



Math: Math and Forgiveness

What if success in math depended on forgiveness?

Joshua taught math in high school and was perplexed by the lack of progress of one student.

"I was puzzled. James was a bright young man who was succeeding in his other subjects, but seemed to lose his way when it came to math. His behavior was fine, although I did detect an underlying antagonism that confused me. 'I just don't like math' was his constant refrain. 'It doesn't make sense.' Since his career prospects would be radically different depending on whether he passed or failed math, I took the matter further and arranged a conversation in my office. I did some diagnostic tests, which he agreed to; fortunately, I was able to diagnose the particular difficulty involved. James's math results began to improve and he passed his exam.

"The reason James passed his math test was not because I had improved my teaching techniques or had solved the problems the diagnostic tests revealed inhibiting his learning. Actually, the turning point came when James said, 'I'm no good at math. My teacher in elementary school told me that.' James recounted the story of how a teacher had held up one of his math assignments as an example of how not to approach a problem. 'I was so angry and upset,' James explained, 'that I vowed that I would never learn math for the rest of my life.' We talked about the incident for a little while; then, I decided to challenge him. 'James, you are never going to pass math if you continue to harbor this resentment against that teacher,' I told him. 'You have to forgive her.' He didn't accept this right away, but after further conversation, he told me that after praying about it he had realized that he needed to let go of his resentment, and had forgiven his teacher."

What's going on here?

Joshua saw math as something that also fits in a wider human context. He saw his math students in a holistic way; as spiritual beings, not just intellectual ones. This enabled him to see forgiveness as related to learning.

He **engaged** students in connecting failure to moral and spiritual dimensions of experience, and challenged them to make a personal response.

Joshua **reshaped his practice** by making space to work closely enough with an individual student to get to the heart of the problem; by asking questions that suggested connections between the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual in math, and by persevering with a failing student.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Love in Christian teaching is far more than feelings for another person. It's about consistently looking to the interests of others and doing what we know is right in our relationships with them, no matter how we may feel. Developing the ability to love may not seem relevant to teaching math, but this incident brings home how much a failure to love can stunt a person, even in their development as a mathematician. It can erode their hope that they can succeed and flourish in a particular area of learning. In this case, forgiveness was needed for the student to move forward.

What difference does it make?

As teachers, with test scores to worry about and academic progress to report on, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that our students are not simply intellectual beings. This is especially the case in an educational system that focuses our attention on mastery of concepts and acquisition of skills. This example reminds us again that intellectual development cannot be separated from other areas of a student's life. This incident emphasize again the importance of thinking of students as spiritual beings, not just as intellectual machines focused on producing results.

Where could we go from here?

This example of an encounter that leads to an unexpected insight points to an intentional approach that can pervade our teaching. Instead of just asking, "How can I teach so that my students are equipped for their exams?" I can also ask, "How can I teach in a way that

accounts for the fact that my students are whole, spiritual beings?" This will result in a number of changes. For example, it will make us more sensitive to the impact of certain emotions, like grief or anxiety, on students' learning. It also will cause us to create space for these emotions to be acknowledged and, where necessary, for action to be taken. Or, it might mean that we give time to looking at the wider context in which math is set. For example, if the school is involved in a charity initiative, lessons could be focused on how skills in math can achieve desired goals in that initiative. Thinking in this way means that math is contributing not just to intellectual development, but also to the development of the whole person.

Digging deeper

A University of Pittsburgh study of 680 women with chest pain found those who harbored feelings of anger were four times more likely to have unhealthy cholesterol levels and a higher body mass index, both of which are linked to heart disease. Forgiveness is good for our health.

Forgiving others is one of the most difficult aspects of Christian practice. It is not surprising that the poet Alexander Pope said, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." Forgiveness means ceasing to feel resentment toward an enemy, but that does not mean that evil is allowed to continue. Sometimes justice and making amends still need to happen. Forgiveness often is the first step toward reconciliation in a relationship. For Christians, forgiveness is a response to being forgiven by God; it was modeled by Christ, who forgave his enemies (Luke 23:24) and offers forgiveness to all who come to him. Asking God for forgiveness should result in our forgiving others (Matthew 6:14-15; Colossians 3:13). Forgiveness is not just a feeling; as Corrie Ten Boom has written, "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive. C. S. Lewis

Forgiveness only happens with the help of God but it benefits both the injured person and the one forgiven.

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. Lewis B. Smedes

However difficult, forgiveness is crucial; for we who forgive will also need forgiving.

He who cannot forgive others destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass. George Herbert

In the Bible, God is shown as slow to anger but quick to forgive, since mercy is central to his character ([Micah 7:18](#)). Various word pictures are used for forgiveness in the Bible. [Psalm 103:12](#) talks about God putting our sins as far away as the east is from the west. [Isaiah 1:18](#) compares forgiveness to removing a stain. One of the New Testament words for forgiveness means canceling a debt.



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