

How does Forgiveness Work in a Victim-based, Blame culture?



There is little doubt in my mind that, here in Britain, we now live in a predominantly victim-based, blame culture; but what does that mean?

It means that we allow the things we have suffered and the wrongs we have experienced to become a key part of our identity. Psychologists now talk of the 'chosen trauma' that defines us.

It means that for me as the victim, everything that I do and say is motivated by love and if you don't agree with me, you hate me. It means that if you love me, you will affirm me and tell me exactly what I want to hear.

This, I believe, is a serious state of affairs which I want to look at initially from 4 different perspectives: the individual, the organisation, society, and then nationally/inter-nationally.

The Individual.

The German psychologist, Stephen Karpman, came up with the idea of 'The Drama Triangle' which an individual may use in the context of their relationships. This involves them taking up one of 3 positions – victim, persecutor, or rescuer (saviour).

The person taking up a **victim** position has an attitude of helplessness. They can't do anything, they don't know anything, they can't achieve anything. They always need others to support them, they never stop complaining about their circumstances and they put their own responsibilities onto the shoulders of others.

The **persecutor**, however, tends to keep him/herself on the outside of any situation. They judge others severely, pointing out their mistakes and failures and have the mindset 'I'm going to make you pay.'

The person taking up a **rescuer** (saviour) stance takes other people's problems and responsibilities onto their own shoulders. They are intent on pleasing others and like to ride in and rescue them from any situation, irrespective of the cost to them personally.

Victims often attract rescuers and vice versa, (they need each other) but the important thing to remember is that we can all swap interchangeably between these 3 roles.

For example, a victim can suddenly become a persecutor; a persecutor may turn and become a rescuer and a rescuer might suddenly decide to go into victim mode!

Everyone is playing their own game as a way of taking control and all 3 positions are manipulative in their own way.

The Organisation.

The impact of a victim-based blame culture on an organisation is that the priority, for those working in it, is to cover their own backs and focus on their own preservation. People seek to shift responsibility onto someone else so that **they** will get the blame if anything goes wrong.

As a result, public and patient safety, customer service, staff morale etc. inevitably suffers and creativity within the organisation is inhibited because folks are afraid of making mistakes. Also, there is often a fear of litigation and a high staff turnover.

Society.

In a predominantly victim-based culture, society breaks down into victim groups. These are often to do with racial, religious, political and gender-based issues.

No one can say anything about other victim groups because that would be persecutory. Only those within a victim group can speak about their group; their mindset is, 'if you are outside of our group keep your opinions to yourself, we don't want anything to do with you!'

Some of the most powerful words in our society today are, 'I am offended by what you believe, what you say, what you do.'

A recent example has been JK Rowling returning an award, associated with the US Kennedy family, after she was criticised for expressing her views on gender and trans issues.

Rowling couldn't accept the phrase 'people who menstruate' rather than 'women who menstruate.'

But to speak those words, according to Kerry Kennedy, is to create a narrative that diminishes the identity of trans and non-binary people, undermining the validity and integrity of the entire transgender community. One that disproportionately suffers from violence, discrimination, harassment and exclusion and, as a result, experiences high rates of suicide, suicide attempts, homelessness, and mental and bodily harm.

Nationally/Inter-nationally.

It is also easy to see the dynamics of the 'drama triangle' working themselves out in the context of national/international affairs. The victim, persecutor and rescuer (saviour) dynamics are often at the heart of wars. Take WW2 as an example.

Hitler was able to persuade the German people that they were all victims; victims of the Peace Treaty of Versailles signed at the end of WW1, victims of the Nations round about them who hated them, victims of the Jews who were stealing from them, victims of the Communists who wanted to bring about social unrest and cause a revolution, victims of the Political Elites who were oppressing them.

And Hitler was the one to rescue/save them from all this by creating an inclusive, folk community where there would be a place for every German.

The problem is that when a victim mentality becomes a powerful cultural force it is utterly destructive; victims suddenly switch and become powerful persecutors instead.

Sometimes a 'national victim psyche' can lay dormant, not only for decades but also for centuries, before coming back to life. This was the case in the Balkan Wars of the 1990's.



In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic, the Serb President, gave a speech to about a million people at the site of the Battle of Kosovo which took place 600 years earlier in 1389. The Serb leader then was Prince Lazar, who was regarded as a messianic saviour figure who gave his life for the Christian Orthodox cause against the Muslim Ottoman Turks.

Milosevic waved pictures of himself and Lazar to the crowd and the Orthodox Church paraded Lazar's remains.

All this had the effect of stirring up nationalistic Serb feelings against Bosnian Muslims, ethnic Albanian Kosovans, Croats etc. so that eventually 122,000 were killed or missing in the conflict that followed.

The Dynamics of Unforgiveness and Forgiveness.

Wherever there is unforgiveness there are feelings of hurt, anger, bitterness, a sense of injustice and, often, powerlessness.

This has led Michael Linden, the German psychiatrist, to coin the phrase Post Traumatic Embitterment Disorder (P.T.E.D.), an emotional state of feeling let down and being unable to do anything about it.

Of course, if we have genuinely been the victim of some crime or wrongdoing then pretending that it hasn't occurred is not going to help. Forgiveness is not about denying the reality of what has happened or the wrong that has been done.

But in order to experience the freedom of forgiveness we have to be willing to let go of anger, bitterness etc.

Nelson Mandela wrote: 'As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.' (Symphony of Love).

We also have to take positive steps to be reconciled to our adversaries and not leave things to drag on.

As Jesus said, 'Settle matters quickly with your adversary' otherwise things could spiral out of control and we could end up in the prison of unforgiveness (Mt. 5:25 &26).

Having said this, however, it is not possible to be reconciled to someone who doesn't wish to be reconciled; all we can do in those circumstances is to make sure we are free from bitterness and resentment, continue to pray for those concerned and hope the situation might change.

The Parable of the Debt Collectors.

Jesus' parable of the debt collectors (Mt. 18:21-35) reminds us that whenever a sin is committed a debt is created and someone has to pay that debt. This is one of God's universal laws, as predictable and certain as the law of gravity.

And there are 3 ways in which the debt of sin can be paid: -

1. We can try and pay it ourselves by storing up bitterness and resentment which may well affect us physically, mentally and spiritually. It is even possible that we might try and compensate for our errors by becoming excessively involved in 'good works'.
2. Or we can make others pay the debt by becoming a persecutor; grabbing the person round the throat and making them pay up.
3. Or we can acknowledge that Jesus has paid the debt by his death on the cross for our own sins and we can therefore show the person who has wronged us that same forgiveness and mercy.

This parable reminds us that 'judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful' (James 2:13).

As Christians, there is no alternative – the Lord taught us to pray each day 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'.

Neither is there such a thing as unconditional forgiveness; only if we forgive others will we ourselves be forgiven by God (Mt. 6:12-15).

And we are to love and pray for those who persecute us (Mt. 5:44).

Jesus chose to be a willing victim in order to be our rescuer/Saviour. If he has paid the enormous debt associated with my own sins, we must be willing to forgive the lesser sins that we may have suffered at the hands of others.

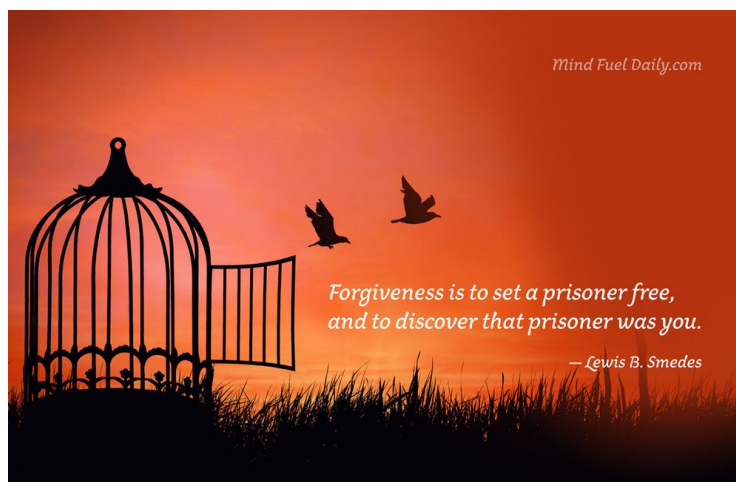
However, there is a cost in this; the greater the wrong suffered, the more difficult it can be to forgive and the longer the process may take.

I remember once talking to a man whose daughter had been murdered. He told me how hard it had been for him to forgive the perpetrator, but God had said to him, "They murdered my son, I know how you feel."

Ultimately, however, forgiveness brings freedom.

Bitterness and unforgiveness tie us to the past and make it more difficult to see God's goodness in the present. And because Jesus has been a willing victim on our behalf, we no longer need to assume a victim position ourselves; past wrongs we may have suffered don't need to define who we are now or determine our future.

We can also bring the gospel message of rescue/salvation to those who are still trapped in prisons of unforgiveness.



Forgiveness and Memory.

One of the wonderful things about God's forgiveness is that when we repent of our sins, he not only forgives those sins but he forgets them as well. They are wiped out/erased from his memory.

There is a book by the Japanese author, Kazuo Ishiguro, called 'The Buried Giant' in which a mysterious mist descends and folks can no longer remember what happened more than a few weeks before.

All past hurts, resentments and wrongdoings have been erased from memory and this has quite an impact on individuals, society etc.

But gradually the mist starts to clear and people start to remember againand the 'Buried Giant' begins to stir.

Contrast that with what God promises:

"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake and remembers your sins no more" (Is.43:25).

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34b).

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journals*, "Belief in the forgiveness of sins means to believe that here in time the sin is forgotten by God, that it is really true that God forgets."

Forgiveness and Justice.

Forgiveness is often linked with a search for justice, but in our quest for justice, again we must always be driven by love, not bitterness, recrimination or anger.

The danger is that, like God's people of old and immersed as we are today in an angry, victim-based, blame culture, it is so easy for us to even 'turn justice/judgement into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground' (Amos 5:7).

It is in times of personal, national or global crisis, that the desire to cast around for someone to blame is heightened considerably. It is often a way of discharging our own pain and discomfort..... and so we are called to pray, at these times especially, 'Lord, have mercy on us, have mercy on us, and forgive us.'

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