



ARTICLES

HENRY T. EDMONDSON III

## A New Year's Resolution

**It feels so good to hold a grudge—but when it is relinquished, the peace that follows is so much better.**

**We are often not in complete control of our relationships when we are hurt and offended. Sometimes the best we can do is take comfort in St. Paul's admonition, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12:18). Do what is**

**within your power to enjoy “clean” relationships, but accept when you have done all you can.**

**But the hard feelings we harbor are our responsibility, and letting them go may be the key to living a happy or “blessed” life, as Aristotle says. He further explains that true happiness can only come from those things that are completely within our control. External things—like money, beauty, health, and honor—may get the better of us, so the philosopher explains that they can’t be the key to happiness. It just wouldn’t make sense. Accordingly, offering or withholding forgiveness is our responsibility alone.**

We might draw inspiration from a song by the Americana band the Avett Brothers, which hails from North Carolina. The song is “[No Hard Feelings](#),” and it begins with a view to the end of life. (In the video, the disheveled-looking man in the control room is none other than famed music producer Rick Rubin.)

*When my body won't hold me anymore  
And it finally lets me free  
Will I be ready?  
When my feet won't walk another mile  
And my lips give their last kiss goodbye  
Will my hands be steady  
When I lay down my fears, my hopes, and my doubts?  
The rings on my fingers, and the keys to my house  
With no hard feelings.  
The lyrics then admit the futility of hanging on to “hard feelings”:  
Lord knows, they haven't done much good for anyone  
Kept me afraid and cold*

**As the adage goes, “Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”**

## **Forgiven Means Forgiving**

**It’s easy to think of a bitter grudge as our own personal property, to do with as we please. It is, however, just another species of self-indulgence, a witch’s brew of resentment and anger.** It differs little from the other more apparent types of self-gratification having to do with the appetites and passions: promiscuous sex, misuse of money, unrestrained ambition, and gluttony. **The only real difference is the pain that accompanies the offense. St. Paul elsewhere warns, “Be angry but do not sin.”**

Human beings remain deeply flawed and in need of mercy, not only from God, but from each other.

One of the most disgusting parables in the Gospels is that of the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18:21–35. Peter approaches Jesus to make sure the Lord didn’t expect the Apostles to take this forgiveness thing too far, beyond all reason. Peter, confident he knew the answer, came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter undoubtedly knew that the number seven has special theological significance. It occurs numerous times in the Old Testament and then later there are multiple occurrences in the New Testament. Among other things, it symbolizes perfection or completion. So, Peter was confident that seven times would be more than enough. Jesus undoubtedly stunned the disciple when he answered, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” meaning there is no limit.

Jesus then introduced the parable. It has to do with “a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” He brought in his slave and asked him about his debt. It was the impressive sum of “ten thousand talents” of gold. The biblical “talent” was

approximately 63 pounds, so that 10,000 talents would be about 630,000 pounds. The price of gold at the moment is wavering around \$2,636 per pound. The slave then owed, in today's figures, about \$1,660,680,000. Since the indebted slave was unable to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and children be sold into slavery. The parable continues: "The slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" The slave's master took pity on him and canceled the debt.

Unfortunately, that slave then went to one of his fellow slaves who owed him a much smaller amount, a mere "hundred denarii" or "silver coins" (NIV). This is a little harder to determine but today, one "silver coin" weighs one troy ounce, which costs at the moment \$29.61. So, let's say the second slave owed the first \$2,961. The first slave who had just received mercy, though, was unwilling to offer forgiveness to his companion and had the latter thrown into prison until he could pay. Word got back to the master; outraged, he called the slave in:

'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

Jesus then applies the analogy, sternly warning, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

### **We All Need Mercy**

Too often mercy seems in short supply. The adage, "Three strikes and you're out," has given way to something like, "One strike and you're out, even if that strike was thirty years ago, and it was inadvertent or done in ignorance." In September of 1963, Tolkien responded to a reader who had asked, in respect to Lord of the Rings, if Frodo was a failure because in the last moments of

his heroic quest, the hobbit refused to cast the One Ring into the fires of Mordor. Rather, in a frightening, desperate reversal, he claimed the Ring as his own rightful possession. Middle Earth lucked out, however, because Gollum intervened one last time: He attacked Frodo and bit his finger off to recapture his “Precious.”

In the scuffle, though, Gollum lost his balance such that both creature and Ring fell into the consuming fire. So although the mission was accomplished, it happened serendipitously because Frodo gave out before he could finish the task for which he had volunteered. As I’ve written at [more length elsewhere](#), Tolkien explains that Frodo was not a “failure,” but rather strove to the extent of his ability; he had gradually deteriorated every step of his quest because what he carried was, so to speak, radioactive. He did his best, and so he deserves our sympathy and understanding.

Tolkien further explains that Frodo deserves mercy because he had shown Gollum mercy ever since he and Samwise had captured the creature amidst the rocky crags of the Eryn Mui. Frodo then began to address Gollum with his previous hobbit name, Smeagol, and a hope grew that Gollum could and would return to his former, uncorrupted self—were it not for a harsh word from Samwise, who understandably was focused on the protection of his “master,” Frodo.

### **The Human Condition: “True Sadness” and “Happy Fault”**

**No matter the frequency of the sacraments, nor the devotion to Scripture, nor the commitment to charitable works, human beings remain deeply flawed and in need of mercy, not only from God, but from each other.** The Avett Brothers help again with their 2016 song “[True Sadness](#).” It is a commentary on the human condition:

*Cause I still wake up shaken by dreams  
And I hate to say it but the way it seems  
Is that no one is fine  
Take the time to peel a few layers  
And you will find  
True sadness.*

**The reward of a relationship cleared by sincere forgiveness is something more—to use the military phrase—than the status quo ante bellum: “the way things were before the war.” Rather, they are made better than they were before the commencement of hostilities.** The Easter Vigil Mass offers the memorable line, “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer.” **Redemption doesn’t just clear away sin; the redemption of a relationship means conditions may be, in some way or another, superior to what was before.** In Psalm 84, the phrase the “Valley of Baca” is meant by the Psalmist metaphorically, as a figurative place of bitterness, of tears—a valley that once trekked, produces something amended and upgraded, new and improved. Here is the relevant passage:

*Happy are those whose strength is in you,  
As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength*

So many New Year’s Resolutions don’t even make it to the Super Bowl. **Perhaps this can be a year of “no hard feelings.”**

## TOPICS

- [Forgiveness](#)

- [Mercy](#)

## BIBLE REFERENCES

- Romans 12:18,
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- Matthew 18:21-35
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Henry T. (Hank) Edmondson III is award-winning, Carl Vinson Professor of Political Science and Public Administration (Emeritus) at Georgia College and State University. He has lectured widely in the U.S., Europe, Taiwan, and China and has served as a Visiting Professor in Beijing and Guatemala. His rather eclectic interests and writings include Literature and Philosophy, Political Philosophy, Constitutional Law, American Government, European Government, Contemporary Culture, and Education Philosophy. His books include [The Moral of the Story: Literature and Public Ethics](#) (2000), [Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism](#) (2005), [John Dewey and the Decline of American Education: How the Patron Saint of Schools Has Corrupted Teaching and Learning](#) (2006), [The Course of Human Events: American Government for the 21st Century](#) (2021), [What Would the American Founders Do? Leadership Principles From the Federalist Papers](#) (2024), [Imagining Europe: Essays on the Past, Present, and Future of the European Union](#), (2021), and [A Political Companion to Flannery O'Connor](#) (2017). You may find him and his chocolate lab Katie out on the river or the lake fly fishing. He can be followed on X @HankEdmondson1