

Amish school shooting. Never would we have expected to hear these three words uttered in the same sentence. But on October 2, 2006, a heavily armed milk truck driver named Charles Roberts burst into an Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, PA. And by the time Roberts had taken his own life, less than one hour later, 5 girls aged 6-13 were dead, and 5 others severely wounded.

No one anticipated the horror of October 2, but within 24 hours, the biggest surprise that startled the world was no longer the intrusion of evil but the swiftness of the Amish response. People across this country struggled to understand how members of the Amish community almost immediately forgave the shooter and reached out in compassion to the members of his family, hugging them at his funeral, treating them as fellow victims, and even making monetary contributions to the Roberts Family Fund for his wife and three young children.

One reporter, who was not a Christian, was profoundly moved by the Amish response. He said that while he could take or leave religion, he could not ignore this. *"Something must be happening in their lives,"* he said. *"It's so unnatural for a person to forgive those who hurt them and to desire reconciliation."*

We must admit that the Bible gives some commands that are extremely hard to understand, and even harder to live out. And one of the most difficult is to forgive our enemies. Forgiving someone who has wronged us is hard to do, even at the best of times, isn't it? Some wounds are just deep and can last for weeks, months, and even years.

But as Christians, we owe a great deal to the fact that the Apostle Peter had a quick tongue. On this occasion, Peter thought he was being very generous, asking Jesus how often he ought to forgive someone. And then Peter answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times.

Peter really wasn't to be faulted, though, since the Rabbi's taught, based on a passage in Amos, that one was to forgive another three times and three times only.

At any rate, I'm sure Peter thought he was going a long way when he takes the Rabbi's teaching three times, multiplies it by two, for good measure adds one, and suggests that it'll be enough if he forgives seven times. Expecting to be commended, Jesus' answer was that the Christian must forgive seventy times seven. In other words, if we're doing the modern math, I think my granddaughter calls it "rounding," there's to be no limit to forgiveness.

Jesus then told the story of the servant forgiven a great debt who went out and then dealt mercilessly with a fellow servant who owed him a debt that was but a fraction of what he himself had owed, and who for his mercilessness was utterly condemned. And notice Jesus' last words on the matter: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

The parable teaches that lesson which runs through all the New Testament – we must forgive in order to be forgiven. One of the most familiar statements about forgiveness, of course, comes from the Lord's Prayer where we are told to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is not something easy to understand or to practice, particularly as it relates to the concept of sin. So before we can pray this petition we must first have a sense of sin.

One mistake we often make is to think of sin as the kind of thing which gets into the news – theft, arson, murder, assault and the like. Yet, there are sins which no one can see, which can't be punished by any human law, and yet produce far more unhappiness for far more people over a far longer period of time – selfishness, pride, criticism, or irritability – to name a few. These can wreck the life of those we meet.

The New Testament uses as many as four different words for sin, one being a word translated as *a missing of the target*. Another meaning *a stepping across*. And yet another as *lawlessness*.

But the last word for sin is the word that translates as *a debt*, which is the word used in the body of the Lord's Prayer. It means a failure to pay that which is due. The most frightening petition might just be this: "*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" The literal meaning is: 'Forgive us our sins *in proportion as we forgive those who have sinned against us*. In verses 14 and 15, Jesus says in the plainest possible language that if we forgive others, God will forgive us; but if we refuse to forgive others, God will refuse to forgive us.

So where do we go to learn about totally forgiving others? Well, we really need not go any further than the first book of the Bible and the account of Joseph forgiving his brothers in Genesis 45.

Twenty-two years earlier, Joseph's brothers had conspired to kill him because they were jealous of the attention he got from his father. As Jacob's favorite child, Joseph strutted around in a richly ornamented robe dreaming that his eleven brothers would one day come begging to him.

But since this young man needed to learn temperance, God allowed Joseph's brothers to deal with him ruthlessly. But instead of killing him, they decided on plan B – selling him as a slave to the Ishmaelites – never expecting to see him again.

And in order to explain Joseph's sudden absence to their father, the brothers concocted a clever cover-up by dipping Joseph's robe in some goat's blood and took it to Jacob, saying, "*We found this. Examine it to see whether it's your son's robe.*" And the plan worked.

The situation looked bleak for Joseph, but he began to work in the house of Potiphar, the Egyptian officer to whom the Ishmaelites had sold him. And he became such a valuable employee that he was put in charge of the entire household. But then Potiphar's wife began to flirt with him.

And after being rejected repeatedly, she decided to accuse Joseph of rape. And since Potiphar naturally believed his wife, he had Joseph imprisoned.

Poor Joseph. He had much to be bitter about and 11 brothers, who sold him into slavery, to forgive.

Well, after some time passed, Joseph had company in prison – Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. While there, each of them had a dream that Joseph offered to interpret. He predicted that the baker would be hanged in three days but that the cupbearer would get his job back in the same amount of time. And both of those events took place just as Joseph predicted.

Two years later, Pharaoh himself had a dream – two dreams in fact – and none of his magicians and astrologers could figure them out. But the cupbearer remembered how Joseph had interpreted his dream so accurately that he recommended Joseph to Pharaoh. Suddenly, Joseph found himself before the ruler of Egypt, and he alone was able to interpret the dreams: there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine in the land.

Joseph also offered his advice: Pharaoh should store up food during the first seven years so that there would be a surplus available during the seven years of famine – not only for Egypt but also for the surrounding countries that would come to Egypt begging for food. Pharaoh was so impressed with this wise advice that he made Joseph the prime minister of Egypt right on the spot!

Then, during the time of famine, who do you suppose came to Egypt begging for food? Joseph's brothers of course. But instead of punishing them, which he had the power to do, he wept. Filled with love, he demonstrated genuine forgiveness.

And just how does this apply to our lives, you ask? First, to ensure privacy, Joseph cried out, *"Have everyone leave my presence!"* He waited to reveal his identity until there was no one in the room except his brothers.

And why did Joseph make everyone else leave? Being a hero in Egypt, Joseph knew that if the word leaked out that his brothers had kidnapped and sold him twenty-two years before, the Egyptians would hate his brothers. Not only did Joseph not let anybody know what they'd done; he ensured that no one could know. That, then, is one of the proofs that one has totally forgiven. We've totally forgiven when we don't need to talk about it.

And did you notice that Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers with tears and compassion? When he could *"no longer control himself,"* he broke down, weeping, and told them who he was. Knowing that they were *"terrified at his presence,"* he said to them, *"Come close to me. 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! (45:4).*

He didn't want them to be afraid, and Joseph had no desire for them to stand back and say, *"Wow! Look at our brother Joseph."* Instead, he wanted them to feel no fear in his presence, and he wanted to be loved, not admired, and he wanted them to feel his love for them in return. He had not forgotten what they had done to him; he was simply identifying himself to them. When we have totally forgiven our offenders, we will not want them to be afraid either. (1 John 4:18).

So to ease their minds, Joseph gave them an explanation for his suffering: *"do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you"* (45:5). Total forgiveness, then, is not wanting our offenders to feel guilty for what they did, but showing them that there is a reason God let it happen. Allowing his brothers to save face, Joseph told them something that's the most gracious statement he had made so far: *"You didn't do this to me; God did"* (45:7-8).

Friends, this is about as good as it gets. When we can forgive like that, we're there. We have achieved genuine forgiveness. Now can you just imagine the looks on the faces of Joseph's brothers when he said to them, *"it was not you who sent me here, but God"* (45:8)

So when Joseph revealed his identity and expressed forgiveness, what do you suppose the 11 brothers were thinking? They would have to return to Canaan and tell their father the truth of what they did, right? For years, their worst nightmare must have been that their father would find out about their deception.

But Joseph instructed his brothers to tell their father the truth – that he was alive and well and had become the Prime Minister of Egypt. He told them exactly what to say and what not to say to Jacob, telling their father all the truth that he needed to know.

Well, 17 years after reuniting with his long-lost son, Jacob died. And Joseph's brothers suddenly panicked, terrified that Joseph's forgiveness would last only as long as their father was alive, and that Joseph would at long last take revenge on them.

And because of their fear, they concocted a story: So they sent word to Joseph, saying, *"Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father"* (50:16-17). When Joseph heard this message, he wept. But what Joseph had done 17 years before still held good; he was prepared to care for his brothers indefinitely. *"I forgave you then, and I forgive you now,"* he was saying to them.

Total forgiveness, then, is a lifetime commitment. As one Amish mother of one of the injured girls said, *"Genuine forgiveness takes a lot of work, even after a decision to forgive has been made."*

But it also involves one additional act: praying for God's blessings to rain on the lives of our offenders, to pray that they will be blessed, that God will show favor to rather than punish them, and that they will prosper in every way. The Amish father of two of the slain girls said it this way: *"I wish Roberts the same as I wish for myself. We must pray that he receive total forgiveness, just as we want it for ourselves."*

Jesus says we must forgive our brother from the heart, and when we do this from the heart, we're there. And if we don't forgive our fellow men from the heart? Just read verse 35 again where Jesus says, *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you."*

So forgiveness involves a conscious choice made on the inside to release others from their sins against us so that we can find ourselves released as well. It doesn't deny the pain or change the past, but it does break the cycle of bitterness and resentment, allowing us to move on. One Nickel Mines Amish businessman was quoted as saying, *"The acid of hate destroys the container. If I hold a grudge for one day, it's bad. If I hold it for two days, it's worse. But if I hold a grudge for a year, then that man's controlling my life. When we place the other person in God's hands and release the bitterness to him, we're set free, just as if we're released from jail. It's just better to let the past be the past, at last. The only thing harder than forgiveness is the alternative."*

Two final thoughts. One, forgiveness is not an optional part of the Christian life. Consider these words from the lips of our Lord: *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven"* (Luke 6:37).

And two, the absolute best incentive to forgiveness is to remember how much God has already forgiven us. Just think of the punishment we deserved that didn't happen because of God's grace. One Amish school girl's mother said, *"It's only through faith in Jesus Christ that forgiveness is possible. He's the one who deserves the praise and the glory, not us Amish."*

Well, back to the Nickel Mines tragedy of October, 2006. Pain from the trauma has faded but memories still linger. Finding a new normal has taken time and hard work. As one Amish bishop remarked, *"This was our 9/11, but extending forgiveness was the right thing to do. It was just standard Christian forgiveness. It's what everybody should be doing. As we forgive and are forgiven, we grow in God's grace."* Today, the Nickel Mines Amish still believe that to be true.

This week, we just might want to take a look in our 'grievance closet' and find out what's hanging there. Can we get rid of it? Can we take it back to their original donor and tell them that it doesn't fit anymore? If we can do that, then we can be comfortable when we pray the petition: *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."* AMEN.

