



*Thoughts on the Sabbath
School Lesson*

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Drinking Poison

I'm sure you've heard that old saying, "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting your enemy to die." Apparently almost everybody from St. Augustine, to Nelson Mandela to Buddha to Alcoholics Anonymous has been credited with some form of the statement.

Whoever actually said it, I think the reason that it comes up in so many variations is that it, pretty accurately, demonstrates the damage that refusing to forgive someone can cause.

And can you think of anybody you know who has not experienced something in their lives that they haven't either had to forgive someone else or be forgiven themselves? Of course not! We're broken people living in a broken world ... and, as we know, hurt people hurt people.

Hurt is universal...Christian or otherwise, it is unhealthy to hang onto resentment. And yet, we often hang onto that one thing harder than anything else in our lives. As a

matter of fact, I have heard some people say that there are things that do not deserve forgiveness.

“*The Power of Forgiveness* is a collection of seven short stories that, taken together, reveal the limits, difficulties, healing qualities, and unforeseen effects an act of forgiveness can have in the lives of the people who give it—or in the lives of those who refuse to give it. One of the stories centers on acclaimed author and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.

“This clip begins with footage of Jewish families being ushered into concentration camps as the narrator speaks in the background: ‘Elie Wiesel was one of the few who lived to walk out of the camps—his father died only weeks before the end of the war. For the next 10 years, he was virtually silent about the experience. For the last half-century, his gift for putting words to the nightmare that was the holocaust has helped generations to never forget.’ “The video shifts to Wiesel giving a speech inside of a concentration camp’s remains. ‘So look and listen,’ he says. ‘Close your eyes and listen, but open your hearts and listen. Listen to the question that we asked ourselves then: “What happened here?”’

“The scene shifts again, and an elderly Wiesel reflects on the powerful emotions he experienced in his attempts to grapple with the holocaust later in his life. ‘I composed a prayer,’ he says. ‘Literally I composed a prayer, saying, “God of mercy, have no mercy on these souls—on these murderers of children. God of compassion, have no compassion on those who killed these children.”’ As he speaks, the video shifts to scenes of Jewish children rolling up their sleeves to reveal the numbers they had been stamped with to replace their names.

“I was criticized all over the world,’ Wiesel continues, “because it was published all over the world. But I felt it—I still feel it. Some persons do not deserve forgiveness. And those are the persons, really, who went beyond the human capacity for evil. They went beyond it.”¹

Do you agree with Weisel? Are there some people who do not deserve forgiveness? If so, who gets to decide who does or doesn’t deserve it?

I was actually shocked the first time I heard someone say that some acts/people were beyond forgiveness. I was listening to a radio program some of you might remember, Dr. Laura, and she made a statement indicating that she believed that we were under no obligation to forgive some folks – pedophiles, serial killers, etc.

I have to say that that concept had never occurred to me – not because I’m any great paragon of Christian understanding and behavior – just because I don’t believe I’d ever given the concept of forgiveness that much thought. I’d grown up in a Christian family and, as such, had heard all my life that almost everything is forgivable (the only exception being grieving the Holy Spirit) when it comes to Jesus, and that we should be like Jesus.

I know, that’s very, very simplistic and I hate to admit that I was well into adulthood when this happened. I was absolutely stopped cold by the concept that some folks did not think of forgiveness as an integral part of their experience of Grace.

Having said that, I believe once we give up any right to withhold forgiveness – ever – for any reason! Our example is Jesus who forgives everyone who sincerely asks, no

¹ The Power of Forgiveness (Journey Films, 2008), written and directed by Martin Doblmeier

matter what they've done. Because for Jesus, the relationship is the most important thing.

“Tom Wiles served a stint as university chaplain at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. A few years ago, he picked me up at the Phoenix airport in his new Ford pickup and whisked me away to keynote a leadership conference at the university. Since I was still mourning the trade-in of my Dodge truck, we immediately bonded, sharing truck stories and laughing at the bumper-sticker truism: ‘Nothing is more beautiful than a man and his truck.’

“As I climbed into his 2002 Ranger for the ride back to the airport a day later, I noticed two big scrapes by the passenger door. ‘What happened here?’ I asked.

“‘My neighbor's basketball post fell and left those dents and white scars,’ Tom replied with a downcast voice.

“‘You're kidding! How awful,’ I commiserated. ‘This truck is so new I can smell it.’

“‘What's even worse is my neighbor doesn't feel responsible for the damage.’

“Rising to my newfound friend's defense, I said, ‘Did you contact your insurance company? How are you going to get him to pay for it?’

“‘This has been a real spiritual journey for me,’ Tom replied. ‘After a lot of soul-searching and discussions with my wife about hiring an attorney, it came down to this: I can either be in the right, or I can be in a relationship with my neighbor. Since my neighbor will probably be with me longer than this truck, I decided that I'd rather be in a relationship than be right. Besides, trucks are meant to be

banged up, so I got mine initiated into the real world a bit earlier than I expected.”²

How much more important is it to forgive our Christian brothers and sisters? We’re going to spend eternity with these folks – our Forever Family ... how can that happen if we can’t forgive them right here and right now? I’d say that at least one of the parties involved in the disagreement won’t be part of the Forever Family – that would be the person who would rather be right than in a relationship. Is that me? Is that you?

“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ ‘Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

“‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’” And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’” So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’” But he was unwilling and went and

² Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery* (Waterbrook Press, 2004), p. 91-92

threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.'" Matthew 18:21-35

Hmmmm. That doesn't sound like a suggestion to me. What do you think?

Lillianne Winegardner Lopez 11.30.2018

In matters of forgiveness, as in all other virtues, the first step (forgiving) is comparatively simple compared to the second (reconciling). Hell is always waiting for the rebound. The only prevention of the rebound is perseverance. The first moment of forgiveness is nearly always confused with other things--affection, delight, honor, pride, love of power; some good, some bad, all distracting. ... But then directly afterwards, the good elements withdraw and leave the reconciliation to its own serious energy; and if that energy is too weak, it will break. ... Nothing is achieved at once.

Charles Williams

Al Masters lives at the other end of our state. He's married and had a little boy and a small business. He considered himself very blessed. And then just before Christmas some years ago, his little boy was killed by a 15-year-old kid driving a car without a license. Al Masters was filled with a deep desire for revenge. And even though that youngster--15 years old--could not be brought before the full power of the law because he was a juvenile, Al Masters wanted the very book thrown at him.

Then, on Christmas Eve, his wife got him to come to the church. He listened to the story of the Word coming to the shepherds. He recognized that he was one of the world's ungood. And he began to weep. When he went out of the church, the next day, on Christmas, he set out to find out

more about the boy who killed his son. He found that he came from a broken home, that he lived with his mother, who was an alcoholic. He went and he met the boy. He gave the boy a job in his shop, and then later took him into his home. And that boy, now a young man, says that Al Masters is the most saintly person he'd ever known.

Bruce Thielemann

I know two law partners who used to hate each other.

When one became a Christian, he asked me, "Now that I'm a Christian, what should I do?"

I said, "Why not ask him to forgive you and tell him you love him?"

"I could never do that!" he said, "because I don't love him."

That lawyer had put his finger squarely on one of the great challenges of the Christian life: On the one hand, everybody wants to be loved, but on the other hand, many people never experience it. That's why we need to learn to love as Christ loves--unconditionally. We can't manufacture that kind of love. It only comes from God; and it's a love that draws people to Christ.

I prayed with that attorney. The next morning, he told his partner, "I've become a Christian, and I want to ask you to forgive me for all I've done to hurt you, and to tell you that I love you."

The partner was so surprised and convicted that he, too, asked for forgiveness and said, "I would like to become a Christian. Would you tell me how?"

See what love can do?

Bill Bright

I remember seeing a picture of a husband and wife in a gentleman's office. I said, "Nice picture." I turned around and looked at the man, and he had tears in his eyes. So I asked him, "Why are you crying?"

He said, "There was a time in our marriage when I was unfaithful to my wife, and she found out about it. She was so deeply hurt and injured she was going to leave me and take the kids with her. I was overwhelmed at the mistake I had made, and I shut the affair down. I went to my wife in total brokenness. Knowing I did not deserve for her to answer in the affirmative, I asked her to forgive me. And she forgave me.

"This picture was taken shortly after that. When I see this picture, I see a woman who forgave me. I see a woman who was willing to stand with me

in this picture. So when you see this picture you say, 'Nice picture.' But when I see this picture I see my life given back to me again."

Randy Frazee

A Nigerian woman who is a physician at a great teaching hospital in the United States came out of the crowd today to say something kind about the lecture I had just given. She introduced herself using an American name. "What's your African name?" I asked. She immediately gave it to me, several syllables long with a musical sound to it. "What does the name mean?" I wondered.

She answered, "It means 'Child who takes the anger away.'"

When I inquired as to why she would have been given this name, she said, "My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me."

It occurred to me that her name would be a suitable one for Jesus.

Gordon MacDonald

The Thlinkit tribes give a hearty welcome to Christian missionaries. In particular they are quick to accept the doctrine of the atonement, because they themselves practice it, although to many of the civilized whites it is a stumbling-block and rock of offense. As an example of their own doctrine of atonement they told Mr. Young and me one evening that 20 or 30 years ago there was a bitter war between their own and the Sitka tribe, great fighters, and pretty evenly matched. After fighting all summer in a desultory, squabbling way, fighting now under cover, now in the open, watching for every chance for a shot, none of the women dared venture to the salmon-streams or berry-fields to procure their winter stock of food. At this crisis one of the Stickeen chiefs came out of his block-house fort into an open space midway between their fortified camps, and shouted that he wished to speak to the leader of the Sitkas.

When the Sitka chief appeared, he said: "My people are hungry. They dare not go to the salmon-streams or berry-fields for winter supplies, and if this war goes on much longer most of my people will die of hunger. We have fought long enough; let us make peace. You brave Sitka warriors go

home, and we will go home, and we will all set out to dry salmon and berries before it is too late."

The Sitka chief replied: "You may well say let us stop fighting, when you have had the best of it. You have killed ten more of my tribe than we have killed of yours. Give us ten Stickeen men to balance our blood-account; then, and not till then, will we make peace and go home."

"Very well," replied the Stickeen chief, "you know my rank. You know that I am worth 10 common men and more. Take me, and make peace."

This noble offer was promptly accepted; the Stickeen chief stepped forward and was shot down in sight of the fighting bands. Peace was thus established, and all made haste to their homes and ordinary work. That chief literally gave himself a sacrifice for his people. He died that they might live. Therefore, when missionaries preached the doctrine of atonement, explaining that when all mankind had gone astray, had broken God's laws and deserved to die, God's son came forward, and, like the Stickeen chief, offered himself as a sacrifice to heal the cause of God's wrath and set all the people of the world free, the doctrine was readily accepted.

"Yes, your words are good," they said. "The Son of God, the Chief of chiefs, the Maker of all the world, must be worth more than all mankind put together; therefore, when His blood was shed, the salvation of the world was made sure."

John Muir

A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school.

They were instructed to call to mind every person they had a grudge against. For every person they refused to forgive, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag.

They were told to carry this bag with them everywhere, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, on their lap when riding, next to their desk during classes.

Some bags became quite heavy. Lugging this around, paying attention to it all the time, and remembering not to leave it in embarrassing places was a hassle.

Over time the potatoes became moldy, smelly, and began to sprout "eyes."

Often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it clearly is a gift to ourselves.

I heard Paul Yonggi Cho speak a few years back. Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world. Several years ago, as his ministry was becoming international, he told God, "I will go anywhere to preach the gospel, except Japan." He hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what Japanese troops had done to the Korean people and to members of Yonggi Cho's own family during WWII. The Japanese were his Ninevites.

Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor's conference—4,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood up to speak, and what came out of his mouth was this: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." And then he broke and wept. He was both brimming and desolate with hatred. At first one, then two, then all 1,000 pastors stood up. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal our heart, to reveal what's really in our heart. How powerful is the blood of Christ? Can it heal hatred between Koreans and Japanese? Can it make a Jew love a Ninevite? Can it make you reconciled to, well, you know who?

Mark Buchanan

Several years ago one of my wife's friends took a missionary furlough with her husband and family after an unusually tiring stint of service. She had been looking forward to this time with great anticipation. For the first time she was going to have a place of her own, a new, large townhouse-styled apartment with a patio. She is very creative and made the patio the focus of her decoration.

After a few months some new neighbors moved in. The word to describe them would be "coarse." There was loud music day and night along with a constant flow of obscenities. They urinated in the front yard in broad daylight. They totally disrupted her peace. She could see nothing good in them.

She asked the Lord to help her be more loving, but all she got back [from her neighbors] was disgust and rejection. The crisis came when she returned home to discover that her neighbors' children had sprayed orange paint all over her beautiful patio—the walls, the floors—everything! She was distraught and furious. She tried to pray but found herself crying out, "I cannot love them; I hate them!"

Knowing she had to deal with the sin in her heart, she began to converse with the Lord in her inner being, and a Scripture came to mind: "And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity" (Colossians 3:14 NASB). In her heart she questioned, "Lord, how do I put on love?" The only way she could picture it was like putting on a coat. So that is what she determined to do—she chose to wrap herself in the love of God! As a result she began to experience a deeper life of Christ within her.

She made a list of what she would do if she really loved her exasperating neighbors, then did what she had listed. She baked cookies, she offered to baby-sit for free, she invited the mother over for coffee—and the most beautiful thing happened! She began to know and understand them. She began to see that they were living under tremendous pressures. She began to love her "enemies." She did good to them. She lent to them without expecting anything back.

The day came when they moved—and she wept! An unnatural, unconventional love and captured her heart—a supernatural love—the love of Jesus.

Kent Hughes

Cats never forgive. Scientists have observed conciliatory behavior in many different animal species; the bulk of the research has been on primates like bonobos, mountain gorillas, and chimps, who often follow confrontations with friendly behavior like embracing or kissing. Scientists have observed similar behaviors in non-primates like goats and hyenas; the only species that has so far failed to show outward signs of reconciliation are domestic cats.

In other words, when it comes to forgiving others, don't act like a cat!

Matt Woodley