

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

The story is told that Leonardo da Vinci resented a fellow artist to the point of hatred. He determined to get revenge by depicting this artist as Judas in "The Last Supper." This he did; but when he started to paint the face of Christ, he couldn't seem to get the results he wanted. At last he realized that his hatred for his fellow artist was preventing him from doing his work. So he painted out the face of Judas and proceeded with the face of Christ. This experience so humbled him that he forgave his one-time enemy, and a broken friendship was restored.

Hatred can build up in an individual until he is unable to think straight or do his work successfully. Happy is the man who can forgive and forget.

What is forgiveness? One dictionary definition says it is "releasing an offender from guilt and restoring the personal relationship that existed prior to the offence." What a beautiful picture this conjures up! The offence is forgotten, and the former relationship is restored. Forgiveness is love in action and a mender of broken friendships.

Jesus told his followers that if they forgave only those who loved them they were no better than a publican. In the book of Proverbs we are advised to feed our enemy and thereby heap coals of fire on his head. Proverbs 25:21,22. In other words the best way to punish him is to be kind to him.

In Christ's day the rabbis ruled that a person was required to forgive only three times. Thinking to impress Jesus with his charity, Peter asked if forgiving a person seven times would not be more fitting. The answer was: Not seven times, but seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21,22.) Christ was not ruling that 490 forgivenesses was a proper stopping place. Rather he was stating that there should be no limit to forgiveness.

Suppose an acquaintance comes to you and says that he has told someone some things about you that have hurt your reputation and he asks your forgiveness. You tell him that you forgive him, fully and completely. But then suppose a while later he returns and says that he recently met another friend and he weakened and told him that damaging bit of information about you that he had formerly spread.

You tell him that you recently forgave him for the same offence. Didn't he learn his lesson? It is a little too much to forgive him again. But wait a minute! Are you keeping track of the times you are forgiving? Doesn't that mean that you are still holding the former offence against him? If you really forgive, doesn't that wipe the record clean? Then why are you still throwing up to him his former transgression? Can't you forgive completely?

What did Christ mean? His lesson was that if you really forgive, the record is clear. You start fresh each time an individual asks for forgiveness. To keep the former record hanging over his head is not forgiving at all.

As further amplification of his answer to Peter's question, Christ told the parable of the ungrateful servant. This servant owed more than could be repaid in a thousand lifetimes of ordinary labour. Yet his master forgave the debt. Leaving the scene, the servant met one who owed him one millionth part of what he had just been forgiven. He resorted to force to try to collect the debt. He had not been affected by the compassion his master had shown him.

The lesson to be learned from this parable is that when someone offends us, we should profit by the experience of our own release from the penalty of sin and freely forgive our brother.

Christ gave the supreme example of forgiveness. As he was nailed to the cross he prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." His tormentors had not asked for forgiveness, yet he was willing to forgive them right then. This forgiveness could be claimed by them at any time when they would have a change of heart, or a desire for forgiveness. And Holy Scripture records that many of the priests later joined the church. It could be that some of those converted priests had stood by the cross, consenting to his crucifixion and taunting him in his death agony.

In like manner God's forgiveness is always available. Accept it. As we develop the character of Christ, we, too, will forgive our fellowmen. We should be willing to forgive and forget even before our brother has repented of his offence.

It is cheaper to pardon than to carry resentment. To forgive saves the expense, the mental and spiritual wear and tear, that anger causes. It costs too much to hate. Hatred is a poison, and its venom will destroy mind, body, and soul.

In his first epistle, Peter explained the principle of brotherly love and forgiveness when he said, "Do not return evil for evil, nor pay back abuse with more abuse. On the contrary, you should give people your blessing, for it is in this way that you yourselves can obtain a blessing." (1 Peter 3:9.)

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A word from Dr. von Braun, a space scientist, who was instrumental in developing the rockets which launched the first U.S. earth satellite, Explorer 1, on January 31, 1958: and at the time of writing was working on a space vehicle to travel to Saturn.

The only thing I've always cared about is space exploration. I guess I've always daydreamed about space flight. In my early teens I used to try out home-made rockets in a field near our house. Usually they wobbled a little way into the air and fell back again. They were really just a lot of smoke and noise. When I knelt to push the ignition button, I would always pray a kind of last-minute, hope-against-hope prayer: "Please, let this one go up."

When eighteen years old, I sent off for a scientific paper showing how we would get to the moon with rockets. But the paper had almost no text to it. It was one long, complicated mathematical equation.

The trouble was, I didn't like maths. I'd failed the subject in school. But this was what it took to get a rocket into space - not daydreams, but maths. So I learned Maths.

After World War 11, I was asked to go to Fort Bliss, Texas, to carry on experiments with rockets. One day a neighbour called and asked if I'd like to go to church with him. I accepted, because I was anxious to see if an American church was just a religious country club as I'd been led to expect.

When we drove up, the small white frame building stood out in the hot Texas sun. Before long I heard a screeching of brakes as up to this church drove an old battered bus. The door opened, and fifty people climbed out until only the driver remained. Then he too climbed down, and my host walked up to him.

"Dr. von Braun," he said, "I'd like you to meet our minister."

The minister, who drove that bus, travelled each Sunday more than forty miles picking up his parishioners. For the first time I really understood that religion was not a cathedral inherited from the past, or a quick prayer at the last minute. To be effective, religion has to be backed up by discipline and effort.

Gradually I came to feel that in order to be realistic, my prayers, too, needed to move into a new dimension. I began to pray daily, hourly, instead of, on occasion, "Pushing the button and hoping." I took long rides out into the desert, where I could be alone at prayer. I prayed with my wife in the evening. As I tried to understand my problems, I tried to find God's will in acting on them.

In this age of space flight and nuclear fission, to use power wisely calls for a moral and ethical climate. We can achieve it only through many hours of the deep concentration we call prayer.