

Bible and the Headlines: Hardest Word

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It has been almost half a century since Sir Elton John wrote the hit song “Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word.” Since that time, the song continues to be covered by different artists and sung in multiple languages. Not bad for a title that contains uncertainty in its truth claim. Maybe this uncertainty is because ‘sorry’ only “seems” to be the hardest word. The truth is there is a word that is even harder to say. The most difficult word is “forgive,” at least when it is preceded with the first person pronoun. This hard to say word is the subject of recent headlines.

Utah’s NBC affiliate KSL 5 on June 17th featured, “Parents of Pleasant Grove Boy Say They Forgive the Driver Who Hit Him.” As stated in the title, the parents of nine-year old Dalton Gibbs have absolved the 80-year old driver who killed their son. Concerning the motorist, Dalton’s parents stated, “We don’t want him to suffer any more than he probably already has, just with the remorse and guilt of doing something like that.” Dalton’s mother said that her family’s willingness to quickly forgive has brought the family “. . . peace and healing.”

On June 19th the Boston Globe carried the story, “The Unwitting Poster Child of the Vietnam War Has Forsaken Bitterness for Grace.” The piece looks at attempts by Kim Phúc (known around the world in 1972 as the ‘napalm girl’) to offer forgiveness to the South Vietnamese pilot who dropped the bomb on her. She wants to tell him, “I survived. I forgave a long time ago. I don’t hate you. I would give him a hug. He changed my life without knowing it.” Kim Phuc found the ability to forgive in “. . . a copy of the New Testament in Saigon’s central library.”

The independent science news website PsyPost on June 20th contained the research review, “Scientists Shed Light on How Forgiveness Does and Doesn’t Reshape Memories.” Researchers wanted to know, “Does forgiveness help us feel better because we no longer remember the incident clearly, or do we simply feel differently about what we still clearly recall?” The “forgivers” in the study were survivors of atrocities committed during Columbia’s civil war. The results were: Survivors still remembered clear details of their lifechanging traumatic event but such memories no longer triggered them emotionally to the same degree.

There are many ‘forgivers’ in the Bible. An early example of forgiveness is Jacob’s son, Joseph. He was trafficked by his brothers and sold into Egyptian slavery. Decades later Joseph had risen to the pinnacle of power in Egypt and his brothers found themselves at his mercy. They were afraid it was payback time. Instead, Joseph forgave them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:19-20). Joseph and his family were reconciled.

The biggest forgiver of all time is Jesus. For our sake, he became a human being and lived among us (John 1:14). Instead of celebrating his incarnation, the people wanted him crucified (Matt 27:22). This fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah, “He was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us” (Isa 53:5). Yet even as Jesus was suffering the extreme pain and humiliation of crucifixion, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luk 23:34).

“Forgive” really is the hardest word. It got Jesus killed. However, if he could forgive, why can’t we?