

“The man I ate dinner with tonight killed my brother.” These words were spoken by a woman at a Prison Fellowship banquet in Seattle. She told how a man named John had murdered her brother during a robbery, served 18 years in jail, then settled into life on a dairy farm, where she had met him in 1983, 20 years after his crime. Compelled by Christ’s command to forgive, Ruth Youngsman had gone to her enemy and pronounced forgiveness. Then she took him to her father’s deathbed, prompting reconciliation. Some would not call this a success story: John didn’t become a Christian. But at that Prison Fellowship banquet, his voice cracked as he said, “Christians are the only people I know that you can kill their son, and they’ll make you a part of their family. I don’t know the Man Upstairs, but He sure is hounding me.”

John’s story is unfinished. But just as Christ died for us regardless of our acceptance, so Ruth Youngsman forgave John without qualification. Even more so, she became his friend.

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian faith. Putting a relationship back together—with forgiveness as the glue—is how the whole thing works. We know this. And yet we can hear a story like Ruth Youngsman’s, and a part of us thinks her foolish—thinks her naïve—or weak—or just strange. Because she forgave. Because she did what Christ would have all of us do. Where we hold to this double standard; or worse, where we withhold forgiveness from others, we need to change direction. No buts; no “what if’s”; no “listen to what they did to me’s.” Repent and change direction, or else “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” are just words; words that we whisper from memory, with no real meaning at all.

But maybe I’m putting the cart before the horse. Reconciliation with other people really is not possible unless we are first reconciled with God. If we have real trouble reconciling with others, that suggests (strongly) we may not be sure about our reconciliation with God.

Perhaps that’s why Saint Paul, writing his second letter to the Corinthians, comes on so strongly: “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” The word “implore” here means to beg. In other words, the apostle says: “I’m begging you to reconcile with God through Jesus Christ.” Is Paul speaking to you, too, right now? If so, the very next verse explains how you can do that: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” It isn’t complicated. It’s a simple exchange. Jesus gets our sin; we get his goodness. That’s the gospel. For some people, that’s just too good to be true.

A pastor recently told the true story of one of his church members, an attorney, who after meditating on several scriptures, decided to cancel the debts of all his clients that had owed him money for more than 6 months.

He drafted a letter explaining his decision and its biblical basis and sent 17 debt canceling letters via certified mail.

One by one, the letters began to return, unsigned and undelivered.

Perhaps a couple people had moved away-- though not likely. 16 of the 17 letters came back to him because the clients refused to sign for and open the envelopes fearing that this attorney was suing them for their debts.

The first step in being reconciled to God is realizing that He is not out to get you! As a matter of fact, He is the one who wants reconciliation! He wants to be reconciled to you so much that he applied your debt of sin to his Son's account, and made Him pay! Jesus paid that debt by going to what St. Paul liked to call "the tree." That was one way he talked about the cross on which Jesus died. But there's more to the "tree" reference than just: the cross was made of wood, and wood comes from trees. The cross is our tree of life. On that tree, the exchange has been made. Jesus agrees to suffer, die, and endure hell for you--so that you never have to. Believe it! And if the devil tries to drag your old, previously-forgiven sins back out in front of you, shove the letter in his face and show him where it says "Paid in Full...It is Finished."

The reconciliation that God offers is meant to become a real, driving force in your life. It takes on flesh and blood in the decisions you make each day. That's probably the best way that we catch the power of forgiveness—when we actually receive it or see it being given by a Christian person like Ruth Youngsman, or the kindly bishop in "Les Miserables."

Victor Hugo's novel "Les Miserables" tells a story of a man named Jean Valjean, who served nineteen years of hard labor for the crime of stealing bread. When he was finally released, Valjean was a hardened, tough ex-convict. Soon after his release, a local bishop invited him to stay in his home for the night. After the bishop and his sister were asleep, Valjean stole the family silver and ran off into the night. The next morning, he was captured by three policemen and bought back to the bishop.

"So here you are!" the bishop cried to Valjean. "I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?"

After the policemen had gone the bishop gave the candlesticks to Valjean, who was speechless and trembling. "Do not ever forget," the bishop said, "that you have promised me to use the money to make yourself a new man."

That's the promise we stand on the edge of today. God does not repay us as our sins deserve. Instead, He gives us the silver and the candlesticks. He gives forgiveness and life that never ends, and other blessings besides.

Do not forget how He has dealt with you. Bring it into every corner of your life. I'm begging you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God, and let the pardon you have received become the pardon that you give.