaliation? It does restore justice, and it can enable the offender to see the nature of his offense. However, the victim is not disinterested. What he perceives as offense is dependent upon his sensitivity, cultural conditioning, moods, modes of comprehension, reasoning power, ability to empathize, and ideas about right and wrong. Will his retaliation be just? How will it be perceived and reacted to by the offender? Probably not as "simply justice." The offender's perception of his own actions usually does not match that of the injured. Maybe he thought he was retaliating or maybe he didn't know his actions were perceived as injury by the other. If he was being deliberately aggressive in injuring the other, it is likely that he has little respect for justice but will react with retaliative force against his victim's efforts to bring him to it. When individuals try to work out their own difficulties by retaliating, reconciliation becomes impossible, and injuries and offenses proliferate.

Another defect of retaliation is its effect upon the individual who retaliates. Usually he himself becomes caught up in the very evil he is protesting and is caught up in cycles of violence, evil-speaking, manipulations, lies, and malicious neglect. If the initial offense is evil, then retaliatory acts, though legally less culpable, share the form of the evil act.

If we were all perfect reflectors of evil, returning that which is inflicted upon us without loss of energy, the initial impulse of evil in the world would never die. How are we then to live at peace? The solution might seem to lie in government, which sets up judges to serve as impartial arbiters, using the law as a guide to judge between the combatants. Someone must be willing to absorb the pain and suffering which the evil causes without transmitting it to others, or, in other words, forgive rather than retaliate. But this is only a partial solution for no government or authority has the time or resources to settle all disputes and conflicts.

Some feel that the only alternative to retaliation is submission, letting themselves be injured again and again or waiting abjectly for the other to apologize for his conduct toward us and restore good feeling between

us. Other responses are possible. We can actively seek reconciliation. We can confront our enemy—tell him of our grievances against him and give him an opportunity to explain them, air his grievances against us, apologize, or perhaps even repeat the offense. This confrontation should be made in a spirit of seeking understanding, rather than of defensiveness or retaliation.

Section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants explains the principles of self-defense the Lord gives his people. If we retaliate when our enemy smites us, we will be left to ourselves in establishing justice. We should bear the injuries inflicted upon us by our enemies patiently, at the same time actively seeking peace. If our enemy does not repent and escapes the vengeance of the Lord, after we have borne his trespasses patiently three times, we are to warn him that if he again smites us we are justified in rewarding him according to his works or the Lord will avenge us a hundredfold. But whenever our enemy repents, we are not to count that trespass as a testimony against him.

This gives the answer to our question “Does ‘always forgive’ mean ‘never retaliate?’” The answer is, “Hardly ever, only under very special circumstances.” The reasons for this become clear as we practice forgiveness. God loves the sinner as well as the one sinned against, the guilty as well as the innocent. The principle of forgiveness shows care for the enemy. He offends, inflicts injuries, and commits crimes in certain ways because he is involved in those kinds of traditions, systems, “games,” habits; perhaps he doesn’t know that there are other ways of interacting with his fellow beings. When we refrain from retaliating we can help him break out of these cycles and find the laws of celestial living. It may take a lot of patience and, for some, some evidence to show that our response is from strength rather than weakness. Finally, if he refuses to repent, to see the nature of his offense and recoil from it, we are justified in retaliating against him, but more blessed if we leave his punishment and restraint to authority rather than undertaking it ourselves. Restraint and patience also have important effects on him who forgives. He does not become involved in cycles of wrongdoing and avoids unrighteous judgment.

3. *Overcoming ill-will.* Doctrine and Covenants 64:12-13 suggests a third sense of *forgive* as it explains why we should not forgive in the first sense:

And him that repenteth not of his sins, and confesseth them not, ye shall bring before the church and do with him as the scripture saith unto you, either by commandment or by revelation.

And this ye shall do that God may be glorified—not because ye forgive not, having not compassion, but that ye may be justified in the eyes of the law, that ye may not offend him who is your lawgiver.

The third sense of *forgive* involves our emotions, while the other two involve our actions. When we are offended, emotions of anger, resentment, hate, bitterness, indignation, and envy (aren’t we sometimes offended by the goodness, achievements, or good fortune of another?) arise. This is part of the logic of perceiving that we have been offended.

Recognizing that these emotions are not Christlike,

we sometimes think that the way to become more like Christ is to deny them. But the principle of forgiveness recognizes our mortal nature; it doesn’t require us not to feel injuries but to overcome with love the emotions of ill-will they arouse in us. There is no exception to the commandment to love, and it is in this sense that we must always forgive. Whether in positions of authority in which we must impose punishments or in circumstances in which the principles given in Doctrine and Covenants 98 justify us in retaliating, we must overcome any feelings of hatred, anger, resentment toward the offender. (If we hope that he won’t repent so that he’ll get what’s coming to him, we haven’t succeeded.)

“Love thy enemy” is really the commandment to forgive, for to perceive an offense is to judge the offender as our enemy—one who is seeking to injure us in some way (even if we at the moment recognize it as probably temporary). This is the key to the principle of forgiveness: love toward those who offend us. Love seeks the good of the beloved. Sometimes that good is to be punished, to be chastised, to receive what he deserves. If we truly love our enemy we will not suffer his trespasses in silence but seek a loving way to show him the nature of his offenses.

Sometimes the question is asked, “When two people are at odds, who should make the first move toward reconciliation?” It seems fair that the one at fault ought to go to the other seeking forgiveness. But very often each thinks the other is at fault, so the reconciliation will probably never be effected. Forgiveness is a principle of mercy, not fairness. If we say, “I will emotionally forgive him when he repents,” we are operating on the level of justice, not mercy. In section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ teaches that he who is offended should go to the one who gave offense. This makes sense too, because it is certainly possible to give offense without knowing it.

How do we approach our enemy or estranged brother? How can we replace our anger, hatred, resentment, or envy with love? We should begin by examining ourselves and seeking through prayer and honest self-analysis to understand where *we* are at fault. Then, having sought the Lord’s forgiveness, we can approach our enemy asking that he forgive us (even if only for our ill feelings toward him). Then, freed from the responsibility of defending himself against our assumed self-righteousness, he will find it easier to examine his own actions, feelings, and intentions and be honest about them. If we can lay our faults before him, he will not be obliged to do it for us.

Talking things over, trying to understand another’s point of view, what he thought happened, what he felt, and what he meant to say and communicate is one of the best ways of overcoming angry, resentful feelings. We usually think that what happened in a given situation is simply a matter of fact, and that if we were there, we know what happened. But what we think happened is dependent upon our moods, our desires, our purposes, the state of our health, and even our habits of perception. Forgiveness requires the humility not to pre-judge, but rather to be willing to learn to empathize with the other’s point of view.



As we learn to forgive from our hearts, restraining our natural impulse for retaliation and then consciously striving to replace hate with love, we will discover that the same methods that enable us to do this will become part of us so that we take offense less and less. And we will discover that our emotive response to the sins of others is sorrow for the injury it does to them rather than the hate and resentment that arose when we focused on what they did to us. As love, seeking the good of others, is the key to the principle of forgiveness, so is the process of forgiveness the key to the commandment to love.

To forgive is difficult; to even begin the endeavor we must be convinced of its importance.

"Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin" (D&C 64:9).

What is involved in failing to forgive? Why is it such a great sin? Failing to forgive involves judging unrighteously: "But of you it is required to forgive all men. And ye ought to say in your hearts—let God judge between me and thee, and reward thee according to thy deeds." If we do not forgive from our hearts, we judge ourselves to be righteous or at least right in a certain situation and the other wrong. We are not in a position, we do not have the knowledge, to do this without error, and even if it seems fairly certain that our enemy has sinned and is unrepentant, we do not know whether or not he will repent in the future. If he does, then Christ's atonement will pay for his sins.

Failing to forgive leads to feelings of hate and resentment and, ultimately, failure to develop the Christlike love our Lord requires of us and without which we are but "as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1).

There are some ways that we can fail to forgive that are usually not recognized as forms of this sin. We must

forgive not only the sins against us, but all sins. This is illustrated in two of Jesus' parables. In the parable of the prodigal son the elder son resents his father's mercy toward the younger. If he fails to overcome this, he cannot enter into the joy of the feast, which represents Christ's kingdom. In the parable of the unequal wages those laborers who worked long are angry at those who worked but a short while and yet received the same wages. The master asks, "Are you envious because I am good?"

Both these parables show an attitude which the "righteous," those who have spent most of their lives committed to Christ and serving in his kingdom, might feel toward a repentant sinner. When they accuse their master of injustice, of unfairly offering the same reward to those who labor but a short time, these lifelong workers have failed to understand their own relationship to the Master. They have not asked themselves if their own labors were sufficient to earn their rewards. They have failed to realize that they are as dependent upon the goodness of the Lord as are their brethren with whom they are angry.

In the parable of the unmerciful servant we find portrayed the essence of the unforgiving spirit. As we ponder its meaning we can begin to understand what the failure to forgive really means to our relationship with Christ.

A servant was called before his king to pay a debt of ten thousand talents which he owed him. The servant pleaded for mercy, and the king had compassion on him and forgave him his debt. Then the servant went to a fellow servant who owed him a small amount and, refusing the second's pleas for mercy when he discovered he could not pay, had him cast into jail. When the king learned of the first servant's lack of mercy, he was very angry with him and had him delivered to the tormentors until he had paid all that he owed the king.

In accepting his lord's mercy, the servant should have himself become merciful. That he did not showed his hypocrisy. He accepted mercy, but its meaning did not penetrate his heart; he accepted it, not as a principle which is offered to all, but simply as something which benefited himself in a particular situation. When it came to a situation in which mercy didn't benefit him (according to his own carnal, material viewpoint) he rejected it.

If we regard the ruler as Christ and his pardoning the servant of the debt as the Atonement in which Christ himself pays our debts, we can begin to see what is involved in not forgiving our neighbor his trespasses. When someone who has himself believed in Christ and accepted his Atonement to free him from his sins refuses to forgive another his trespasses, he refuses to acknowledge the Atonement of Christ in regard to that person. It is as if he said, "Your offenses are not paid for," thus usurping judgment, which belongs to him who paid the price. To refuse to forgive is to not accept the suffering of Christ as substitute payment for the offenses of others; it is setting at naught the Atonement. If we demand justice, we, like the unmerciful servant, shall receive it. "For if ye forgive men their trespasses your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (3 Nephi 13:14-15).