

Forgiving Seventy Times Seven

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Countless pages have been written by scholars around the world, who all have opinions about the “ideal” education. Books upon books can be read instructing teachers to recognize and eliminate prejudice, to teach conflict resolution, and to teach children to become productive members of society. Regardless of the credentials of the authors, there is one thing sadly lacking from such books, and from all modern education: the truth of God’s holy word. It’s no wonder that young people of the world turn to juvenile delinquency and violence to resolve conflicts. Because of the depravity of the human race, it is vital for the Christian school teacher to emphasize each day that we must love and forgive our neighbor as Christ also loves and forgives us.

It is every Christian teacher’s duty to instruct the covenant youth concerning their responsibility towards a brother who has sinned against them. But before this can be done properly, the teacher had better recognize the depravity of both him/herself and the students. The Canons of Dordt, Heads Three and Four, Article Two states, “All men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto.” The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 2, Question and Answer 5 also teach that we are prone by nature to hate God and our neighbor.

In order for true, covenant education to take place, a “child must, in the totality of his nature and in the development of every aspect of his nature, be spiritually nurtured... Sanctified children must be taught and disciplined to be holy” (Engelsma, 68-69). This means that when a student has been sinned against by a fellow student, the godly teacher must teach him or her to respond according to the principles set forth in Scripture.

As I hope to be an elementary teacher, Lord willing, I have thought about this whole issue in regard to teaching young children. Contemplating how I might convey the truth of Scripture when a young student sins against another student, I believe there are three closely related principles to set forth. They are simple enough to be understood and carried out even by young children.

First and foremost is that of forgiveness. The Bible teaches a lot about forgiveness; therefore, we can teach children a lot about forgiveness. God repeatedly forgave Israel for falling into sin. Even the holiest of men, such as David, Solomon, and Paul, had to be forgiven of grievous sins. How much more are we and our children in need of forgiveness each day? In Lord’s Day 51, Question and Answer 126, we are taught: “Which is the fifth petition? And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ’s blood, not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions, nor that depravity which always cleaves to us; even as we feel this evidence of Thy grace in us, that it is *our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbors*” (emphasis mine). Years ago, Rev. Vos wrote an article entitled *Forgive* in the Standard Bearer. In it he stated, “We are at a loss to rightly evaluate our debt. It is endless. So we sing. “Endless is the love of God!”

Because God loves us, He demonstrates that eternal love by washing away all of our sins in the blood of Christ. “The Christian school teacher should be one who always lives in the

conscious presence of the Eternal Source of grace and love” (Boerkoel, 475). We, as teachers, must constantly forgive the wrongs of our students, and also teach them to forgive one another. We may not just forgive someone when we feel like it; on the contrary, there is to be no end to our forgiveness, just as there is no limit to God’s love and forgiveness. Jesus taught Peter in Matthew 18:22 that the brother is to be forgiven seventy times seven—thereby implying that we must forgive over and over, not just a mere 490 times.

The second principle to teach children is that we must not only forgive, but we must forgive from the heart. When a student has been wronged by another student, Christian teachers ought to teach the children more than just “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.” It is too easy to spit these phrases out just for the satisfaction of our parents and teachers, and not because we really mean them. “If we forgive from the heart, that is, if Divine mercy flows through our heart to our fellow servants that sin against us, we will receive greater mercy” (Vos, 376).

Forgiving from the heart entails that the sin is dismissed and not held against the sinner. This is a demonstration of God’s love in us; if God held our sins against us, we could have no hope of life eternal. As Hebrews 8:12 teaches, God “will be merciful to [our] unrighteousness, and [our] sins and iniquities will [He] remember no more.” Likewise, truly forgiving our neighbor means that we do not hold grudges. We do not refuse to speak to the person for days on end. We do not speak badly of the person or refuse to have contact with them. Only by the grace of God can teachers and students see the mercy of God toward their own sins, and thereby extend mercy to our neighbors.

The third principle that godly teachers need to demonstrate to their students has to do with Christ’s command to love our neighbors as ourselves. If a brother has sinned against us and we have forgiven him, we may not just stop at that. No. Because we may not hold grudges, we are to go the opposite direction and serve our neighbor. A wonderful reminder of this is found in Galatians 5:13-14, which states, “...use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Not only must students be taught to forgive from the heart, but also, they need to serve each other—even if this involves actions as simple as sharing a glue stick, answering a question, or holding the door open.

In order to love and serve the neighbor, our covenant children must also learn from early on that they must not go around looking for faults in their neighbor. It is so easy for our human natures to see the shortcomings in others and not ourselves. Rather than running to tattle-tale to the teacher what so-and-so did, even children need to be taught to first look at the beam in their own eye. As [Galatians 6:1-3](#) puts it, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.”

The importance of Christian schools and teachers can not be emphasized enough. As Prof. Engelsma wrote, “The activity of rearing covenant children in the nurture and admonition of Christ is only done by means of Scripture” (Engelsma, 22). Because depravity exists in teachers and students, it is necessary for teachers to rely on God’s infallible Word as the only guide for faith and life. This means that when a student of mine has been sinned against by another, I will not just make the offender put his/her head down or write lines. I will teach the children to forgive each other willingly, and from the heart, as God has so willingly forgiven us. I recognize that I myself am weak and sinful; therefore, by daily prayer I will seek God’s mercy to

carry out His task of instructing the covenant youth. And only in prayer will I rest assured of God's forgiveness when I have not done so properly.

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