

How many times have you asked God for forgiveness for the same sin? We are creatures of habit and we sin again and again. When Jesus counsels Peter to forgive his brother 77 times, he is really saying to forgive without limit. Peter thinks he is being generous by forgiving 7 times, but he is placing a limit on forgiveness that is way too low.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask our heavenly Father to forgive our sins as we forgive the sins of those who have trespassed against us. Jesus tells the parable of the person released from a huge debt who shows no mercy to those who owe him money. Jesus suffered and died that each of our debts would be forgiven. The greater the sin on our part, the greater God's desire to forgive us. In gratitude, we must be willing to forgive those who have hurt us through sinfulness. That is easier said than done.

Jim had an abusive father and he himself became an angry young man. He held a grudge against his father for decades and that unwillingness to forgive only got him into more trouble. From the age of 10 on he began acting out. He spent the better part of a decade in one reform school after another. In the military, he learned discipline, but never being able to forgive, he continued to harbor anger towards others disproportionate to whatever the trespass was.

One night in a fit of rage, he took his anger out on his pregnant wife. Just as his father had tried to scare him in to being good, he tried to scare his wife into loving her. He was convicted of a triple homicide for killing his wife, pregnant with twins. They locked him up and threw away the key. He was given a life sentence.

In jail, he pretended to be good hoping that his debt would be cancelled. He hoped that by his good behavior, that at the very least he would be transferred to a minimum-security prison that would allow for an easy escape. He thought he could con the system and God, so he faked a spiritual awakening.

As he learned more about God and his mercy and forgiveness, God conned him. Jim developed a healthy conscience. He showed genuine sorrow for his sins. He had a firm purpose of amendment. He sought out penance looking for ways to help others. God worked miracles in his life and 20 years after his conviction, he was a new man. The parole board released a good man, a reformed sinner back into society.

Jim had a lot of debts, sins, that still hung over his head from his childhood. He reconciled with his father and brother. He forgave everyone he had harbored grudges against. With the ability to forgive others, he finally was released from the prison of his own making.

Set free from anger and revenge, he owed a debt of gratitude to God. Jim explored entering the Trappists, a very strict religious order. The prison chaplain tried to steer him to an order more suited to his own temperament. He became a Capuchin friar. The Capuchin's were hesitant, but once they tested him to see if he had what it took, they discerned the call to holy life was a genuine one. Jim worked as a maintenance man while studying the prayerful and contemplative ways of the order.

Thinking that others will not accept us, we often hide behind a veil to disguise our darker side. Jim realized that the painful lessons he had learned in life, could benefit others. He told others the truth in order to help them seek God and forgiveness, transformation and peace.

Over the course of a 40-year religious life, Jim made it a point of going back to the prison he had been released from each year and giving week-long retreats. He sought to help those whose debts had not been forgiven by society to find peace in allowing God to transform them, forgive them, and lead them back to lives of holiness.

Jim also reached out to troubled youth in reform school to help them learn what it took him decades to experience. Anger in the heart only leads to torture, genuine forgiveness from the heart leads to peace.

In closing, let us recall the teaching of Jesus to his own disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27).

Source: Post-gazette.com 2011/06/17 James Townsend turned from life of crime to minister to offenders.