

## Forgiveness

Matthew 6:12

A few years ago, when the kids were all still at home, Linda and I took a trip to the mall. She went her way. I went mine. At the time, the handiest branch of our bank was there, so I often made trips to the mall by myself. I only mention that so that you will know how easy it could be for a person to temporarily forget that he had a passenger out there somewhere at Park City. You see, anybody could drive off and forget his wife. I would have remembered as soon as I got home and saw that her car was there but she wasn't. Obviously, I wish I hadn't made those six other stops, first.

It was dark when I got home. The two younger kids had a fearful look in their eyes. The oldest one said, "You should just keep going." A voice from the other room muttered something about walking home. I started to regret the fact that it had rained all afternoon. Then, she appeared - red-faced, soggy and silent. We were all a little terrified until she said, "Let's just say, 'Forgiven', and drop it."

"Wow!" I thought. Then, I looked around and noticed that no one had started supper. I was faced with a dilemma. Should I rant and rave, or, should I just let it slide this one time? "Hmm ... a quandary."

Let's call it a parable ... That's right! Not a word was true. Some of you were way too delighted at my near misfortune. In the spirit of the text, "I forgive you." Not a word of the story was true, but there is a truthful lesson in it. To be forgiven of something big (like leaving your wife to walk home in the rain) and, then, to be graceless when annoyed by a far more minor grievance is to push one's luck. And yet, a parable of our Lord with a similar plot line was read to you only a few minutes ago.

Too many times, that same plot line is reenacted in our own experience with God's grace. The plot line includes an incredible debt, an incredible act of forgiveness and, on the part of the one forgiven, a brutally dumb unwillingness to be forgiving. Jesus continues teaching His disciples to pray, saying:

<sup>12</sup>Forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors. – Matthew 6:12

Let us explore this essential link between the grace of God flowing toward us, and also from us.

### I. The Provider of Forgiveness (12a)

<sup>12</sup>Forgive us our debts ...

#### A. We Owe God a Big Debt

After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and orchestrated the death of her husband, Uriah, he prayed to God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned ..." (Psalm 51:4). That's an odd comment. David had sinned against lots of folks in this, the most sordid episode of his life. But in the final analysis, all sin is uniquely an affront to God. Only God is holy. Only God is the rightful Lawgiver who can establish the standards by which we are to live together in community. Any notion of a moral code apart from a belief in God from Whom all truth and virtue descend is doomed to be arbitrary. All our sins, public and allegedly private, put us in God's debt.

Jesus speaks of our sins in terms of our “debts” to God, something owed. The Bible uses several words for sin, but in prayer, to speak of sin as a debt owed to God reinforces the idea that sin is a personal issue between you and Him. Unless you can settle the debt, He needs to forgive it or it remains.

One word that describes our sin is *hamartia*, “a missing of a mark.” This word appears in Romans 3:23: “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” At the end of life, at the end of a year, at the end of a day, how often does a man feel he has used his God-given potential for good, much less for God’s glory? We often find ourselves being less than we were called to be.

*Parabasis* is “a stepping over.” This speaks to the willfulness by which we step over or just dance as close as we can to a line of right and wrong that God has drawn. This word is used of Adam and is translated “breaking a command.” in Romans 5:14. God had one rule for Adam to keep. “Do not eat from that lone tree right there!” Adam violated the only occupancy policy in Eden.

*Paraptoma* means “trespass.” This is a “false step,” the sin revealed when we are “off guard.” Ten years ago, a certain baseball owner popped off about a player in a way deemed racially demeaning. She defended herself saying, “That was my mouth speaking, not my heart.” Recently, a popular actor got liquored up and cut loose with an anti-Semitic slur. He claimed that wasn’t who he really was. The offended parties didn’t buy the explanations, nor should they have. If sinful thoughts do not exist somewhere in the recesses of our hearts, they would never come out of our mouths.

I’m not judging those two sinners. Far from it. My mouth has uttered many things that my mind regretted immediately. Obviously, they were in my heart somewhere. I just hope if I ever find myself in a situation with microphones thrust in my face, I’ll say something thoughtful like:

“I never thought that was in my heart, but it must have been, because it sure did come out of my mouth. I regret that such things still reside in me. My mind condemns them, but my mind grasps truth long before my heart catches up. I will keep surrendering my deceitful old heart to God to be remade. My hope is that one day, by His grace, such things won’t reside there anymore and I won’t have to guard my mouth so closely.”

To simply say it was not in my heart or not the real me speaking is silly. That is only a hollow way of deflecting full responsibility for the sin away from me.

So, how’s your spiritual net worth look after assessing the various ways we rack up debt to God? We fall short of what He has called and equipped us to be. We belligerently step across some lines of right and wrong and cutely try to live right at edge of other lines. In unguarded moments, we stumble into sin. Think you can settle that debt? There is only thing we can do. We ask for forgiveness.

## **B. God’s Forgiveness Is a Staple of Life**

In the original language, the prayer for daily bread, this prayer for forgiveness and next week’s prayer for God’s protection are one sentence. The petitions are connected with a word meaning “and.” They are presented as equivalent needs. Life would be hopeless without any of the three.

Do you often think of your need for God’s forgiveness as being just as crucial to your existence and survival as physical sustenance? The Bible teaches that sin erected a wall that prohibits our access to a Holy God. Apart from grace, this sin dilemma is so severe that Paul described us as “alienated from God” ... “enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (Colossians 1:21). Consider why God’s Old Testament nation so often experienced futility as they sought God’s blessings:

<sup>1</sup>Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,  
nor his ear too dull to hear.  
<sup>2</sup>But your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you,  
so that he will not hear. – Isaiah 59:1, 2

This petition is meaningless apart from a personal sense of sin. If we recite the prayer mindlessly, thinking of it as a simple way to generically deal with bad things we may or may not have done, we are wasting our breath. To ask God for His forgiveness is to openly admit our guilt. It is to acknowledge that the only way we will ever see His presence is by His gift of forgiveness.

## **II. The Parallels of Forgiveness (12b)**

... as we also have forgiven our debtors.

### **A. Jesus Draws a Troublesome Connection**

Immediately following the prayer, Jesus adds:

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive men when they sin (trespass) against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup>But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. – Matthew 6:14, 15

Does this really mean that if we are unforgiving, God's willingness to forgive us can slip away? Some would protest, "That sounds like God's grace is contingent upon our forgiving others! How does that harmonize with a salvation that is "not by works"?" (Ephesians 2:9). Look at it this way: Forgiveness is not a religious work like sacrificing a goat. Forgiveness is the family resemblance of a child to His Father. The capacity to forgive is the fruit of a new life. Far from just being some religious thing to do, a gracious spirit is a mark of spiritual rebirth. It proves we belong to our Father.

I cannot imagine that Jesus ever intended these words to frighten anyone into thinking that our salvation is contingent upon our ability to forgive as perfectly as God forgives. Our forgiveness of others will never be perfect. To forgive is to struggle with pride and to surrender the insatiable desire for self-vindication. But, suffice it to say, if you are unwilling to embrace a spirit of forgiveness, things cannot be right with God. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to appreciate that if we are indifferent to the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, we really don't understand God very well at all. We cannot claim to bear much resemblance at all to our Father.

Jesus taught the same crowd, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). To that audience, to be a son of God was to be God-like. There is no enterprise more God-like that you will ever be involved in than the work of making peace. Nobody wants to hear about how committed you are to the cause of world missions or evangelism if you are indifferent to putting back together damaged relationships with those under your roof or in your church.

### **B. Never Doubt God's Willingness to Forgive**

God went to great lengths to secure our forgiveness. He is not reluctant in bestowing it on any who wish to be restored to Him. But, that's the crux. Forgiveness is more than mere debt cancellation. It is the restoration of fellowship. If a man does not desire to be restored to God, he is not a candidate for the pardon God offers; because he's not interested in the actual gift that God is passing out.

Somewhere in the discussion of free grace, many have failed to understand that a free gift can still have terms of acceptance. If a person wants to be restored to God and become like Him, he will have no problem with being told to repent of His sin. He will have no problem with confessing the Name of Jesus. He will have no problem with being baptized as an act of becoming united with Christ. And, though it is hardly accomplished in a single moment in time, and he will encounter many obstacles, he will have no problem with embracing the pursuit of the likeness of His Father. He will bear the cross of self-denial that pursuit demands. He will serve others as God has enabled Him. And, he will willingly engage in the practice of forgiveness as he grows in the grace of His Father.

One old preacher observed: The Queen of England is free to take any street urchin and give him a home in Buckingham Palace. This is a free gift. However, she likewise has the right to demand that this street urchin take a bath and behave like a royal without the “grace” of her gesture being challenged or called into question by anyone. Repentance is not a work. Confession is not a work. Baptism is not a work. The decorum of grace is not a work.

### **III. The Practice of Forgiveness**

#### **A. Forgiveness Requires More than Clichés**

One woman boasting of her mastery of forgiveness said, “I have an uncle I hated so much I vowed I’d never go to his funeral. Now that I’ve forgiven him, I’d be happy to go to it any time.”

In the realm of forgiveness, we tend to fall back on tired old clichés, because the genuine article is hard work and it cuts across the grain of an old, inherently prideful nature. So, instead, we embrace trivialized versions of forgiveness, sometimes spoken, sometimes unspoken.

- “I forgive you, but I’ll never forget.
- “I forgive you, but I’ll never be able to trust you again.”
- “I forgive you on the record, but we both know this relationship is over.”
- “I forgive you, but I’ll drudge up the past any time you annoy me.”
- “I forgive, but I reserve the right to make snide comments just to remind you every once in a while of how you ‘done me wrong.’”

If that is your idea of forgiveness, do you really want to risk praying to God, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”? No, when the psalmist described God’s forgiveness, he wrote:

<sup>8</sup>The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger, abounding in love.

<sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse,  
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

<sup>10</sup>he does not treat us as our sins deserve  
or repay us according to our iniquities.

<sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;

<sup>12</sup>as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us. – Psalm 103:8-12

True forgiveness, the genuine article confounds the world. One day, Peter asked Jesus:

... “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” – Matthew 18:21

Peter thought he had come up with something revolutionary in the realm of conflict resolution. After all, the rabbis taught that if you had to forgive the same man three times, you should give up on him. Peter doubled the rabbinical norm, tacked on one for good measure and landed at 7, a remarkable Jewish symbol of wholeness. Imagine Peter's shock when Jesus burst his bubble:

... "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." – Matthew 18:22

The forgiveness God calls us to blows the minds of those who cannot understand. Our nation is perplexed at the way our Amish neighbors have reacted to the recent slaughter of their children. That degree of forgiveness is so foreign to gut instinct that some angrily criticize the Amish.

The world is more accustomed to what was played out this past week on one of those TV news magazines. A man was found guilty of killing his wife. The woman's father had the occasion to address his son-in-law at the sentencing hearing: "I hate you. I will never forgive you. I hope you rot in Hell." I thought, "Well, at least he's not wasting anyone's time with some syrupy pretense of grace." Months later, the father was sticking to his guns. The bitterness etched on his face was gut-wrenching, but that's a response people understand, seething, soul-consuming bitterness.

## **B. Still, Forgiveness Is Not Primarily a Mental Health Gimmick**

In this "what's-in-it-for-me?" age of the church, people always seem to need some inducement to do what God tells them to do. It's no longer, "Be generous and God will prosper you according to your needs. Today, it's "Give in order to get." In the realm of forgiveness, it's no longer "Forgive others and show yourself to be a child of God." Now, it's "Forgive, or the bitterness will eat you up inside." Inner peace is a side-effect of forgiving others, but it is not the primary motive. When I try to forgive just as a means of settling my own inner turmoil, I could not care less about reconciliation. It's a mind-game attempt to fabricate peace, and the issue always resurfaces to eat me up inside anyway. We are to forgive others because we have tasted God's forgiveness.

We are to seek first the kingdom of God. That means our driving passion is to obey and honor God. Good things come to us as side-effects, but God-love, not self-need must drive obedience.

Do you think God forgives us for the sake of His own mental health or because reconciliation is His great desire? How about forgiving as a way of imitating your Father? How about forgiving for the sake of the offender? How about forgiving out of obedience to God? How about forgiving so as to reenact the miracle of grace? Remember, true forgiveness is something only God can enable us to do, for so little of that nonsense we call forgiveness really qualifies.

Picture that horrid hour at Calvary as God's spotless Lamb hangs on a cross in the darkness. Imagine the darkness being penetrated by this prayer: "Father, I have loved them. They have brutalized me. Receive my spirit and, for all I care, send them straight to Hell where they belong."

Now, exactly what grievances do you find so hard to forgive? Picture Calvary again. See your redemption secured. Recall the words that were really spoken from the cross that day: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Find no satisfaction or warmth in bitterness. Forgive as you have been forgiven and as you desire to be forgiven.