

FORGIVENESS AS PROCESS AND VIRTUE:
HOW TO OVERCOME FEELINGS OF ANGER AND RESENTMENT
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The Nickel Mines Miracle

On the morning of October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts entered the Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines Pennsylvania intending to molest and kill the 10 young girls in attendance. Roberts was angry at God over the death of his firstborn daughter Elise who, nine years earlier, had survived only twenty minutes after her birth. According to several survivors, Roberts said “I’m sorry to do this. But I’m angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with Him” (Kraybill, Nolt, & Weaver-Zercher, 2007, p. 25). Fortunately, Roberts’ plan to sexually assault the girls was thwarted when state police arrived just 15 minutes after he entered the schoolhouse.

Once his plan derailed, Roberts became very agitated. He started mumbling to himself and pacing the schoolhouse. Recognizing Roberts’ violent intent, thirteen-year-old Marian Fisher stepped forward and said, “Shoot me first,” (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 26) hoping to save the younger children with her sacrifice. By the time police officers broke down the schoolhouse door, all 10 girls had been shot (5 fatally) and Roberts lay dead on the floor, victim of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The school shooting at Nickel Mines was the first of its kind. Never before had a tragedy like this befallen an Amish community. Yet somehow the Amish seemed prepared for the heartbreak. For shortly after the Nickel Mines shooting ended, the Nickel Mines miracle began. Just hours after the dust started to settle at the schoolhouse, Amish families were already beginning to show up at Amy Roberts (Charles Roberts’ widow) front door with food, handshakes, hugs, and a message of forgiveness. The Amish quickly realized that Roberts had a family—he and his wife also had three children—who just lost a husband and father. And to make things worse, the Roberts family had to deal with this loss while struggling with feelings of embarrassment, shame, and isolation. As a result, the Amish made it a point to visit the family early and often. Amy’s grandfather recalled one visit from an Amish man this way: “We met in the kitchen and shook hands and put our arms around each other. They said ‘We forgive you. There are no grudges. There’s forgiveness in all of this.’ It was hard to listen to, and hard to believe” (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 44).

Several days after the shootings, many in the Amish community, even those who lost daughters, granddaughters, sisters, and nieces in the massacre, decided to attend Charles Roberts’ funeral. Of the 75 people who gathered for the service, more than half were Amish. The funeral director described the scene: “I was lucky enough to be at the cemetery when the Amish families of the children who had been killed came to greet Amy Roberts and offer their forgiveness. And that is something that I’ll never forget, not ever. I knew that I was witnessing a miracle” (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 46). Several weeks after the ‘miracle’, a meeting took place between members of the Roberts family, Amy’s family, and the Amish families who had lost children. According to those present, it was a powerful time of healing and forgiveness. “We talked and cried and talked and cried. Amy was near me, and I put my hand on her shoulder, and then I

stood up and I talked and cried. It was very moving.... There were a lot of tears shed that day. There was a higher power in the room” (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 46).

One of the survivors of the attack was 5-year-old Rosanna King. Unfortunately, she sustained significant injuries to her brain and body. She is currently confined to a wheelchair, cannot speak, eats through a feeding tube, and requires constant care. In spite of Rosanna’s serious injuries her parents, Christ and Mary Liz King, attended Roberts’ funeral and made it a point to reach out to Amy and her children to extend love and forgiveness. As a result of the Kings’ response, Charles’ mother Terri Roberts has regularly visited little Rosanna and the King family for the past nine years. During her visits, Terri eats dinner with the family, bathes Rosanna, reads to her, and sings her songs. And while Terri acknowledges that it is difficult to confront the pain caused by her son, she says that it brings her a sense of peace to be with Rosanna and the King family. From tragedy comes forgiveness. And from this remarkable forgiveness comes healing and redemption.

The Amish response was so remarkable that stories of grace and forgiveness soon became the main story of Nickel Mines. The media started to ignore the horrible atrocities enacted by Roberts and instead focused on Amish forgiveness. How was such amazing forgiveness possible? How were the Amish able to forgive so quickly? Was this kind of forgiveness really genuine?

In the pages that follow, this paper will argue that forgiveness is a three-step process that when practiced habitually, can become a moral virtue. Unlike one-time acts, virtuous forgiveness equips a person or community with the dispositions needed to move through the process of forgiveness consistently and in a wide range of circumstances. Forgiving actions are the actual steps toward forgiveness. But the virtue of forgiveness prepares one to engage the process, and to perform each step with integrity, proper motives, and appropriate emotional dispositions. Virtuous forgiveness was on full display in the Amish response to the Nickle Mines tragedy.

What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a multifaceted concept with many nuanced layers. Defining such a concept is extremely difficult. What are the essential features of forgiveness? At the outset it should be noted that forgiveness has many definitions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004; Luskin, 2002; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Enright, Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). But in the midst of this diversity, several features seem relatively universal. Almost all definitions of forgiveness acknowledge that an unjust transgression has taken place. Most agree that forgiveness is both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal activity; that is, forgiveness is something that occurs within an individual as well as within relationships. Finally, the vast majority of definitions acknowledge that when a person begins to forgive, their reactions toward the perpetrator become “more positive and less negative” (McCullough et al., 2000, p. 9). This typically encompasses a range of factors. As one forgives, one begins to think, feel, and act differently. Because of this complexity, I support the claims by Ed Worthington Jr. and others that forgiveness is a process one undergoes, not a one-time action one achieves (Worthington,

2001; McCullough, 2001; Wortherington, 1998; Wortherington, 1998a). This process *typically*¹ includes three elements: omissions, actions, and emotions. Because of this, I define forgiveness as a three-step process.

First, forgiveness requires certain omissions (McCullough, 2001; Wortherington, 2001). After suffering an unjust harm, the victim has many possible responses. The victim can seek revenge, suffer silently, indirectly harm the wrongdoer through gossip, demand reparation for the harm, and the like. Forgiveness is compatible with many responses, but some responses must be avoided for the process of forgiveness to begin. For instance, forgiveness demands that victims forgo revenge, gossip, and other forms of direct and indirect retaliation. I call these intentional acts of omission. That is, for the process of forgiveness to begin, the victim must avoid certain vindictive actions.

Step one is a clear Biblical mandate. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "... I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."² And in Romans Paul writes, "Do not repay evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath..."³ Scriptures like these remind us that we are not to take revenge; we are not to repay evil with evil. Instead, we are called to forgive. Justice is a Christian virtue, but vengeance is not.

We can see step one clearly in the case of Amish forgiveness. For instance, Christ and Mary Liz King did not seek revenge after hearing the news that their five-year-old daughter had been shot. They never tried to harm the Roberts' family. They never slandered Charles Roberts in the press. They didn't even file a civil lawsuit against the family. Instead, the King family resisted the temptation to act on feelings of anger and resentment that no doubt pervaded their hearts and home. These acts of omission allowed the King family to begin the forgiveness process.

The second step in the process of forgiveness entails consciously choosing to show the perpetrator kindness, patience, and, in some cases, love (McCullough, 2001; Wortherington, 2001). These need not be extreme acts of kindness like the ones demonstrated by the Amish at Nickel Mines. It often means something as simple as saying "I will work to forgive you." But on the road toward forgiveness, overt acts of grace and kindness will often need to be extended by the victim. On this point I side with Coyle and Enright who claim that "In genuine forgiveness, one who has suffered an unjust injury chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and instead offers mercy to the offender" (Enright & Coyle, 1998, p. 140). This might not happen right away. It may take a lot of time to reach the point of extending patience, kindness or love. But the process of forgiveness is greatly aided by such actions.

¹ There are certain circumstances that make going through all three steps impossible. This will be discussed in more depth throughout this paper.

² Matthew 5:38-39, NIV

³ Romans 12:17-19, NIV

Step two is also a Biblical mandate. Jesus says, “..love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”⁴ And Paul quotes the book of Proverbs saying, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...”⁵ It’s not enough to simply forgo revenge. Christian love asks us to pray and to care for our enemies.

Again, we see this clearly in the Amish response to tragedy. Not only did the King family forgo acts of revenge, they also extended kindness to the Roberts’ family. They met with the family to offer forgiveness for Charles’ actions. They offered condolences for Amy Roberts’ loss. They even attended the gunman’s funeral. These acts of kindness facilitated forgiveness.

I refer to steps one and two as *preliminary forgiveness*. These movements are vital for the process of forgiveness, but they do not signify the culmination of forgiveness. At this point many readers might balk at the idea that steps one and two are insufficient for genuine forgiveness. I can imagine someone saying “Look, I didn’t seek revenge. I stopped saying nasty things about the person who hurt me. I even extended forgiveness both verbally and through acts of kindness. What more does forgiveness entail? What more is expected of me?” I argue that forgiveness is not complete with acts of omission or words of forgiveness. Rather, genuine forgiveness is a change of heart. Because of this, forgiveness requires an emotional transformation. Thus, the third step in the forgiveness process entails *forgoing or overcoming vindictive emotions* ⁶ *like anger, resentment, bitterness and even hatred.*⁷ Lewis Smedes says it this way, “You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well” (McCullough, et al., 2000, p. 10). However, I suggest that forgiveness has not simply “*begun*” when vindictive emotions have been curtailed. Rather, forgiveness is *complete* once the feelings of resentment and desires for retribution have subsided. The signature event of successful forgiveness is the emotional and spiritual transformation one experiences from anger and resentment to kindness and inner peace. Thus, the process of forgiveness not only changes the way a person thinks and acts, it also transforms the way a victim *feels* towards the transgressor. The completion of step three represents a transition from preliminary forgiveness to what I call *genuine forgiveness*.

Step three can also be seen in Scripture although in a less prescriptive fashion. The clearest examples come from the Hebrew Bible. The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers for selling him into slavery. When Joseph reveals his identity, he can’t control his joy at seeing his brothers again. Scripture says Joseph wept “so loudly that the Egyptians hear him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.”⁸ When his brothers became concerned that Joseph might take revenge, he assured them saying “... ‘don’t be afraid. I will

⁴ Matthew 5:44-45, NIV

⁵ Romans 12:20, NIV

⁶ For more description and a defense of the vindictive passions see Jeffrie Murphy (2003)

⁷ This definition of forgiveness is incredibly common in the forgiveness literature. See Bishop Butler; Jeffrie Murphy (2003), 16; Trudy Govier (1999), 59-75; David Novitz (1998), 299-315; Charles Griswold, (2007); McCullough, et al., (2000); Wortherington, (2001).

⁸ Genesis 45:2, NIV

provide for you and your children.’ And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.”⁹ Joseph’s immediate response of love towards his brothers strongly suggests that step three had been achieved. I have no doubt that Joseph had strong feelings of resentment and anger after his brothers threw him in a pit and then sold him into slavery. But over the course of time, Joseph was able to move past these emotions in a way that allowed him to welcome his brothers with open arms. This is not to say that Joseph was finished with the forgiving process. It’s quite possible that some feelings of anger and resentment still lingered. But much of the work towards forgiveness had been achieved.

At this point, some clarifying comments are in order. First, this argument is focused on human forgiveness. For the sake of time, divine forgiveness is left unaddressed. There are many parallels between human and divine forgiveness, but there are significant differences as well. These differences, while theologically important, will not be addressed in this paper. Second, preliminary forgiveness can be directly controlled by the forgiver (Burnette, Davisson, et. al., 2013). A victim may have strong feelings of anger, bitterness, even hatred and still manage to avoid overt acts of revenge. A victim may even muster the willpower to smile at a lying coworker or extend words of love and forgiveness to an unfaithful spouse. These steps, at least for some, are within their direct control. But as I’ve argued, these steps are often necessary for forgiveness,¹⁰ but they are not sufficient. To complete the process of forgiveness, a victim must overcome feelings of anger, resentment and bitterness. But this step is not within a victim’s direct control. Emotions do not respond to the wishes of the agent. Rather, emotions arise immediately and spontaneously; they are triggered by events or memories in unpredictable ways. And they dissipate at a pace not dictated by the agent. Because of this, step three cannot be controlled directly. Instead, victims must work toward forgiveness indirectly, habituating patterns of thought and action that lead to the long-term transformation of vindictive emotions. Thus, genuine forgives often requires effort from the victim as well as divine grace. Emotional and spiritual healing can be aided by human participation, but forgiveness often requires divine healing as well.

Because genuine forgiveness is not entirely in one’s direct control, I often feel a little uncomfortable with the quick forgiveness expressed in situations like the Amish. It’s one thing for the Amish to immediately forgo acts of revenge, and conversely to extend acts of kindness to Amy Roberts and her family. But it is quite another thing to say “I forgive Charles Roberts” immediately after the tragedy occurred. Is it possible that the Amish community overcame justified feelings of anger and resentment so quickly? If so, did they feel vindictive passions at

⁹ Genesis 50:21, NIV

¹⁰ I argue that steps one and two are often necessary for forgiveness, but they are not always necessary. There are circumstances that preclude these steps. For instance, if a perpetrator is unknown or deceased steps one and two become impossible. I can’t seek revenge on an unknown or deceased perpetrator. Similarly, I can’t extend kindness or words of forgiveness either. In these unfortunately circumstances, forgiveness is reduced to step three. The victim must work to overcome vindictive feelings of anger and resentment in order to find inner healing and peace. Thus, in these circumstances the third step is both necessary and sufficient for forgiveness.

all? It is hard for me to believe that Christ and Mary King (Christ is the first name of the father who's daughter was shot) did not feel strong feelings of anger, loss and resentment. It is also hard for me to believe that these feelings were completely overcome so quickly. When interviewed, Mr. King acknowledged the difficult task of forgiveness saying, "The Amish are like anyone else, with the same frailties and emotions. We hope that we have forgiven, but there actually are times that we struggle with that, and I have to ask myself, 'Have I really forgiven?'" (Kraybill, et al. 2007, p. 27).

But today, years removed from the tragedy, it seems clear that the King family has completed the process of forgiveness. Some evidence for this is the King's open invitation to Terri Roberts (Charles' mother-in-law), who comes weekly to eat dinner with the family, bathe Rosanna, and put her to bed. Terri's presence does not evoke feelings of pain or anger. It doesn't cause the King family emotional harm at all. In fact, they claim it brings them a sense of peace and joy to see Terri. This is a strong indication that the process of forgiveness has been completed.

How forgiveness is misconstrued

In section one I sketched a definition of the forgiving process. To help clarify further, I will use some of the literature on forgiveness to highlight a few things forgiveness is *not*. First, forgiveness does not mean that what happened was "o.k." or "no big deal." That is, forgiveness does not *condone* the offense (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Murphy, 2003; McCullough, 2001; Smedes, 1996; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). Forgiveness should never attempt to sweep the pain or the injustice under the carpet. In fact, the very logic of forgiveness requires a wrongful action. Without pain or injustice, there is nothing to forgive.

Second, forgiveness is not *pardon* or *mercy* (Murphy, 2003; McCullough, 2001, Enright, et. al., 1992).¹¹ To grant a wrongdoer mercy is to reduce or eliminate justified punishment. In this way, the process of mercy deals with external factors, but it does not require overcoming feelings of resentment. If I catch a student cheating on a quiz, I might grant them mercy by not reporting their academic dishonesty to the school administration. In this case, the student might fail the assignment, but it won't be part of their permanent record. But I can pardon the offense while still harboring strong feelings of pain and anger towards the student. This shows that mercy is not the same as forgiveness.

Furthermore, non-victims can grant mercy. For instance, a judge or magistrate might grant a prisoner mercy or the president of the United States might pardon a past offender. These individuals are in a position to grant mercy, but they are not in a position to forgive. Only those harmed (directly or indirectly) have standing¹² to forgive. The one granting mercy need not experience any strong emotions related to the wrongdoing. But if forgiveness requires

¹¹ For a good discussion related to the things forgiveness is not see Jeffrie Murphy (2003), 13-16.

¹² Proper standing in relation to forgiveness is discussed in more detail in Charles Griswold (2007).

overcoming anger and resentment, then forgiveness requires one to actually experience vindictive emotions.

Finally, separating forgiveness and mercy allows one to forgive without forgoing proper punishment for the wrongdoer. There is no inconsistency with a person working to forgive a perpetrator while simultaneously hoping that perpetrator receives just desserts. As Trudy Govier writes, “Nor is forgiveness incompatible with punishment. Forgiveness can follow punishment” (1999, p. 60). But by definition, mercy means forgoing or reducing the punishment due the offender. This clearly shows the distinction between forgiveness and mercy or pardoning.

Part of the confusion is over what is actually being forgiven. I would argue with Govier that we forgive *people*, we pardon wrongful *acts* (1999, p. 65-6). The distinction between persons and actions is important. The King family can work to forgive Charles Roberts, but they will not forgive the actual crime committed. Forgiveness is fundamentally relational. It is focused on the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Some acts may never be forgiven. But no person is beyond the reach of forgiveness. As Desmond Tutu, the archbishop of South Africa, argues, deeds may be monstrous, they may be unforgivable, but human beings should never be described as monstrous or beyond the reach of forgiveness (2007). If forgiveness is reserved for persons, then it is perfectly consistent to forgive a perpetrator and still advocate for punishment resulting from the perpetrator’s actions. For instance, suppose for a moment that Charles Roberts’ survived the school shooting. It would be possible for the Amish community to show grace to Robert’s widow and children, to work towards emotional and spiritual healing, while simultaneously wanting Roberts to go to jail for the harm he caused.

Third, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation (McCullough, 2008; Baskin, & Enright, 2004; McCullough, 2001; Enright, & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998; Smedes, 1996). Reconciliation represents a restored relationship, forgiveness does not. Reconciliation is a two way street. It requires forgiveness on the part of the victim, but it also requires some form of repentance on the part of the perpetrator. When both parties come together to repent and forgive, the broken relationship is made whole again. But forgiveness is a one way street. It moves only from victim to perpetrator. As a one way street, forgiveness can occur when the perpetrator is unrepentant, unknown to the victim, or deceased. The reason is forgiveness, at least in part, is something that happens inside the one who has been harmed. Part of forgiveness is a kind of emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness is about letting go of anger and bitterness. It’s about healing past wounds so that they no longer inhibit one’s future. With forgiveness comes a new perspective. (This definition is given in the section above when I define what forgives is (it is the third step in the process))

Because human forgiveness is something that takes place in the heart of the victim, it isn’t dependent on the perpetrator’s response the way it is with reconciliation. This is what allows Jesus to say from the cross “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34 New International Version). The crowd was not remorseful. They had no intention of repenting of their sinful actions. Yet, Jesus was still able to extend forgiveness. This demonstrates the nature of human forgiveness (I made a note above that the paper will focus on human forgiveness. I don’t have time to incorporate divine forgiveness) as a one-way street.

Of course the hope is that forgiveness will open the door to reconciliation. The ideal is for perpetrators to see the pain and injustice inflicted and for real healing to occur. But in the absence of such reconciliation, forgiveness is still possible.

Forgiveness is a one-way street, in part, because forgiveness is a gift to the perpetrator *and* the victim (Witvliet & McCullough, 2007; Wade & Worthington, 2005; Baskin & Enright, 2004; Smedes, 1996). It is a gift to the perpetrator because it extends grace and love. Forgiveness invites the perpetrator to enter into the fullness of humanity via repentance, healing, reconciliation and relationship. But forgiveness can also be a gift to the victim. There is a growing body of research highlighting the important physical and psychological benefits forgiveness provides to victims (Ricciardi, Giuseppina, Sani, Gentili, & Gaglianese, 2013). For instance, those who report higher levels of forgiveness after a transgression experience less stress, hostility and bouts of rumination. Forgiveness is also negatively correlated with physical illness (e.g., high blood pressure), depression and generalized anxiety. In contrast, those who experience continued feelings of vindictiveness and anger showed higher levels of stress and anxiety. Those struggling with forgiveness were also more likely to engage in violent behavior and suffer from depression (Witvliet & McCullough 2007). Most of the data in the forgiveness literature strongly supports the conclusion that forgiveness is an incredible gift to both perpetrators and victims.

As Ann Lamont so wittily says “Refusing to forgive is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die” (2000). But embracing forgiveness can help transform vindictive passions. It is overcoming feelings of resentment and replacing them with wholeness and peace. But to seek emotional and spiritual healing requires more than mere forgetting or apathetic passivity. To find inner wholeness and peace requires one to actively engage in the hard work of forgiveness. As Lewis Smedes writes, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you (the victim)” (1996, p. 73).

Forgiveness as a Christian Virtue?

Forgiveness is a process of personal healing and hopefully interpersonal reconciliation, but it is also a moral virtue. Here I’m defining virtue similarly to both Aristotle and Aquinas as a habit that disposes an agent to perform its proper operation or movement (Aquinas, 2010; Aristotle, 2004; Augustine, 1993). For Aristotle, the ultimate goal or telos for humans is eudemonia or flourishing. In essence, virtues are those habits or dispositions that enable humans to flourish. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle’s general point, but shapes it for a specifically Christian context. For Aquinas, the ultimate human telos is union with God. This union represents true human flourishing. But union with God is no easy task. In fact, it isn’t something one can do on one’s own. It requires hard work and the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. The hard work comes in the form of imitating Christ. To cultivate Christian virtue and attain union with God, one must habituate thoughts, desires and actions that mirror those of

Jesus. The connection to forgiveness should be clear. Jesus' strong emphasis on forgiveness, both in his teachings and displayed in his life, makes it a foundational Christian virtue.¹³

But virtues should not be confused with one-time actions. Unlike fleeting emotions or individual actions, virtuous traits and dispositions are relatively stable over time. A cowardly person may display courage from time to time. But a person who possesses a courageous character is inclined to act courageously in consistent ways spanning many different contexts. Virtues foster consistency because they help shape the whole person. Virtues not only impact behavior, they also shape a person's motives, thoughts and emotions .

The primary difference between forgiving actions and the virtue of forgiveness is forgiving actions engage the three steps that actually lead to genuine forgiveness, while the virtue of forgiveness is a set of stable character traits that equip a person with the dispositions needed to engage in the process of forgiveness consistently and in a wide range of circumstances. Forgiving actions are the actual steps toward forgiveness. But the virtue prepares one to engage the process, and to perform each step with integrity, proper motives, and appropriate emotional dispositions. A vengeful person can produce forgiving actions from time to time. But a person possessing the virtue of forgiveness is inclined to undergo the process of forgiveness regularly, predictably, and in a myriad of circumstances.

We see the virtue of forgiveness clearly displayed in the Amish at Nickel Mines. Their hearts and minds were tuned to the rhythms of forgiveness. This equipped them to respond so quickly to the needs of the Roberts' family. Instead of words of anger or acts of revenge, the Amish were prepared to extend grace, kindness and love. When people asked the Amish at Nickel Mines about forgiveness they heard responses like "Refusing to forgive is not an option. It's just a normal part of our living." Or as Bishop Eli explained, "It's just what we do as nonresistant people. It was spontaneous. It was automatic. It was not a new kind of thing" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 49). If you believe the Amish, the decision to forgive was a natural response to tragedy. For the Amish, this sort of forgiveness is not a one-time event. Rather, forgiveness is a core virtue, a communal disposition, a deeply embedded part of Amish culture. In this way, preliminary forgiveness was accomplished immediately. It almost seemed like a "natural" response for the Amish to move toward forgiveness.

It should be noted, however, that moral virtues¹⁴ like forgiveness are not naturally occurring human traits (Aristotle, 2004; Aquinas, 1920; McIntyre, 2007; Austin, 2011). It may

¹³ For Scriptural References for the importance of forgiveness in the life and teachings of Jesus see Matthew 6:9-14; Matthew 9:1-6; Matthew 18:21-35; Mark 11:24-25; Luke 3:3; Luke 7:43-49; Luke 17:3-4; Luke 23-34.

¹⁴ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between moral virtues and intellectual virtues. Moral virtues like courage, temperance, and prudence, are not natural endowments. They are cultivated through habituation. Intellectual virtues like wisdom and intelligence are considered more natural, but can be fostered through instruction. For a variety of reasons, Aristotle did not include Gratitude in his list of moral virtues. But if Gratitude is a virtue, it best fits as a moral virtue.

seem to come naturally to the Amish, but in fact, impulses toward forgiveness require practice and habituation. Much the same way a person learns a skill like dribbling a basketball or playing the guitar, moral virtues are developed through hard work and repetition. Thus, the more one practices small acts of forgiveness, the better equipped one will be to forgive consistently and predictably.

In many respects, the Amish community was uniquely equipped to handle a tragedy like the one at Nickel Mines because they actively and intentionally cultivate the virtue of forgiveness. This cultivation is done primarily through Christian teaching and practice. For instance, the Amish stress the Christian duty to model Christ. One of the central features of Christ highlighted in Amish worship is his amazing forgiveness. After the shooting many in the Nickel Mines community highlighted Jesus' willingness to forgive from the cross. They cited Luke 23:34 "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

The Amish also emphasize the Lord's Prayer. Children are asked to memorize the prayer by age 5. It is recited at every church service, during morning prayers, at every wedding and funeral and often before meals. As one Amish woman put it "The Lord's Prayer is in our minds all the time. It's not just in the evening when we think of it" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 92). One of the key lines from the prayer is "Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us." The Amish take this line very seriously and very literally. A person will receive forgiveness from God to the extent they have forgiven others. Another Amish man put it this way, "The Lord's Prayer plays a big part in our forgiveness. If we can't forgive, then we won't be forgiven" (Kraybill et al., 2007, p. 91).

Christians can learn much from the example set by the Amish at Nickle Mines. Forgiveness is not optional or supererogatory, rather it is commanded by God. As Bishop Eli remarked after the shooting "Refusing to forgive is not an option... It's just a normal part of our living" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 49). This sentiment was echoed by a ten-year-old Amish girl who survived Roberts' attack. When discussing the parable of the "unforgiving servant," (Matthew 18:21-35) the young girl said the main point of Jesus' story is "We must forgive others" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 111). A similar argument is made by an Amish woman whose niece was murdered in a separate incident. When speaking of her murdered niece and the perpetrators, she said "a Christian must forgive, yes, even the worst murderers. My thoughts were of how Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 81).

The obligatory nature of forgiveness finds support in Scripture as well. For instance, in Mark 11 Jesus tells his disciples "...if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your father in heaven may forgive you your sins." And in Matthew 18 when asked how many times a person should forgive their brother, Jesus replies "I tell you, not seven, but seventy-seven times." In passages like these Jesus makes it clear that his disciples are to forgive one another for the wrongs they have suffered. That is, Christians are morally obligated to forgive. Further support comes from the book of Ephesians, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

As a Christian philosopher, I feel somewhat torn. Scripture makes a powerful case for the obligatory nature of forgiveness. Christians do not decide whether a person deserves our forgiveness or not. Similarly, Christians shouldn't wait for an apology before forgiving. On the other hand, a philosophical problem arises from this line of reasoning. In moral philosophy, ought implies can. That is, one can't make a normative demand on a person, if the action is beyond the person's control. For an action to be considered a moral duty, it must be something a responsible agent can freely choose. I have argued that forgiveness is complete once the feelings of resentment and desires for retribution have been replaced by feelings of kindness and inner peace. This final step is difficult to label a moral duty because it is not within the direct control of the victim. As David Novitz writes,

It is clear from all of this that there can be no duty to forgive; this simply because it is not directly within one's power to do so... Whether or not they do succeed (in forgiving) clearly depends on a range of factors, many of which lie beyond their full control. (1998, p. 313)

Given these two conflicting arguments, I feel torn. As a Christian I'm morally obligated to forgive. But I also agree that moral obligation implies the ability to freely choose forgiveness. If genuine forgiveness is beyond a person's ability to choose, can it be a moral obligation?

To resolve this tension, I argue that the real moral duty is to the process of forgiveness. There are no guarantees that all three steps will be achieved. Some wounds may never fully heal. But committing to the process ensures that most, if not all of the steps will be addressed, helping victims move as close to genuine forgiveness as possible. As Michele Moody-Adams argues, "...what the Amish stance manifested was not unconditional forgiveness, but an unconditional willingness to forgive..." That is, the Amish were willing to engage in the process of forgiveness no matter the severity of the harm. Thus, moral duty is not connected to an individual act, but to the long and painful process of forgiveness regardless of the type or severity of the harm.

In the end, I argue that every Christian is obligated to the process of forgiveness by actively cultivating the virtue of forgiveness. Working to develop the virtue of forgiveness is vital because it will enable one to engage in the forgiving process consistently, diligently, and with right motives. The steps needed to achieve actual forgiveness may or may not be moral duties depending on the situation. But regardless of the particular circumstances, it is imperative that one work to develop a forgiving disposition that will allow one to faithfully engage the process. The cultivation of virtue will also shape one to feel the right way, in the right circumstances, for the right reasons. In this way, developing the virtue of forgiveness will aid in step three. The more forgiving one becomes, the easier it is to let go of unwarranted anger and bitterness allowing genuine forgiveness to occur.

In order to achieve emotional and spiritual healing, a person must do the indirect work needed to genuinely forgive. But what indirect steps are the most effective? In recent years, a variety of forgiveness models have emerged from psychology and the social sciences (Walker & Gorsuch, 2004). These models provide tools that help one move toward emotional and spiritual healing. One strongly supported model comes from Everett Worthington called the "Pyramid Model of Forgiveness" (1998, p. 107-38). When practiced consistently, this model can help one

cultivate the virtue of forgiveness. For the sake of time, focus will be given to the three primary movements described in the Pyramid Model.¹⁵ The first step is learning to *empathize* with the perpetrator (Worthington, 1998, p. 63; McCullough, Rachal, et. al., K. C., 1998). Seeing the wrongdoer as selfish, or evil, or a monster, typically leads to anger and resentment. Empathy asks the victim to see the perpetrator as broken, insecure, and wounded. In short, empathy asks victims to humanize those who have harmed them. The pain we inflict on one another is often the result of fear, insecurity, and past hurts. To see this is to see the perpetrator as human and not the embodiment of evil. To help heighten empathy one might try to think about what the perpetrator might have been thinking or feeling during the hurtful event. How might things look from their perspective? This is not an attempt to excuse their behavior. Rather, it helps one to see the wrongdoer as a human being who made a mistake.

The process of humanizing offenders can be seen clearly on the cross. When Jesus forgives the crowd, he doesn't say "forgive these evil Israelites and Romans for their selfish acts of cruelty and violence." Instead, Jesus says "forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."¹⁶ Jesus acknowledges the crowd's ignorance, their finiteness, and their brokenness. In short, Jesus acknowledges the crowd's humanity. Jesus' words and actions would be very different if he viewed the crowd as an evil mob of selfish individuals.

It is worth noting that from a very young age, Amish children are taught the virtues of empathy and selflessness. One example is the acronym J.O.Y. which is located in many Amish homes and in all Amish schools. The acronym stands for Jesus first, Others second, and Yourself last. These banners are a constant reminder of the value placed on selflessness and service. Practicing J.O.Y. on a regular basis helps cultivate an others-focused orientation and aids in the process of forgiveness. These types of practices equip the Amish to enact swift and radical forgiveness like that displayed at Nickel Mines (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 19-22).

The second step in the pyramid model of forgiveness is *humility*. Empathy helps the victim to embody the perspective of the perpetrator. But it's possible for a victim to empathize with the perpetrator, to see this person as broken and in pain, and still fail to forgive. To help facilitate forgiveness beyond empathy, Worthington suggests entering a state of humility. Here, the victim begins to see themselves as broken and in need of forgiveness as well. We have all been selfish, we have all caused others unnecessary and unjust pain. Thus, we are all in need of forgiveness from others. As the apostle Paul writes, "...for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."¹⁷ This is not to say that the victim has done something wrong in the particular situation in question. Rather, humility, as Worthington describes it, realizes that every human

¹⁵ More recent formulations of the Pyramid Model have 5 movements highlighted by the acronym R.E.A.C.H. R- Recall the hurt. E- Empathize with the perpetrator. A- Altruistic gift of forgiveness. C- Commit to Forgiveness. H- Hold on to Forgiveness. For more detail on these five steps see Worthington, "The Pyramid Model of Forgiveness." I believe that the heart of the Pyramid Model can be explained using three steps. In other places, Worthington himself only describes three stages. See Everett Worthington (1998).

¹⁶ Luke 23:34, NIV

¹⁷ Romans 3:23, NIV

has made serious mistakes that require forgiveness. As the victim begins to see and feel that they are not a better person than the perpetrator, it becomes much easier to forgive (1998, p. 63).

In this way, empathy helps the victim to see the world from the wrongdoer's perspective. But humility causes the victim to realize that they have had similar feelings and desires in the past. Much like the unrepentant servant in the book of Matthew¹⁸ who is asked to *recall* his own debt so that he might learn to forgive the debts of others, we are asked to recall our own sin so that we might forgive the sin of others. In those times when we have hurt others, we hoped for forgiveness and mercy. If this is so, how can we refuse to forgive those who have trespassed against us?

Like empathy, the Amish community works to make humility a habit as well. One of the primary focuses of the Amish is selflessness or "giving up self." A big part of this is learning to submit to the authority of Scripture and the church community. For most Americans, individuality and freedom are highly valued. But in Amish culture individuals are asked to submit to the authority and collective wisdom of others. An Amish individual may think or feel a particular way. But if their parents or Christian community feels differently, then the individual is asked to submit to the will of the group. This can be a very difficult and very painful process. For the Amish this is referred to as the practice of *Uffgevva* (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 114-6). As one young mother put it, "Uffgevva is the opposite of me, myself, and I. It means letting go of self-will" (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 115). *Uffgevva* means letting go of individuality and self-governance and actively submitting to the will of others. This helps cultivate humility. And the collective humility of the Amish may have contributed to their ability to forgive so quickly and so radically after the tragedy at Nickel Mines. It seems that by cultivating empathy and humility, the Amish were indirectly developing the virtue of forgiveness as well.

The final step in the pyramid model of forgiveness is making a public *commitment* to forgive. It's not enough to commit privately to forgive because there are often doubts that arise later in the forgiveness process. To help one stay focused on forgiveness, it is important to make one's commitment public. This can be confessing to a counselor, a pastor, a small group, a spouse, or even to the offender.

There are several important psychological reasons for making a public commitment to forgive. One is Bem's theory of self-perception. According to Bem, a person better understands their own attitudes after observing their own overt behavior. Thus, when a person makes a public declaration to undergo the process of forgiveness, it becomes easier for the victim to label themselves as having forgiven the wrongdoer making it easier to move past the pain (1968). Another important reason is the human desire to avoid cognitive dissonance. If a victim publically commits to forgiveness but continues to speak and act in unforgiving ways, this will create a sense of cognitive dissonance. In short, it creates the feeling of hypocrisy. In order to avoid this feeling, people who publically commit to forgive are much more likely to speak and act in ways that correspond to forgiveness (Festinger, 1957).

¹⁸ Matthew 18:21-35, NIV

Like empathy and humility, the Amish structure their community to assist in public declarations of forgiveness. Twice a year (Spring and Fall) the Amish celebrate communion together. These services are considered sacred because they symbolize the church becoming one body united through Christ. Unlike most Protestant communion services that focus on individuals standing before God, the Amish sacrament carries a deep communal dimension. Throughout the four weeks leading up to communion, the Amish listen to sermons on forgiveness, Jesus' sacrifice, and the call to love one's neighbor (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 116-9).

On the second Sunday of the communion season, the Amish call a "counsel meeting." The centerpiece of this service is Matthew 18. The second half of this chapter focuses on a four-step process for resolving conflicts within the church. The Amish take this process very seriously. Before the community can take communion, all known disputes must be resolved. For instance, if one family member has unresolved anger towards another family member, the entire community will delay communion until forgiveness and reconciliation is reached. The same is true for other ruptures in community living. Thus, twice a year the Amish work on forgiveness publically and communally. The public focus on forgiveness makes it a normal part of Amish life and aids in the success of the forgiveness process (Kraybill, et al., 2007, p. 116-9). But the council meeting also helps with humility. Those that have wronged someone in the community must go to that person to confess and apologize. These powerful moments of confession remind each person in the Amish community that they are in need of forgiveness. Remembering our own need for forgiveness is humbling in a way that makes extending forgiveness to others a little easier.

The Amish community is by no means perfect. But their unique set of practices does help cultivate the virtue of forgiveness. This equips them to forgive more quickly and more naturally than those who have not committed to similar practices. And the virtue of forgiveness enables the Amish to go through the process of forgiveness predictably, consistently and in a myriad of different circumstances.

Conclusion

The forgiveness at Nickel Mines was remarkable. But radical forgiveness like that showed by the Amish is not beyond our reach. A combination of practice, habituation and God's grace can equip us to forgive in similar ways. This paper has argued that forgiveness is not a one-time action but a three-step process, culminating in emotional and spiritual healing. This healing represents a significant gift to those who have been harmed. Furthermore the paper argued that the process of forgiveness can be aided by cultivating the emotional dispositions necessary (empathy, humility and confession) for the virtue of forgiveness to develop. Practice and habituation can equip a person with the tools needed to forgive fully, consistently and predictably.

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