

Forgiveness

It was Father's Day, June 16, 1996. 25 year old Shannon Bigger had just arrived at her Silver Spring, Maryland apartment. Anthony Robinson had been waiting for this. As Shannon entered her apartment, Anthony rushed in behind, gaged her, tied her to her bed, and heartlessly raped and murdered her. Thanks to surveillance tape and witnesses, Anthony was taken into custody quickly. At the sentencing trial, when the State's attorney made his summary statement to the judge, he concluded by pointing to Anthony and saying, "This man who committed this heinous crime, deserves to spend the rest of his life in his own private **hell!**" With that, Anthony raised his head, glared at the attorney and gave him the finger. He had no remorse at all.

I can't even imagine what Shannon's parents, Darold & Barbara Bigger went through. Could you forgive Anthony for doing this to your daughter? This devastated the lives of Darold, his family, and their loved ones.

It was a year later when something amazing happened during a church service. The scripture reading for that day was [John 13:35](#) "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." This struck Darold at the core of his being, realizing his own lack. Then he remembered [Matthew 5:44](#), "I say unto you," says Jesus, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;" Darold was devastated because he knew that he wasn't able to do that. He said that he never felt so distant from God as he did during that church service.

"At the core of who I am," Darold said, "I was an angry, cynical, vengeance-filled human being." This pastor and college religion professor hit bottom that day. He realized his powerlessness over the sin that dwelt within him. But he loved God and trusted Him. [Romans 5:8](#) came to mind: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." He knew that this text applied to him -- a cynical, rage-filled man. It hit him like a ton of bricks that this part of himself -- this part that Darold hated so much was exactly what Christ died for.

It seems to me that in this process, Darold went through the three most important steps that Christians pass through time and time again:

1. He realized his powerlessness over those sins that so easily beset him.
2. He had a deep, abiding trust in God.
3. He gave up on his own efforts and submitted to the will of God.

Whatever we are struggling with, whether it be a bad habit, lack of forgiveness, or our lack of complete willingness to follow the Lamb of God wherever He leads, our willpower won't always give us the desired results. However, I am of the conviction that **our willpower is ALWAYS sufficient** to submit ourselves to God whenever He calls to our heart. When we do this, God makes possible whatever He calls us to do. Jesus said, "With men this is impossible; but with God, all things are possible!" -[Matthew 19:26](#)

Well, the church service was wasn't over yet, when Darold realized that the knot in his stomach -- his lack of forgiveness -- the resentment and condemnation he held toward Anthony -- all of it was gone. His whole body was relaxed. I'm pretty he sure gained that "Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" as Paul referred to in [Romans 5:1](#).

"It taught me", said Darold, "that forgiveness was not something that I accomplished but it was a gift that God gave to me." He said, "It's not something I do for myself but what's been done for me that changes me.... Yes," he said, "I have forgiven Anthony and have repeatedly forgiven him every time it comes up again. This is not an event. It is a process.... Each time it resurfaces, we repeat the process.... Forgiveness that comes from God to us, empowers us to share that with other people. It lets us let go of our hurts.... To be forgiven by a good God changes everything for me. I am better able to share the gift of forgiveness with other people.... This is a story about God and what God has done for us and can do through all of us as a human family..." End quote from Darold Bigger.

Darold was in Washington DC at an office just across the street when the plane attacked the Pentagon on Sept 11, 2001. As a Navy chaplain, and because of his own experience in the progressive work of forgiveness and sanctification, he effectively spent that day and the days following ministering to those who were affected. He was later assigned to the World Trade Center site in New York City where he spent time ministering to those on the clean up and recovery crew after the attack. He had planned to return home on Sept 12, but the work was so great that he didn't leave New York until January.

Darold Bigger is a pastor, professor of Social Work and Religion, at Walla Walla University and a retired US Navy Rear Admiral after serving as a reserve component chaplain. At his retirement, he received the US Navy's highest noncombat award, the Distinguished Service Medal.

Here is an interesting quote from the book *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*:

The Father's presence encircled Christ, and nothing befell Him but that which infinite love permitted for the blessing of the world. Here was His source of comfort, and it is for us. He who is imbued with the Spirit of Christ abides in Christ. The blow that is aimed at him falls upon the Saviour, who surrounds him with His presence. Whatever comes to him comes from Christ. He has no need to resist evil, for Christ is his defense. Nothing can touch him except by our Lord's permission and 'all things' that are permitted 'work together for good to them that love God.' [Romans 8:28](#). - MB 71.2 (Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing)

One time many years ago, when I used this quote in sermon, I was later challenged by a husband and wife who were very close to the Shannon Bigger tragedy. They knew the story well. They contended that it could NOT be true that nothing touched Shannon "except by our Lord's permission and 'all things' that are permitted 'work together for good to them that love God'" as was claimed in this quote. I did not have a good answer for them and I'm not sure I do now, but I have some ideas...

It is possible that God could have prevented Shannon from feeling the pain of her last torturous moments of life. I've heard that God did that for at least some martyrs that were burned at the stake. Whether He did that for Shannon, or not, we won't know in this life. Did **anything** good come out of this horrible experience? Let's consider some outcomes.

1. I believe the next thing Shannon will be conscious of, is when Jesus will raise her to newness of life -- everlasting life -- when he comes back in the clouds of heaven! In death, she has been spared a long life in a sinful world. She has been spared the time of trouble that some of us may soon face.
2. Darold, Shannon's father, through his sufferings, has witnessed to thousands who may have otherwise never heard the good news of forgiveness and salvation. I suspect that his promotion to Rear Admiral and being awarded the Distinguished Service Medal had something to do with his effectiveness in ministering to others who have experienced deep personal loss.

Now, God didn't cause Shannon's tortuous death. God is, however, ready, willing, and well-able to bring good out of what satan meant for evil.

Yes, friends, I believe it true that " 'all things' that are permitted 'work together for good to them that love God.' " I think that's why both Paul and James encouraged us to be joyful when we are confronted with tribulations and temptations. For, when our faith is tried and we hold on to, and submit to Jesus, our faith is strengthened, our patience grows, our character becomes more and more like Jesus. This is the process of sanctification -- , "**the progressive work of a lifetime**"(SM3, p. 202.3). This is about learning to let go of our own autonomy and depending more and more upon the God of our salvation. One of my favorite authors put it this way,

"To have the religion of Christ means that you have absolutely surrendered your all to God and consented to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit moral power will be given you and not only will you have your former entrusted talents for the service of God but their efficiency will be greatly multiplied. The surrender of all our powers to God greatly simplifies the problem of life. It weakens and cuts short a thousand struggles with the passions of the natural heart." -MYP 30.2 (Messages to Young People)

What does it mean for God to forgive my sins? He will never think of them again ([Isaiah 43:25](#)). He will make them as white as snow/wool ([Isaiah 1:18](#)). He will trample my sins under His feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean ([Micah 7:19](#)). He removes our sin from us as far as the east is from the

west ([Psalm 103:12](#)). He removes all condemnation toward me ([John 8:10-11](#) & [Romans 8:1](#)). Does God have amnesia? Does he condemn me? Or, does he accept me just the way I am?

What are the conditions to receive and to keep God's forgiveness?

1. **Confession** ([1 John 1:9](#)).
2. **Repentance** – a sorrow for sin and a turning away from it ([Isaiah 1:15-20](#) & [Ezekiel 18:21-24](#)).
3. **Forgive others** ([Mt 6:12,14-15](#) & [Mt 18:21-35](#)).
4. Should I have condemnation, amnesia, or acceptance of those who offend me?

I do my best to meet all those conditions, but you don't understand just how horrible my sins have been. Is there any hope for me? God's (10 Commandment) law was given so that I could see my sinfulness. But as I sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant ([Romans 5:20](#)). Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in [your] weakness" ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)). If I humbly confess my sin to God, is there any sin too hideous for Him to forgive?

I am sorry for my sins, but how do I overcome those evil desires (temptations) when they keep coming back? Recognizing my own powerlessness ([Matthew 26:41](#)) and God's loving desire to help me ([Philippians 2:13](#)), I pray simply, "Lord, I can't..., You can..., Please do..." Even though my will power is **NEVER** strong enough to resist every temptation that comes to me. My willpower is **ALWAYS** strong enough to **CHOOSE TO SERVE GOD** whenever I am tempted. Then He will work in me to will and to do of His good pleasure ([Philippians 2:13](#)). [More details about the power of the will](#). The intensity and frequency of the temptation progressively decreases with the practice of this principle. See my study on [Mike & Blind Bart](#) ([Mark 10:46-52](#)) and Saul ([Acts 9:6](#)).

How do I forgive, when I FEEL those old resentments keep coming back? This is temptation from an evil angel. The answer is the same as how to overcome the temptation of evil desires, as we mentioned above.

Forgiveness DOES NOT: Excuse sin; Make wrong right; Mandate reconciliation ([Romans 12:18](#)); Restore trust (especially of myself).

Forgiveness DOES: confront, name, and deal with the reality of the offense; free me from the past.

Forgiveness IS a healing gift from God: Spiritually, emotionally, and physically. It is the pathway to freedom and peace.

Results of Un-Forgiveness: Anger (raises blood pressure), resentment (re-feel over and over again), and condemnation. All of these can result in an elevated risk of heart disease. **"You can't swallow the poison pill of un-forgiveness and expect someone else to die!"** –Dick Tibbits

"Reframing": take an offense and look at it from a different perspective. Example: When Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" ([Luke 23:34](#)) He didn't take the offense personally.

You can either, complain and blame, OR, you can forgive and live! –Dick Tibbits

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, mercy, kindness, humbleness, meekness, longsuffering... forgiving one another... as Christ forgave you..." ([Colossians 3:12-13](#)). *"When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too"* ([Mark 11:25](#)). "For my own sake", I will forgive! ([Isaiah 43:25](#)).

Forgiveness is a process. It often takes time, and it doesn't mean forgetting that wrong was done. I think it is more about allowing for other people's mistakes just as we would like others to allow for our mistakes. Hmm... That sounds a lot like the Golden Rule, from a different perspective. Maybe we should have a Golden Rule of Forgiveness: **"Forgive others, as you would have them forgive you"**.