

This article will continue on the topic of forgiveness, taking up the question of: what is forgiveness, what does it entail, what does it really mean, what really constitutes forgiveness. Last week's article started giving some address to this question by saying what it's not, trying to dispel what are perhaps *some* misunderstandings. But that still leaves a person with a sense of vagueness. We now need to take up the question of what forgiveness *is*.

Forgiveness, or having the habit or constant "posture" of forgiveness, can be hard to describe. A good start, one that certainly gets us well into the ballpark, is that forgiveness is an absence of certain evils; being in "a state of" forgiveness means there's a complete absence of hatred, grudge-bearing, ill-will, bitterness, or a desire for vengeance, retribution, or repayment of any kind. It means the person is not clinging to an offense committed by another; they are not constantly looking at it, dwelling on it, or raging over it. In a certain sense, forgiveness means that I don't really care about the offense committed. I don't want to crush the offender every time I think of them or the hurt done to me or my beloved. Imagine an offense against you as, say, a big ball; forgiveness means that I'm not clinging to that ball. In fact, I'm not really paying any attention to that ball at all, it's not controlling me, it's not twisting me up on the inside. Unforgiveness means just the opposite – I'm clinging to that ball as if it's life itself, wanting to ram it down the throat of the offender and see them choke on it.

Suppose you gave someone a dime. Would you obsess over that dime day after day until they paid you back? Would you take that debt to the grave with you? Would you go up to that person 10 years later and say: hey, you never did pay me back that dime? Well someone might but if they do, there's something wrong with them. Most people would not give it a second thought. This is what it's like to be in a constant state of forgiveness. I'm not dwelling on an offense, I'm not looking for something (some satisfaction) for myself.

Always being, habitually being, in a state of forgiveness means that I never cling to the ball to begin with, at all. It means that I am in the habit of not bearing grudges, hating, wishing ill on another and so on. I am in the habit of not dwelling on and hanging onto wrongs (real or imagined). Some offense is committed against me, I feel the hurt of it, but my mind does not turn towards vengeance, hatred, bitterness, etc.

Forgiveness is not a matter of going up to someone and saying I forgive you; that could even be done out of self-interest, maybe as a way of extracting some sort of apology or acquiescence or acknowledgement out of the other person. The description of forgiveness as freedom from hatred, ill-will, etc makes it clear that forgiveness is something interior to the person, an interior disposition. It is an interior disposition, meaning that it does *not* depend on the offender, it depends only on your willingness to do it. A person can be in a state of forgiveness (not clinging to the ball) without the offender ever knowing or even caring. St Maria Goretti is a good example. This also means that there is a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. There might not ever be reconciliation because reconciliation *does* depend on the other person. Incidentally, this is also true in our relation with God. Our Lord is always "in a state of forgiveness" (if you will) but my reception of it and reconciliation with Him does depend on me. He doesn't force it on us.

Why practice forgiveness? This question will also help to round out a little more of what forgiveness is. The practice of forgiveness/granting mercy is for the good of both the offended and the offender. St Thomas Aquinas points out that forgiveness/mercy is "part of" the virtue of charity, or an act of charity (i.e., love of God and neighbor). We must have the virtue of charity when we die otherwise hell is the result. Love of another person means willing the best for the other person, wanting them to get to Heaven. If a person does not repent of their wrongdoings, especially serious ones, they're going to end up in hell. Part of being in a continual state of forgiveness (not clinging to the ball), then, means that I am not only not bearing grudges etc, but I am actually hoping for the person's conversion, hoping for their reconciliation with God.

It should be obvious now why our Lord said that it is necessary to have the consistent mindset of forgiveness (not holding grudges) – it is because unforgiveness is contrary to the virtue of charity, which is necessary to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. God is love and you can't be happy in Heaven if you hate the nature of God.

Notice again that constantly having the stance of forgiveness (not clinging to offenses) does not mean that a person never says no, that they are always affirming, affirming even sin, or any other such thing. There are many times (e.g., parents) when a person has to say no, in spite of the reaction or expectation of the other person. Forgiveness does not mean that there are not times when I should perhaps, out of genuine charity, avoid another person because it either leads me or them into sin. Forgiveness does not entail first and foremost exterior actions. Although forgiveness can direct external actions it is, once again, first and foremost an interior disposition – I do not, in my mind, cling to or dwell on the wrongdoings others have committed; and it hopes for the conversion of the offender. Incidentally, imagine what relief that would bring to the person offended if the person who committed the (real) offense wept bitterly and sincerely over that offense.

Some people might say: well I believe in forgiveness...*but*. Whatever follows that ‘but’ is intended as an excuse for the grudge-bearing, hatred, etc, that the person carries. The expectation is that the Lord Himself should say: oh, well, ok, you’re exempted, you’re right, I didn’t understand, go ahead and hate the person, you’re justified. Whatever follows that but means that I don’t want to practice it and I’m probably not going to, and I have good reason not to. What probably follows the ‘but’ is something like: you don’t understand; this person really hurt me or my beloved, this was a grave offense, the person isn’t sorry, etc. When the king told the wicked servant that the forgiveness of his debt was revoked, it wasn’t because the other servant didn’t owe him a real debt, it was because he refused to forgive the (real) debt of the other servant, as he had been forgiven.

The first reading (Sirach 27:30-28:7) on the Sunday we had this Gospel said that “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tightly.” Hatred, grudge bearing, etc can be one of the hardest things there is to get rid of, once it has infiltrated someone’s mind, heart, and soul. The best thing is to never yield to it. But suppose it has gotten in; how does a person get rid of it?

To answer this question, we might first return to the parable of the king and the wicked servant. The wicked servant pleaded for mercy when he realized the terrible consequences of his debt. He lost that forgiveness because he did not, in turn, forgive the debt of another. This can be expressed in terms of fear of the Lord. There are two levels of fear of the Lord. The first is (basically) a healthy fear of hell, a fear of the consequences for what I have done and failed to do. The wicked servant experienced this, which is why he pleaded for mercy. But then he lost his forgiveness because he refused to elevate his fear of the Lord to the next level, which says something like: I don’t want to do (or not do) this or that because I’m afraid it will hurt my beloved (our Lord). The first level of fear of the Lord (a healthy fear of hell) is where conversion usually begins. Our Lord warned us about the consequence of serious unforgiveness; the consequence is hell. One of the things a person has to do when the remembrance of past hurts starts to impinge on their mind and rile them up with bitterness is choose to say: NO – make a strong act of the will: NO, I will not dwell on it. Motivation is needed to make that strong act of the will. Bearing in mind the consequence of unforgiveness is a strong motivation.

Forgiveness makes us like Christ, which tells us probably the most important thing for really getting rid of ill-will (etc) and being habitually in a state forgiveness, such that grudge-bearing etc never enters in to begin with. The most important thing is to build relation with our Lord, to reach that higher level of fear of the Lord. If Jesus has really become my brother, my father, my closest companion, my greatest love, then I will *want* to have the habit of forgiveness simply because I really want to be like Him. Do I want to be like Him, like a young boy wanting to be like his dad? These are not just words. We have to live them, become them, in this life and this world. That’s the purpose of this life – to choose God, which means listening to, doing, and becoming what He teaches and commands.

Going back once again to the parable, it starts out by saying that the king decided to take account with his servants. Aquinas brings out that this “accounting” corresponds to examination of ourselves. This too needs to occur in this life and this world. If the first real accounting of ourselves is done by the King Himself after we die, it’s too late, it will not end well. This taking account of ourselves is a real, honest, in-depth self-examination. Dispose yourself to it through sincere prayer, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the sacraments, study of the faith, an embrace of the virtue of humility, and asking our Lord to show you your own interior. As a person really begins to see their own depth of sin – how many times and in how many ways they’ve failed to

be the son or daughter they are meant to be – they cannot help but be free of unforgiveness. There is a certain pride in unforgiveness, a self-righteousness, an unwillingness to see my own debt. When a person sees the 192,000 years worth of wages that they themselves owe, it goes a long way towards curing unforgiveness. With even the slightest bit of humility, the person is then able to say: who am I to bear a grudge when our Lord has forgiven me so much. Be open to the Lord, don't reject Him or try to make excuses if you start really seeing your sins and experiencing real sorrow for them. It is the Lord coming to your aid; let Him do it.

How to get rid of unforgiveness? Perhaps just a couple of more things to put into practice can be mentioned. One might be to just think about what a burden, in this life and this world, it is to carry these things around day after day. It will wear you out and probably even affect your physical health. Think about how miserable it makes you now. And then also ask: do I want to be like this for all eternity, with no way to escape? How much research has now shown that chronically elevated cortisol levels, for example, caused by “stress,” results in many adverse health conditions. Unforgiveness – harboring anger, dwelling on past hurts – is most definitely a “stressor.” The things our Lord tells us are for *our* good, and they begin to affect us even in this life and this world. As you ponder the effects of harboring ill-will, think also about how the offender is still controlling you now, long after the offense. Do you really want to hand control of yourself over to this person who committed some wrong against you? Do you want to basically be their property, their puppet?

Another practice that will be needed to get free of unforgiveness is to bring it to the sacrament of Confession. You might have to keep bringing it back for some time; if so, then just do that. Contrite confession combined with a firm purpose of amendment will keep knocking away at the vice, as it does for all vices. Sincere Confession weakens temptations. The firm purpose of amendment is the preparation for the temptation to dwell on the offense to come back. The firm purpose of amendment is the preparation to make that strong act of the will, saying NO when the temptation returns. The more times you successfully repel the temptation, the weaker it gets.

This life is just a brief part of our total existence. But it's a crucial part. It determines what our never-ending existence will be like after this life – never-ending, ecstatic happiness or never-ending misery. This life is the trial period in which we are given knowledge of God and then have to choose whether or not we will follow Him – grow in knowledge and love of Him, become like Him. Let's rise up and choose well! Don't be possessed by unforgiveness.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*