

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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Forgiveness and Trust

This week, we consider the relationship between forgiveness and trust: Does forgiving a person mean that I have to trust that person as though they had never sinned against me? This is a matter that can be very confusing to many Christians. In fact, the confusion starts very early in our development. Here's a hypothetical situation:

Picture yourself as a toddler in nursery – be it a day-care setting or a church setting, etc. You are playing with a stuffed toy. Meanwhile, a few feet away, there is little Johnny – and little Johnny wants your stuffed toy. So little Johnny just comes over and takes your stuffed toy – and if he has to push you down to wrestle it away from you, he will. The nursery coordinator responds immediately, insisting 1) that Johnny give back the stuff toy, 2) that Johnny say to you 'I'm sorry' and 3) that you say 'I forgive you, Johnny'.

So, what's the problem? The problem is that, even as a three-year-old, you somehow have a pretty good idea that Johnny is not sorry! He just happened to get caught, but if he can get away with it again, he will. Meanwhile, in your impressionable heart, you try to respond to what the coordinator is telling you to do (forgive Johnny and act like everything is okay), but now, especially now, you're not too sure about Johnny and his intentions. This is a fascinating dilemma that is brought on, in part, by the person in charge of the nursery who is trying to force reconciliation and trust.

So, guess what happens when we grow up to be adults? In a way, it's actually quite similar, except that it just gets that much more complicated. Sin takes on vastly different and insidious forms and what is at stake are things immensely greater than a stuffed toy. The irony is that the 'Christian' idea of reconciliation and trust can be just as forced, contrived and hollow as it was in the aforementioned nursery story.

In the last week, for example, there has been a plethora of news coverage featuring Jenny Sanford, the wife of South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford and author of the book "Staying True" which just came out last week. The book, which I have not read (and don't know that I ever will read), details the Sanfords' marriage and Gov. Sanford's now infamous hiking trip on the Appalachian Trail... 'infamous' mainly because it didn't take place. The hiking trip was a fabricated story designed to cover Gov. Sanford's visit with another woman in South America).

This entire Jenny Sanford story and book tour intrigues me for two reasons: 1) I'm not sure how such an 'unveiling' truly helps Ms. Sanford to forgive – the publicity seems to be a means of revenge (which Gov. Sanford may well deserve, but how is that wise or helpful to Ms. Sanford or her children?); and 2) Ms. Sanford's story is similar to that of so many enabling women in marriage relationships marked by infidelity.

In this past Sunday's Cincinnati Enquirer, syndicated columnist Ruth Marcus writes, "*The book is replete with instances of Jenny-as-doormat, from the very start of their relationship and continuing, excruciatingly, months after her discovery of his affair.*" Marcus concludes with this, "*So the disturbing question about Jenny Sanford remains: Why would a woman so obviously smart, well-educated, successful and attractive allow herself to be treated so badly for so long?*"

What particularly caught my attention in Marcus' editorial, though, was when she referred to a part of Sanford's book talking about this matter: "*After one of the all-too-rare pre-affair moments in which Jenny gets angry, Mark enlists leaders of a congressional Christian fellowship to talk her down.*" These 'leaders' told Mrs. Sanford that "*staying angry with Mark was not an option. If I wanted to heal the relationship, I had to open my heart and be kind, even if Mark was in the wrong.*"¹

Translation: Ms. Sanford was getting 'Christian' advice to trust her husband to a much greater extent than her husband deserved being trusted. Ms. Sanford was being encouraged (in a supposedly Christian way) toward reconciliation. Others encouraged her to *stand by her man* when 'her man' wasn't interested in true reconciliation, when her man wasn't truly interested in being 'her man'.

In the case of adultery, Jesus has noted that marital unfaithfulness is Biblical grounds for the offended spouse to divorce their unfaithful spouse (see Matthew 5, Matthew 19). Jesus is NOT commanding the offended spouse to divorce, mind you, but the word of God does give such freedom (to divorce and remarry) to one so wounded. That, in itself, should tell us that, if adultery/marital unfaithfulness is such a trust-breaker that the offended spouse is no longer bound to the relationship (if he/she chooses not to be), then the offended spouse is not required to trust the offending spouse, either. Forgiveness on the part of the offended spouse is important and necessary (if for nothing else, than for the offended spouse's own heart), but trust is not required.

To put this in another light, over a decade ago, I remember being in another country and listening to an adult woman telling me about her becoming, in her childhood, a victim of sexual abuse – by a relative. She talked about what a difficult matter it was for her to go to her small hometown and see this relative, either in marketplaces or, worse, at family reunions. Here again, is a situation where God calls the wounded person, in her heart, to forgive, but there should not be the expectation of a chummy, "as if it never happened" type of reconciled relationship with her relative.

But what about the situation where one party to a marriage commits adultery and the offended spouse desires to stay faithful in the hopes of reconciling the marriage relationship? By God's grace, such healing and reconciliation can happen, but such a process takes time – time for genuine forgiveness to truly take place, and time for genuine trust to be *earned* again. It can happen, but it won't happen over night, and the offended party should never be pushed prematurely toward trusting when that trust was so egregiously damaged.

These are heavy examples, but sometimes, that's precisely the hard ground from which the seeds of forgiveness must grow.

¹ Marcus, Ruth, "*Jenny Sanford should have dumped that jerk long ago*", Cincinnati Enquirer, February 8, 2010 (Editorial page).

So, let's end this introspection with an example that is, hopefully, much closer to home for most folks. Let's say that you see that your child has a penchant for lying. You love your child unconditionally, but you also know, as a responsible parent, that you ought not to have any delusions about your child's 'potential' to be dishonest. You're committed to your child. You discipline your child. You forgive your child, but, if you are astute about the sinfulness of your child's heart (not to mention your disciplinary responsibility as a parent), then you know very well that you had better not unreservedly trust your children! That is parental love in action – but it is also a picture of God's love toward us – knowing our heart and what evil we are capable of, but loving us unconditionally and, therefore, choosing not to hold our sins against us. It is a picture of how God mercifully, by His word and His Spirit, leads us to repentance.

For the one sinned against, forgiveness is ultimately a matter between the offended party and God. The offended party offers forgiveness to the offender - through the strength that God provides, independent of the offender's actions.

Trust, on the other hand, is quite dependent upon the offender. The offender has to earn back the trust of the offended. In some cases, trust may never be regained and the one who is sinned against is not obligated to trust. God doesn't expect us to trust a human being when everything we see and sense tells us we should not trust. Forgiveness, on the other hand, doesn't work that way. God expects us to forgive and, furthermore, God expects us to depend upon Him for the gospel perspective, the grace and the strength, to offer, unconditionally, that forgiveness to those who have wounded us.