

**“490 TIMES, GIVE OR TAKE”**

Have you noticed how everyday there seem to be more and more “How-to” videos? For a few bucks you can rent a DVD and learn how to do almost anything, from building a house to having a baby.

A friend told me about one such video that teaches you how to get revenge. I’m not kidding! It’s called “The Video Guide to Creative Revenge.” Its creator, Mitch Lang, decided to make the video after he was aced out of a parking space by a very rude driver. He got to thinking about how he could get even with the guy and that, in turn, led to the video. It outlines fifty different tactics for getting revenge, ranging from making embarrassing phone calls to leaving funeral home brochures in the reception areas of doctors who make you wait too long.

Lang’s video is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, and we can all chuckle a bit at the prospect of using his techniques to get even. But revenge itself is no laughing matter. And many of the world’s greatest problems, ranging from domestic violence to civil war, grow out of a never-ending cycle of violence which is fueled, more often than not, by a desire to even the score, a desire to get revenge.

The Amish residents of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania probably haven’t seen Mitch Lang’s video about creative revenge. For they live without televisions, without electricity, automobiles and many of the other things we take as commonplace.

Many people view the Amish and their farms as nothing more than a quaint tourist attractions. But in truth, like all Mennonites, the Amish are folks who take their faith very seriously, seriously enough to reflect it in their lifestyle. Their clothing, for instance, so plain and free of ornamentation, is designed to help maintain humility. Their historic stance as pacifists is reflected in many facets of their lives, including something as simple as facial hair. In past centuries, German soldiers always wore mustaches. As a sign of their opposition to war, Amish men never grew mustaches, but simple chin whiskers and beards.

But their commitment to pacifism isn’t restricted to matters of dress and facial hair. When Jesus says to love your enemies, they take it quite literally. They believe in a strict adherence to a code of non-violence. As journalist Tom Schachtman recently noted: “The Amish walk the walk as much as they talk the talk.” (New York *Times*, 10-4-06, A-20)

Their isolation makes the fact that Charles Roberts entered an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, shot ten Amish schoolgirls, and then committed suicide, all the more shocking. Shocking to the Amish, shocking to the world.

**Donald Kraybill, one of the nation's leading scholars in the field of Amish studies, commented this week on the events of last Monday. "Violence in an Amish school," he said, is just unthinkable . . . . These are really safe schools, in rural settings . . . . The children have never watched television, never seen a video game. They don't in their minds have any images of violence, and there wouldn't be any protocol in the schools for what to do in an emergency like this." (Ibid)**

**But there is an Amish protocol for dealing with the hurts and injuries caused by others, and that is the way of forgiveness. While most of us might be consumed by anger and a need to lash out, while our tendency might be to seek revenge, not so the Amish. In fact, a representative of the Amish community visited the family of Charles Roberts last week with other things in mind.**

**The Amish man entered the Roberts' kitchen, where family members were huddled around, shocked by the actions of their milkman husband, father and son. In the midst of the family stood the patriarch, Charles Robert's father. The Amish man walked up to him. No doubt things were tense. But instead of yelling at him, instead of hitting him, he gave the Amish man a hug, and quietly said, "We will forgive you." Dwight Lefebvre, a friend of the Roberts family, was there when it happened. He later told worshippers at a memorial service, "We met God in that kitchen." (Lancaster *New Era*, 10-4-06)**

**And that's just the beginning of it. In the days ahead, members of the families of the murdered girls will be meeting with members of the Roberts family to accept their condolences and to offer further words of forgiveness. And, as a concrete demonstration of their desire to forgive, the Amish community has established two funds: one to assist the families of the murdered and injured schoolgirls, and the other to help the family of Charles Roberts.**

**This is forgiveness in action. This is walking the walk.**

**It is important to remember that forgiveness does not mean saying, "What happened was OK." Indeed, true forgiveness involves radical honesty. It may mean saying "What you did was very, very wrong. It hurt me deeply. It was inexcusable." But, as C. S. Lewis writes, "to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." ("On Forgiveness," *The Weight of Glory*, 182) For if something can be excused, if something can be explained away, it doesn't need to be forgiven. Forgiving and excusing are two different things!**

**Forgiving someone doesn't side step the truth. Forgiveness acknowledges the wrong. But it means saying, "I won't try to get even with you, I won't exact revenge. I will let go of hatred."**

All of this may strike you as nothing short of incredible. It may seem to you a bit much. Why should the Amish forgive the man who took away their daughters? Why *shouldn't* they seek revenge by lashing out at his family?

But that, course, would only perpetuate the cycle. In offering up words and actions that speak of forgiveness, the Amish have taken concrete steps to stop the violence. They are saying, "Enough! It stops here!" Rather than focusing on questions that seek to fix blame and perpetuate the hurt and anger, they are working to build bridges and bring about healing. Rather than being stuck in the present pain, they are seeking to move into a new future of freedom.

In reflecting on the power of forgiveness, author Philip Yancey writes: "Not to forgive imprisons [one] in the past and locks out all potential for change." He then goes on to tell about a rabbi who came to this country after the Holocaust. "Before coming to America," said the rabbi, "I had to forgive Adolph Hitler . . . I did not want to bring [him] inside me to a new country." (*What's So Amazing About Grace?*, 99)

That doesn't mean the rabbi doesn't want to see justice done. That doesn't mean he was opposed to the Nuremburg trials.

Indeed, forgiving someone doesn't mean letting a wrong doer off the hook. There may still be legal consequences that have to play themselves out. There may be relational consequences that become necessary. A Christian woman who is beaten up by her husband is called on by our faith to forgive him, but that doesn't mean she has to stay in the same house. It doesn't mean she needs to remain married to him. It doesn't mean she has to put herself back into harm's way! It doesn't mean he won't go to jail. It simply means she lets go of the hatred, the anger, and the desire to get revenge.

As Anne LaMott writes: [Forgiveness] means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back. It doesn't necessarily mean you want to have lunch with the person." *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 47-48)

It's hard to do. And it may have to be done again and again. Maybe that's why, when Peter asks about forgiveness, Jesus says, "You must forgive seven times seventy." The desire for revenge, the desire to get even, may keep rearing its ugly head, but we are best served by refusing to act on the impulse to strike back. We are better served if we forgive, even if it means forgiving someone over and over again. It is that aspect of Jesus' teaching that is so radical—now and then.

The standard rabbinical teaching of the day taught that you had to forgive a person three times. When Peter asks, "If my brother keeps sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive, seven?" he is actually suggesting going above and beyond the call of duty. But Jesus takes it out of the realm of legal obligation. "No," he says, "Seventy times seven." He doesn't mean a literal 490 times, rather he is

saying, “as often as is necessary.” Not out of obedience to the law—which must always be stated in exact terms—but rather out of love—which is beyond numbers and limitations.

In the Lord’s Prayer, and in the parable in today’s passage, Jesus goes so far as to say that our being forgiven by God is dependent on our willingness to forgive others.

But it’s not some sort of legal tit-for-tat. It’s not some sort of even-Steven swap. Rather it’s a recognition of the psychological and spiritual reality that if we are unwilling to forgive others, then we will be so filled with anger, hatred and bitterness, that there will be no place left for accepting our own forgiveness. If my attentions are focused on hating someone and getting revenge, I will be unable to see love and forgiveness when they come my way. “They don’t call it “blind rage” for nothing!

To ask if the Amish should forgive Roberts and his family begs the issue. To ask if that rabbi should forgive Hitler misses the point. For in truth, it is really a matter of deciding whether one wants to live a life of love or a life of bitterness and hatred. When you fail to forgive, the person you hurt the most is yourself. “If you keep hitting back,” says LaMott, “you stay trapped in the nightmare.” (Ibid) But if you forgive you discover a new freedom. You replace the seemingly endless cycle of violence and hatred with a cycle of forgiveness, understanding and love.

Fortunately, those Amish children never saw the video game based on another school shooting, the one that took place in Littleton, Colorado at Columbine High. Called *Super Columbine Massacre*, the game allows players to enter into a cartoonish replica of the Columbine school cafeteria and recreate the actions of the two young men who killed thirteen people on that fateful day. The object of the game is to kill as many students and teachers as you can.

But other things have come out of the Columbine shootings as well. Positive things. Healing things, including the work of Darrell Scott.

Scott’s daughter Rachel was one of those killed at Columbine. And he was devastated, as any parent would be. But he has refused to be stuck in anger. He has not only offered forgiveness, he has written several books, and spoken to thousands and thousands, about the futility of hatred.

In a television interview, Scott spoke about forgiveness. “[It] has to do with the attitude of the heart,” he told the interviewer. “pardon has to do with the judicial system. I would not have pardoned [the two shooters] Eric and Dylan. They were responsible for their actions, but I could not harbor anger, bitterness and hatred, because it would have ruined my life, and my daughter wouldn’t have wanted that.” (*American Morning with Paula Zahn*, CNN, 10-29-02))

**Few of us here have anything as traumatic to forgive as those parents from Columbine, or Nickels Mines. But most of us have been wronged at one time or another. And some of us may be holding on to the anger and hatred that have grown out of those wrongs. Has your boss cheated you out of a promotion? Has a sibling lied about your actions and got you in trouble with your parents? Has your spouse or partner caused your heart to break with thoughtless words or actions? Has a friend betrayed your confidence and told others your deepest secrets? What will you do about it? Will you live in bitterness, or will you forgive?**

**Enos Miller lost a great deal last week, for two of the five girls killed in that schoolhouse were his granddaughters. I can't imagine losing two of my grandchildren. When asked if he had forgiven the shooter, he said, "In my heart yes, through God's help." (CT Post, 10-5-06, B5) That help is available to you and me as well.**

**Friends, as Christians, you and I are called to forgive those who harm us. Sometimes it will seem impossible, but like Enos, with God's help, we can do just that. If necessary, we can do it over and over and over again.**

**We have a choice. Will we live in hatred, in anger, in bitterness. Or will we ask God to give us the strength to forgive? Will we be imprisoned by pain, or will we seek a future of freedom and hope?**

**Forgiveness is many things, but in the end, it is a choice.**

**How will you choose? How will you live?**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**