

Forgiveness, Redux

"This then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. . . 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" (Matthew 6:9, 12, 14-15).

Have we grasped how exceedingly important forgiveness is in the life of a Christian? We talk about it all the time in our churches, and we've discussed it here before, but we need to reflect on it yet again. It's not a matter about which we dare be smug. Let's think about it carefully, for there are lots of wrong views about forgiveness in modern Christendom.

Forgiveness is not an easy, empty word. It's not forgetting an offense. It's not refusing to hold a grudge. It's not "getting over it and moving on." It's not refusing to engage with the offense until the offender repents or apologizes. And it's not "therapeutic." It's none of these things. Forgiveness is being reconciled after an offense so as to restore a relationship. And for horizontal relationships, that is, between people, it includes referring the matter to God, who is always involved.

Let's think: What does it mean that God is holy? For one thing, His entire creation must be morally suffused. We mustn't be like pagans and suppose that our physical world is amoral or morally neutral. A holy God means His handiwork, His creatures also must be holy. No one ever has a right to offend God with any act (or motive or thought, even) that is contrary to His holiness. And if anyone does, that creates moral debt. That person is in debt to God for the harm done, for the offense committed. There's also alienation because a real personal relationship is involved. Justice requires moral debt and ruptured relationships. That moral debt may be invisible but it's real, and unless it's paid, along with repentance, there's no forgiveness or reconciliation. It's no different from the world of economics: A harm done to another person creates real debt and someone has to pay it; and unless the debt is paid there can be no forgiveness. ("Forgiveness" of a monetary debt is a fiction; it really only means that someone else pays it.) Do we realize the ghastly moral situation we're all in? We're all under supremely onerous obligation to God for the offenses we cause just by living. The debt **MUST** be paid, because God is *dangerously* holy.

We all necessarily harbor within us a force that compels us to sin. For want of a better term, we call it a "sin nature." That places us all in overwhelming debt to God. We can't not sin, we can't not offend Him; and we can't satisfy our debt because it's too massive. The alienation therefore is just and necessary. However much God loves His human creatures, He cannot simply forgive their sins. To suppose that in transcendent love He can do that, is nonsense. Debt is incurred with each sin, however trivial it may be, and someone must pay that debt. **"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground"** (Genesis 4:10) poignantly illustrates the debt that sins create. Humanity's burden of moral debt since the day that Cain killed Abel is immeasurable.

Let's go a bit deeper. We may only enjoy the privilege of life in our Creator's house if we honor Him by being righteous (that is, live by His revealed standards). Thus the debt owed for sin is death, the loss of the privilege of living in God's world. Forgiveness releases the sinner from that debt owed, and is possible only because Christ voluntarily made the necessary payment that a holy and just God demands. Only God could meet the just demands of a holy God, so the second Person of the Trinity became one of us, a human, in order to pay the price of sin, thus freeing God to offer forgiveness to the sinner. But there needs to be some identification of the sinner with the substitute; thus Christ identified with us in His incarnation, and we identify with our sin-bearing, atoning Savior by our union with Christ.

The Son came into this world to pay the *entire* human moral debt. Yes, there were other purposes in God's plan for His creation. But God's creational intent is for His beloved humans to dwell in His holy presence in intimate personal relationship. So, Jesus paid it all. All! **"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world"** (1 John 2:2). As deity, His life has infinite value, and the voluntary atoning sacrifice of Himself therefore satisfies all human moral debt. Because our debt is paid in full, in perfect justice God is free to forgive us our sins and invite us into blessed, eternal, intimate fellowship with Himself. That is the goal of what we call "salvation."

Salvation however is not merely having one's sins forgiven. Forgiveness is only the initial essential for us to be able to access a dangerously holy God. Forgiveness of sins by itself is not sufficient to be in heaven. One must be as righteous as Jesus is, and God imputes that to us. But that still isn't sufficient. One also must have Jesus' resurrection life and be in a

glorified state. In grace, God does that for us too. So forgiveness of sins alone is necessary but insufficient for salvation. “Forgiveness” is a relational term: it establishes and maintains a personal relationship with God. And there’s a condition for forgiveness: Repentance. **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins”** (Acts 2:38). The New Testament consistently connects repentance to forgiveness and salvation (for examples, see Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9 and Revelation 2:5,16; 3:3, 19).

Repentance means taking responsibility for our wrong-doing, It means acknowledging that we’ve offended a loving and good God, we’re grieved we did that, and we commit to eschewing sin for the life ahead. But it’s more. It means honoring and loving the Son for who He is and what He did for us, and we do that by pursuing a Christ-like life and by serving Him. It is no less than an on-going, life-long transformation of our character, thoughts, values, beliefs and purposes to make us like God. If we humbly submit to this requirement, regardless what loss or suffering results as a consequence, our attitude will be one of boundless gratitude, love and commitment. And our life will overflow with joy, peace, and a transcending, Spirit-enabled obedience to God’s will as we strive to be holy as He is holy. And with a heart filled with expectation, we await entry into God’s glorious presence to know and enjoy Him forever. There’s no salvation apart from repentance.

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But now, what about at a horizontal level? Let’s review here the Joseph story. As a teen-aged boy, his jealous, wicked brothers deceitfully sold him into slavery. Decades later, after suffering much grievous trauma, by God’s grace Joseph rose to be prime minister of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. When the brothers journeyed to Egypt for food because of a famine in the Land, Joseph recognized them and put them to a test. Were they still like when he last saw them? What were their hearts like now? Joseph did not forget what they had done to him. Taking leadership, Judah compassionately appealed to Joseph for the life of Jacob, their father. In Judah’s speech in Genesis 44, he referred to “my father” 14 times. Judah acknowledged the loss of Joseph and the harm the brothers had caused their father by what they did. And then, out of compassion for their father Jacob, Judah offered himself to be a substitute to suffer the penalty about to fall on Benjamin. At this confession and humble offer of personal sacrifice, Joseph wept and revealed himself to his brothers. Joseph understood the entire matter was God’s doing, so Joseph forgave them and they were reconciled. Forgiveness is always about reconciliation.

We live in a dark world, a place saturated with offenses. We suffer violence, lies, slanders and worse, because of human sin. We were created to love one another, and Jesus commanded His followers to love each other, but the sin nature easily overwhelms and the offenses flow. How do we deal with them? Answer: With love. Forgiveness is an expression of love. Our goal is always to be reconciled with the one who offends, to renew the relationship. Forgiveness means we’re open to and will welcome a restored relationship with the offender.

Forgiving another person who has offended in some way is consciously and deliberately resolving to live with that offense, seeking not revenge but blessing for the offender. **“Love covers a multitude of sins”** (1 Peter 4:8). Love (or grace) allows no anger, bitterness or resentment in the heart of the offended person, because the offense is referred to the cross. **“Forgive each other just as in Christ God forgave you”** (Ephesians 4:32). To put it differently, we can forgive all manner of sins and failures that harm us *as unto the Lord*, that is, in His name. The moral debt was already paid at Calvary. Forgiveness of others’ sins is an appropriation of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross. We only can do it in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If we fail to forgive in Jesus’ name, that is, without referring the offense to the cross, there’s no real forgiveness, only empty words. Unbelievers *cannot* forgive.

Now, there also should be repentance by the offender in order to re-establish the relationship (if there was one). If there’s no repentance, for whatever reason, the relationship remains broken, but the forgiveness occurs anyway and is real. Forgiveness doesn’t remove the necessity of repentance. Forgiveness doesn’t mitigate or excuse the offender’s responsibility. Joseph did not forgive his brothers until they repented (the remorse they had for causing their father great pain). Repentance involves suffering and a humble heart and so, sadly, is rarely ever in evidence.

Notice too that in Numbers 14, God forgave that rebellious first generation of Israelites, but He punished them anyway! Sins have consequences, often dire ones. And so with us, although we may forgive others for the harms they cause us, God may nevertheless visit consequences upon them.

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Forgiveness is such an important issue in Christianity, one too easily neglected, that I should share here a few more necessary thoughts.

- (1) Forgiveness is the opposite of getting revenge. If someone refuses to forgive a hurt, the only other response is to seek to harm or desire that harm comes to the offender in return. Wanting to “get even” is worldly, pagan, selfish and possibly demonic. It is totally alien to biblical Christianity.
- (2) Forgiveness expresses godliness, our knowing God and wanting to be like Him, which is our calling in the Gospel. Forgiveness reveals that grace is our character trait. Forgiveness sanctifies us. Forgiveness is also an act of worship. And forgiveness exalts Christ.
- (3) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clearly stated the extreme importance of forgiving others (Mttw 6:14-15). Every believer should know this text, because refusal to forgive reveals a spirit that’s hostile to Jesus’ teaching. May God have mercy on such a person!
- (4) We cannot justify not forgiving others because of the imprecatory Psalms. Those psalms are all Messianic and don’t model our attitude toward those who offend.
- (5) In lands today where persecution is extensive (and deadly), Christians forgiving their persecutors is testimony to a supernaturally changed life. The ability to forgive reveals who is real and who’s phony.
- (6) The refusal to forgive is largely due to pride. Proud people are so full of themselves that when others offend them in some way, it’s like daring to strike a god. It takes a genuinely humble person to be able to forgive others.
- (7) Pervasive in American Christendom is people “making a decision to trust Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of being in heaven.” And that’s all that they think is necessary! So they suppose they’re free to live as they please. It’s a “deal,” a contract. No responsibilities. No transformation. No relationship. No need for the Word. No discipleship or sanctification. No need to forgive. No anything! This aberration makes God into a transactional deity, a pagan deity.
- (8) Forgiveness is an act of trust in God. God has stated, **“Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”** He executes justice in the world He created; He is ultimately responsible for wrongs and offenses due to sin. So when others hurt us in some way, we forgive, that is, we turn the whole justice matter over to God to deal with in His way in His time. Refusing to forgive means we are ignoring God, not trusting in God, and that heaps contempt on Him.
- (9) Last is this: Do we realize how totally comprehensive the atonement was that Jesus made? Do we realize how pervasive sin is, that Jesus dealt with for us so that we can have forgiveness of sins? We’re in the “world,” that is, human society organized on godless principles, influenced by wicked, invisible (demon) beings, and we’re enmeshed in it. It’s ubiquitous, and we unwittingly participate in it in one way or another. We commit—probably daily—sins of omission, sins of neglect, things we should have done but didn’t. We commit unintentional sins, and we participate in communal sins. We’re responsible for unconscious, though not necessarily willed, sin. Sin is an unavoidable reality of human life! And so we incur real moral guilt. We are *unavoidably* offensive to God, yet because of Jesus, God forgives us and welcomes us into His presence. Nothing’s more precious—*more essential*—than to have God forgive us and that we forgive others.

And now I conclude. We cannot live the Christian life in this present world without understanding forgiveness. It’s something we need to meditate on and practice. When we forgive others, we mirror God’s Person, we mirror God’s glory. That’s why we’re here.