

Forgiveness

By Jenny Thompson-Richards

It has long struck me that the experience of externalising interactions seemed similar to the experience of forgiveness. This prompted me to explore how an externalising worldview relates to the Christian understanding of forgiveness. I draw on Alan Jenkins' book "Invitations to Responsibility (1990) in which he outlines his work with men who abuse and my own work with woman who have experienced abuse and with men who abuse. I have chosen this because it is clearly an area in which problems and sin do coincide.

Biblical Imagery of Forgiveness of Sin

Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman (1998, 302-303) helpfully suggest two key complementary biblical motifs for understanding forgiveness of sin. One views sin as something that needs to be eradicated or removed, while the other views sin as disrupted relationships between people that need to be restored. They go on to suggest some of the imagery of this first aspect of forgiveness is spatial, as sin is removed (Ps 103:12; Zech 3:9, cast into depth of the sea (Mic 7:19), swept away .. like a cloud and ..like mist" (Is 44:22), cast behind God's back (Is 38:17), "set aside" (Col 2:14), "put away" (Heb 9:26).

Forgiveness

Christian theology includes both a personal and an original concept of sin, that is a ubiquitous part of the human condition. McMinn, (1996:241) contributes that while only God can offer eternal redemption, humans are also able to offer a form of interpersonal redemption to one another. This is an "act of compassion that comes from one person identifying with another".

An externalising worldview

An Externalising Worldview, associated with Michael White and David Epston, asserts that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem (White & Epston, 1990; White, 1995). Externalising interactions, reflects a perception that determines to see people first and separate from their problems.

Similarities

1. Justice and Mercy

Christian psychologists, McCullough, Sandage and Worthington (1997:64) fruitfully point out, that forgiveness balances the imperatives to be **just** and **merciful**. "Forgiveness requires that we hold the offender morally accountable (justice), but forgiveness also entails a commitment to care about that person's welfare (care). Exercising an externalising perception neatly skirts two equally faulty errors. If we **exercise mercy without justice** we are likely to lead the one offending to further blame others, make excuses and become further entrenched in the helpless victim role. If we **exercise justice without mercy** we are likely to alienate the offender and further entrench the person in denial. Externalising questions such as "Do you want to let abuse rule your life, or do you want to take steps to challenge its power over you?" embody both mercy and justice. When Alan Jenkins (1990:80-115) issues irresistible invitations to a man, troubled by his abuse, he is seeking and frequently gets accountability. This accords with my own experience of gently and humbly confronting men with their abuse.

Those exercising an externalising perception acknowledge the power of language. King, a Christian psychologist (1999:35) agrees. They deliberately choose to speak to, and about, "someone who has sexually abused", rather than "a perpetrator." As Jenkins (in conversation, 1999) put it bluntly, "while the acts are monstrous they are not monsters." This resonates loudly with the common Christian saying "God loves the sinner, but hates the sin". Speaking in a "separating fashion" allows us, paradoxically, to maximise our co-humanity with the person who offended (the sinner), while simultaneously facing the full depravity of the deeds (sin). It clearly helps us to exercise justice fully; clearly justice is about fairness accountability while exercising mercy fully.

If the person and deed are not separated then justice and mercy become entangled . For example, when McMinn(1996:217), seeks to express mercy he inadvertently stigmatises by the unfortunate use of labelling. He says "As abhorrent as we may find the actions of sexual abusers, murderers, rapists, and...psychopaths, we must acknowledge that we are all sinners whose only hope for redemption is found in a forgiving and gracious God." He, unintentionally, fuses sin with sinner, compacting the identity of the person and their actions. Repulsion of the act strangles love for the person, and love constrains the full, clean and unequivocal justice the abominable acts deserve. Rather than sounding the two harmonious notes in which each is clear and strong, the result is a discordant muddle. Uncertainty incapacitates both mercy and justice. Neither is allowed to be fully itself. If we clearly separate sinner and sin, we can love the sinner ardently, and be heartily repulsed by the sin.

Separation of Sin and Sinner

Sinner	Sin
Subject: Person	Subject: Abuse
Response: Passionate love for the person	Response: Clear-headed need for accountability
Result: Mercy sounding its own clear note: the person is one of us	Result: Justice sounding its own lively note

Fusion sinner/sin

Subject:

"Perpetrator"

Response:

Guiltily constrained love and a confused weak sense of justice
Sounding discordant muddle

Result:

A "perpetrator" is "Not one of us"

McMinn(1996:181) gives three possible choices when faced with an offence: do nothing; confess; or seek comfort and minimise the offence (Figure 2). The endings differ. Either they express a profound awareness , "I am forgiven", or they make the proclamation "I am okay". This last option is mercy without justice. Jenkins (1990:181,193) makes it clear that those who abuse must show evidence of working towards an authentic apology (repentance), before attempting to be reconciled. It is not simply a case of words; no cheap grace.

Option 2:

confession

"I am forgiven"

Option 1:

Paralysing shame

Option 3:

Seeking Comfort

"I am okay"

2. Metaphors of separation

Thirdly, externalising interactions use spatial metaphors of separateness: "mapping the distance " between the person and problem to describe the relationship between the two. They draw a sharp distinction just as the biblical writers do. In my work with women who have experienced abuse, I found, in the initial stages of therapy, a woman might typically find only a few occasions when she has been able to separate herself from the influence of self-blame. Later, a woman might report that she has more influence over self-blame than it has over her.

3. Personification of problems

Problems are personified in a way analogous to biblical references to sin. I might ask "What do you think self-blame would want for your life?" There are the metaphorical references to a problem "dominating" the person and to acts of resistance against a problem. Alan Jenkins (1990:183) uses the term "slave" in inviting men, who have abused, to take responsibility for their actions. "*Would you prefer to face the pressure of making your own decisions or are you willing to remain a slave to your feelings of disappointment?*" Biblical references to sin in a similar vein include "*it desires to have you, but you must master it*"; *sin as slave driver* (En 4:7); Jesus warns that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (Jn 8:34f); and Paul makes numerous references to enslavement to sin (Romans 6:6,16,18,20;7:14). Cook (2000:31) also makes this connection referring to "externalising the slavery".

4. Clarity of individual and social problems

Externalising interactions can make visible and clarify both individual responsibility and the role of societal injustices. This accords with biblical understanding that sin is both an individual and a corporate phenomena. Clarity of attribution is a vital pre-condition for forgiveness and repentance. Unless we have this (McCullough et al, 1996:136), then we are likely to have either false guilt, as is often the case with women experiencing abuse, or blame others, as is often the case with men who abuse. In my own work with women escaping the effects of abuse, naming injustices enables them to begin to forgive themselves for what they had previously perceived as their internal weaknesses. This in time, can facilitate more empathy towards the one who abused.

5. The experience of externalising interactions.

A re-negotiated Identity

"Listening with an externalising attitude has a powerful effect. It helps us interact differently with people than if we see them as intrinsically problematic. In this kind of context, the content and meaning people give stories almost always becomes less restrictive?" (Freedman & Combs: 1996:50) People are able to see themselves differently. (White & Epston, 1989:39). Garfinkel (1957 in McLeod: 1997:98) a sociologist, examines "**degradation ceremonies**". Persons who have engaged in a breach of an important social norm are denounced in the presence of the group. The outcome of a successful degradation ceremony is to label the perpetrator of the breach as someone who is not now, and never really was, 'one of us'. Externalising interactions become "**ceremonies of regradation.**" Therapists use therapeutic letters, counter-documents, reflecting teams, audience of acknowledgment, and forgiveness ceremonies. They affirm that the person is "one of us". This creates a greater sense of dignity, reducing shame. People report the greater the distance between the problem and themselves the less the shame. Our co-humanity is a central Christian understanding since we believe that we are all sinners and saved only grace. There is no room for judgment or pride in the knowledge that we are morally superior (Luke 7:37-42).

More resourceful.

Since it decreases the unproductive conflict between persons, they are able to *work together* against the problem. (White & Epston, 1989 in Kollar, 1997:131). People then have, not just greater **inner resources**, but more **social resources**.

Summary and Conclusion

Externalising interactions resonate strongly with the Christian understanding of forgiveness. They balance the twin imperatives for justice and mercy; they use metaphors of separation of person and deed; personify problems; and clarify individual and social responsibility for problems consonant with the biblical view. Finally the experience corresponds, significantly but not fully, with the experience of forgiveness. The major difference is one of scale. While only God can offer ultimate forgiveness, humans are also able to offer a form of interpersonal forgiveness. The externalising worldview coincides, not just superficially, but actually reflects something of ultimate forgiveness. So regardless of their religious beliefs, narrative therapists are unknowingly ambassadors of God's grace. Along with other types of counselling, it provides a legitimate vehicle of confession and forgiveness. It does not have the depth and final resolution that a relationship with a transcendent and compassionate God brings, but, nevertheless it imparts of measure of forgiveness. While not of the same magnitude, it is quietly representative of the larger picture. It is a foretaste of the grand banquet, a prelude to the symphony.

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