

The Forgiving Landlord



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To help explain the two sides of the Atonement, let me try a rather homely analogy. Like most analogies and metaphors, it is not perfect in all respects. I hope, though, that it can aid understanding.

Suppose I find myself in a home built for me by a very generous landlord. It is a nice home. He encourages me to maintain and improve the home and gives me a number of instructions for making the home a nice place to live.

Over the years I sometimes improve the home, but other times, through my negligence, I make it worse. One time I flood the home when I fail to set the faucets to drip during a freeze. Another time my kitchen catches fire because I fail to turn off a burner on the stove. A couple of times I lose my temper and put my fist through a wall.

In each instance the landlord forgives me and encourages me to pay a little closer attention to my home and to his instructions for making the home a joyful place to live. He does not charge me for the damage caused by my mistakes. Instead, sometimes he is patient while I figure out how to fix things on my own; sometimes he sends someone over to fix the problem; and sometimes I wake up and things are fixed in ways I don't quite understand.

This same landlord happens to have a son who is quite wayward. The son is always up to no good, and I don't particularly like or respect him. One night the landlord's son,

as a prank, sets fire to the shed attached to the back of my house. The fire gets out of control, and the entire house burns down. I lose the home. I lose all of my possessions, including some particularly valuable possessions that I can't replace, such as photos and heirlooms.

I'm angry and distraught. I want the no-good son to pay. I want him to fix things and to make me whole. A part of me knows he can't really make it better. He may not have the resources to rebuild the house, and, even if he could rebuild the house, he can't retrieve the photos and heirlooms. And that makes me even angrier.

As I sit in anger, the landlord comes to visit me. He reminds me that he has promised to take care of me. He promises me that he is willing to rebuild my house. In fact, he says that he will do more than that: he will replace my house with a castle and then give me all that he himself has. He says that this might take a while, but he promises it will happen.

"What's the catch?" I say.

"Here are the conditions," he says. "First, you need to put your faith in me and trust that I really will build you that castle and restore all that you have lost. Second, you need to continue to work on implementing the instructions I gave you about keeping up your house. Finally, you need to forgive my arsonist son, just as I have forgiven you all these many years."

That sounds easy enough and seems like an obviously great deal, but why might it be hard for the tenant to accept the landlord's offer? Or, to move away from the analogy, why is it sometimes so hard for us to forgive others? Let me suggest some reasons:

First, we are probably angry. We want the arsonist to pay. But if we harbor this sort of anger, we may spend so much time

pursuing the person who burned down our house that we don't get around to rebuilding our house. As someone once said: "Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies."

It might also be hard to forgive because we can't quite believe that the landlord will fulfill his promise. He's never failed us when we've messed up the house before, but what about this time? Besides, it is usually easier for us to believe that the Lord will forgive our mistakes. This time it is someone else's mistake.

Trust can be particularly difficult if the rebuilding project will take time. We want things fixed now, not later. Trust may also be hard in the case of losses and hurts that do not seem easily fixable. Perhaps the landlord can rebuild the home, but can he really replace the photos and heirlooms? What if we lost a child in the fire? Can he really take away that pain?

My testimony is that the Atonement really can make us completely whole, even for those things that seem like they can't be fixed or repaired. As Isaiah foretold of the Savior: "The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, . . . to comfort all that mourn; . . . to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning" (Isaiah 61:1-3).

I recognize that this doctrine—that the Atonement can heal us from the hurts of others—is well established. Yet, in my experience, it remains difficult to trust and accept that the Atonement serves this purpose. My hope is that I can add to what has previously been said on this topic and help remove some barriers to forgiveness by offering some reasons why we should trust the Lord's promise.

James R. Rasband - BYU Devotional (October 23, 2012) - Faith to Forgive Grievous Harms: Accepting the Atonement as Restitution

Lesson: You Must Also Learn to Forgive