

“Breathing Under Water: Step 8 Payback Time”
Matthew 5:23-24

Apologizing for our mistakes is not one of our national hallmarks. Our political leaders don't often apologize as such apologies are considered to be signs of weakness. But our friends to the North, the Canadians are often known for their politeness and good manners when it comes to apologies. Here is an example. In 2016, there was a little incident in the House of Commons where Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accidentally hit two opposition members of parliament—grabbing one Conservative by the arm and then inadvertently elbowing a New Democrat in the chest. Let's watch the incident. Elbowgate -Canada: <https://youtu.be/FrLhYhk4a8>. And here is one of the many apologies Trudeau had to make: <https://youtu.be/DeJ4zucC0xY>.

This incident became known as “Elbowgate,” which was an exaggeration for the wrong done. The public and political nature of the events took away from the real spirit of the apology for the harm done. But setting that aside, I share this as an introduction to Step 8 which calls us to be aware of the harm we have done and the people we have hurt. Step 8 states (screen), “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.” It is much easier to make a list of the people who have harmed us. This comes to us naturally because our egos keep track of that, but if we look at the list of people we have harmed, we have to do some digging because we often justify our actions and rationalize the harm we have caused. This step is counter-intuitive but has tremendous power to release us and the people we have harmed. In his book *Breathing Under Water*, Richard Rohr writes (screen), “God fully forgives us, but the ‘karma’ of our mistakes remains, and we must still go back and repair the bonds that we have broken. Otherwise others will not be able to forgive us, will remain stuck, and we will both remain a wounded world....’Amazing grace’ is not a way to avoid honest human relationships, but to redo them -but now gracefully -for the liberation of both sides.”

In the Big Book of AA Step Eight is about taking concrete steps to (Screen) “repair the damage done in the past, to sweep away the debris which has accumulated out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves. If we haven't the will to do this, we continue to ask God until it comes.” (A.A. Big Book, p.76).

Jesus was fully aware of the importance of clearing this debris. In our scripture for today, we hear a call from Jesus to abandon a sacred duty to fulfill a greater mission for healing and justice in the world. At the time of Jesus, offering sacrifices to God at the temple was seen as central to one's religious duty and life. In fact, some believed that offering animal sacrifices at the temple could take the place of having to make amends for wrongs done. Jesus used an interpretive method of scripture where not every line would be given the same weight. We call this today: “Weighing the scriptures.” Some scriptures carry heavier weight than others. Jesus saw that the heavier scriptures were the ones related to justice, mercy, and faith. This didn't mean that the lighter scriptures were to be neglected. It just meant that the heavier ones were supposed to take priority if there was to be a conflict or if the lighter law was going to get in the way of obeying the heavier law. Let's listen to Jesus applying this method to when it comes to reconciliation and making amends.

Jesus gave more weight in his teachings to justice and mercy which led him to teach that making an offering in worship was to be secondary to making amends with those one might have harmed. As a result, Jesus dealt with the root causes of our human struggles. The part we are focusing on has to do with unresolved anger and hurt. Jesus knew that violence does not begin with murder. It begins with our negative and angry thoughts about others. Jesus was not denouncing anger in general. He was talking about a specific kind of anger, the anger that is a continual state of being. He was talking about holding grudges and stewing in our angry feelings. Unresolved anger can lead us into violent thoughts, words and even actions. Jesus invited the listeners to be proactive about seeking reconciliation. Even as one is doing their religious duty of bringing their offerings to God, one has to leave that duty and get their affairs in order before being truly able to pray and to be present to God. An open heart to God comes from our ability to resolve and complete our relationships. Not making amends creates barriers for us and not just with the people we have hurt, but also with our ability to feel whole and open to others.

One of the most powerful movies I have watched about anger and hate is “Munich.” It is based on the book *Vengeance*, an account of Operation Wrath of God, the Israeli government's secret retaliation against the Palestine Liberation Organization after the Munich massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics. The idea was getting revenge on the people who killed the 11 Israeli Olympians. This was supposed to make the Israeli's feel better about their loss. But at the end of the day, revenge made things worse. Here is a clip from a dialogue between two of the members of the group that was supposed to exact the revenge: <https://youtu.be/1i82-3RUPw>. Holding on to grudges creates more pain and emotional debris in our lives. It robs us of the ability to find healing and wholeness.

Today we are invited to make a list of the people we have harmed and to become willing to make amends. I know that this is no easy task. Yet, we approach this task with faith and with the grace of God knowing that it will help set us and others free.

Here is an example of the power of such a step. During the Vietnam War, an 18 year old soldier by the name of Richard Luttrell, on his very first tour, made his way through the hot jungle, totally exhausted, when he sees a young Vietcong soldier pointing his rifle at him. For some reason the young Vietnamese man doesn't shoot, so they stare at each other before Richard shoots and kills him. When he got closer to the dead man, the first man he ever shot, he saw a picture sticking out of the cap of the other man with a young girl on it. And he takes it with him. For decades Richard kept the picture in his wallet, staring at it often, his stomach burning with the pain of guilt for having taken the life of the father of that young girl. He started a search for the young girl that took 10 years, until he was able to return to Vietnam to give that picture back to her, now grown, to make amends and to ask for her forgiveness. Here is a clip of when he returned the photograph, part of an NBC dateline special: <https://youtu.be/fMQEcMKQF4c>. The girl forgave Richard and it was this that allowed the healing process to continue – the process of letting go of the guilt that had been with the man for such a long time.

May we be blessed by courage and God's grace to become aware of the harm we caused and the relationships we need to complete. May you trust God to show you the way for this difficult and amazing step! Amen.