

Reagan's Forgiveness

On March 30, 1981, John W. Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in Washington, D.C. It was the culmination of an effort to impress actress Jodie Foster.

It was reported to have been driven by an obsessional fixation on her. Hinckley was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and he has remained under institutional psychiatric care since then. Public outcry over the verdict led to the Insanity Defense Reform Act of 1984, which altered the rule for consideration of mental illness of defendants in federal criminal court proceedings in the United States.



In December 2013, a federal court ordered that Hinckley be allowed to leave St. Elizabeth's Hospital – a federally operated psychiatric hospital near Washington – for extended visits with his mother, who lives near Williamsburg, Virginia. He is permitted up to eight 17-day visits, with evaluation after completion of each one.

On Aug. 4, 2014, James Brady, Reagan's press secretary who was critically wounded in the attack by Hinckley, died. His death was ruled a homicide, but Hinckley did not face charges as a result of his death.

But the focus of this Perspective is not on Hinckley and his crime. It is about something much more powerful, much more constructive, and much more instructive to all of us.



Reagan's daughter, Patti Davis, later recounted what she learned from her father: "My father said he knew his physical healing was directly dependent on his ability to forgive John Hinckley. By showing me that forgiveness is the key to everything ... he gave me an example of Christ-like thinking."

And she – just like her father – has it right.

Scriptures give Christians a clear standard concerning wrongs we experience. We are to forgive those who hurt us "even as God in Christ forgave (us)." Therefore, God's forgiveness is the model for how we are to forgive. Sometimes we dispense forgiveness like a soft drink from a vending machine – mechanically, with no feelings attached.

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The Apostle Paul, however, said two attitudes should accompany forgiveness: kindness and tenderheartedness. Why? Because that's the way God forgave us. Throughout Scripture, we find emotions such as kindness, gentleness, compassion, and tenderness – in word or by action – ascribed to God.

Yes, He forgave with feeling. And we should do the same.

True forgiveness is as much an act of the heart as it is an act of the will.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter