

Call-in confessions: Youthful indiscretions

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

Should there be a statute of limitations on youthful indiscretions? The question had me hooked, even though it was going to be discussed in one of my least favorite formats: a call-in talk radio show. I knew the conversation would give me a glimpse of popular culture's sensibilities about forgiveness, accountability and the past.

Sure enough, the callers gave fascinating descriptions of their youthful indiscretions: an unpaid speeding ticket, an embellished accomplishment, a falsified résumé, a drug arrest, an abortion, stardom in porn movies, and even an unspecified felony conviction that resulted in a prison sentence.

The range of indiscretions was encapsulated in one person's response: an arrest for marijuana possession, a loan default, a forced resignation from a job, a speeding ticket. But in this case, a troubling pattern emerged. One indiscretion led to another, and the list seemed less a description of youthful behavior and more a summary of serious character issues.

At what point is someone's past an important consideration in predicting future behavior? Does future behavior depend on the severity of the offense, the frequency of offenses, the risk of harm to others? Or can one predict future behavior on the basis of how and with what attitude the person tells about what he did and what he learned?

Even more important, do we as a culture, and especially as the church, have the structures and practices that shape our ability to forgive people their past mistakes when forgiveness is appropriate?

The musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has become an American cultural icon in part because audiences cheer Jean Valjean's desire for a fresh start and his triumph over Inspector Javert's pursuit of him even after he's served his prison sentence. We ought to acknowledge that Javert's nihilistic "law and order"

perspective is part of us too, and exists in our own hearts. But instead we want to escape Javert—in our own hearts and in the real world.

In previous eras, people could escape their pasts—leaving behind a youthful indiscretion by relocating to the big city, emigrating from Europe, or leaving the city for the frontier. But these opportunities are disappearing; today we live in an era of heightened technological capacities, including sophisticated surveillance that can track us anywhere on the globe.

Shouldn't there be forgiveness, or at least a statute of limitations, for minor offenses—particularly if there is no clear pattern of behavior? How do we balance this with society's and employers' need to know about patterns of behavior that would put others at risk—say, a school's need to know if a person has a pattern of sexual or verbal abuse or violence? The challenge is to practice wise discernment in communities and develop social structures and practices that avoid the wild pendulum swings of ignoring serious wrongdoing on the one hand and marking people for life for minor indiscretions on the other.

As the call-in show concluded, one of the hosts noted that with technology available to track any person's minor or major sins, employers may be likely to hire only risk-averse people with clean slates instead of people who may have sown a few oats during their youth. She didn't seem to know the story of the woman in Luke 7, who, Jesus tells us, "loved much" because she had been "forgiven much," but her point seems directly relevant to Jesus and the Gospels. Would we rather have the pharisaical Javert or the saintly Valjean? Do we know how to forgive and be forgiven? Or are we so driven by fear that we always take the self-protective course?

The question of fear reminded me that while heightened surveillance creates new problems and scary scenarios of Kafkaesque injustice, the deeper problems remain in our hearts and in our lack of desire for forgiveness.

Soon after my book *Embodying Forgiveness* was published, I received a phone call from a woman in a state attorney general's office who had read about my book and wanted to know if I thought Christians cared about forgiveness. "Yes," I said, while also noting that the issues are complicated and that it is difficult to learn how to embody forgiveness well.

"I'm not so sure Christians do care," she responded. She said she was a lifelong churchgoer, but had just about given up on the Christian faith and on Christians.

“Why?” I asked.

She told me that she was responsible for transitioning people from prison back into society. She had worked with a wide variety of prisoners, and many were genuinely repentant and wanted to learn how to live constructively within society. But when she contacted churches throughout her state to ask them to host these prisoners as they reentered society, she was turned down each time. She acknowledged the legitimate concerns and fears that people have, but given how quickly people cut off her overtures, she wondered: “Do Christians even care?”

I have known Christians who care, including some who are in ministry to those in prison and to those recently released from it. How would our culture be affected if Christians cared even more? How might things change if we cared about embodying Luke 7 and nurtured understandings and practices of forgiveness and accountability?