

What is Biblical Forgiveness? (Part 1)

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There is a lot of talk today on the need for forgiveness, probably more than we have heard in a generation or so, but is what we're hearing now really forgiveness, is it a biblical forgiveness, or is it something quite different from what is taught on this subject in the Word of God?

Someone says, for instance, "I forgive the man who killed my parents," but you ask her why she forgives him, and she gives as her answer, "I can't live with hating him anymore. I can't let my own life be destroyed because of something that he has done to me." In other words, forgiveness here, according to her understanding, is what we do for ourselves, it's how we make life more bearable for ourselves under overwhelming affliction, not what we do for somebody else.

Now I seriously oppose that notion and reject it as a biblical forgiveness. I'm not saying that she is wrong in putting away her hatred and deep-rooted resentment. Indeed, we're to love even our enemies, the Lord tells us; we're to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who spitefully use us (Luke 6:27,28). I'll come back to that later. What I am saying, rather, is that she is wrong in thinking that she has actually forgiven someone when her only concern is for herself. Yet this is the popular misconception of forgiveness in our day, and it's being taught from many a pulpit.

The word 'to forgive' (including the words derived from it) appears 110 times in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament. We'll look at some of these in due time because they warrant special attention, but for now it's enough to say that the meaning of forgiveness throughout the Bible is clear and consistent; it means to grant someone a pardon for his transgressions, it means never to think of those offences, much less talk about them, or bring them up before him ever again.

Do we really think, for instance, in 2 Chron. 7:14, where the Lord says, "if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land," that He's just doing that for Himself, and trying to find a way to make their atrocities easier for Him to bear? Is He not, rather, doing something wonderful for

them, for the offenders, and freely, graciously granting them a pardon, a complete pardon, which is entirely undeserved?

Forgiveness, then, genuine forgiveness, is always about what someone does for somebody else. It's a free gift that he bestows upon him, and has nothing at all to do with what he does for himself, though, as any sinner who forgives another will find, it's a gift that he will benefit from as well. All the focus is on that other person, in other words, what he gives the offender, however undeserving that person may be of such favour. Does it not make sense? Can we not see that this is what biblical forgiveness is? It's not what I do for myself; it's something that I do for (a pardon that I give to) the one who has sinned against me.

As God forgives, so, too, beloved, are we to forgive. In fact, we even pray, "forgive us our debts (i.e. our sins), as we forgive our debtors" - as we forgive those who sin against us. Notice, our forgiving others is not a condition of our being forgiven by God, no, but, as children of God, we are to imitate our loving Father in heaven - that's what children do, isn't it, a son (even at a very early age) will imitate his father - and, at the same time, we're to remember what James tells us, that judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Let's face it, those who demonstrate that they are most like God, deliberately replicating His example in their own behaviour, show themselves to be children of God, whereas those who don't follow His example, or even care to know what it is, are yet without hope and without God in the world!

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Notice, too, it's the same kind of forgiveness we receive from God that we are expected to extend to others; it's not a different forgiveness, as if we may distinguish them, but the same free and gracious pardon that we ourselves have received from the Majesty on High.

Well, if this is so, why does Mark 2:7 tell us that only God can forgive sins? What that means, clearly, is that only God Himself can grant any of us entrance into heaven. That's what His pardon gives us. In the same way, only a duly appointed court of law can determine whether someone who is charged with a crime is to be punished or acquitted. In our case, believer, we aren't called or given the power to admit someone into heaven, nor do we have the right to take the law of the land into our own

hands and give someone a ‘get out of jail free’ card. Nevertheless, we are called (and with the Holy Spirit’s help we’re also equipped) to pardon those who sin against us, and, what’s more, under the gospel we are fully expected to do so.

The great incentive for us as believers to forgive others, of course, is that God in Christ has forgiven us. God has commanded us to forgive, we know that this is what pleases Him, but, above everything else, He has forgiven us. Just as those who have been forgiven much also love much, the Bible says, so, too, those who know something of how much they’ve been forgiven, how much they have in Christ and think often about it, will be most eager to forgive others who have wronged them, knowing at the same time that no one could ever do as much against them as they themselves have already done against the Holy One of Zion.

As God forgives those who have sinned against Him, therefore, so, too, are we to forgive those who have sinned against us. And as those who are believers, particularly, as we’ve just seen, we have been given an amazing, even overwhelming, incentive for doing so. But the question remains, how are we to do that? What are the biblical ground-rules for our forgiving other people?

A very helpful text in this regard is Eph. 4:32, “And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another even as God in Christ forgave you.” Notice, not just because God in Christ forgave you, but in the same way. In other words, if we learn how God forgives sinners, what His ground-rules are, we have only to copy them, to do what He does, in order to be imitators of God as dear children. Again, does this not make good sense? The Lord does not call us to do something other than what He does, or to go beyond that (as if we could), but to do what He does. This is an amazing and very practical concept, if we can just take hold of it.

What, then, are the ground-rules of God in forgiving sinners? Under what conditions, if you like, has He promised to do so? There are several that apply to His own people. Let me give you two of them: (1) God condescends to the weaknesses of His people. We see that in Isaiah 42:3, where we read, “A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench.” The point of that is that a small or weak faith is still a

true faith; it has the power to get through to God in prayer, and thus to handle insurmountable problems with His help that we could never resolve or even cope with on our own.

(2) God forgives His people repeatedly (Hosea 14:4), and has instructed us to do the same (Matt. 18:22). What this means is that we need to be very patient with other people, and this is especially so since we, as the chief of sinners, would surely want others to be as patient with us.

There is one ground-rule, however, that applies to everybody. There are no exceptions. Here it is: God doesn't forgive everyone, notice, but only those who repent, only those who put their sin right away, and who determine by all that they know to be right and good never to return to the same careless way of life again (Ezek. 18:23, along with countless other texts which might also be cited). This is not to say that such forgiven souls will never transgress again, no, but they must be resolved from that day in their own hearts not to do so.

Now the first two points, condescending to the natural weaknesses of His people, and so forgiving them repeatedly, are straightforward enough. We simply cannot expect, even with all the ducks in order and we have forgiven someone who has offended us, that everything is going to go well in our relationship with that person after that. He may sin against us again, or in some other way, perhaps, and we may sin against him. Patience is the key, therefore, and how thankful we can be, believer, for the longsuffering of our great and gracious God toward us!

But it's this last ground-rule, the one that applies to everybody, which we need to examine with very special care. God does not forgive everyone. "Narrow is the gate," said Jesus, "and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." Whom, then, does He forgive? Only those who repent of their sins. Now this makes perfect sense. Why? Because until someone repents, he is still pursuing the wide gate and broad way that leads to destruction.

This is the same rule, believer, for us. We cannot forgive someone who is determined to pursue the same path of destruction that he's on, and, without repentance, that's precisely what he's doing. Let me illustrate that. You see someone who breaks into your neighbour's house, people who may be very dear to you, and he begins shooting them. You yell out

your door, “I forgive you!”, to which he responds, “Thank you very much - I appreciate that”, and then he proceeds to shoot the rest of the family. That doesn't make any sense.

Alright, this is a rather crude example, but you get the point. The biblical rule for forgiving anybody is that he must first express repentance. True pardon is built on the back of repentance, and it's without foundation apart from that. There must be some indication that the offender wants to turn his life around, however difficult it may be for him to do that.

With the Lord, of course, this very One who grants the free gift of forgiveness is also the One who grants the free gift of repentance. He puts it in the sinner's heart to turn from his wicked ways, so that he may indeed be forgiven. With us, on the other hand, we can't make someone repent, can we? - it just isn't in our power to do that - and we mustn't think that we can forgive him either until he does repent.

Suddenly, therefore, it becomes a very challenging question, how can we know if someone who has sinned against us has really, truly repented of that sin? Do we just take his word for it? God knows the heart, He knows everything, but we don't. And therein lies the problem. We know that we are to forgive all who repent, to be sure, but how do we know whether that repentance is genuine?

In many cases, true repentance requires restitution, and the offender's willingness to pay the restitution demonstrates the sincerity of the heart. In certain cases, though, restitution (or setting things right) isn't even possible, as with the man who has left his wife, for instance, but now he can't go back to her because she has married someone else.

I'm not saying that this is ever easy, but there are two things that make these difficult situations at least manageable: (1) The one who repents has an obligation to demonstrate, even excessively if he must, that his change of heart and determination to walk a very different path are entirely genuine. This may take some creative thinking, and even self-sacrificing on his part, but no attempt to express repentance should ever be handled glibly, which in itself suggests that it isn't genuine.

(2) Even if the one who is called on to forgive has misgivings, or he isn't sure that the repentance (expressed at least verbally) is genuine, he's still better to forgive than not forgive. We can't take responsibility for what someone else does, ultimately, but we are responsible (all of us) for what we do ourselves, and it's always better to err on the side of mercy. It's as if you were sitting on a jury, and after the trial you still aren't sure whether the defendant is guilty or not - nothing was proved - you are better to let the guilty walk free than to condemn an innocent man to any time in prison. Sadly, justice is never perfect in this world. We strive to make it so, but it's often the case that, having done our best, we have to leave it in the hands of Him, the Lord our God, whose judgment is perfect.

Another question arises, what are we to do if someone doesn't repent? This kind of thing happens all the time, doesn't it? As difficult as this is for the one who is offended, however, and it is, we need to realize that the consequence of this neglect for the offender is much, much worse. How so? Well, by not repenting, he has really offended twice, the first time in what he did, and the second time in not allowing the offended one to forgive him. It's a great sin in itself to prevent, let alone to reject, forgiveness.

So, what should we do? If someone doesn't repent, shall we harbour anger, hatred and resentment toward him? No, it's important, rather, that we drop the matter and let it go. That may be very difficult, even more difficult than forgiving him, because we continue to feel the weight of this unfinished business still hanging over our heads. And please note, letting something go like this is not an act of forgiveness. Why let it go, then? It's because of another biblical principle, that we must never allow someone else's sin to become an occasion for sin in us. "Do not be overcome by evil," says Rom 12:21, "but overcome evil with good." It's somewhat like someone jumping into a river to save a drowning swimmer; he has to be careful that the swimmer doesn't pull him down with him!

There is one final question that I want us to consider: We hear a lot of talk these days about the need to forgive ourselves, but is it something that we really need to do? Let's not confuse biblical teaching with the doctrines of the self-esteem cult. No, I don't need to forgive myself, nor do I need to feel good about myself at all. There are things that I have

done that I will regret for the rest of my life. I have repented of them, I believe that God has forgiven me, and I joyfully accept that forgiveness. And that's what I need, to know God's approval, not my own.

One of the reasons the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit, according to Ezek. 36, is that we might learn to loathe ourselves for all our iniquities. That's the only way that I will ever turn from them, isn't it? But then when I think of all that God has given me in Christ, how He has forgiven me, how He is even now cleansing me with the washing of water by the Word, how His grace is so much greater than even all my sin, it's by this means that He draws me to Himself and constrains me to love Him even more! That's what I need, too, to know God's approval, and to love Him all the more for it. As I say, biblical forgiveness, whether God's or man's, is what one gives freely and graciously to someone else, not what I do for myself.