

FORGIVENESS:
Will That Be One Goat Or Two?
Message 3
Date: 1/30/2011
Scripture: Luke 17:1-10

INTRO: This is our third message on forgiveness. What we have said so far is very simple. One, God cannot and will not forgive without repentance. Two, many Christians believe that Christians must forgive their fellow man even if there is no repentance.

Let me just mention one thing I could not get into the last message. Most of the writers I quoted, who say they hold to unconditional forgiveness do not truly hold that position. For example, MacLintock and Strong say, "Repentance and confession are indispensable, when one has intentionally injured us in any way, to restore him to our fellowship and approbation. But what is a necessary condition of this is not a necessary condition of forgiving." So, if you forgive unconditionally, that other person can still not be restored to fellowship. The wall is still there. To restore the fellowship he must first repent. So, in a sense that is conditional forgiveness.

John MacArthur considers himself an unconditional forgiveness man, but says, "It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional. For example, in certain cases the offender is to be confronted and ultimately even excommunicated from the church if he or she refuses to repent (Luke 17:3; Matt. 18:15-17)". So is he a conditional or unconditional forgiveness man? Conditional, at least in some cases, according to that quote.

This morning we want to consider the view held by some Christians, among whom I find myself, that forgiveness between people must be conditioned upon repentance. I would go this far and say you cannot forgive unless repentance takes place. You can say you forgave, but the person is not forgiven. This morning we want to look at this more closely. Let me recommend a book to you by J. Adams, "From Forgiven To Forgiving."

So, without more introduction, let us move on to our look at the view that says forgiveness is conditional.

B. Conditional Forgiveness

1. Definition of this view

So let us begin with a basic definition of conditional forgiveness as I see it. *Forgiveness is the covering or sending away of sin.* It provides everything needed to restore the relationship. I will define this in greater detail in another message. So, conditional forgiveness says that before forgiveness can be extended, repentance must take place. That is, repentance is a condition to forgiveness. Without repentance, there can be no true forgiveness. This holds true for both divine and human forgiveness.

2. Explanation of this view

So, let me take some time to explain this view by quoting from two writers that support this view. Vine's Dictionary says this of forgiveness: "Human forgiveness is to be strictly analogous to divine 'forgiveness,' e.g. Matt. 6:12. If certain conditions are fulfilled, there is no limitation to Christ's law of 'forgiveness,' Matt. 18:21, 22. The conditions are repentance and confession, Matt. 18:15-17; Luke 17:3."

First, he says human forgiveness is to be strictly analogous to divine forgiveness. For a defense he gives Matthew 6:12 where Jesus taught the disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." A better verse would be Colossians 3:13 which says, "...if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." We are to forgive like Christ forgave us. And how did He forgive us? On the basis of repentance, of course.

Vine then says that there are two conditions to forgiveness and they are repentance and confession. For this he gives Matthew 18:15-17 and Luke 17:3 and we will look at those more closely in the next point.

Now in all respects but one John MacArthur could be said to hold the conditional view of forgiveness. Listen to him again: "It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional. For example, in certain cases the offender is to be confronted and ultimately even excommunicated from the church if he or she refuses to repent (Luke 17:3; Matt. 18:15-17)" (119).

Then, as we noted earlier, he says, "If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else." But, in my understanding Scripture gives us another principle for dealing with the vast majority of petty infractions. I want you to see this principle (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13). To forbear is to hold up or hold back. Vine's dictionary says it signifies to 'bear with' or to 'endure'. There are many things we can bear with another. Colossians says, 'forbearing one another, forgiving one another'. When do you forbear and when do you forgive? When a matter breaks our fellowship with another, I think is a good rule to tell us when what needs to be done.

Sometimes it is necessary to correct another. Sometimes it is necessary to reprove another. Sometimes it is necessary to rebuke another and confront him with sin. God give us wisdom to know what to do when. We will be looking at the command to 'rebuke' another because of sin later.

So MacArthur says, "If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else: overlook the offense. Forgive unilaterally, unconditionally. Grant pardon freely and unceremoniously" (120). Now MacArthur makes a serious error there in my estimation. He equates overlooking or forbearance with unilateral unconditional forgiveness, and there is no Scripture for that. Forbearance and forgiveness are two very different words with two very different

meanings. So, there are times to forbear and there are times to confront sin with a rebuke.

Let me take you back to the NISBE. Their position is unconditional forgiveness between people. They say, "Jesus recognized that there are conditions to be fulfilled before forgiveness can be granted. Forgiveness is part of a mutual relationship; the other part is the repentance of the offender. God does not forgive without repentance, nor is it required of mankind. The effect of forgiveness is to restore to its former state the relationship that was broken by sin. Such a restoration requires the cooperation of both parties" (341).

Now, you will say, "They don't hold the unconditional view. They hold to conditional forgiveness." Now listen as I read what they write a little later, "It is not to be supposed, however, that failure to repent on the part of the offender releases the offended from all obligation to extend forgiveness. Without the repentance of the one who has wronged him he can have a forgiving state of mind." This is a kind of double talk which almost all of the unconditional view teachers do.

3. Reasons for this view

So let us look at the reasons why some hold that forgiveness between people is conditional. Let me state my own view. It is my view that when we say we have forgiven another without their repentance, what has happened is not forgiveness. Here is how it goes in a discussion I have had with numerous people. I ask this person that has unconditionally forgiven, "Did you say you forgave the one who wronged you without repentance on the other person's part?" And the answer is, "Yes, I did." And then I ask, "Is that person now forgiven?" And the answer, usually after some probing, is, "No. Not really. But I have forgiven on my part." So I say, "You forgave this person but they are not really forgiven?" And they say, "Yes. I guess that is it." So I ask, how can you have forgiven them if

they are not forgiven?" And the answer is, "Well, I forgave on my part." That is unconditional forgiveness. That is what I call one goat forgiveness.

Now later we will look at the difference between what a Christian is to do when wronged by an believer and when wronged by a believer. That is an important distinction that very few make when dealing with this subject. Colossians 3:12-13 says, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*." How did Christ forgive us? When we repented. How should we forgive? when repentance has taken place.

Now let me say one word about repentance here. I was asked by one of our folk, "What if you can see in their actions they are sorry but they don't say it?" And I say, "Sounds like Mennonite forgiveness to me." You see, maybe I said something nasty to my wife and then I feel bad and take her out to supper. Is that repentance? No! How do you repent. Well there is a confession part to it. So I say to my wife, "This morning I said..." And then you name it. That is confession. To confess is to say the same thing. To say, "I am sorry" is not enough. If you want to use the 'I'm sorry' clause then say, "I am sorry I said... to you this morning. Would you forgive me for that?" Oh, how we like to repent with icing on it. Don't. Confess. Say it in words. Then ask for forgiveness.

4. Scriptures for this view

So, I ask, are there Scriptures that teach that repentance must take place before forgiveness is extended when wrong has taken place between two Christians? Let us begin with Luke 17 (read 1-6). First, Jesus said it is impossible to live life without offences entering our lives somewhere. Now the word translated 'offences' is

the Greek word 'skandalon'. We get our word 'scandal' from it. It means to trip somebody up. Then in verse 2 Jesus talks about offending 'little ones'. In a parallel passage, Matthew 18:6 Jesus says, "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

Then in verse 3 Jesus said, "Take heed to yourselves..." Watch yourselves. Take care of yourselves. You could get offended, or tripped up in your Christian life. How? Your brother might sin against you and thus skandalizo or offend you, or cause you to stumble spiritually. The danger from one brother sinning against another is that he might cause the other brother to stumble, and if that should happen, the one who does the sinning is in worse condition than if a huge rock were tied to his neck and he cast into the sea!

So, how do you keep from stumbling when your brother sins against you? Should we just unconditionally forgive him? What does the Bible say? No! We should do that one thing nobody wants to do. Unconditional forgiveness is so much easier than this. The only thing is it does not work. We are to rebuke the one that sinned against us! We violate few instructions more than this one. The instructions could not be much clearer. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him.

Now let me tell you something that will shock you. Please do not leave just yet. Let me personalize it to take some of the shock out of it. If another Christian sins against me, and I unconditionally forgive him and act as if all is OK, I am a hypocrite and I have sinned! I have disobeyed Almighty God! Our passage here does not say we are to forgive him. It says we are to rebuke him.

Now what is surprising is the word 'to rebuke'. It literally means 'to put honor upon'. It then

came to mean to rebuke. I think Matthew 18:15 sheds further light on what this means (read). How do you rebuke him? Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If you have any experience in this, you know why we avoid this practice at almost all costs, but that is what the Bible says.

Now Luke tells us that when we have done this, if the person repents, we are to forgive him. There is the order plain and simple and this is not dealing with sin between man and God but man and man. This is what the Bible teaches. This is how we take heed to ourselves. This is how we avoid falling into sin!

But Jesus goes on in verse 4 (read). Now, to the Jews this was unbelievable teaching. To rebuke your brother and then forgive him if he repents? They held to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But Jesus' teaching, to forgive every time a person repents, in verse 4 is too much for them. So they say in verse 5, "Lord, increase our faith!" What they are saying is, "This is beyond us. We are going to need a lot more faith if we are to forgive simply on repentance." You see, to forgive simply on the ground of repentance was too much for them. We have gone to the other extreme, saying that to forgive only after repentance is asking too much. They had trouble forgiving at all. We, on the other hand, are taught to forgive before repentance takes place! And if you read through to verse 10, you will find that if we forgive one person seven times in one day over the same thing, we have only done what is our duty to do!

In this passage in Matthew the teaching is simply this. If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, if he deals with his sin, you have gained your brother. That is, the relationship is restored. This is how you keep from staying angry, or bitter or carrying a grudge.

But if he does not take care of his sin, take one or two more as witness and try again. If he hears you, the relationship is restored. All is well, but if not, take it to the church. If, after it has been addressed by the church, and no repentance takes place he is to be excommunicated, here described as treating him like a heathen and a tax collector.

Now let me here begin to answer a very important question. Here is the question: If you do not forgive your brother though he does not repent, how will you keep from anger and bitterness and carrying a grudge? How? You rebuke him. If he does not repent, take somebody else and rebuke him again. And if he does not repent? Let the church rebuke him. And if he does not repent? Excommunicate him until he does repent. You see, if you follow biblical procedures you won't need to stay angry, or carry a grudge or become bitter. You will be vindicated and the wrong will be acknowledged by the church. That solves all problems of bitterness. Now I know there are other cases and we will see some of them as we go along.

And now I must say a word about treating this person like a heathen and a tax collector. It is held by many that this means we should treat them like the unsaved and so we try to win them back to Christ. We invite them over or seek to bring them back in various ways. However, I believe this means we are to avoid them. That is what the Jews did with the heathen and tax collectors. They did not mix with them.

Now I know that view, held by Mennonites, and sometimes called 'shunning' is decried as unbiblical by most. But this is not the only passage that deals with this matter. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul deals with a matter more serious than this. He lists the matters for which excommunication of this type is to be exercised and then he explains how to treat such people (read 9-11). The ultimate form of communion is eating together and Paul forbids it with people who call themselves Christians and

live in gross immorality or have been excommunicated for such.

Let me take you to another passage in 2 Thessalonians 3 (read 6-15). What are we to do with those who are disobedient but not to the extent of gross immorality? Mark them and withdraw from them (6). Does that sound like trying to win them back? And then look at verse 14. We are to note that person, and not to keep company with them. Why? That he may be ashamed and amend his ways.

What does it mean then, to treat them like a heathen and a tax collector? Avoid them. Do not company with them. Do not eat with them. Have no fellowship with them. In short, excommunication is ex communication. Sin must be treated harshly, something the church has failed to do for so long we have lost our fear of God.

Now some of our ladies Bible study groups use a book written by Nancy Leigh Demoss. She is a very good Bible teacher and teaches many ladies. But in the matter of forgiveness, it seems to me she has followed John MacArthur's lead. Here is how she defines forgiveness in her book, *Seeking Him*, "Forgiveness means that I fully release the offender from his debt. It means fully cleaning the record. It is a promise never to bring up the offense again (to God, to others, or to the offender himself) (page 179)."

Is she right? Yes! But put that in the perspective of unconditional forgiveness and see if it works. A fellow Christian has sinned against me. So, according to unconditional forgiveness, I forgive this person, though there is no repentance. But Matthew 18 says that if somebody has sinned against us we are to rebuke him. And how do we rebuke somebody if we have fully released the offenders debt, cleaned the record entirely, and have promised to never bring it up again? You cannot even obey Matthew 18 if unconditional forgiveness is correct. You cannot bring it up the first time, as we are instructed in Matthew 18, and certainly not the

second time, or the third time. So how do you rebuke somebody you have already forgiven? It does not work. And you can never exercise church discipline, because you have buried it and promised to never bring it up again. This simply is unbiblical.

But then, according to Nancy Leigh Demoss, forgiving the person unconditionally does not let that person off the hook. Here is what she says on page 181, "Letting the offender off your hook does not mean they are off God's hook." Here is what she is saying. You have unconditionally forgiven and let the person off your hook, but they are not off God's hook yet. For that they must repent. And I say, "That is not forgiveness at all." If it is, it is that part of forgiveness that does not work!

And now, let us say the person comes and repents. Do you then say, "Oh, don't worry about it. I have forgiven you already"? And the person may say, "I can do whatever I want. They will forgive me before I repent. I don't even have to mention it. They forgive before I do." On the other hand, if they repent and you say, "I forgive you", when were they forgiven? The first time you forgave them or the second time?

And you may say, "You know something? You are making far too big of a deal of this." Then I want to tell you something. You have never sat before horror stories of things that happened and then afterward instructed these people on how to deal with it. Forgiveness is one of the most important subjects in the Christian life there is.

CONCL: So our subject this morning has been conditional forgiveness. Does the Bible teach conditional forgiveness when the sin is against God? Definitely. No true Christian will argue that. Does the Bible teach conditional forgiveness when the sin is between two or more people? Well, let us let the Scriptures answer that. We begin with Luke 17:3, "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." You will not get a plainer statement than that. And how do

you rebuke him? Matthew 18:15, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." This passage ultimately teaches excommunication for not dealing with sin if no repentance takes place.

Now let me just answer one more question, though I have covered before. Mark 11:25 says, "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." This verse does not mention repentance, so is it not necessary in some cases? It is a point of Bible interpretation that unclear verses must give way to clear verses. Luke 17:3 is very clear. So this verse cannot be interpreted against Luke 17:3. I have mentioned this before as well, but John 3:16 does not mention repentance as necessary for salvation, but other passages clearly do. So because John 3:16 does not mention repentance, that does not mean repentance is not required. Jesus very clearly taught in other passages that it is necessary. So in Mark 1:15 He says, "Repent and believe the Gospel." In Luke 13:3-5 He says twice, "Unless you repent you will likewise perish."

So Mark 11:25 may present a case where someone has repented to this person but this person does not forgive. And now the Lord instructs this person that before he prays he needs to take care of this matter. Verse 26 then says this, "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

No true forgiveness can be extended without repentance first taking place.