

Forgiveness

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On 31 August 1986, two Soviet ships, a liner with 1,234 people aboard and a freighter carrying a cargo of oats, were supposed to pass in the night as they sailed in the Black Sea off the coast of southern Russia. Instead, they collided and hundreds of passengers died as they were hurled into the icy waters below. In total, 423 of the 1,234 people on board died. News of the disaster was further darkened when an investigation revealed the cause of the accident. It wasn't a technology problem like a radar malfunction – or even thick fog. The cause was human stubbornness. The authorities said that both vessels' captains knew for 45 minutes that they were on a collision course, but ignored warnings, and that the captain of the Admiral Nakhimov even abandoned his bridge minutes before the crash. Both could have steered clear, but according to news reports, neither captain wanted to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield first. By the time they came to their senses, it was too late.¹

When we hear that story and think of the captains, words come to our minds like hard-hearted, arrogant and selfish. Those do apply, but we need to be careful to not become too self-righteous. How often are we guilty of the same thing? We get in a situation where we refuse to submit or yield or even forgive, and for the sake of winning or being strong we end up losing a friendship, our testimony and our intimacy with Christ.

In scripture we see that forgiveness plays a key role in the life of a Christian and at times is even a sign if one is truly a Christian or not.

In Matthew 6 we find the verses known as the Lord's Prayer. In verse 12 we find these words of Jesus:

“And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

¹ International New York Times; “Two Soviet Ships Collide in the Night,” By James F. Clarity, Milt Freudenheim and Richard Levine, Published: September 7, 1986 (edited by adding other materials from Closer Walk, December, 1991.)

He was not praying for the forgiveness of His sins, because He had no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). He was giving a model prayer for His disciples.

The word “debt” in this context refers to sin. To pray these words demands that we have a sense of our own sin. That we realize that we are desperately in need of forgiveness. All sins are first and foremost against God (Genesis 39:9; Psalm 51:4;). In Romans 2:14-16, we see that a general sense of right and wrong is written on every person’s heart, even those who have never heard the written Word of God. ***“When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.”***

God has determined the moral law, so even when we have sinned against another person our first request for forgiveness must be directed towards God.

We are to ask God to forgive us in the same way that we have forgiven others. Are we really ready to pray this type of prayer? Is this a prayer request that we really want God to answer? Christ is once again holding up the goal, his holy standard. His desire is that our forgiveness of others would be as complete as God’s forgiveness of us. He then proceeds to explain it in verse 14-15:

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Matthew 6:14-15

At first glance these verses seem to say that if we first forgive others, then God will respond by forgiving us. That if we do what is required, then we will have “earned” God’s forgiveness. However, when we step back and look at the full counsel of scripture, we see another pattern. We never move first. God does. God draws us to himself, and we respond. God convicts us of sin, and we repent. God puts a burden in our hearts for an unbeliever, and we share our faith. God grants us a heart of compassion, and we give to those in need. God always works first to stir us up to faith and good deeds.

Scripture also reveals to us that none of us are good. None of us seek God on our own (Romans 3:11). We cannot even truly forgive others unless God has first forgiven us. Then and only then are our hearts prepared to truly forgive others (Ephesians 4:32).

So what is Jesus really saying? If we truly forgive others, then it is proof that we have been and will continue being forgiven by Jesus Christ. If we refuse to forgive others, then one of two things is happening. It is possible that we are believers who are living in disobedience. If that is the case, then our lives are likely now characterized by conviction and discipline of God, and that does not even include the emotional baggage and the callousness of heart that it brings. It is a horrible way to live. We are children of God, but forfeiting all of its benefits. It would be like a child who has run away from home and lost the benefits of food, shelter, love, protection and so many other things, merely for the sake of living life their own way.

The only other option is that if we refuse to forgive, that we have never experienced God's forgiveness and are not God's children at all. That our hearts have not yet been changed and our minds renewed by the amazing grace of God. That we have never been born again. That we are not really a Christian.

It is through this amazing gift of forgiveness that we are to treat those who sin against us with the same mercy. It is similar to the servant in Matthew 18. He owed the king "billions", but the king had forgiven him of everything and chosen to erase the debt. You would think that the servant would now become a very gracious man, but instead he left the palace, saw a fellow servant who owed him a few euros and began to choke him. He then even had him thrown into prison.

That story is dominated by greed, selfishness and judgment. But are we not the same? We are sinned against by a fellow human being and we rage against them. We forget the debt that we have been forgiven and the sins that Christ has erased.

God calls us to "let it go", to rest in His grace, and to trust that He will take care of it. Yes, people have sinned against us, but revenge is not the way that a child of God should respond. If we will choose to give up the right to revenge, and love instead, we are promised that "the Lord will reward you" (Proverbs 25:21-22).

This parable shows us how illogical our unforgiveness is when compared to the great forgiveness that God has granted to us. This should never be the case with those who have tasted the forgiveness of God.

Some will argue, "They have sinned against me and they deserve justice!" Be careful with this argument. I know it feels natural to be angry against those who sin against us, but do you really want justice? That way of thinking will only lead us all to condemnation. No one is innocent. Our sin has disqualified us from ever rightfully playing the role of judge. And when we think of true justice, if we have been forgiven everything, then what is the "just" way to respond to our fellow man?

Have I truly forgiven, if I can't forget?

One of our church leaders recently told a story from his childhood. His sister sinned against him, and he was so angry that he wrote it on a wall that could be seen every day as he entered the house, so he would never forget what she had done to him. That is not God's plan for us, as forgiven children of God.

Many have heard the phrase "forgive and forget", but is forgetting necessary to forgive? No. Many have heard this phrase, but it is not found in the Bible. Isaiah 43:25 tells us that God blots out our transgressions and that He will not remember them again. Hebrews 8:12 says, "**For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.**" God knows all things. He is timeless. He is omniscient. He cannot forget in a way that means He know longer knows.

This word "forget" in these verses literally means that God chooses to not bring them as evidence against us anymore. It would be similar to 1 Corinthians 13:5, where love is described as "**Keeps no record of wrongs**". God will not use our past sins to accuse us or identify us anymore. That is the opposite of what Satan will do with the memories of our past. Satan uses them to accuse and threaten

our identity and our newness in Christ. In these moments we must stand on the righteousness of Christ that is ours. Forgive even though we will naturally still remember the event in our lives.

Romans 8:1 says, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

Hebrews 12:15 tells us to, *“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”*

Forgiveness is releasing someone from all forms of future payment

While forgetting is not an essential part of forgiveness, no longer holding one’s offense against them is. Forgiveness is no longer making someone pay for the sin they have committed against you. For example, imagine that someone hit your car with their car in the parking lot. It was not intentional and it only caused a little damage. They stopped, got out of their car and told you how sorry they were about the accident. You then see how minimal the damage is. You then tell the person not to worry about it. You will take care of it. In that moment you are forgiving them. You are releasing them from any form of future payment.

Forgiveness is much the same. We release the person from any further punishment or payment. But at times we make a mistake at this point. We say that we forgive, but then we make them pay by not talking with them anymore, not sending them a birthday card, by no longer meeting their needs, or by not being considerate. We claim it is not punishment, only protecting our hearts, but that is not our responsibility.

God is the one who guards our hearts, so that we can take relational risks

Our responsibility is to walk near to God and allow him to protect our hearts. If we are filled up with Christ, we can now selflessly forgive others. Our needs are already met and secure in Christ. In this we are able to take a risk and extend a hand. It is the gospel in action. It is returning good for evil. Through Christ he makes possible the “70 times 7” as we forgive others (Matthew 18:22).

That is similar to God’s role in our lives in regards to forgiveness. You may argue that you cannot forgive or relate any longer with the other person, because you have to protect your heart. While some discernment is helpful, ultimately it is a healthy spiritual life rooted in Christ that holds one secure so they can relate with others and still be fine, if someone sins against them. As believers, our love, joy, peace and hope are to come from Christ anyway. In this truth we are more resilient than we could ever be if we tried to depend on ourselves for our own well-being.

If I was already forgiven by God at salvation, why do I need to keep confessing and asking for forgiveness when I sin?

When we turn from our sin and believe in Jesus Christ, our past, present and future sins are forgiven. Jesus’ sacrifice has paid for all of our sins. We are counted as righteous. When God looks at us, He sees

the righteousness of Christ. We can call this a “Forever forgiveness”. We have been adopted into the family of God and we are now His, forever. Much like earthly families, there are times that the children rebel or disobey. It does not mean they are no longer part of the family, but there is reconciliation that is needed within the family relationship, so that the children can once again be rightly related with the parents and intimacy can be restored. This is the purpose of ongoing, daily prayers of confession of sin and forgiveness. That a disobedient follower of Christ can once again be brought near to God and experience the daily intimacy and resources of Christ.

God is responsible for justice and payment for wrongdoing

In Romans 12:17-21 the Apostle Paul writes, *“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

When one has been sinned against, the natural response is to seek revenge or to demand some sort of restitution from the other person. In the economy of God it is different. Only He is fit to be the righteous judge who holds people responsible for their sinful actions. Because of this, God frees us from carrying out justice and commands us to leave it to Him. It is not that the one who has sinned goes free, it is just that we trust them to God’s care and justice. This is important to understand as we seek to forgive others. It is God who has set the standards of holiness and it is God alone who is holy to judge.

People are not our enemies and we are not the only victim

In Ephesians 6:12 the Apostle Paul writes, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* This teaches us that even though someone sins against us, they are not the ones we should battle against. Yes, they are the ones who have wronged us, but our true struggle is ultimately against Satan and his forces of darkness.

We feel like the victims and in some ways we are, but the ones who sin against us are also victims. That does not mean they are innocent or without blame. They are guilty, but are also living in darkness. They are blind to the truths of God. They are lost people naturally living as lost people, or they are saved people still living in the shadows of Satan’s deception.

Instead of our hearts raging against them, may our hearts be broken for them as we see them living in the darkness and causing harm to themselves and others.

God uses suffering and being sinned against to accomplish his purposes in our lives

God is sovereign. He rules over all things. God uses sin and suffering in our lives to accomplish his purposes in us and in our world. *“He works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose”* (Romans 8:28). We have a choice to make. Do not harden your hearts. In the midst of being sinned against, do not miss the opportunity to exercise your spiritual “muscles” of forgiveness, faith, mercy and humility. Allow God to shape, to make you more and more like Christ, and to take you to a deeper place in your faith than you have ever been.

Remembering our sinfulness and understanding the size of God’s grace are two huge tools in the hands of God as He gives us forgiving hearts. When we are sinned against, it is very easy to see the other as the guilty one and we as innocent. From this perspective we rise to the place of judge and punisher, but that is not the true reality of what is happening. In reality, it is one guilty person sinning against another.

God’s love was most clearly seen in the forgiveness that was made possible by Christ’s death on the cross. The same display of God’s love can be evident in our lives as well. We need to be generous to others. We need to be kind to others. We need to be patient with others. However, we most clearly display the love of God when we forgive our fellow man. The one who has sinned against us then sees in us the image of God and experiences a small example of the forgiveness that Christ gives to His children.

For some, their ongoing unforgiveness is a sign that they have never received the forgiveness of Christ.

For those who do truly belong to Christ, God’s unfathomable grace and peace that we have received should soften our hearts and develop in us a heart for God and compassion for people. When one refuses to forgive, his heart is hardened and distanced from the heart of God. It does not mean that one has no faith, but it is a clear sign that one has no idea of the size and the meaning of the grace that they have already received.

Leonardo Da Vinci once had a violent argument with one of his fellow painters. This was just before he began his famous painting, “The Last Supper”. Because of his anger at this painter, Leonardo Da Vinci decided that he would paint this other painter’s face as Judas Iscariot in his painting. In this way he would have his revenge throughout the centuries to come. Leonardo Da Vinci followed through with this plan and everyone could easily recognize what he had done.

Leonardo Da Vinci then continued with the other faces of the painting. However, when it came time to paint the face of Christ, something just wasn’t right. No matter what he tried, he couldn’t find the right way to paint the face of Christ. It was at this point that he remembered the face of his enemy portrayed as Judas. This was the reason for his frustration.

Leonardo returned to the face of Judas and removed the face of his enemy. It was only then that his work on the face of Christ emerged with the success that has been remembered through the ages.

When Leonardo Da Vinci moved past his right to take revenge, he broke the power of hatred and allowed the love of Christ to have the last word.²

Today will you do the same? The mercy and freedom of Christ awaits you. Those who refuse to forgive are enslaved by bitterness and miss out on the intimacy and resources of God. Those who forgive are drawn near to the heart of God and continue to experience the riches of God's forgiveness.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Ephesians 4:32

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<http://www.sermoncentral.com/Illustrations/SearchResults.asp?Keyword=Revenge&TopicID=0&ScriptureBookA=&ScriptureVerse=>