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Peace Committee

Peace Essay

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Forgiveness: The Peacemaker's Alternative to Vengeance

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”¹ God calls His people to promote peace. God's peace includes, not only abstaining from violence, but also includes harmony in human relations. In relationships, humans hurt each other. Learning to respond to inevitable hurt in ways that do not add to the harm is a key to peace in human relationships. In order to understand the human potential for peace, we must explore forgiveness as the alternative response to vengeance.

Revenge, or vengeance, is defined as the infliction of punishment in return for injury or insult.² The thirst for vengeance is timeless. It is as old as the eyes and teeth traded in the Bible, and as fresh as the raid that took the life of Osama bin Laden.³ The desire for revenge is part of our human nature. A century of research in both the social and biological sciences reveals the unfortunate truth that the desire for revenge is normal. Every human being on the planet has the biological capacity for it.⁴ When one feels humiliated, a loss of dignity or honor, or intense shame or anger, a yearning for revenge often follows. Revenge is closely tied to the powerful need to overcome shame and dishonor. However, recent studies have discovered that revenge fails to fulfill its satisfying expectations. Behavioral scientists have observed that instead of

¹ Matthew 5:9 NIV

² “Revenge.” Def 1. Webster's New College Dictionary, Third Edition. 2008. Print.

³ Jaffe, Eric, *The Complicated Psychology of Revenge*. The Observer. 2011.

⁴ McCullough, Michael E. "The Forgiveness Instinct." *The Forgiveness Instinct*. The Greater Good, 1 Mar. 2008.

eliminating hostility, revenge can prolong the unpleasantness of the offense, and that bringing harm upon an offender is not sufficient to satisfy a person's vengeful spirit.⁵

So, as peacemakers, what should we do in response to hurtful actions? Forgiveness is the ultimate Christian response to harm doing. "Forgiveness is the act of consciously deciding to let go of resentment or vengeance toward another individual who has harmed you in some way".⁶ When you forgive, you make the choice to give up your desire for revenge.

Forgiving has been shown to lead to physical health benefits. According to a 2001 study in the *Journal of Psychological Science*, not forgiving someone is associated with anger, sadness, and feelings of not being in control. This study showed that people who held on to a grudge had higher face muscle tension, heart rate, blood pressure, and fatigue. Health benefits of forgiveness stem largely from its ability to reduce feelings of tension, anger, and depression. Reducing these feelings results in lower blood pressure, better sleep, and even a stronger immune system.⁷ In addition to the many health benefits of forgiveness, there is an even bigger reason to forgive: Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate role model. He is perfect, because he is the son of God. Therefore, we are called to adopt His teachings and live like Him. As peacemakers, we must also remember Ephesians 2:14: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility"⁸ When we are striving to promote peace, Jesus is our example of perfect peace. With this in mind, we can assume that the way Jesus taught, and lived out the concept of forgiveness is how we should as well. Even as he was beaten, whipped, and hung on the cross he responded with non-violence and even forgiveness.

⁵ Jaffe, Eric, *The Complicated Psychology of Revenge*. The Observer. 2011.

⁶ Chan Amanda, "8 Ways Forgiveness is Good for Your Health," Huffington Post, October 25, 2014, under "Healthy Living," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/25/forgiveness-health-benefits_n_6029736.html

⁷ Chan Amanda, "8 Ways Forgiveness is Good for Your Health"

⁸ Ephesians 2:14 NIV

With his last breath he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...”⁹ Jesus is the reason we can be forgiven and He is the reason we can forgive others. We all make mistakes and because of Jesus, we are forgiven. Because of His example, we know how to respond to others.

There are many examples of the teachings of forgiveness in the Bible. In Matthew, Peter asks: “How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” Jesus responds: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”.¹⁰ He continues by telling the parable of a servant whose debt was forgiven by the king, but he would not forgive his neighbor’s debts. This parable teaches us that God’s forgiveness of our sins should motivate us to forgive those who sin against us. Another example comes from the book of Genesis. The jealousy of Joseph's brothers drives them to sell him into slavery. Years later, when they come to him for relief from famine, Joseph has mercy on and forgives his brothers. This story is another example of mercy in the Bible that can teach us the importance of forgiveness.

Another extraordinary example of forgiveness took place on October 2, 2006 when Charlie Roberts walked into an Amish school house and shot and killed ten young Amish girls. That same day, a grandfather of one of the girls that was shot expressed forgiveness towards the killer. In the midst of their grief, the Amish community reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer’s family. When Charlie Robert’s funeral came around, the Amish mourners surpassed the non-Amish mourners in attendance. This incredible instance of public forgiveness was an embodiment of Paul’s message in Colossians. “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you”.¹¹

⁹ Luke 23:34 NIV

¹⁰ Matthew 18:21-22 NIV

¹¹ Colossians 3:13 NIV

It is also important to consider how observers of the relationship are affected by forgiveness. In each of these examples, someone made the decision to forgive. By choosing to forgive, they infused their lives, and the lives of those around them, with an element of peace. When the Amish chose to forgive their perpetrator, and even comfort his family, they were proclaiming the message of Jesus. We can all set an example to believers and nonbelievers. By forgiving, we can inspire others to forgive and draw people to the gospel of Jesus.

Romans 12:17-19 is central to the overall theme of letting go of revenge and replacing it with forgiveness.

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as long as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge, I will repay.”¹²

This verse tells us that it is not our responsibility to make an offender pay for what they have done. We must trust that God will be the judge of our offenders.

Instances of forgiveness in the Bible ensure that forgiveness is to be a practice of all Christians. While the desire for revenge is strong and forgiveness is not easy, it is an important part of peacemaking.

¹² Romans 12:17-19 NIV

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