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FORGIVING OURSELVES: LET THE HEALING BEGIN

Marcia J. Galles

Forgiveness, in the words of Horace Bushnell, “is man’s deepest need and highest achievement.” It is the singular, inexplicable, life-changing dynamic that banishes the darkness that would otherwise consume us, a darkness so complete as to be impenetrable. On its purest level, forgiveness is the essence of grace. It is that most precious of mysteries, a gift that is at once spiritual and tangible. Through its cleansing power we are reunited with our Heavenly Father above, even as it is our means of reconciling with one another here below. Yet many of us refuse to accept God’s forgiveness. We believe it in theory; we rarely live it in our lives.

No one who has ever looked into the eyes of a trembling teen and watched the transformation as forgiveness washes over him or her could doubt the presence of the living God. It is as if, in that instant, heaven is visible on earth, allowing us to catch sight of the Spirit at work. In our prisons and our juvenile halls, in our homes, and in our pews, the healing metamorphosis is undeniable. There is no force more powerful, no beauty more fine, no instant

when his presence is more real among us than when forgiveness transforms a lost and hurting soul. Yet, incredibly, we resist. Out of ignorance, sometimes arrogance, we

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cling to the grudges that consume us. Even more debilitating, we deny ourselves mercy. What is it within us that so mocks God’s forgiveness? Why are so many of us, shackled with marred and shattered lives, resisting God’s foremost cure?

Some years ago, camping in the California Redwoods, our family attended a fireside worship service. That memory has stayed with me, as part of the minister’s message was so tragic. He had spent time as a missionary in communist China, a country where there had been many missionary “successes.” However, it was his experience as he continued to encounter Christians that, while they knew about the cross, accepted Jesus as God’s son, and even believed in the resurrection, they remarkably knew nothing of forgiveness. Like a heart without a soul, they were missing God’s saving grace. Their faith was little more than another chain in their oppressed lives; it was a faith of bondage, heavily weighted with guilt. I wondered how it had happened. How could they have so missed the core of the gospel? In the intervening years, I’ve seen the scenario repeated, this time in lives closer to home. I meet Christians without peace clinging to faith without hope. And I can’t help but feel that God must be incensed.

A former preacher of mine once said he believed pride was at the root of all sin. True faith, after all, is built

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