

Thoughts on Forgiveness, Acceptance and Consequences.

Forgiveness – Difficult and Challenging

We all are familiar with the responsibility we have to forgive others and how difficult and challenging this can be.

We can understand what is expected of us and perhaps grasp a little of the concept of the Father's abundant grace towards us in Christ Jesus and to know our responsibilities of reflecting this grace towards others.

We are familiar with the teaching of Jesus in the parables of the prodigal son - where the Father welcomed back the lost son in contrast to the attitude of the elder brother- and the unjust steward who failed to show the same compassion to his fellow servant that had been shown to him.

The logic and rationale of this is clear.

Perhaps there is doubt in our minds and we judge that the other is not truly repentant. Is our human judgement a condition of forgiveness?

So why do we find it so difficult to accept and show grace to others?

Is there something of our nature that can overrule that logic part of our minds which knows the spiritual principles?

Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul is thinking when he writes:

*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
Romans 7:14-15 ESV*

He calls it "the flesh". We could also refer to it as our emotions or feelings. These cannot be switched on or off at will and so often control our decisions and actions.

We think of the two incidents in the Apostle Paul's life which record his anger with the apostle Peter and with Barnabas. I wonder if this is to what he is referring when he says he does the very thing he hates.

Our rational mind demands that we try to manage these feelings but so often they can rule our choices and decisions.

Where is grace and forgiveness in all this?

Let us look at two cases as examples. The names are changed for confidentiality.

Andy worked long days and was busy most evenings on his computer preparing for speaking appointments. Their two young children were very demanding and Lizzie was exhausted and admitted to being depressed and lonely. She welcomed the opportunities to keep in touch with her friends on Facebook. Without realising the possible implications, she made contact with an old school friend on Friends Reunited and enjoyed the friendly chats and catching up with news. He was a good listener and it wasn't long before she was sharing with him how unhappy she was. He made her feel good and she began to look forward to his texts and phone calls. Over six months she became increasingly emotionally attached to him.

Then one day Andy read the texts on her phone. She was astonished and frightened by his reaction. After all there was nothing physical in this relationship so it wasn't an affair as he called it was it?

But it was an affair because this third person had emotionally become part of her relationship with Andy.

Andy and Lizzie did not want to lose what they had and went for couple counselling. This helped them to realise how each had been neglecting the other and ignoring each other's needs. So they

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vowed to work together; to forgive each other and to show how special and valued their relationship meant to each other.

Logically and rationally they were in the same place and knowing how they wanted to be. Forgiveness formed an essential part of the future.

But emotionally.... Lizzie still felt the loss of her Facebook friend and Andy's trust in Lizzie had been seriously damaged. These were the consequences of what had happened. It could be said that their old relationship was broken and they would never be able to get back to what they had: they are now in a new different relationship built on the experiences they had shared. Perhaps a better relationship.

They both accept what has happened but the consequences live with them.

John, a caring husband, loved his wife Kate and children. Then he lost his job and he became morose and depressed. He started to drink and when drunk one night in his anger about his life, he physically abused Kate in front of the children. She was injured and the police were involved. He was desperately sorry and vowed it would never happen again. But it did and increasingly frequently with the result that Kate left him taking the children with her.

Her church was involved caring and supporting and doing their best to help in a tragic situation.

A faithful woman, Kate was conscious of her responsibilities and the vows she had made but she had to weigh up safety of herself and her children.

Where is grace and forgiveness in all this?

"I have forgiven him and do so continually to the best of my ability but I cannot live with him. We are on reasonable terms and share support for the children but others don't seem to understand why we can't get back together again.

But I can't just forget what has happened, nor pretend the past can be just ignored.

Emotionally I'm scarred by what has happened and my feelings of fear and disgust overwhelm me."

The consequences of the past continue in the present and future. John cannot change these however much he feels he should be given a fresh start.

I suppose that is the difference between divine grace which in Christ presents us faultless before the Father's throne and human frailty that carries emotional memories which perhaps only prayer and time will heal.

We may be seeking forgiveness from others. It may well be granted and we may expect to be accepted as if the past never happened - but emotions and feelings can't be just switched off. There may be consequences of our past behaviour which will live with us still.

And those of us who have offered forgiveness may still carry with us the hurt and disappointment of past experience which cannot be forgotten however much we wish we could.

So let's acknowledge human weakness, offer forgiveness but understand that acceptance will so often be marred by consequences.

And thank God for his unconditional grace that whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

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