

## Forgiving Others

Jesus warned, *“If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14&15).”* From this and other passages, we see that having eternal life depends on whether we forgive others. Because of the terrible consequences of not forgiving others (eternal hell), it is extremely important for us to look inward to see if we have been forgiving those who sin against us.

Many who call themselves Christian are unclear on what it means to forgive others. In so-called “Christian” books about human relationships, forgiveness is mentioned but not usually described biblically. Often, the authors themselves do not know what it means to forgive. Before you assume that I am wrong about this, consider Jesus’ warning that broad is the road that leads to destruction and many are on it while few are on the narrow path leading to life. Just as there are many people who falsely believe they are Christians, likewise many “Christian” authors may be likewise deceived or at the very least fail to portray what it means to forgive others.

While you read on, please consider the possibility that you yourself may not be in the practice of truly forgiving others. This is so important because if you are not in the practice of truly forgiving others, the Father will not forgive you and you will not inherit eternal life. In case the understanding and experience of truly forgiving others is not firm within your grasp, read on as I attempt describe what it means to forgive others. While you do, look inward to determine if you have been forgiving others with a mind open to the possibility that you are failing to do as Jesus prescribed.

To lay a foundation for this discussion, it may be helpful to understand what it is that must be forgiven. When we forgive, are to forgive sins against us. The words “trespass” and “transgression” are used often in the Bible in place of the word sin. When someone transgresses against you, they cause an offense. It is your responsibility to forgive the offense. Some offenses are easier to forgive than others. For example, when someone transgresses against you out of complete ignorance and in a way that does not cause much harm, forgiving is relatively easy. Perhaps you own a piece of land that runs along side some state park. While you happen to be visiting your land, you notice an older man who seems lost walking on your land. It turns out that he missed a turn on a hiking trail and ended up on your land. He trespassed but he did so out of ignorance and without malice. This offense is easy to forgive but it nevertheless must be forgiven. But what if the sin is more grievous? One month later, two teenagers who don’t like you purposely set fire to your land and burn up everything on it. Not only is your land damaged, but also you know that these kids did it to spite you with malice. Such an offense has great potential to cause anger and a desire to “get even” or pay them back for what they did. It is much more difficult to forgive this transgression than the other.

It is important to also realize that the intensity of harm and hurt increases in proportion to the degree that your trust in them is broken. It is one thing to forgive the two teenagers because your trust in them was not that high in the first place. You already knew that teenagers sometimes act badly so your trust in them is not extremely high. But if these teenagers happen to be your own children and by their act of burning your property you come to realize that they hate you and want you out of their life, the degree of hurt and damage increases, especially if you were ignorant of the hate they had toward you. The degree of pain increases depending on the degree to which you have entrusted someone with your heart. The word betrayal describes the type of offense that requires the greatest amount of forgiveness. The more of your heart that is been given prior to betrayal, the more that is on the line. Whether your own children burn your property or whether the one you have completely given your heart to leaves you for another lover, betrayal is the appropriate word to describe the offense because the one to whom you entrusted your heart has inflicted tremendous pain.

If a person does not experience extreme trauma from such offenses, it only proves that they had not fully given their heart (trust) to them in the first place. The degree of pain is always in direct proportion to the degree your heart was given to them prior to the offense. But all transgressions, from the accidental trespassing on property to the most grievous of betrayal must be forgiven or we may end up in hell’s torment having proven ourselves unregenerate. All offenses by others are designed by God and brought into our life to test our faith. All of them require our forgiveness. Some of them are relatively easy to forgive. Others require nothing less than the supernatural power of God which is always present in true Christianity (and

appears to others as “radical.”) This discussion will focus on the type of forgiveness that is required for the greater, more painful transgressions because it is this type of forgiveness that is most illusive.

How do we know if we have forgiven a grievous transgression such as betrayal? There are some who maintain that forgiveness is something merely volitional. That is, it is just a matter of us choosing with our will to forgive. Others might add that to truly forgive, we must “forgive and forget.” In other words, to forgive, we must always decide to “put it behind us” as if to “forget” it. If a person simply makes up their mind to forgive someone, does that mean that they forgave them? If they simply tell the offender that they are forgiven, did they truly forgive them? If enough time has passed that they generally do not think about the transgression, does that mean they truly forgave them?

Jesus said that when we forgive, we must “**forgive from the heart.**” (See Matthew 18:35<sup>1</sup>.) It is not just choosing to do so with our volition or “putting it behind us.” There must be a change that takes place in our heart in regard to the person and the transgression that caused so much pain. Though the phrase “forgive and forget” fails to convey what it means to forgive, it does allude to something that is characteristic of true forgiveness. It is naïve to insist that we really forget transgressions that cause deep pain. We don’t forget and this is not what God expects. In fact, though it says that God forgets our transgressions,<sup>2</sup> He actually doesn’t do so at all. The expression is used to convey that it is “as if” He actually forgot completely. It is “as if” they were blotted from His experience altogether. But being God, He never actually forgets anything. If He did, He would not be omniscient.

Likewise, we never forget but if we truly forgive, it will appear to the offender “as if” we completely forgot. The only way it will appear this way is if there truly has been a complete change in the heart of the one offended. And the only way that the most grievous transgressions can be forgiven is when God supernaturally brings about this change deep within our heart. There are many things that God calls Christians to do that are impossible and forgiveness of deep grievous sins is one of them. Such things require the exercise of faith to get down on our knees and plead with God to do this work in us. We follow Jesus’ invitation, “Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek and you shall find.” This is the posture of faith that believes that we are powerless but that God has the ability and desire to give us this power as a means of manifesting His glory.

It is interesting to note that just prior to Jesus’ warning about the eternal consequences of an unforgiving heart, He says, “*Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.*” (See Mark 11:24&25.)<sup>3</sup>

Forgiving is often linked to prayer in the scriptures because it requires the power of God to perform it and faith to lay hold of it. It is no wonder that Jesus said that those who forgive are the ones who will be forgiven. They are the ones who “live by faith.” They confess their own sins and inability to do what He asks and they believe He is able and desires to perform it. They “call upon the Lord” as a lifestyle. These are the “justified.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you **forgive your brother from your heart.**” (Matt 18:21-35)*

<sup>2</sup> *“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Hebrews 8:12).”*

<sup>3</sup> *“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. (Mark 11:22-25)”*

Deep transgressions that seem impossible to forgive require us to desperately seek God for the gift of repentance and the supernatural power to forgive. In these situations, everything is on the line. For if I cannot forgive, I am at a spiritual impasse. There is no moving forward. Also, the power of God is in question. If He cannot work this power in me, then either I am not His child or He is not the almighty God. This is why it is a desperate situation requiring desperate pleading and faith toward God. On the other hand, it is times like this when God is most magnified. When true forgiveness takes place, it is obvious to the one forgiving that it was God who brought it about. It is like the moving of a mountain!

Now let us consider how forgiveness relates to our experience with pain over grievous transgressions. Many people might falsely assume that when true forgiveness takes place, all of the pain that was inflicted is removed. It is critical to see that the two are not related. When true forgiveness takes place in our heart, the only thing that is removed is our resentment and anger toward the offender concerning the transgression that caused the pain. But the pain itself can remain. This is true if the pain was physical or emotional. For example, if the offender accidentally shot me leaving physical pain lasting several years, I can forgive shortly after being shot though the physical pain lingers on. Or, if a parent loses a child to murder, they can forgive the murderer but the pain that comes with the loss of their child will remain in some measure for years and perhaps a lifetime. When true forgiveness takes place, it is “as if” the offender did not cause the pain even though the pain remains. Rather, the one who forgives views the pain as medicine administered by their loving heavenly Father.

This medicine is considered essential to their spiritual well-being and that which enables the new creature to experience the fullness of God in much greater and needed measure. In this way, the pain is much like a physical scar that mars one’s appearance. When a Christian is burned and their face is disfigured, they will remain embittered toward God until they are able to view the deformation as God’s special gift to always remind them that he or she is His beloved child. They bear God’s identifying mark on their face like a loving brand on a sheep that shows the world and the sheep that they belong to God. So it is with emotional scars. When the believer truly forgives a grievous transgression, the pain can linger on for years but it is a constant reminder to their soul that it was God’s love that afflicted them.

In this way, the pain becomes a friend that is continually wooing us to take our comfort in the one who afflicted us, God. But the one who actually transgressed has been forgiven. There is no anger toward them over the transgression and there is no resentment either. The one who was offended now counts the transgression as immensely valuable and necessary. (See the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis.<sup>4</sup>) It was perfectly designed by their wise heavenly Father. The lingering pain serves to remind them daily that their heavenly Father deeply loves them. If it were not for the pain, they would not have come to experience Him this deeply and would have missed out on wonderful riches that God lavished upon them through the pain. Until a Christian forgives, they cannot help but resent the offender and they miss out on what God wants to do by orchestrating it all. God wants to show them His glory and prove that He is the Comforter. But they wallow in misery while they hold fast their anger and bitterness of soul. In this condition, they simply cannot walk in the path of righteousness or experience the joy God wants to give them. When God pours out His power enabling us to forgive a grievous transgression, we behold His glory. We know that it was Him doing it because we were completely powerless to forgive it. We had to turn to God, agree with Him that we were powerless and then believe that He could and would give it. We suffered long in prayer asking Him to give us the power because we believed that He had the power and desire to give it. And when He gave it, we experienced in great measure His love being shed abroad in our hearts. This is why we never want to “forget.” Through the entire process, from the point of transgression through until the power of God was unleashed in them to forgive it, we recognize God’s sovereign, loving hand and we are reminded of His deep love for us every time we remember it. God showed Himself to them and they NEVER want to forget it. The lingering pain becomes their friend who always urges them to slip into His presence. It is the finger of God that caused it and His loving balm that soothes it.

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<sup>4</sup> But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good (Genesis 50:19&20)

One point must be also be made concerning the conditions in which we are required to forgive. There are some who insist that we do not have to forgive the offender unless and until they first repent and ask for our forgiveness. They point to Luke 17:3&4 as a proof text.<sup>5</sup> Though this verse speaks of forgiving when the offender repents, we must not assume that people always have to repent before we must forgive. It merely tells us to forgive when they repent but it does not excuse us from the responsibility to forgive when they don't repent. The fact that forgiving others is supposed to be unconditional is clearly pictured by the cross where Jesus stated, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Due to the eternal implications, we must look within to determine if we are in the practice of forgiving those who sin against us. Do you have any resentment toward someone who hurt you? Are you angry with anyone for causing you harm? If so, you are at a spiritual impasse. You cannot move forward on the path of righteousness until you truly forgive the offender from your heart. God wants to show you His glory by giving you supernatural power to forgive as Christ forgave us. Begin pleading with God today to display His glory by delivering you from your bitterness and resentment into the awesome joy of His presence.

*Tom Bear (December 2004)*

### **Appendix: God's Providence over the Sins of Others**

The doctrine of God's sovereignty, though once generally understood and accepted, is now unfamiliar to many Christians. Since this doctrine is foundational to "*Christian Marriage*," a brief explanation is provided below. **God never sins!** God is and always has been holy. His "*eyes are too pure to look upon evil*" and He "*cannot tolerate wrong*" (*Habakkuk 1:13*). God never sins! Also, "*God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone*" (*James 1:13*). While difficult for the human mind to comprehend, God is sovereign over all things including the sins of man. This means that though He Himself does not sin, He superintends over the sins of man. This does not mean that He just allows the sin to happen and then reacts to it. No, He somehow has a part in orchestrating it all so that it occurs according to the divine plan that He devised even before He created the cosmos. This can be clearly demonstrated from the biblical testimony concerning the death of His Son. Jesus is called, "*The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*" (*Revelation 13:8*). It was God's plan, even before He created Adam and Eve, that He would send His Son to die as a blood sacrifice to pay for the sins of His people.

This plan included the sinful actions of people to bring it about exactly as He desired. "*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. **They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.** Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness*" (*Acts 4:27-29*). "*This man (Jesus) was handed over to you **by God's set purpose and foreknowledge**; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross*" (*Acts 2:23*).

Deists believe that God created the universe and then left it up to the will of His creatures and forces of nature to determine the outcome of things. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God is providentially ruling over everything that happens in a way that is mysterious to man and impossible for him to grasp. This includes even the sinful actions of man. We see this taught throughout the Bible in narratives like the one involving Joseph (*Genesis 37* culminating at *50:20*), the hardening of Pharaoh's heart to bring about the Exodus (*Exodus 4:21-Chapter 14*), the use of Satan to test Job (*Job 1-2*), and in the crucifixion of Jesus described in *Acts 2:23* and *4:27-29*.

God's providence is not restricted just to special events recorded in the Bible. David believed that God had formed every one of his days before he was even born. "*Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be*" (*Psalms 139:16*). Paul believed God was superintending over the sins of His enemies in order to bring about His purposes. "*Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because*

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<sup>5</sup> "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.* (*Luke 17:3&4*)."

*of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:12-14). His understanding of God’s providence is clearly demonstrated by his declaration, “We know that **God causes all things to work together** for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28 NASB). As we read on in Romans chapter eight, we see that the “all things” Paul had in mind certainly include things like trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and unjust physical attacks by our enemies. (See Romans 8:35.)*

Perhaps the thing that is most difficult to accept about this teaching is how it “appears” to make man into a robot. This objection was obviously raised to Paul, “*One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ ” (Romans 9:19). But Paul did not consider men robots without responsibility to make moral choices. He taught that man is fully accountable for his actions. God “Will give to each person according to what he has done” (Romans 2:6). Since the Bible teaches that man is fully responsible for his moral choices and yet God is somehow ruling even over the sins of man, we must simply accept both teachings by faith and believe that God is beyond our understanding. (See Deuteronomy 29:29.) For a more thorough treatment of this, I recommend “The Sovereignty of God” written by Arthur W. Pink, published by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.*