

FAMILIES THAT THRIVE

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

Don't Get Even

I will never forget it. It isn't a painful memory. It's rather amusing. We weren't very good at sharing a bed. Whenever we were on vacation or visiting our grandparents, my brother and I had to share a bed. At home, we shared a room, but we had separate beds (they were bunk beds, which we thought pretty cool). But the spare bedroom at our grandparent's home had one bed for two brothers. That meant trouble.

In retrospect, I can see that as children, we had an awful lot in common with primates (and some canines, for that matter). We were a bit territorial. Every night, when lights were out, one of us would say, "I don't want you touching my side of the bed." Each of us had an idea where the middle of the bed was. I'm pretty sure that we both located the middle several inches into the other's territory.

Sometimes, things would get ugly. One of us might push the other, or give the other what we regarded as a tap. If my brother tapped me, then I would tap him back. I would always measure my tap to be slightly harder than his tap. In my book, I was getting even. What we didn't realize at the time was that we didn't really get even. What we actually tried to do was to cause the other just a touch more discomfort than he had caused us. And once taps had crossed the line into hitting, we were calculating our hits to cause the other just a little more pain than we had received.

From there, things would escalate. They would end with one of us in tears (more often than not, my brother, because he was younger). Once he was in tears, the referees would come in and charge me with a personal foul ("You're older and you should know better!"). They were right, of course. I was older, and I should have known better, but at the time, I didn't like their logic.

Why was that? Probably because I wasn't trying to be logical. I was trying to get even, and the fallacy of getting even is that you can't. At best, it is difficult to get even. It is probably impossible. The truth is that getting even only makes matters worse. When we're at odds with someone else, we keep score differently. We always think that we are right. We are both scorekeepers, and we keep different scores. We take offense, we get hurt, and we nurse our wounds. And because wounds hurt, we want others to bear the hurt—to feel our pain. Somehow, we think we will feel better if the other hurts more than we do. After all, I am in the right!

This is why forgiveness is so essential to relationships that thrive. The truth is that we can't get even. It isn't possible because our scores never agree.

So what do we do? I have found that it's helpful to recognize that because we are human, conflict is inevitable. One of the reasons it is inevitable is that humans make mistakes. Another is that we are prone to selfishness—all of us. We are also prone to think of ourselves as right and others as wrong.

The problem is that when we try to even the score or to punish others, things almost always get worse. We then have this nasty habit of nursing our wounds until they degenerate into bitterness. If our bitterness then ossifies, we are in trouble and our relationships are in trouble.

This is why the art of forgiveness is essential to relationships that thrive. When I forgive, I recognize that I can't get even. God alone knows the score. I also recognize what my own bitterness does to me: It makes me hostile, chronically resentful, and not such a nice person to be around. It also helps when I recognize that it takes two to tangle with each other.

But even if the other person is totally in the wrong, when I do the hard, mature work of embracing the grace to forgive, everyone wins, including me. By forgiving, I release all of us from the debt we owe each other. I free myself from my own bitterness and resentment, and I liberate both of us for a fresh start.

We can really thrive if we mutually commit to a climate of grace and forgiveness in which we are all free to make mistakes, while at the same time doing our best to honor and love each other. That's when our relationships thrive.