

If You Do Not Forgive, Your Father Will Not Forgive

Matthew 6:12; Matthew 6:14-15

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Greg L. Price

Bearing grudges against those who have offended us, keeping a mental ledger of the sins committed against us, maintaining an unforgiving heart against those who have mistreated us, and nursing bitterness toward those who have hurt us are not expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps there is nothing that goes more against our flesh (and yet is the gospel of Jesus Christ) than to forgive others who have wronged us just as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven us for all of our countless and far more grievous sins committed against Him (Ephesians 4:32).

We evidence the mercy we have received from our Father in heaven when we show that mercy to those who have offended us. Unbelievers will be bitter and unforgiving for the way they have been mistreated (I expect that, for that is natural to fallen man); but as a Christian, I cannot personally return evil for evil, but rather good for evil. As a Christian, I cannot keep a mental ledger of offenses, but must seek reconciliation where there is damage to my relationship with others (Matthew 18:15; Matthew 5:23-24); and if the other person does not want reconciliation, I must let love cover a multitude of sins until such a time (1 Peter 4:8). Nursing and feeding in our minds the sins others have committed against us or sharing them with others so that more people become involved in a disagreement and conflict is not the way of the gospel. That is the way of the world. As we shall see, God takes these matters very seriously, and so must we as those who profess Jesus as Savior and Lord.

We continue in this most important subject of forgiveness as found in the Lord's Prayer, focusing today upon our forgiveness of one another. The main points are the following: (1) God as Father Forgives Us as We Forgive Others (Matthew 6:12,14); (2) God as Father Will Not Forgive Us If We Do Not Forgive Others (Matthew 6:12,15).

I. God as Father Forgives Us as We Forgive Others (Matthew 6:12,14).

A. The Lord's Prayer (as we have noted before) speaks of God's children coming to Him as a reconciled Father who has already judicially pardoned us (all of our sins) and removed the sentence of condemnation from us once and for all, having granted to us everlasting life through faith alone in Christ alone ("Our Father which art in heaven" Matthew 6:9). All of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer are directed to God as our loving and holy Father rather than to God who condemns us as a righteous Judge. This is very important to keep in mind; otherwise you may conclude that your salvation is based upon your work (forgiving others) rather than upon the work of Jesus and His atoning sacrifice for sin. If forgiving others was in truth the ground for God forgiving us then there was no need for the death of Christ for us—His death then becomes only an example to follow, but it actually accomplished nothing. Then it really is your work of forgiveness that secures your forgiveness from God, not Christ's work (Titus 3:5).

B. What does this petition mean when Jesus says "And forgive us our debts, **as we forgive our debtors**" Matthew 6:12)?

1. Let us be clear that when we forgive others we do not remove guilt and condemnation from others as when God judicially forgives us. Only God in that sense forgives sin. But just as God's fatherly forgiveness of us is intended to mercifully restore fellowship with us (His children), so likewise our forgiveness of those who sin against us is intended to restore fellowship with them. Just as God's forgiveness is a promise not to hold our sins against us any longer, so likewise is our forgiveness of one another. Thus, when we forgive, we are promising that we will not hold that sin against that person any longer. It is a promise as well

not to bring that sin up to others or to nurse it in our own minds.

2. Jesus is teaching us that as we forgive others their debts/sins committed against us, God will testify to us in our own hearts that He has forgiven us. For when we in mercy and love forgive others, it bears witness to the truth that we truly grasp the mercy and love God has shown to us in forgiving us our sins. Jesus is making a vital connection between the way you treat others and the way you say God has treated you. If God has forgiven you, you will (not might) forgive others. If you will not forgive others, you are saying God will not forgive you.

3. Just as faith without works is dead (James 2), so faith without forgiveness is dead. Professing Christians can talk about faith in God and about theology all day and night, but if they do not show mercy to their neighbor, and forgive them from the heart, their faith is dead. If bitterness, resentment, hatred, and personal vengeance toward others (even toward those who make themselves our enemy) fill our thoughts, then our religion is like that of the Jews—a religion of mere show and pretense. Faith without true forgiveness is hypocrisy.

4. Forgiveness of others and reconciliation with one another over personal offenses is so important that even the public worship of God (not just the Lord's Supper) should temporarily be interrupted to seek it out (Matthew 5:23-24). Not only should we seek God's forgiveness for having offended Him as we approach Him in worship, but we should also seek forgiveness from others or seek to forgive others before approaching God in worship. Jesus is not saying, "Miss worship if there is not reconciliation with others." What He is saying is that we must seek reconciliation with others even if it means missing worship. We should seek to take care of offenses before worship if we are already aware of them. How do we expect our worship to be acceptable to our merciful Father if we have not given nor sought the forgiveness of wife, husband, children, parents, fellow Christians, or friends before gathering to worship God, especially when He tells us how important this is?

5. What personal offences are significant enough for you to go to others and to seek reconciliation? Obviously, if we approached every personal offense against us by following Matthew 18, we would get little else done in our lives. Here are some guidelines.

a. For personal offenses that are clear and grievous violations of God's law rather than possible violations of God's law—where there is no doubt in your mind that a sin was committed.

b. For personal offences that seriously disrupt a relationship rather than merely irritate the relationship. We must learn not to be so easily offended and not so defensive. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, we should develop a thick skin and a tender heart toward those who may offend us in different ways.

c. For personal offences that are committed intentionally rather than those that are due to mere weakness and committed unintentionally.

d. For personal offences that are committed repeatedly rather than once in a great while—where it has become a habit.

e. For personal offenses that like leaven will draw others into the same sin—and not by us talking with others about that sin.

f. When sins are not of this nature, we must allow love to cover a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8; Proverbs 17:9). If we will not practice the gospel of forgiveness, bitterness and vengeance will take root in our lives. They will destroy us and we will find ourselves becoming more miserable and hateful than even the one who offended us.

6. What should you do if there is no repentance in one who has sinned against you? There may not be reconciliation, but you are not left without help from God.

a. Let the love and mercy of Christ cover a multitude of sins—even to those who make themselves your enemy (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:20-21).

b. Do not allow bitterness to take root in your life. "But you don't understand what

he/she did to me. If it has not happened to you, you cannot know what I'm going through." That may be true, but God knows, and it is He that has commanded (not suggested) that you forgive others and show them the mercy you have received from Him.

c. Consider what you deserve from God for your many sins committed against Him. Beat your chest when it is hard to show mercy. Do you deserve mercy? Do I deserve mercy? Of course not! It is freely given, not earned or deserved.

d. Replace vengeful thoughts with thoughts of praise and thanksgiving to God for His merciful love and kindness to you.

e. Pray for the offender's repentance and forgiveness as did Christ. If you are fervently praying in love for the repentance of those who have offended you, you will find that God will remove that bitterness and anger in your heart (Psalm 86:5).

D. Jesus is teaching us to do everything within our power to promote forgiveness and reconciliation (whether it means we go to one who has personally offended you, Matthew 18:15; or whether it means you go to someone you have personally offended, Matthew 5:23-24). And if that desired reconciliation is not reached (perhaps there is no agreement that a sin was committed or will not repent), then cover that sin in love and move on—don't dwell on it—don't become bitter. Fast and pray for tenderness in your heart and in that of the other person.

II. God as Father Will Not Forgive Us If We Do Not Forgive Others (Matthew 6:12,15).

A. There are certain blessings that flow from forgiving others who have sinned against us: namely, the enjoyment of God's fatherly forgiveness, a clean conscience before God and man, joy, peace, and assurance (Matthew 6:14). Likewise, God's fatherly discipline will fall upon us for not forgiving others who have sinned against us (Matthew 6:15): namely, God's fatherly forgiveness will not be ours; we will not enjoy that blessed, sweet communion with Christ, but rather will feel estranged from Christ; God's peace which surpasses all understanding will fade away in the midst of our trials and afflictions; God may deliver us into other sins in obstinately continuing in this sin; and we may even temporarily forfeit assurance of our salvation.

B. The Lord Jesus gave a specific parable that illustrates this very truth (Matthew 18:23-35).

1. How can we truly claim to have received and to know the amazing forgiveness of God, who has forgiven us so much, and then go forth and refuse to forgive one who has committed a relatively insignificant amount of sin against us? And even if we do utter with our mouths, "I forgive you", do we continue to nurse the offence in our hearts or expose the sin of someone to others? Talking with others about what someone has done to you is to invite others to do the same thing to you in talking and gossiping behind your back. Rather than exposing the personal sins of others before family members or friends (which is certainly not done out of love for or mercy to that individual), let us pray for them, cover their sins, and show the love of Christ to them (looking for an opportunity for reconciliation, Proverbs 17:9).

2. Note, what is said in Matthew 18:23-35. "And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors (perhaps a tormented conscience), till he should pay all that was due unto him (spiritually, until he has confessed his sin of not forgiving others and showing mercy to those who have offended him)." Does Jesus take this matter of forgiveness seriously? Absolutely!

C. Until we clearly see the depth of our own sin and God's mercy to us, we will not show God's mercy to those who have sinned against us (Micah 7:18). God delights to show mercy, do you?

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