 Copyright © 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University

Forgiveness as a Character Trait

BY ROBERT C. ROBERTS

How do forgiving people 'see' those who have wronged them? Do forgiving persons require repentance? Are they moved by the wrongdoer's excuses or suffering? What relationship do they see themselves sharing with their offenders? Though there is no simple recipe for forgiveness, we can learn how to forgive—by coming to see offenders the way forgiving people do, with "eyes of the heart".

An eye for beauty is a precious thing, and we do well to spend some time and energy on training others and ourselves aesthetically. But even more important is an eye for people. Here too is a kind of appreciation. The seeing is an evaluating, a seeing of good and evil, a seeing that involves attraction or repulsion or some combination of the two, and motivation. Seeing is not just registering on the sensory receptors. This kind of seeing is done with the heart—the "eyes of the heart" as Paul says in Ephesians 1:18, "that you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." Just as eyes for beauty vary in their power to detect it accurately, so Paul prays that the eyes of the Ephesians' hearts may be "enlightened," so that they will see the great and wonderful things of God, which not everyone can see. Much of the teaching work of the church is exactly this project of enlightening the eyes of Christians, of opening them

up to the glories of God and his creation, of forming us so that we can see aright and are not too much subject to the illusions that threaten to beset us by the darkness of our culture and the deformities of our hearts.

THE EYES OF THE HEART

The Christian vision of people has several dimensions: they are possible recipients of our time and goods, sometimes in trouble and in need of help; they are sometimes our competitors, sometimes our bosses or subordinates or colleagues; they are sometimes our benefactors. In all these contexts, seeing people with appreciation is an important part of our Christian formation and governs much of our behavior toward them. But right now I wish to discuss the right seeing of people when they have offended us in some way, when we are angry with them, or anyway within our rights to be angry. For the Christian, "being forgiving" is a good summary of the right formation of the eyes of the heart for such situations.

How do we see people when we are angry with them? Consider a simple case of a person whose moral eyesight for others is not very mature. Jeff is six years old and for the last hour he has been playing cops and robbers with his friend Carl. Jeff is the robber at the moment and after a chase scene of a few minutes Carl ambushes him from behind the shrubbery and tackles him to the ground with a little too much force in his police arrest. Carl has not acted with malice toward Jeff, rather just in the spirit of the game; but Jeff gets the wind knocked out and a skinned elbow. When he gets up he sees Carl with very different eyes. Carl has taken on the character of an offender, a nasty and malicious person, an enemy and someone who deserves to be hurt. Jeff's impulse is to try to hurt Carl. A fist in the face would do the job, but Jeff is afraid to do that. So he gives him a sulky scowl and says, "I quit. I'm going to tell on you." Suddenly, at least from one side and for a moment, friendship has disappeared between the boys and enmity taken its place. The vindictiveness galvanized in Jeff's anger may not last long, or he may nurse his anger a few days, suckling it on sweet rehearsals of the scene of offense and tasty imaginings of revenge. Carl calls him up to say how sorry he is about the skinned elbow and to see if Jeff wants to play. But Jeff does not relent his anger; instead he turns it into a grudge. As long as it lasts, Jeff's anger has made him blind to Carl's look of a friend; there is something about Carl that he has ceased to appreciate. That appreciation has been erased and excluded by the "appreciation" of Carl as an enemy.

What is it to be a forgiving person, to have the eyes of one's heart enlightened for people who have offended against oneself? The deeply forgiving person is one who is sensitive or responsive to five considerations (there may be more) that tend to damp anger in ways

characteristic of forgiveness (we will see that some ways of damping anger are not characteristic of forgiveness).

SENSITIVE TO THE OFFENDER'S REPENTANCE

I said that Carl calls up Jeff and tells him how sorry he is about what happened. This is not repentance, since Carl is not blaming himself for what happened, but merely expressing regret. The story as I have told it illustrates a typical reaction of an unforgiving person, but it does not really depict a situation that calls for forgiveness, since Carl has committed no blameworthy offense. However, Carl's apology has a purpose similar to repentance: to show Jeff that Carl, who had the look of an enemy, is really on his side. Carl is inviting Jeff to see him that way.

If Carl had, with malice, tackled Jeff roughly so as to hurt him, then Carl would need Jeff's forgiveness and not just his sympathy. If he wanted Jeff's forgiveness, it would be very appropriate to speak to Jeff in the following terms. "Jeff, I was being cruel and I take responsibility for intentionally hurting you. I have had a change of heart. I am sorry that I hurt you and now I wish you only the best. And I hate what I did at least as much as you do, and I hate my intention in doing it. I disown myself as I was when I did this, and I hope you will accept me and my apology now." I admit this is a pretty deep speech for a six-year-old; indeed, it is quite a bit more explicit than most adult expressions of repentance, which are often halting and awkward and compromised in their self-severity and leave a lot to be filled in by the generous imagination of the offended. But the explicitness and maturity of the speech brings out why repentance makes such a strong appeal for forgiveness. As we saw, anger sees the offender as alien, an enemy, in opposition to oneself and one's interests. But repentance invites a reversal of that. The offender says, "I'm on your side. I'm my own enemy insofar as I responsibly did what I did. I, like you, hate the me who did that deed. Will you please accept my self-rejection, and thus accept me as I now am?" Repentance invites the offended one not to insist that I am emotionally identical with the offender, and thus to drop his anger against me and restore me to fellowship.

Some people are more open to this kind of consideration than others. By "open" I mean that they tend to be moved by it, that their hearts go out to the repentant one and the eyes of their hearts see not a nasty offender, an alien and enemy, but a fellow human being, a friend, a beloved sister or brother. The unforgiving person is resistant to being moved to new vision by this kind of consideration. He is prone instead to harden his heart and thus to blind himself to the humanity of the offender. But the forgiving person is sensitive and responsive to the repentance of those who offend

him; it strongly "appeals" to him, tending to melt his anger and change his perception. We might wonder what makes the difference between these two characters. The word "love," in the Christian sense, comes to mind. But perhaps we will become clearer what that means by considering some of the other sensitivities of the forgiving person.

SENSITIVE TO EXCUSES FOR THE OFFENDER

The French have a saying, "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*": to understand fully a person's situation, motivation, and history is to blame him for nothing he does. The reason is presumably that if we could see and appreciate all the factors lying behind the criminal's crime—his genetic make-up, environmental influences on his development, and the interaction between the current state of his organism and the environmental stimuli to which his deed was a response—we would see that he could not have done otherwise than he did. If we could really dye this doctrine into the fabric of our moral perception, we would never get angry, because anger involves seeing the offender as blameworthy and worthy of punishment. I mentioned earlier that there are some ways of ridding ourselves of anger that are *not* characteristic of forgiveness. This is one of them. When we *completely excuse* an offense, we admit that it is an offense in the sense that it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even devastating from our point of view, but it doesn't require forgiveness because the offender was not to blame. Somebody steps backward painfully onto your toe, but you are fully cognizant that she had every reason to think you were standing elsewhere. When you realize this and give up your anger for this reason, you are not forgiving her, but exonerating her.

> **The unforgiving person resists being moved to new vision by the offender's repentance. He is prone instead to harden his heart and thus to blind himself to the humanity of the offender. But the forgiving person is sensitive and responsive to the repentance of those who offend him.**

Still, excuses are relevant to forgiveness, and the forgiving person is open to finding excuses for his or her offenders. Indeed, the forgiving person actively *looks for* excuses for her offenders. To be relevant to forgiveness, these must be only partial excuses. When from the cross our Lord prays for his torturers, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," he is expressing his own forgiving disposition. He is not saying that they are in

no way blameworthy, but only that they are less blameworthy than they might appear: for example, while they know they are crucifying a man, and perhaps even know that he is innocent, they do not know they are crucifying the Holy One of God.

It is a mark of the unforgiving person that he does not want to hear about excuses for his offender's behavior. If an excuse is offered, he tends to want to refute it. He may even concoct blameworthiness where it is missing. This is why Jeff is a good example of an unforgiving person, even though Carl's deed does not call for forgiveness: Jeff "constructs" the offense as blameworthy, though the situation offers little justification for this, and clings to this construction. The forgiving person is the very opposite: he is open to excuses, looking for them, glad to hear them. Again, the word "love" comes to mind. Someone who cares a great deal about being in a relationship of harmony and beneficent interaction with another person—whether that person is a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a stranger—will welcome the offender's repentance and any excuses that may plausibly reduce the severity of the offense because such repentance and excuses pave the way for reconciliation. So it will come as no surprise that sensitivity to relationships is one of the sensitivities of the forgiving person.

SENSITIVE TO PRIOR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OFFENDER

You can be quite angry with someone and still care deeply about your relationship to him or her. A mark of the deeply unforgiving person is that being angry makes him willing to abandon the relationship—to start talking about divorce, to start thinking the offender is not worth having as a friend, to take seriously disowning a son or daughter. So we commonly hear relationships cited as reasons for forgiving: "I forgave her because she is my daughter (sister, wife, mother, friend, colleague)." Mentioning the relationship of colleague may raise a doubt: are not collegial relationships a little too far from love relationships to be a real reason for forgiving? When I overcome my anger at a colleague *because we are colleagues*, the real reason is just the practical one that I need to work with this person on a daily basis, and the work is not likely to be very fruitful or pleasant if we are at war with one another.

I think we can forgive people where our reason is that they are our colleagues, but in that case the collegial relationship must not have merely instrumental value to us. It must verge towards friendship. Let us say you work in a real estate agency and in a somewhat underhanded way one of your colleagues cuts in and takes a listing that you had begun to cultivate with the seller. The colleague seems to be sorry she did this, but she does not have the courage to bring out an explicit confession, and you are angry and alienated for a few days. When you see her in the office you avoid her

and she avoids you and you have some nasty thoughts about her and she has that wicked look of an enemy. But you are uncomfortable with the alienation and at some level want to be reconciled with her. One of your main reasons is that you have this collegial relation with her, and it is not going well because of your anger and her guilt. So you begin to smile at her in the office and joke a bit with her in a friendly way at meetings and generally treat her like a good colleague. Are these actions verging towards forgiveness, or not? That, I think, depends on how you are thinking about the reconciliation that you are seeking. If you think of it simply in terms of your comfort, or your productivity as a real estate agent, then even though you overcome your anger toward your colleague, you are not really forgiving her. But if you seek the reconciliation because you value your personal relationship with her (even though that relationship is nothing more than friendly collegiality), then your damping of your anger is a kind of forgiveness.

SENSITIVE TO SUFFERING OF THE OFFENDER

A moving example of forgiveness motivated by the suffering of the offender is found in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Prince Andrei Bolkonsky's marriage to Natasha Rostov must, at his father's insistence, be delayed a year. Prince Andrei departs for a time, and while he is away the rake, Anatole Kuragin, alienates Natasha's affections and they attempt to elope. The elopement fails, but in Prince Andrei's view it destroys any possibility of marrying his beloved Natasha. Prince Andrei pursues Kuragin to Petersburg and into Turkey with the intention of provoking him to a duel, but does not find him. At the battle of Borodino, Andrei is severely wounded and carried into a tent-hospital where he is laid on one of three tables. On one of the other tables lies a man sobbing and choking convulsively, whose leg has just been amputated. Gradually, Prince Andrei recognizes him as Kuragin.

> He remembered Natasha as he had seen her for the first time at the ball in 1810, with her slender neck and arms, with her timid, happy face prepared for ecstasy, and his soul awoke to a love and tenderness for her which were stronger and more pulsing with life than they had ever been. Now he remembered the link between himself and this man who was gazing vaguely at him through the tears that filled his swollen eyes. Prince Andrei remembered everything, and a passionate pity and love for this man welled up in his happy heart. Prince Andrei could no longer restrain himself, and wept tender compassionate tears for his fellow-men, for himself and for their errors and his own.

Forgiveness here is a matter of refocusing the wrongdoer: while "remembering everything", Prince Andrei switches from seeing Kuragin in terms of the harm he had done him and his desert of punishment—the terms in which he had pursued him for months—and now sees him benevolently in the suffering and weakness of his humanity. The crisis created by the battle activates a disposition to forgive that neither Andrei nor anyone else knew he had. Note that in this example the compassion seems to work without the aid of the other considerations we have looked at: Kuragin does not repent, nor does Prince Andrei learn or reflect on any excusing circumstance, nor is Kuragin in any relationship with Prince Andrei that would motivate him to seek reconciliation.

The forgiving person is moved by the repentance of those who offend her; she is eager to know what mitigates their offenses; she cares about her relationships, wanting them to be harmonious and loving; she is moved by the sufferings of offenders; and she is keenly aware of her own moral failings.

SENSITIVE TO MORAL COMMONALITY WITH THE OFFENDER

The following story is told of the desert father Moses, who before he became a monk lived by robbery:

> A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, 'Come, for everyone is waiting for you.' So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, 'What is this, Father?' The old man said to them, 'My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.' When they heard that, they said no more to the brother, but forgave him.

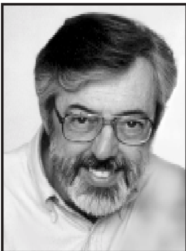
Abba Moses invites his fellow monks to consider their own faults, as a reason to forgive their brother for his sin against them. But how is this a reason? Abba Moses suggests that a sinner is not in a position to judge another sinner. The judge sits in a superior position vis-à-vis the defendant; as judge, he is removed from the defendant, so it is incongruous for one criminal to sit in judgment of another. Anger is a

judgmental emotion. Attitudinally, the angry person takes the superior position, looking down on the one at whom he's angry. Abba Moses gets the council members to see themselves as on the same level as this offender, and their anger evaporates.

The forgiving person is unusually sensitive to these five considerations: She is moved by the repentance of those who offend her; she is eager to know what mitigates their offenses; she cares about her relationships, wanting them to be harmonious and loving; she is moved by the sufferings of offenders; and she is keenly aware of her own moral failings. These sensitivities of the heart give the forgiving person a special eye for people when they do nasty things.

NOTES

A few paragraphs of this paper are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Forgivingness", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 289-306. I thank the editor for permission to use the material. I give a fuller account of the virtue in this earlier paper; in particular, I explore the conditions under which the forgiving person withholds forgiveness.



ROBERT C. ROBERTS
is Distinguished Professor of Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, TX.