

DEAR AEBI: *"Do I have to forgive someone who has not repented or who has not asked for forgiveness?"*

I don't know if you have to, but you ought to forgive him anyway, because (1) forgiving those who haven't asked for it is following Jesus' example; and (2) you will be thereby helping yourself by getting rid of the excess baggage of resentment, bitterness, or anger that you carry around when you don't forgive. This excess baggage will hurt you worse than it will the one you refuse to forgive, and it could happen that the person doesn't even know he has hurt you.



Look at the example of our Lord. When they crucified him, Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). "They" includes all who had a part in his death, not just the soldiers who drove the nails into him--they were just doing what the Roman governor commanded and the Jewish council demanded. Both the hit man and those hiring him are guilty of the crime. But notice that none of them asked for or even wanted forgiveness, because none of them thought he had done wrong (unless it was Pilate, who allowed himself to be intimidated). Although the Jewish council knew their actions were illegal, they felt that the end justified the means, so they didn't feel guilty at that point. Of all who had a part in Jesus' death, only Judas felt remorse at that time, and even then he didn't ask forgiveness, but instead went and hanged himself.

Since Jesus prayed for their forgiveness, we must assume that to be consistent he personally forgave them for the evil they did to him. Of course, that did not clear them of guilt, for they had violated God's law by condemning and killing an innocent man. But Jesus' prayer was answered for some of them when they obeyed the gospel at Pentecost. Peter accused them in Acts 2:23,36 of crucifying Jesus, and about 3,000 of them were added to the church that day. In this case they were forgiven by their victim nearly two months before they repented and were forgiven by God. Should we not follow Jesus' example? Peter thinks we should, particularly in matters where we endure persecutions and suffer wrongfully (1 Peter 2:19-23). Stephen obviously thought he should follow Jesus' example of forgiving those who were killing him, and they certainly were not asking for forgiveness, nor were they repenting. They were stoning him because they were furious at his teachings (Acts 7:54-60), but he prayed to the Lord as they were killing him to not hold this sin against them.

Jesus in Luke 17:3-4 said, "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." Someone may ask, "What if he doesn't say, 'I repent?'" Forgive him anyway. It is the best way; it is the Lord's way; follow his example. You'll be glad you did. But what if he doesn't deserve forgiveness? None of us "deserves forgiveness"; forgiveness is getting something you don't deserve; if you deserved it, it would not be forgiveness, but justice.

Charles Aebi