

# Gospel-centered forgiveness

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Several years ago we offered counseling booklets here at the church on different topics, and week after week the booklets that were taken the most were those booklets that counseled people on how to forgive others. Today we would like to focus on this same topic that many of us may need, and see how the gospel frees us to forgive others.

Several years ago, I was part of a Bible study group that met every Friday at a port just north of Miami, Florida, in the United States. It was made up of different people, from different countries, who worked on a ship that came into the port every week. I remember one night, one gentleman in the group, who worked on a cruise ship, told this story as we talked about forgiveness. He said that when he was about 10 years old, he was out with some other boys. At one point they were all getting in the back of a small truck. As the truck was pulling away, this man was running to get into the truck. It was moving fast, and he was running hard to keep up. He got his hands on the back of the truck, but it was now going faster than he could run. He had to jump in quickly or he was going to get hurt. It was at this point that another one of the bigger boys, who was already in the truck, pried this man's fingers off the truck and he fell, face first, hard onto the street, and all the other boys laughed as the truck drove away. This man in our Bible study group remembered how this root of bitterness had grown up inside of him (Hebrews 12:15) against this other boy for years, until finally he was big enough and strong enough to fight him and make him pay for what he had done.

Can you relate to this man's pain, anger and humiliation? Have you ever been sinned against, refused to forgive and then been overcome with bitterness? Maybe you are refusing to forgive your parents, a sibling, a former coworker, your neighbor, or you hold a grudge against a whole group, tribe, ethnic group or social class. Whoever the culprit is in your story, God desires that you would be free from this spirit of unforgiveness, today.

A heart of bitterness and unforgiveness feels like an emotion of strength, but in reality, it is like an acid that corrodes and eats away at our lives. It breeds anger, self-righteousness, and a heart that easily takes offense. It feels like it is hurting the other person, but in reality, we are hurting ourselves and those around us. It is a poison, especially to the heart of a Christian. So, what does scripture say about forgiveness?

In Ephesians 4:31-32, the Bible teaches us to, ***“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”***

Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice are the natural behaviors that come from an unforgiving heart that desires to harm the person with whom we are bitter. The second half of the verse is how God would have us respond. Our forgiveness of others is to flow out of God’s forgiveness of us. It is through Christ that forgiveness, that seems impossible, becomes possible. As we remember the gospel, we are shown what real forgiveness is like.

### **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, recently I was taking our daughter to school. The traffic was hectic. Everyone was in a hurry. At one intersection some were wanting to go right from the left lane, others wanted to turn left from the right lane, and I was just trying to do my best to get through the traffic and get to the school. At one point I veered right and lightly bumped the back-left corner of the car next to me. It was slight enough that our daughter did not feel it, but the other driver looked at me and I looked at him. We pulled over to the right lane and stopped our cars. Fortunately, the light was red. We both got out of our cars. He looked at his car and saw that there was minimal damage, so he gave me a *“no pasa nada”*. We got back in our cars and drove away, likely to never see each other again. It was my fault, but in that moment, I was forgiven. The other driver was releasing me from any form of future payment.

Forgiveness is much the same. We claim to release the person from any further punishment or payment, but then we make them pay by not talking with them anymore, not sending them a Christmas card, by “unfriending” them on Facebook, or by secretly wishing that bad things would happen to them. We claim it is not punishment, only protecting our hearts, but that is not our responsibility.

If Christ is the caretaker of my heart, if we rest fully in the gospel, then we are secure. We can risk being betrayed, rejected or even ignored. As believers, our love, joy, peace and hope are to come from Christ. In this truth we are more resilient than we could ever be if we tried to depend on ourselves for our own well-being. Philippians 4:19 words it this way: ***“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”*** Our responsibility is to walk near to God. 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).

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

Many have heard the phrase “forgive and forget”, but is forgetting necessary to forgive? 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.”* Does God’s “remembering them no more” literally mean that He will forget it and have no knowledge of what happened in the past? God knows all things. He is timeless. He is omniscient. He cannot forget in a way that means He no 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 in the gospel. Romans 8:1 says, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Forgive even though we will naturally still remember the event in our lives.

Recently, in a men’s prayer breakfast, we were discussing if forgiveness really required forgetting. One of the men then shared a story that is one of the best explanations that I had ever heard of this idea of forgiving and supposedly forgetting.

He told of his brother hosting a wild party in the family home. After the party the home was a mess. This man told of how he returned home and confronted his brother. The brother then responded, *“If you ask me another question about this, I will hurt you!”* Later the man asked his brother another question about what had happened. The brother, in a fit of rage, took a broken bottle and cut this man’s face, forming a line from the corner of his mouth, down to his chin. The man then told us how he was angry for years. Every time he shaved, he would see the scar and be reminded. This daily reminder just fueled more anger. It was only after this man became a believer and experienced the forgiveness of Christ that he was able to forgive his brother for what he had done to him.

The man has now forgiven and “forgotten” the same way God does for us. The man still shaves every day, but the scar no longer even catches his attention. Yes, if you ask him about the scar, he still remembers what has happened, but he no longer holds it against his brother. Following the example of God, the sin has been “forgotten.”

## God is responsible for justice and payment for wrongdoing

In Romans 12:14, 17-21 the Apostle Paul writes:

***“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them . . . 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.”***

These words of scripture sound like foolishness to the world. God’s Word calls us to love others as Christ loved us. That even includes our “enemies”. We are never to take revenge into our own hands. There are multiple reasons for this. God is the One who is ultimately responsible for justice, discipline and vengeance. We are a sinner among sinners. Who are we to judge another person? We were enemies of God (Romans 5:10). Without Christ none of us are good. None of us seek God (Romans 3:11-12). But God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Now some of us may have a hard time with the idea of leaving vengeance to God. Isn’t God all loving? Yes, but this love has different sides to it. God is gracious and He is also holy, but His holiness and righteousness demand justice.

Saying “no” to revenge doesn’t make sense in our thinking, but God is calling us out of our reality and inviting us to live in His. Does this deny justice? Definitely not. It just chooses to acknowledge the fact that the kingdom of God has come and only the King has the authority to judge another.

We refuse revenge because God will judge others, so we don’t have too. We refuse revenge because we choose to forgive as we have been forgiven. We refuse revenge out of obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We refuse revenge for the sake of being a testimony to those who have sinned against us. We refuse revenge because we are healthy and stable in Christ, who already granted us hope, love, power and self-control. We refuse revenge because we have died to our self-centeredness and are now alive in Christ.

On the cross our value was secured, so we no longer have to fight for our dignity and control. On the cross we see that God holds sin accountable. Today God is asking you to let it go. To live within His reality. To trust and obey and experience the freedom that it brings.

Some will say, “But you don’t know what they did to me!” But God says, “let it go”. Others will say, “I refuse to be treated like that!” But God says, “let it go”. Some will declare, “I deserve better!” But God says, “let it go”. God is in control, so we don’t have to be.

Is revenge holding you back from God’s best? Is anger, pride, a false sense of honor, or a judgmental heart holding you back from knowing Christ more intimately? Is an unwillingness to forgive making you a slave to bitterness? Is your lack of faith in God causing you to take things into your own hands and

somehow pay someone back for what they did to you? Today, God says, “let it go”. Refuse revenge and give grace. In this act of obedience, you will find that Christ becomes more clear to you.

Vengeance is the Lord’s. Will we trust God with that, and allow Him to take our culprit into His custody so that He may carry out whatever type of justice that He chooses, even if it is to pour out grace upon the guilty one? To refuse to let God oversee the vengeance means I keep the right for myself. I then set my heart on making the other person pay, even if it is nothing more than holding a grudge against them indefinitely or hoping that they suffer hardships. The other option is to release them as we have been released. This often sets in motion several events. We are freed from the bondage and hardness of heart that has resulted from our unforgiveness, and the love of God is put on display for the watching world to see.

One additional point from these verses is found in Romans 12:18. It says, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* This, “if possible” lets us know that our steps of forgiveness may not always be received well. Forgive anyway. Just as God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. In the same way our forgiveness is not based on a person earning or even receiving it. We must purpose in our hearts to forgive them anyway for our good, God’s glory, possible reconciliation, and maybe even their eventual salvation. Just as we read on the cross, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34).

## **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 you, 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. Yes, 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.

This is our goal. To be freed from the spirit of unforgiveness, but many times it seems like a big inflatable ball at the beach. No matter how hard we try to keep it under water, eventually the bitterness explodes back into public view and splashes everyone around us.

### So how do we receive a heart of forgiveness?

When we are unwilling to forgive, our eyes are not set on Christ, but on ourselves. If we are to be a forgiving people, then we must draw near to Christ and His gospel. We must nurture our hearts with God's Word, God's people and prayer. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus calls us to *"love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us"*. Prayer is a strong resource when seeking to reconcile with and forgive others. As we begin to pray for God to bless the one we want to forgive, God begins to soften our hearts. He begins to shape our desires and remind us of the gospel which we have received. We are reminded of our sin, which brings humility, and we are reminded of His grace, which holds us secure, so we can have the courage to "release" the one who sinned against us. The key is returning to the reality of the gospel. From this vantage point we see more clearly and are enabled to forgive.

Let's close up with one more example:

What should a Christian do who has had years of bitterness against a family member? Imagine that he was treated badly when he was growing up and has never been able to forgive them. He knows that he should forgive them, but feels that if he forgives them, they will have won. That somehow, they will be getting away with it. So, he has never forgiven them. But the more he draws near to the gospel, he can't help but realize the full extent of his own sin. His own rebellion against a holy God, and the unbelievable forgiveness that God has granted him. He no longer can function as if he is the "innocent one" or the righteous judge. His sin has disqualified him from both. He, too, is guilty and has been forgiven much. He knows he should forgive. He now has a fuller understanding of the gospel in his mind, but how does he get the gospel to take root in his heart? Only God can do that, but he has given us ways to prepare the soil. Out of his longing for reconciliation with his family member and a desire to be freed from the bondage of bitterness, he begins to obey God's Word. He begins to pray for God to bless his family member (Matthew 5:44). He begins to read God's Word daily. He shares his need to forgive with a couple of other Christian friends who he really trusts. He begins to be kind to his family member and reach out to them, even though in the beginning it is more out of discipline than delight. He continues to cry out to God to change his heart... and eventually, step at a time, God does it.

While it often appears that we are unable to forgive, sometimes we need to face the fact that the real problem is that we are unwilling to forgive. We must realize that it is only God who can change our hearts and make forgiveness happen in our lives. We do not have the capability in ourselves to forgive others, but God can empower us to forgive those who have sinned against us (Philippians 4:13).

As we finish, let me encourage you to continue to rehearse the gospel on a daily basis. Be reminded of your sin. Be reminded of God's forgiveness. Be reminded of His promise to bring justice in all things. Ask God to show you who you need to forgive. Begin praying for God to bless them and minister to them.

Then trust God to grant you a spirit of forgiveness. May you know the miraculous freedom of forgiveness and may you experience Christ like never before.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1) Can you remember a situation in your life when you found it very difficult to forgive someone? In your opinion, what about the situation made it so difficult to forgive?
- 2) One biblical definition of forgiveness is “releasing someone from all forms of future payment”. How would you rephrase that definition in your own words?
- 3) This lesson was divided into several portions. Which was most meaningful to you? Why?
- 4) How does remembering the gospel help us be better prepared to forgive others?
- 5) What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson? How will you apply it to your life?