



Shamelessness, Not Forgiveness: Americans and “Fallen” Celebrities

On the front page of the January 18-20 weekend edition of *USA Today*, one of the headlines reads: “Can You Forgive?” The article uses Lance Armstrong’s recent “confession” of “doping” to Oprah Winfrey as the point from which to segue into a discussion of the broader topic of Americans’ readiness to extend mercy to those celebrities who have veered from the straight and narrow path.

Rick Hampson writes: “From Bill Clinton (again toast of the Democratic Party) to Charlie Sheen (again a sitcom star) to Michael Vick (again an NFL quarterback), the bar for public redemption seems to have gotten lower and lower.”

This one article provides much food for thought.



Unfortunately, it is all junk food.

USA Today expresses our culture’s conventional wisdom on this matter of forgiving those public figures who have fallen from grace. And this is exactly what we should expect would pass for wisdom within a culture that elevates celebrity status above that of every other station.

“Forgiveness” and “redemption” are concepts that originally emerged in Western culture within a religious context — specifically, the context(s) of Judaism and Christianity. Within this framework, they are preeminently meaningful. Once they have been dislodged from this setting, though, they open themselves up to the worst sort of abuse. Hampson’s *USA Today* piece is a classic case in point.

I cannot forgive Armstrong. Neither can *you*. Nor can either of us forgive Clinton, Vick, Sheen, Don Imus, Richard Nixon, or any other celebrity who throws himself at the mercy of the court of public opinion.

It isn’t that either of us is necessarily merciless. Rather, we can no more forgive any of these famous penitents for their offenses for the same reason that neither of us would ever think to offer forgiveness to *the other’s* spouse for undermining his or her marriage.

In other words, neither you nor I can forgive the rich and famous for their transgressions because they didn’t transgress *against us*.

Real forgiveness is among the most painful things in the world for both the persons who ask and offer it. The person who seeks it is pained by the acute realization that he has wronged another. Yet he is also pained by the fear that his request will be rejected and he will be humiliated. The person who is asked to forgive is pained by the transgression. But he too is afraid, for in forgiving, he will render himself



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vulnerable to being harmed once more. Maybe he will even be thought weak, a sucker.

In the Christian tradition, forgiveness or mercy is a *virtue*, an excellence of character. Like any other virtue — whether moral, intellectual, or physical — it comes about only as the result of the blood, sweat, and tears of those who make the point of practicing it.

To suggest that we can collectively “forgive” a person who hasn’t lent us any personal offense and about whom we couldn’t care less isn’t just to cheapen the concept of forgiveness; it is to cheapen it to the point of extinguishing it.

In remarking that “the bar for public redemption seems to have gotten lower and lower,” it isn’t upon Americans’ ever-growing capacity for forgiveness that *USA Today* comments. It is, rather, their ever-growing capacity to tolerate shameful conduct to which it speaks.

A country that is indifferent to the most shameful, most dishonorable, sorts of conduct is itself *shameless*. In conflating this most odious of vices with forgiveness, the noblest, the most divine of virtues, we convict ourselves of more than just an intellectual error.

We hurl ourselves into the depths of moral confusion.

The problem is that as long as we insist upon treating our vice as virtue, the less likely it is that we will recognize our shamelessness for what it is.

And the less likely it is that we will be able to practice forgiveness in our personal relationships — where it belongs.



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