

The Journey of Transformation Raymond L. Fox

Something to reflect on, comment on, and even practice on your journey.



The Expectation of Forgiveness

“Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” This is the question the king asked the servant whom he had forgiven of an enormous debt and who stubbornly refused to forgive a fellow servant (Matthew 18:23-35). Although, as a gift of grace, the king had forgiven the servant unconditionally, forgiveness carried an expectation: that the king’s mercy would persuade the servant to be full of mercy toward his fellow servants. We traditionally think that the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, but Jesus taught that receiving forgiveness ought to take us beyond reconciliation to transformation in the image of the One who has graciously forgiven us.

In response to our Father’s gift of forgiveness, transformation into people of grace is not just a beautiful object of contemplation but a moral obligation of life in his kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus concluded his explanation of unconditional love by calling upon his disciples to “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:32-36). The apostle Paul, as a devout follower of Jesus, instructed Christians to “forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). Then the apostle John broadened the scope of this obligation to include the patience, kindness, goodness, compassion, and gentleness of the Father when he wrote, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

In the parable of Jesus, the king was just in expecting that his unconditional and abundant love would persuade his servant to learn to love. When the servant refused to show grace to his fellow servant, the king's goal remained the same: transformation of this servant into a merciful and kind member of his kingdom. If such a generous gift would not motivate him, then perhaps logical consequences would. He would have to suffer the consequences of his greed: the alienation and misery of living a selfish life. So, the king sent him to prison until he could pay the debt. Forgiveness and consequences are two sides of the same coin—one positive and the other negative. The goal of both ought to be transformation.

We understand in our relationships that there is a point at which consequences must serve to produce a change. Forgiveness, when repeated, requires patience, but, when there is no change in someone's selfish behavior, patience can subtly turn into tolerance and continued tolerance enables the offensive behavior to continue. At some point between patience and tolerance, we know that facing the consequences of our selfishness—alienation and misery—can finally convince us to change our minds about how we treat others. It is the reason a child must sit alone for a time-out after continuing to argue with their sibling and the reason we must separate from a person who continues abusive behavior.

How can we know when we have arrived at the point of imposing consequences? Jesus taught that if a person offends us and then repents, we ought to forgive them (Luke 17:3-4). What is the role of repentance in this process? It is not a condition that the person must fulfill to deserve our forgiveness; instead, it is evidence of a person's desire to change. To repent means to change our minds. A changed mind is the first step toward transformation and produces "fruits of repentance" (Luke 3:7-14): evidence in our behavior that we want to replace our selfishness with self-sacrificing love. Changing our minds can be a difficult process because of habitual ways of thinking that are part of our implicit memory and unconscious behavior. Jesus warns us that someone may offend us multiple times in one day and tell us each time they repent. Compassion for their struggle compels us to forgive. In the case of the servant, who choked his fellow servant while demanding repayment of the debt, consequences were appropriate because there was no reason to believe he had changed his mind about his greed.

Forgiveness depends not on the worthiness of the person we are forgiving but on who we want to be in the image of our Father's abundant grace and whether we want to be forgiven. Just as the Father forgives us with the hope that we will be transformed to live in love, we patiently and generously forgive because we hope those who offend us will discover the joy and peace of living in love.

About Raymond

Raymond L. Fox has been teaching about transformation in the image of Jesus for forty-five years, in the U.S. and abroad. He has written four books: *Love God, Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength*, *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*, *The Transformed Church*, and *The Fruit of the Spirit*. His work also includes character counseling and mentoring in juvenile detention facilities. He has degrees in philosophy and education.



Connect: RaymondLFox@thejourneyoftransformation.org

