

Forgiveness and Repentance

Part 1

What is forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive? Does it make sense to say I am trying to forgive?

Matthew 6:14, 15

With Study Questions

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2/21/2009*

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For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14, 15).

Preface

There are certain things you can say to people which will give them the impression that you are haunting insight: “I get the feeling you’ve been misunderstood...You’re a very complicated person...You’ve been hurt, haven’t you?” I don’t mean to make light of these things, but at some level these things are common to humanity.

We’ve all been misunderstood (although maybe it’s that we’ve been understood all too well). The human creature is a tapestry of feelings, thoughts, passions, conflicts making us all complicated. And from children who thoughtlessly offend other children at play to adults who have engaged in moral or criminal attacks against the person or property, of others – even loved ones – we’ve all been hurt; and that hurt, if unchecked, like a toothache, can linger, even intensify over time.

Then, as Christians, we’re confronted with a passage like the one above, which, in my opinion is one of the most disconcerting statements Jesus ever made.

Following His instruction on how we ought to pray (commonly referred to as the Lord’s Prayer), Jesus uses the conjunction “for” (*ean*), in the beginning of His very next statement. In doing this, He is attaching this statement to the Lord’s Prayer, almost as a commentary on the prayer He just taught.

But it is more than a commentary. It’s more like a personal challenge. We might imagine a professor instructing his students from his notes before pausing, looking up, making eye-contact and letting them know that this next piece of information is so vital to the class, that if you miss it, you fail! It’s the only portion of the prayer with which Jesus does this.

Jesus taught us to pray that God forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors? Perhaps His followers, perhaps we, have many times prayed that prayer almost thoughtlessly. But just in case we've become rote in our prayer or we're unclear in the matter Jesus drives the one issue home — maybe because it is the most difficult or neglected.

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:14, 15).

I am unaware of any other virtue in the Bible that carries with it this type of admonition. The Scriptures don't say unless you're kind, patient, courageous, gentle, wise, enthusiastic, etc., you will not be forgiven. The subjunctive clause **"if you do not forgive"** (as far as I know) is only related to the virtue of forgiveness. It is regarding forgiveness and forgiveness only that we see this powerful **'if you don't then neither shall I'** statement.

It initially sounds like our ability to forgive others is a virtue necessary to our own salvation¹. How this relates to the grace of the gospel we'll address in time (not this morning). But since Jesus, according to the gospel writers, didn't immediately qualify His statement, maybe it's just best to allow it to hang in the air with the same impact it had when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount — an unwillingness to forgive others is simply not acceptable behavior for a person who considers himself a Christian!

An unforgiving heart is harmful to everybody. It enslaves the offended party, it estranges the offending party and it dishonors God. So figuring out forgiveness is a pretty critical issue. Since forgiveness is inextricably linked to repentance, we'd better try to figure that one out as well. In light of these things, we will wrestle with the following in the weeks to come:

- 1. What is forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive? Does it make sense to say I am trying to forgive?**
- 2. Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?**

¹ This will get down to making distinctions versus separations. It will also be important to grasp things that are necessary versus things that merit.

3. Why is it so difficult for people to forgive?
4. Do we always forgive – even if there is no repentance on the part of the offender? And if there is no repentance, how do we spiritually, emotionally, psychologically or functionally deal with the wound?
5. What is repentance? What does it look like?
6. How do we reconcile forgiveness as a necessary virtue to salvation?

**What is forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive?
Does it make sense to say I am trying to forgive?**

Forgiveness – A Legal Decision

People who have been hurt by the transgression of another person will sit across from me and, I believe, with sincerity of heart lament that they just can't seem to forgive. In their state they feel tortured by this resident grudge that they can't seem to shed and the matter is exacerbated by the sense that they are failing as a Christian to obey this necessary virtue.

I ask them what they mean when they say they can't forgive. Just what is it they can't do? Their answer usually involves their own sense of anger, hurt or some form of emotional angst. They are just so mad, sad or upset that this person did this to them. I think it is critical for us to understand, here at the beginning, that the way I might feel about forgiving the person, although closely related, needs to be distinguished from the act of forgiveness.

'Forgive' is the passage above (Matthew 6:14) is *Aphete* from the verb *aphimui* literally meaning "**to send away.**" The verb is used by Jesus in Matthew 13:36 when **He sent the multitude away.** It is the verb Matthew uses to describe how Peter and Andrew **left their nets** to follow Jesus. Paul uses the verb to describe **divorce** in 1 Corinthians 7:11, 13.

It might be easiest for us to understand forgiveness the way Jesus uses it in a parable addressing the very issue under our discussion – the parable of the unmerciful servant. We see in that parable forgiveness used in relationship to a **financial debt – to forgive a debt** (Matthew 18:27).

It might be helpful to realize that forgiveness should not be thought of as a process but a single action. We should also realize that once the debt is forgiven, it is no longer owed.

It does not make sense to say that we're trying to forgive someone any more than it would make sense to tell someone you're trying to tell them they no longer owe you a financial debt. Forgiveness is not something we try to do; it is something we decide to do. And once we decide to do it, we must know that what we have decided to do send away the debt. You might think I'm getting nit-picky with the terms here but it's critical to understand what Jesus is actually telling us to do here.

Initially, He is not telling us to get our emotions in check and make sure we feel a certain way about the offending person (and I am not suggesting that's not important); He is telling us to make a decision.

I assure you I have no intention of avoiding the more experiential questions that arise in the issue of forgiveness and repentance. I don't intend to leave this as a purely forensic² issue where broken hearts are mended by the signing of a legal contract.

Nonetheless, legal contracts and forensic declarations are highly valuable, biblical and a source of great comfort to Christians. One of the most beautiful passages in the Bible which expresses God's unquenchable love for His children contains words suited to a courtroom:

Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. ³⁴ *Who is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:33-35)?

"Who shall bring a charge...It is God who justifies...Who is he who condemns?" These are all very legal terms. We can be comforted in knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ because God has made a contract – a covenant³. And it is God holding Himself to His own legal covenant that brings consolation to His people.

Men will (at least did) swear in a courtroom with their hand on a Bible because it represented telling the truth before God. In the Bible itself we see a record of God swearing by the highest authority there is.

² Forensics pertains to legal matters and statements.

³ The word 'contract' might sound cold and certainly a covenant has a much more personal aspect to it (like a marriage covenant). But a marriage covenant does, at very least, include a legally binding contract.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, ¹⁴ saying, *“Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.”* ¹⁵ And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. ¹⁶ For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation *is* for them an end of all dispute. ¹⁷ Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, ¹⁸ that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before *us* (Hebrews 6:13-18).

Beware of people who love you but don't want to marry you – who want to do business with you but don't want to sign the contract. There is a reason people hesitate at such well-grounded commitments; it's usually because they don't want to be required to be faithful.

Imitating God's Forgiveness

Our forgiveness of others needs to resemble God's forgiveness of us. It is a covenant of forgiveness. It is a single action whereby God sends our sins away. We are to imitate that when we forgive others. In legal terms, they're acquitted – pardoned!

God doesn't hang forgiveness out there as an incentive whereby He manipulates us to earn His favor through deeds. God never says “I'm trying to forgive you, but look at yourself – look at what you did!”

One of the beautiful aspects of the Reformed faith (and I believe biblical Christianity) is the distinction between being justified before God and being sanctified in the faith. These two things are never separate but they are always distinct.

Brief, yet biblically accurate, definitions of justification and sanctification are found in our confession of faith. **Sanctification** is understood as the Spirit's continuing work in the life of a Christian where the power of sin is being quelled and the ability to practice holiness is strengthened.

Justification and Forgiveness

A definition of **justification** (which is more closely related to our current topic of forgiveness – pardon, acquittal, etc.) is found in chapter 11, paragraph 1.

Those whom God effectually calls He also freely justifies. He does not pour righteousness into them but pardons their sins and looks on them and accepts them as if they were righteous - not because of anything worked in them or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone. He does not consider their faith itself, the act of believing, as their righteousness or any other obedient response to the gospel on their part. Rather, He imputes to them the obedience and judicial satisfaction earned by Christ. For their part, they receive and rest on Christ and His righteousness by faith (and this faith is not their own but is itself a gift of God).

For the sake of our discussion on forgiveness I wish to point out something that may not be readily apparent at first glance – the effort made in this definition to completely exclude the person’s actions or worthiness – even God-given worthiness – from the equation of being acquitted by God. Forgiveness, acquittal, pardon is not given because of **“anything worked in them or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone.”**

God does not even look at their faith or act of believing as their righteousness. God imputes⁴ to us the **“obedience and judicial satisfaction earned by Christ.”** This is the gospel! This is the good news! Is there anything more soothing to the soul than to realize that we have peace with our maker, not based upon our own sufficient morality and introspection but by looking outside of ourselves to Christ!

I can’t help be a bit amused by the first sentence of the above definition – especially as it relates to how we are called to pardon others. **“He does not pour righteousness into them but pardons their sins and looks on them and accepts them as if they were righteous – not because of anything worked in them or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone.”**

⁴ To impute means to credit to one’s account. As if I went to your bank and put money in your account thus making your rich. It is a free gift.

How many of us are frustrated in our inability to forgive because we are trying to “**pour righteousness**” into our offender. And we are not going to forgive them until we have sufficiently poured so much righteousness in them that they can’t stand us any more. With all due respect, this is a Roman Catholic view of pleasing God and, in my opinion, a source of spiritual slavery.

All this to say, if we don’t have it in our heads and hearts, that forgiveness is a commitment by the forgiving person to send away the debt of the offending party, we don’t truly understand what it means to forgive. We must have that squarely before us as we pursue, in the weeks to come, the other dynamics of this issue.

Let us think about the way we forgive others, and then ask ourselves if this is the way we want God to interact with us. We need to excel in our understanding of the nature of God’s love and forgiveness toward us – we need to meditate on good theology – if we’re to understand how we are to love and forgive others. And the bottom line of this morning’s message – especially as we begin to look to the Lord’s Supper, is that God has cancelled our debt by paying it Himself through the blood of His own Son.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you think Jesus only comments on the portion of the Lord's Prayer which addresses forgiveness (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is unique about the virtue of forgiveness (page 3)?
3. Who is harmed by an unforgiving heart (page 3)?
4. Define the word 'forgive' (pages 4, 5).
5. Does it make sense to say "I'm trying to forgive" (page 5)?
6. How is forgiveness, on the part of God, a legal decision? How is this consoling to Christians (page 5, 6)?
7. What does God's forgiveness tell us about how we are to forgive (pages 6, 7)?
8. What is justification and how does it relate to forgiveness (pages 7, 8)?