

RELATIONSHIPS:

GRACE REQUIRED

Wayne Messner achieved the seemingly impossible when he returned to the Ice Arena in 1995 and sang the National Anthem for his hometown Chicago Black Hawks. Earlier, an assailant shot Messner through the neck, narrowly missed his vocal cords and left the popular singer with an uncertain future. When interviewed by WGN radio, Messner described three *F*'s holding his life together: *Faith, family and friends.*

The threatened loss of his singing career pushed Messner into an abyss of despair. After experiencing an empowerment of God's amazing grace, Messner confronted his challenge, took control of his behavior and visited his incarcerated attacker.

Winning this stranger's friendship transformed Messner's life and led to his forgiving his assailant. That act released his emotional ball-and-chain and allowed him to put it behind him. In extending forgiveness to his assailant during a prison visit, he discovered he "was released."

"The Eternal Now" concluded Alexander Pope, comes to us, because "To err is human, but to forgive is divine." Barry Callen describes this grace as "the rich soil in which we are enabled to participate in any redeemed future" (God as Loving Grace, *Evangel*, 1996, p. 10).

We build barrier-free buildings, but without the grace of God, we lack the necessary ingredients for lubricating satisfying human relationships. Successful relationships require the periodic lubrication of *mediating grace.*

Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12, RSV). "We will never construct

homogeneous communities without building personal relationships structured on forgiveness, mutual respect and

trust. Without people of good will to intermingle and share a common peace, we will fail in our attempts to build a barrier-free society.

No family, tribe or nation can experience lasting peace without the empowerment of Divine Grace. No two people can enjoy a serious friendship without incorporating God's anointing grace of forgiveness and reconciliation into their relationship.

Paul learned this when he became a disciple of Jesus Christ. When he met Jesus, he discovered the empowerment he needed to forgive others. His walk with Christ revealed life-enriching spiritual nutrients that transformed his life and resulted in his use of the greeting "Grace and peace...." (Philippians 1:2).

More than just a word, grace—*charis*—suggests a fullness of joy. Grace comes as freely as an undeserved gift. It is freely given and becomes liberating, without leaving anyone under obligation. Grace suggests a harmonious relationship that brings individuals—and nations—to peace and order, reconciled by God's mediating love. *Grace* suggests God's activity and attitude toward us, in which we experience personal peace. In turn, peace becomes our natural response to God and to others.

Paul's life left a roadmap detailing a full range of human experiences—good, bad and otherwise. His letter to the Philippians shares secrets of joy, peace and grace that we lack today.

Finally, he adds, "Make it your responsibility to initiate forgiveness" (Ephesians 4:26-27, author's paraphrase).

Family, community and global relationships suffer greatly today from a lack of forgiving spirits. Nothing torments damaged relationships like holding a grudge and maintaining an unforgiving

attitude. On the other hand, nothing promotes peace and tranquility more than forgiving wrong deeds. Nothing accelerates personal growth, or constructs warm and personal relationships like extending forgiveness.

Ron Lee Davis tells the true story of a priest in the Philippines—a much-loved man of God who carried a private burden of a secret sin he committed many years before. The priest repented often, but found no peace and felt no sense of God's forgiveness.

In his parish, there lived a woman who loved God deeply. She claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The priest remained skeptical. To test her he suggested, "The next time you speak with Christ, I want you to ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." The woman agreed.

A few days later the priest asked, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?"

"Yes, he did," she replied.

"And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said, 'I don't remember.'"

God forgets what he forgives, and as George Foreman argues: "If you want to love people, you've got to understand them." Foreman reasons that lions sometimes bite their trainers and people ask, "Why don't you kill it?" The trainer responds, suggests Foreman, "Because I made the mistake."

The animal was just doing what came natural to it; leaving Foreman to believe "It's strange that people understand that about animals but not about human beings. You've just got to forgive them" (Janet Kinoshian, *Modern Maturity*, 1999, p. 18). □

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