

Forgiveness: When, What, Why, How...

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Matthew 18: 21-35\*

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*This sermon is influenced greatly by my reading of [Amish Grace: When Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy](#), written by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher.*

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Or in some translations Jesus replies, “70 x 7”.

Hmmm

### **Opening Scene October 2—Amish 9/11**

Do you remember October 2, 2006? It was a Monday, a clear, blue sky, a cloudless day, in Lancaster County, PA; a day that some say very much reminded them of September 11, 2001. In fact, it has been called, by more than one person, the Amish 9/11.

This is the day of the Nickel Mines School Shooting. I’ll spare all of us the grim details, save to say an assailant slayed five and critically injured five others all under the age of 13.

Do you remember how the headlines changed from talking about murder to forgiveness?

Do you remember the media’s confusion as reports went out that the relatives of the Amish children who were shot, were bringing food to the family of the assailant?

Do you remember that over half of the people who attended the assailant’s funeral were Amish?

I’ve spent some time reading a wonderful book about this incident, entitled, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald B Kraybill, Steven Nolt, David Weaver-Zercher, all of whom are scholars who study the Amish. Although they themselves are not Amish, they each have a close tie to the community.

The book, written in three parts describes the events on the day of that shooting, the roots of forgiveness in the Amish Culture and the last part looks at the practice of shunning and excommunication in the Amish world.

It’s an amazing piece that is even-handed and thoughtful and at least for me, extremely helpful in wrestling with the idea and notion of forgiveness.

Take a minute—When was the last time you felt the bottom of someone’s shoe step down on your soul? Does a time or an incident come to you?

Separate, or perhaps linked to that—when was the last time you forgave someone?

For me, it was a bit easier to think of how and when I've been wronged, and I was bit slower on coming up with times when I have forgiven someone. Coming up with defined moments or events where I've been injured or hurt... yup—I have those—times.

When I've let go of those injuries--- times when I have forgiven someone for what they have done—well I'd be fibbing if I said that those moments were as readily at hand.

Because I think this is an extremely difficult and important topic, I'd like to offer some *Who, What, When and, Why's* of forgiveness for you to think about, most which I gleaned from reading this book. Perhaps some of it may be helpful for you.

### **What is Forgiveness?**

So what exactly is forgiveness? What I really liked about this book, *Grace: How Forgiveness transcended tragedy*—is how the authors point out that the Amish differentiate forgiveness from both pardon and reconciliation.

**In forgiveness**, the victim forgoes the right to vengeance. If I forgive you, I give up my need or desire for revenge.

**In pardon**, the offender is released from punishment altogether. If I pardon you, I will actively seek from the ruling bodies that adjudicate such things— to have you released from all punishment.

Whereas, **Reconciliation** is the restoration of a relationship, or the creation of a new relationship between the victim and the offender. When I reconcile with you, both of us are creating a new relationship.

The Amish are clear,

**Reconciliation** is not necessary for forgiveness to take place. Reconciliation does not always happen, because it requires the establishment of trust between two willing parties.

I found differentiating between forgiveness and reconciliation to be incredibly important. I can forgive you, you can forgive me, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you and I will continue on in a relationship of sorts. We might—and that may in fact be a possible and even an ultimate goal—but it is not assumed in that first step of forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't mean a resumption of trust, nor does it mean we put ourselves back into a possible position of harm.

For example, in the instance of domestic abuse, I can forgive the person who abused me, but that doesn't mean I'm going to continue living with that person or stay married to that person.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation.

Another piece about forgiveness—it is not ours to make someone else do. As the Amish parents said, of their children who were in that school house on that ill-fated morning: “We can tell them what forgiveness is and we can offer forgiveness to the assailant’s family, but we cannot make them forgive anyone.”

### **When to Forgive?**

The Amish would say quickly.

### **Why Forgive?**

We forgive, so say the Amish, because of scripture.

Matthew 18—For the Amish, citing today’s scripture, it is pretty clear. They say, “We forgive to be forgiven.” If we don’t forgive, then God won’t forgive us.”

Which is somewhat at odds with some protestant theology that says, “Because God died for our sins, because Jesus died on the cross and has forgiven our sins, we must forgive others.” Personally, the former Irish Catholic in me, likes the Amish twist a bit better. “I forgive, because then God will forgive me.” This take on forgiveness requires some agency from me—it also kind of has a reward, and I’m a big fan of that.

The Amish then point out that this theology is echoed in the Lord’s prayer.”

“Forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive** those who trespass against us...

[Amish History and Culture]

Forgiveness is also embedded in the Amish culture and history.

The Amish are descendants of the Annabaptist movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Annabaptist didn’t think that either Luther or Calvin went far enough in their efforts at reformation of the Roman Catholic Church, and they were not reticent in making their misgivings known. As a result, the Amish ancestors, the Annabaptists became the *persona non grata* of both the original protestant reformers and the Roman Catholic Church. Thus ensuring that they would be prime targets by both sides for martyrdom. A central piece of the Annabaptist’s martyrdom was to do as Jesus did and publicly forgive their persecutors as they were being put to death. Forgiveness is in the Amish DNA.

Why else forgive? This last bit is extremely practical.

Gid, one Amish minister says, “If I hold a grudge for a day, it’s bad. If I hold it for two days, it’s worse. If I hold a grudge for a year, then that man, that person, is controlling my life. So why not just let go of that grudge now?”

“Otherwise,” says Gid, “You live with that grudge forever and it controls you.”

### **So What’s the process for forgiving?**

Psychologist Everett Worthington—identifies two different types of forgiveness—decisional and emotional.

Decisional forgiveness is a personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue.

A Person practicing, “Decisional forgiveness” writes Worthington, “promises not to act in revenge or avoidance, but it doesn’t necessarily make a person less unforgiving [it doesn’t make me more forgiving]. I just don’t act that way.”

“Emotional forgiveness”, says Worthington, “happens when negative emotions—resentment, hostility, and even hatred—are replaced by positive feelings.”

An Amish grandfather of two of the slain little ones, when asked if he had forgiven, said, “Yes—in my heart.” Said the minister, Gid, “That family will have to struggle with the forgiveness issue for a long time, forgiving again and again and accepting the loss of those children again and again.”

Regardless of how many times you forgive, forgiveness needs to be practiced over and over, again and again.

And that’s when it came to me! Forgiveness is like a muscle—that we can train and build... Just like a muscle that has:

*Fast twitch*, powerful fibers, that twitch quickly and provide short bursts of power and strength, there are also

*Slow twitch fibers*, which take awhile to contract. These are the muscle fibers needed for endurance. Forgiveness is made up of both of these metaphorical muscle fibers.

The fast twitch fibers are the ones we activate when we move toward decisional forgiveness, the slow twitch fibers are the ones we use as we possibly make our way to emotional forgiveness.

**Forgiveness then, is a short-term act and a long-term process, and the two are connected.**

The initial decision to forgive may spark the [eventual] emotional long-term change of heart.

**And Lastly:**

The Director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, Fred Luskin, writes that forgiveness means, “Becoming a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell of your life.”

Becoming a hero instead of a victim, I like that. When I forgive, I become the hero instead of the victim.

Forgiveness means... hmhhh.

Forgiveness means:

I give up the right for revenge or recompense.

It doesn't always lead to reconciliation.

It's hard work that can begin with a quick action and can continue with a long process of change.

It's an act that I can practice and train up in my soul.

Creating the *muscle of forgiveness*, will be less work than being a victim and being held hostage to the grudges I cannot bear to relinquish.

The Amish have a 300-year cultural head start on us with a community that reinforces this practice. And I think that's something that we can learn from them. Like those barn raising parties, it all seems to go quicker if we give each other a hand.

Forgiveness is something we might consider practicing. And according to Jesus, 70 x 7 times.

Amen.