

In his short story entitled, **The Capital of the World**, Hemingway tells us about the many boys in Madrid named, Paco, and about a newspaper ad that read: *Paco meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.*

In his story, a squadron of Guardia Civil (the local police) was needed to disperse the nearly eight hundred young men who answered the ad.

Hemingway’s story points to the underlying longing of many to be forgiven, even if our name is not Paco. We desire forgiveness because we value relationships, and we know that relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard to carry out. Often, we do not see why we should forgive, or we want to, but cannot. Other times we forgive, but the forgiveness is rejected and the relationship is further harmed. We think that if we could somehow neutralize the wrongdoing, the relationship would be restored without having to do the hard work of forgiving.

Of course, if we could undo the wrong, forgiveness would not be necessary. But we can’t. Our lives don’t have a reverse button. We can do new deeds, but cannot undo old ones. So, we need forgiveness.

If we could ensure that our wrongful acts did not “stick” to us as our fault and our guilt, then forgiveness would not be necessary either. But humans are not mere animals acting according to instinct. Instead, we can do wrong through negligence or an intentional malicious act where guilt is assigned to us. The wrongdoing sits like a burden on the shoulders of the one who committed it. So, we need forgiveness.

Forgiveness involves two important actions. First, it names the wrongdoing and condemns it. Without naming it, what would there be to forgive? Second, it gives the gift of not counting the wrongdoing against the wrongdoers. The generous release of a genuine debt is the heart of forgiveness.

It is more difficult to forgive than to give. When we give, we give to the person out of joyful love for their good. But when we forgive, we release the person from the burden of their wrongdoing. The difference lies in the violation suffered by the forgivers at the hands of the person receiving the forgiveness.

Forgiveness presents some problems. It seems to remove a major incentive for a wrongdoer to change. Neither does it remove the guilt for the wrongdoing. To be certain, forgiveness removes anger and lets the wrongdoer go free, but perhaps forgiveness is unwise and unjust.

Forgiveness does not just involve the wrongdoer and the one who was sinned against. God is also involved. Without God, forgiveness may seem ridiculous, but we must remember that we forgive because we echo God’s forgiveness.

When Christians discuss forgiveness, they tend to make one of two mistakes. Either they think God is a negotiator, or they think God is a soft, heavenly Santa. It is unwise to think of God as a negotiator, because God does not need anything we might bring to the negotiation, and He is the source of all that we have anyway. Besides, even if we could strike a bargain with God, it would be disastrous for us because we all would break the deal at some point. If God is a negotiator, our terror of God would be our only remaining possession once the deal be broken.

It is also unwise to think of God as a Santa Claus or a doting grandparent who refuses to see the wrong we do. We like such a God because it helps us avoid peeling back the layers of our souls in self-examination, and finding a self tainted by sin. We like such a God because a Santa God, does not enter our private hidden sphere. We end up thinking that our interior life is not God's affair. We end up believing God will affirm us no matter what. We conclude that a God who points out sin is an evil and unsophisticated God. We design a God who gives us all we need and affirms us and all our deeds.

But the apostles speak freely of God's judgment and God's condemnation. They also speak of God's wrath. I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God, but when one of our son's was stationed in Bosnia with the United Nations force, the people killed, mass graves, villages destroyed, brutalization beyond imagination, I could not imagine God being angry. How does God act towards the carnage of Rwanda and such places? I believe God must be wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God is not wrathful despite being love. God is wrathful because of love.

God's love spills over into the creation of the world. Were it not for the mystery of human sin, that is all God would do. God would shower creation with gifts, and creatures would delight in God, each other and in their mutual exchange of gifts.

Satan came into the world, harming creation and dishonouring God. So, the God who gives became the God who forgives. It seems God knew that humans would sin right from the beginning and it is that same love that propelled God to create by giving forgiveness.

What does it mean for God to forgive? To be just is to condemn the fault and because of fault, to condemn the fault but spare the doer.

Notice that God does not do with wrongdoing. He does not excuse it as natural or the result of a bad environment. If He did, there would not be anything to forgive in the first place.

God covers our sin, hiding it away where it cannot be found (Ps. 32:1; Rom. 4:7). Our wrongdoing is put behind God's back (Is. 38:17), symbolizing a place God chooses not to see. God removes our transgression as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). God also blots out our sin (Is. 43:25), making the inky stains evaporate. God does not count debts (Rom. :8; Ps. 32: 1,2). We owe but we do not have to pay. God sweeps away our sin like mist disappears as the sun rises (Is. 44:22). Most wonderful of all, God chooses not to remember our sins (Is. 43:25; Jer. 3:34; Heb. 8:12; 10:17). Our sins are gone, gone from reality, and gone from memory.

Christ did not die as our substitute. Instead, his death enacted our own. When he was condemned, we were condemned. When he died, we died. When Christ died, that old self – the

old Adam – also died. When Christ was raised, we also were raised to new life. this death and resurrection with Christ is what we enact in baptism – the waters of death surrounding us, then being raised to new life in Christ and Christ in us.

Without Christ living in us, we are in the power of sin. We fail to live out the fact that everything we are and do comes from God. When Christ indwells us, we are freed from the power of sin, and the life we live is God’s life in us. Because of Christ, we can walk over the chasm from our sinful self- love to a life of genuine generosity and forgiveness, the righteousness of Christ becomes our righteousness. God the forgiver does not just forgive sin, He transforms sinners into Christ-like figures and clothes them with Christ’s righteousness.

We respond to God’s forgiveness by showing forgiveness to others. In the Lord’s prayer, *forgive us our debts(sins) as we forgive our debtors (those who sin against us)*, (Matt.6:12), begins to mean something. The forgiveness we show is a demonstration that we have received God’s forgiveness. When we fail to show it, we demonstrate something else: that we remain stuck in unbelief. If I do not want to forgive, there is a good chance I have not received the remarkable forgiveness from God, even if I say that I have.

How can I have the faith to receive this forgiveness? How can I recognise my sin, repent, and receive forgiveness, and thereby forgive others? If all things are from God, through God, and to God (Rom. 11:36), then this faith and this repentance of ours must also come from that same Source. Amen

Inspired by an article by Mirosiav, Professor of Theology, Yale Divinity.

Adapted from chapter 4 from his book, **Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace**

Scripture Texts to support the statements made:

Psalms 32:1

Romans 4:7

Isaiah 38:17

Psalms 103:12

Isaiah 43:25

Romans 32:1,2

Isaiah 44:22

Isaiah 43:25

Jeremiah 3:34

Hebrews 8:12; 19:17

Romans 11:36

Matthew 6:12