

GROWING Together

Is God's forgiveness an easy way out?

In the midst of brokenness, fault, and sin we turn to God to receive forgiveness. Perhaps like me you are faced with a suspicion: do we make selfish use of God's forgiveness? Do we use the promise of forgiveness as an escape from our real responsibilities?

"Forgive me!"

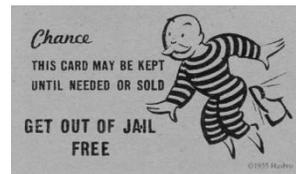
We can recognize this misuse of forgiveness in common ways of speaking: "Well, *forgive me!*" Perhaps we can hear the dismissive tone in that response; recognizing a fault is simply a minor detail before getting back to business. But the same words can also have a pleading, almost commanding tone. The intention there is to make sure peace and pardon are given to the speaker. We can see why these calls for forgiveness fall flat: their intention is self-referential. Ears, eyes, and heart are not opened to what the other person says.

Confession or Monologue?

It is the same when our confession of sin becomes entirely routine: we are really speaking to ourselves, closing down the dialogue with God. We may mention greed and racism in our confession, along with pride, anger, and lust, but we do so knowing in advance that absolution will be given. If so, we remain in a dead cycle within ourselves: we *know* we are forgiven, and we *know* we have sinned, and that knowledge is enough.

The Jail of Pride

When we treat forgiveness as a free pass to avoid trouble, we avoid reality. This is true whether it is God's forgiveness we take for granted or another person's. In other words, if we use forgiveness as a "get out of jail free card" we simply end up back



in a jail of our own making. That jail may be an addiction, or it may be any emotion or pattern of behaviour. It may be overwork that disconnects us from loved ones. It may be an ungratified desire that turns to bitter poison in the heart. The jail encloses others with us. And, if we make apologies only to protect our pride, without opening the gates to change, we end up with no one to apologize to: we isolate further our companions and neighbours, until we are alone with God.



So it is God who finally confronts us. Perhaps through the voice of hurt loved ones who will endure us no longer. With the slam of a door, or the sound of footsteps walking away in the snow. With the dull ache of regret that reverberates through a whole life. God confronts us with consequences that utterly refuse to flatter our pride. But God's word holds the promise of freeing us from that very pride.

You are Forgiven: Stand up and Walk

Reflecting on the misuse of forgiveness helps us see the goodness of God's forgiveness: for if a misused forgiveness is one that claims a free escape, God's forgiveness is one that freely calls us to God's own service, to discipleship. When we hear the words that Jesus Christ has forgiven us, we hear that he has taken us, even with our guilt and regret, to walk with him as his disciples. "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?" (Luke 5:23) To hear "you are forgiven" and "stand up and walk" at the same time is to hear that Jesus claims us as his own. His voice empowers us to stand up and walk away from fear, guilt and pride: it is this new-found freedom in Christ that empowers us as forgiven disciples to turn honestly to the work of amending our lives.

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