

Question: Some people seem to be ready to forgive too quickly those who invade schools and kill our children. Does Jesus really expect that kind of forgiveness?

History is filled with heinous crimes, but few are more horrifying than the murders of totally innocent children that have occurred in recent years. The shock and grief of these families, especially the surviving children who witnessed the horror, is beyond our ability to comprehend unless we have faced a similar tragedy. With a strong sense of outrage, the heart cries for justice, which certainly makes it difficult for us to believe anyone could forgive such crimes. However, I don't believe I've ever seen a better example of what Jesus taught about forgiveness than that demonstrated by the Amish families of Pennsylvania back in 2006.

A deep sense of the power of Christ's death on the cross to atone for sin demands that we forgive just as we have been forgiven. It is the assurance that the death of Christ could atone for even the worst of sinners that gives confidence that our sins can be forgiven. For example, the apostle Paul stated that the law was not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels including murderers (1 Timothy 1:9). Of himself, Paul said: "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1Tim.1:13). But he then added: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16 NIV).

We should also keep in mind that hostility only creates more hostility while the offer of forgiveness breaks the evil cycle. The offer of forgiveness can be a powerful motivation for changing attitudes as well as actions. In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancy tells about some amazing transformations in the life of Larry Trapp, a grand dragon of the KKK who hated and wanted to kill African-Americans and Jews. But when a Jewish family took care of him in a serious illness, his life was changed; and he asked forgiveness publicly. Romans 2:4 asks: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" Of course, a sinner cannot benefit from any forgiveness apart from a deep sense of sorrow for his sin and repentance (Luke 17:3-5; Acts 17:30-

31); but we are also reminded that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). It is easier to ask forgiveness of one who wants to forgive you.

The Amish families of Nichol Mines, PA, understood that only through forgiveness could they move beyond the hurt. If we allow an injury to always remain fresh in our hearts, the emotional pain, bitterness and hatred can continually haunt us (Ephesians 4:31-32). Sometimes it leads a person to the tragic sin of attempting to take revenge into his own hands instead of leaving it to the Lord (Romans 12:19-21). This kind of turmoil working inwardly can also damage our physical health. Even if the criminal does not repent and accept our forgiveness, we should forgive in our hearts for our own sakes.

Forgiveness is a very complicated matter. Even these reasons to forgive do not make it easy. God our Father understands the difficulty because he forgave those who killed his own beloved Son on the cross. Only a deep faith in our Lord Jesus Christ could have empowered the kind of forgiveness witnessed in the Amish families and in others who have faced this situation. But this kind of forgiveness can bring an incomparable sense of peace with God, self and others.

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