

DIOCESE WIDE Lenten Book Study



Chapter Two Reflection

The Second Word: *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

By Elizabeth Kelly

Getting to Forgiven

Some years ago, a woman told a lie about me that caused some serious harm and was tremendously painful to bear. After many months had passed, out of the blue, she sent me an email, something along the lines of "If I hurt you, I'm sorry." We've all gotten these: the non-apology, apology. It was, I thought, cowardly, and did very little to repair the damage that had been done.

On the other hand, I've received some very sincere and blessed apologies, too. One from a dear friend who years earlier had done something that needed forgiving. By the time he got around to asking for forgiveness, I had long since forgiven him, but I will never forget the sense of freedom that was unleashed in him in naming the offense, claiming it before me, and asking for forgiveness. Such joy it brought to us to see God's grace at work flowing freely between us and further cementing our friendship with one another and with the Lord we both loved so dearly.

This Lent has me thinking about the tricky and nuanced work of forgiveness; that is, where I need to ask for forgiveness. Where do I need to make real amends? Where is it not enough to name it in the confessional, but instead to shrug off all cowardice and pride, name my offense in plain language without excuses to the one I have harmed, and ask for their forgiveness? Have I done all that I am able and obligated to do in order to help facilitate forgiveness in the one I have wounded?

Before the Altar

I love—and occasionally dread—the passage in Matthew where Jesus tells us most plainly, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift" (5:23–24). I find these verses to be an excellent and effective examen before Mass. And I confess that on more than one occasion, this passage has turned me around before receiving Communion in a most unworthy condition.



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Of course, getting to forgiveness is not always a perfectly tidy, linear operation, and I am not advocating for scrupulosity. Sometimes our hurts flare up long after we've sincerely forgiven someone, revealing another little corner of resentment that still needs to be swept out. It does not mean that our apology was somehow flawed if someone we've harmed has not yet forgiven us, or not forgiven us fully, or needs to forgive us again. We forgive in layers, working out our "seventy times seven" along an often bumpy and unpredictable road.

Sometimes our apologies are not received in the moment we offer them. That's all right. True and worthy apologies don't have an expiration date. A heart can "catch up" so to speak at a later time, and I want to hope for that in another.

If you tend toward an exaggerated scrupulosity, maybe you don't need to pray about this. For my part, I am more tempted to diminish my sins and their damage. For those like me, let's not waste any opportunity to be reconciled with those we have hurt. Let's resolve to trust in the power of God's grace and beg his clarifying love to flow freely mending all our soul-fissures where it will.

Merciful Jesus, your grace can never be exhausted. Help me to look at my sins honestly, and with courage, to ask simply and without excuses for forgiveness where it is most needed. Amen.

