



## Forgiveness: Sending Away Self-Protectiveness

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The word forgive means to “send away.” If we’re to forgive others as God forgives us we have to send away what God sends away: hate, self-protectiveness, and vengeance. Sending away hate and substituting love, while a difficult choice, nonetheless makes sense. But sending away self-protectiveness and substituting vulnerability? That seems not only dangerous but stupid.

You and I may be willing to send away hate and replace it with love. We may even be willing to send away vengeance (it does, after all, make us look bad). But when we even think about sending away self-protectiveness and becoming vulnerable most of us recoil. I’m thankful God doesn’t imitate our fearful avoidance. For, unlike most of us, God is willing to risk vulnerability. He demonstrated it most vividly on the cross.

### **Forgiveness Is Costly**

We tend to think of God as invulnerable rather than vulnerable. If *we* had all power, all knowledge, and could be everywhere and anywhere we wanted, we certainly would think ourselves invulnerable. And so God is ... unless He chooses otherwise. Which He did.

Jesus, talking about the kingdom of heaven, tells His disciples about two men, each of whom sold all that he had to buy something he treasured. (See Matthew 13:44-46.) Jesus’ stories remind me of what He Himself did. He paid with His life to buy what He treasures: us ... you and me. Take a moment and let this sink in. God gave everything He had to buy us for Himself. We have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). Forgiveness cost the Lord incalculably. He chose to be vulnerable to humiliation, cruelty, and pain. Why did He pay such a price? Because He treasures us. He treasures us even when we wrong Him. He is willing to suffer for our sake. And it costs Him dearly.

How about us? If you’re anything like me (and you are) you’re inclined to respond in ways that protect you from suffering. Peter counters our reflexive self-protectiveness by urging us to be willing to suffer for the benefit of others. He’s not talking about unnecessary suffering (the kind that follows our bad choices); he’s not recommending unwise suffering (suffering without purpose); he’s not advocating choice-less suffering (victimization), and he’s not promoting suffering for its own sake (that’s masochism). But he is saying that some suffering produces benefits that are worth the price.

## **Sometimes Suffering Isn't Stupid**

Look at 1 Peter 2:19-24.

*<sup>19</sup>For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. <sup>21</sup>For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, <sup>22</sup>who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; <sup>23</sup>and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; <sup>24</sup>and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.*

Notice Peter's conclusion: *by His wounds you were healed*. That's quite a concept. Look at the connections: Jesus leaves us an example for us to follow in His footsteps ... His footsteps lead to His wounds ... His wounds provide healing for others. Peter is saying that our wounds can serve the same purpose. Righteous wounds – God's and ours – can provide for the healing of others. This is not stupid suffering, but suffering with meaning and purpose.

## **Sometimes Danger Isn't Dangerous**

Vulnerably sending away self-protectiveness carries huge risks – unless we have a God that will stop things from going too far. We do. God puts restraints on danger. That fact, if we believe it, gives us the courage to suffer for the benefit of others.

I'm reluctant to say this next part and need to say it most carefully. There are times when sending away self-protectiveness leads to physical hurt, even death. Martyrs (like Stephen) and missionaries (from John the Baptist to Jim Elliott) have died obeying the Lord. Christians in current times have been beaten and killed for their faith. Does this mean we routinely and passively submit to viciousness? No. Of course not. Escaping a violent situation may limit the perpetrator's sin, expose their wrong, and protect others from harm. We are not to sign up for pain. I'm not even suggesting that. More importantly, God is not suggesting that. But God does make clear that righteous vulnerability sometimes costs. At times the cost is staggeringly high.

Yet, contrary to our fears, time and time again God guarantees and demonstrates that each person who has chosen His protection will never experience suffering that will not work for good. Never. God limits evil. (Ask Job.) Suffering is real ... but disaster is an illusion. (Zephaniah 3:17). Nothing goes so far that it can't be redeemed (Genesis 3). Deathly shadows that darken the air around us cannot drive God from our side or usurp His control (Psalm 23:4). God surrounds us with His shield (Psalm 5:12). The Lord alone causes us to dwell in safety (Psalm 4:8). Vulnerability, though it may be costly, isn't dangerous. Jesus was very familiar with sending away self-protectiveness and replacing it with vulnerability. He knew about paying the price instead of making another pay. He chose to be vulnerable to the Father's will. Jesus did not seek suffering – He sought healing. We do well to follow His example.

## A Few Questions

Forgiveness is personally costly. Think of someone who has wronged you or continues to wrong you.

- What would it cost you to send away self-protectiveness? That is, what would you lose if you forgave this person? (Reputation? A sense of power? The approval of others?)
- Would you be willing to suffer for their benefit? That is, are you willing to pay the price? (To seem stupid? To look weak? To be misunderstood? To be demeaned or shut out or judged or scorned? To suffer deprivation?)
- Would you be willing to ask the Lord to teach you to be wisely vulnerable?
- Do you trust that God won't let things go "too far"?

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