

Forgiveness

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. – Matt. 6:12, 14-15

*To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.
– C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory*

It is hard enough to climb Pike’s Peak in a pair of light hiking boots and a daypack. Add 50 lbs. of camping gear, and you can forget about enjoying the trip! On the other hand, if you dropped that load halfway up the mountain, you would experience a sense of freedom which would energize you all the way to the top. Jesus Christ climbed the mountain of forgiveness carrying the sins of all believers on His back so that we could follow Him without lugging that extra weight. Unfortunately, many of us are still bearing a heavy burden as we follow in His footsteps. What weighs us down is not our own sin, however, but the sins of those who have offended us, the small slights and deep wounds we have not forgiven. Much of the unresolved depression, anger, dissatisfaction and loneliness we experience in life could be left behind through forgiveness. It can be our ambition to drop those burdens, to continue our journey toward the throne unencumbered, to experience the freedom of forgiveness as we become more like Christ.

There are theologians who teach that you do not need to forgive anyone who has not asked for your forgiveness, but the Lord’s Prayer teaches we are to forgive others as we want God to forgive us. If God only forgave those sins for which we have asked forgiveness, how many debts would remain outstanding in our account? Wise King David realized that God sees sin where we are blinded, and He forgives where we are silent: “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.” (Ps 19:12) If we are truly to forgive others as the Father forgives us, then we must forgive when forgiveness has not been requested, even where repentance is not in evidence.

Forgive the unrepentant? How can we possibly do that, and would God really suggest such a thing – since He Himself does not pardon the wholly unrepentant sinner? Yes, I believe that we are to forgive everyone everything, to drop the burden we may have carried since childhood and to rejoice in becoming free to run our race without that dead weight. Both the unity of the body of Christ and the joy of the Christian in the world depend upon it. But that requires a particular understanding of forgiveness, and a proper view of our position and of God’s prerogative.

Human and Divine forgiveness are not interchangeable. When we forgive someone who has offended us, it does not mean that God has forgiven them. It is even more obvious that when God forgives someone, it does not mean that we have forgiven them! Forgiveness is about carrying a burden, owning a debt, not letting go of our so-called rights. ***We cannot free a person of the debt they owe to God; we can only cancel the debt they owe to us.*** We cannot interpose ourselves between God and any other soul. In this context forgiveness is part of a lateral relationship between two humans. Each of those humans also has their own vertical relationship with the Creator. Therefore, our forgiveness or lack thereof does not create or cancel another person’s debt to the Lord. When we forgive someone, it does not mean that they will *not* suffer consequences at God’s hands. When we refuse to forgive someone, it does not mean that they *will* suffer -- it only means that we will suffer.

What then is Biblical forgiveness if it can be given to the unrepentant and if it does not undo the consequences of sin? Many people have trouble forgiving because they understand it to be saying that an offense never happened, or worse, that the offense doesn't matter. In most cases that couldn't be farther from the truth. We do not have the power to change the past, to make a sin not a sin or to undo the damage that has been done. For us as humans, then, ***forgiveness is the proper recognition that only God has the wisdom, the right and the power to avenge*** (Rom. 12:19). It is letting go of the entitlement, real or perceived, to extract payment from another person, for the simple reason that God alone has that right. The peace which is found in forgiveness is the peace of knowing that real justice will be done in the end, for you and your enemies. The power you thought you had over them was never yours to begin with, and the burden you carried was never really yours either.

By the same token, the refusal to forgive is a symptom of pride. Our souls grasp to themselves the booty of revenge, a treasure not lightly thrown down. Let us take the terrible but all too common situation of the woman who was abused as a child. Her abuser may still be in her life or he may have died years ago, but her soul clings to the pain, the anger and the right to hold that offense against him. She cannot drop that burden because, in her eyes, he has not *paid* for his offense. She still owns that debt; he still owes it. Whether he has asked for forgiveness or not, whether she has tried to forgive him or not, in her heart of hearts, his offense still belongs to her. She cannot allow God to take responsibility for her abuser because her only revenge is unforgiveness. If she were to release him to God, would he get off "scott free?" Of course not. He will face his Maker entirely independent of her feelings. If she were to forgive him, would it mean that she could not prosecute him or that she would have to renew a relationship with him? No. It would simply free her to follow the course of justice or mercy or wisdom or release to which God led her *apart* from her secret hatred. In short, you cannot forgive someone on God's behalf, and you cannot condemn someone on His behalf either. But you can release the debt into His good and sovereign care and run free from the burden which has weighed you down.

God asks us to love, to serve wisely and to pray for our enemies. Within the body He asks us to be reconciled to them. But He also gives us the discernment of the Holy Spirit to know when we need to "shake the dust off [our] feet" (Matt. 10:14) and move on. Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending that you like someone. It just means seeing them more like God sees them: either as fallen but redeemed recipients of the precious blood of Christ — or in desperate need of it. It means seeing them more like you see yourself, as a sinner beset with temptations, with faulty perceptions, with evil desires, with swollen and painful pride. When you understand that they are made of the same substance you are, it can help you to leave them in God's hands, even to begin to love them as Christ loves them. God commands us to pray for our enemies because He first began to love us when we were His enemies.

How do you know if you have finally forgiven someone? Only you can say that. I have experienced both a supernatural, instantaneous release of hostility and also the kind of long-term labor that begins with asking God to help us *want* to forgive. But I think I know God has finished the work of forgiveness in me when I can say the other person's name, think of them in any context, without hugging to myself that secret, sinful nugget of treasured resentment; when I can think of them just like I would think of anyone else; when I can think of them with pity or compassion or bewilderment or sorrow or charity or love; when I can pray that their hearts will be filled with the true knowledge and love and blessing of Christ. Then I know that God is working in my heart, and that I am becoming forgiving.

C. S. Lewis describes the process of forgiveness this way: "Every time [resentment] bobs its head up, day after day, year after year, all our lives long, we must hit it on the head." Corrie ten Boom describes the same idea differently:

Forgiveness is like letting go of a bell rope. If you have ever seen a country church with a bell in the steeple, you will remember that to get the bell ringing you have to tug awhile. Once it has begun to ring, you merely maintain the momentum. As long as you keep pulling, the bell keeps ringing. Forgiveness is letting go of the rope. It is just that simple. But when you do so, the bell keeps ringing. Momentum is still at work. However, if you keep your hands off the rope, the bell will begin to slow and eventually stop.



✦ **Read the following Scripture passages and make some notes about each:**

Gen. 50:15-21

Matt. 18:21-35

Rom. 12:17-21

Do you think you can really know God without a deep understanding of forgiveness? Although there are a few outstanding Old Testament examples (such as Joseph forgiving his brothers) forgiveness of others receives greater emphasis in the New Testament. Why do you think this would be true?

What are some of the consequences of unforgiveness?

Is it enough to say the words, "I forgive you?" Does that accomplish the fact of forgiveness? Is forgiveness an act of the will? Explain your answer.

What might the process of forgiveness look like in your life? How would it begin?

Many people experience pain or anger when they think of certain others without realizing that they need to forgive those people. Who are the ones in your life that you cannot think about without negative emotions? If you can identify the issue(s) for which they need your forgiveness, write that down too. Are there people you should talk with? If so, ask someone else to pray for you first.

It is often helpful to conduct a ritual of forgiveness. You could create an object which represents the debt you feel you are owed and then prayerfully offer it to God in some tangible way. Any ideas?

Finally, do you have reason to believe that you have offended anyone else? What is it that prevents you from reconciling with them? Do you need to apologize, make restitution, or renew your relationship with that person? Write about it. Make a plan. Ask someone else to pray about this for you.





Forgiving God

Please note at the outset that there are two different things called “forgiveness” in the English language. I do not wish to be called a blasphemer for using the same word to designate both ideas! When a real wrong has been done to us, we speak of forgiving it. But also, when no wrong has been perpetrated, when we feel bitterness for a perceived *or* imagined wrong, we also speak of forgiveness. They are not really the same things. In one case, we release a debt that is owed to us as the victims of injustice. In the second case we change the way we think about the situation and release only the bitterness. We call both of these things forgiveness. Both of them *feel* like forgiveness.

It is only under the second definition that we can be said to “forgive” God. There is no such thing as righteous anger with God. He has not sinned against us, whatever we may feel about it. We can know objectively from Scripture that God loves us and has acted for our good, something which may not be true of other people. While anger towards people often results in further separation from them, anger with God implies belief in God. It implies an ongoing relationship with Him. It is less likely to be the first step away from God as it is to be a platform for a return to God.

But our emotions are the same when we are angry with God as they are when we are angry with sinners. And one important aspect of our definition of forgiveness is crucial here: “the proper recognition that only God has the wisdom, the right and the power . . .” We must recognize that only God has the wisdom, the right and the power *to do with us as He wills*. That is the message of Job. However, God’s sovereignty is not neutral. If we love Him, He IS working all things for our benefit. To be angry with God is to believe that He has wronged us, that He owes us something. To forgive Him is to release Him from that imagined debt, conceding His right to govern our lives as He sees fit, even when it hurts, even when we would do it some other way, trusting that His word is true and He does know best. It means repentance. It means ***relinquishing our right to judge God***. “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10). This takes a tremendous amount of faith. It takes the faith of Joseph, imprisoned unjustly in a foreign country; it takes the faith of Jeremiah, weeping over the destruction of his people; it takes the faith of Christ, who “for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb 12:2). Ask God to give you this kind of faith.

We are sometimes angry with *people* who have not actually wronged us. How is forgiving them different than forgiving those who have actually sinned against us?

If we cannot have the universal peace and happiness that we desire, then we feel we should at least have answers. We could “forgive” God more easily if He would tell us why He allows suffering in our lives, but He is often silent on this question. If He would satisfy our minds, then we might – occasionally – for the very best of reasons – consent to have our hearts broken. How do you deal with His silence?

Is there anything you are holding against God right now? What do you think He owes you? Where do you require Him to answer you? What don't you believe about God? Could you begin to forgive Him? Ask God to forgive your pride and grant you more faith. Use the space below to write down some of your thoughts about this topic.