

Once Labor Day was over I should have known it was just a matter of time, but I still winced when I got this in yesterday's mail, "Christmas gift ideas for all ages." In some bizarre way that got me to thinking how Charles Dickens might have rewritten the parable in today's Gospel. Jesus tells the story of an official whose master forgave him a huge debt, but then the same official threatens someone who owes him a mere farthing. The master hears about it, then hands the official over to torturers. The end. Not a bad story, but kind of a downer. Maybe in the hands of Stephen King the ending would get more exciting.

I think if Charles Dickens had written this, the master would be a ghost, the official's name would be Ebenezer, and the person who owed him the money would be Bob Cratchit. We'd get a much different ending: Ebenezer, moved by the forgiveness given him, extends the same mercy to Bob Cratchit. Jesus heals Tiny Tim, and after eating the traditional Passover goose, they all live happily ever after.

The official in the parable shows us how not to act when we've been forgiven, and there's more of him in us than we like to imagine. We delight in the failures of others; we love to hear them cry uncle; we scheme how to exploit people when we've got them down; we make them work to regain our forgiveness.

I think we do this when we confuse forgiveness with trust. Offense creates distrust, and some people think that to forgive means we have to trust again, and they find they can't do that. But being a forgiver doesn't mean being a fool. It means accepting someone for who they are, even in the light of this offense. If the offense is slight we can forgive and forget. If the offense is grave, we may be more cautious; we can't forget a grave offense, but if we want to rebuild trust, I think the proper advice is not "forgive and forget," but "remember and forgive." However, if the offense is severe, we may still forgive, but we'd be fools to trust again. We don't have to trust before we can forgive. Trust may come after forgiveness, or it may not come at all. Forgiveness is not trust; it's just acceptance.

Even though this parable doesn't pack a happy ending, it does include a key to happiness: Know what forgiveness is and what it's not, and then, be ready to give it away.