

In Order to Forgive

One consequence to living in a world marked by sin, including my sin, is the near certainty of suffering grievous wrong at the hands of another human being. Job's dubious friend spoke truly when he said, "*...man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward*" (Job 5:7). When trouble flares up in the form of grievous sin committed against me, how should I respond?

The reader should know that the sin I have in mind now is not the common everyday type, if I can rightly speak of such a thing. Do any of us ever live any significant period of time without being wronged by another person or, sadly, wronging someone ourselves? There are many expressions of sin which we, by God's grace, overlook with relative ease. Praise the Lord this is so, or life would be untenable and joy non-existent. Praise God that, "*A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression*" (Proverbs 19:11, NASB). Thank the Lord that while, "*Hatred stirs up strife...love covers all transgressions*", or, as Peter puts it, "*...love covers a multitude of sins*" (Proverbs 10:12, 1 Peter 4:8, NASB). While we must not limit the words of Proverbs and Peter only to certain categories of sin, we also know that not all transgressions are equal. Not all transgressions can be overlooked. For love to cover some transgressions, love itself requires the sin be reckoned with. There is, if you will, common sin and extraordinary sin. I'm concerned here with the extraordinary type. I'm particularly, though not exclusively, concerned with the extraordinary type when it comes to us not from the world, but, grievously, from an apparent brother or sister in Christ. What happens when, metaphorically, you feel searing pain in your back, look down to see a blade protruding from the abdomen of your heart, and look back to find a professing Christian holding the dagger's hilt? How is a follower of Christ to respond in such a moment?

The Bible's answer to the scenario I've posed here – grievous sin suffered at the hand of a brother or sister in Christ – is by no means simple or simplistic. Justice comes into play. Discipline comes into play. Vengeance, God's vengeance, comes into play. So also does forgiveness. It's that last factor of forgiveness that I want to consider briefly. In the face of grievous sin, forgiveness is not only a Christian duty, but just as importantly it's the Christian's privilege, and joy, and freedom. What is forgiveness? How does it happen? How should I think about forgiving grievous sin, especially the sin of a brother or sister in Christ? These are big questions, and I don't propose to answer them in full. I do offer a few principles by way of hearing and applying God's word concerning forgiveness.

There's Mystery Here

Before moving to principles concerning forgiveness, let me first acknowledge mystery, a certain tension, inherent in the thing. When I use the word “tension,” don’t think of destructive tension. Don’t think of stress and strain, the sort that leaves you with an anxious migraine. Rather, think of constructive tension. Think of two things, two realities, two forces, inextricably connected and pulling on each other such that something beautiful exists amidst the tension. Biblical forgiveness is free, but not unconditional. There is tension in the relationship between “free” and “conditional.” Biblical forgiveness comes extended by grace that springs from love, and yet it only flowers in full when watered by repentance. There is tension between the free grace of forgiveness and the necessity of repentance for forgiveness.

We shouldn’t be surprised when, considering forgiveness, we encounter mystery and tension in the Bible. Such things alert us to the fact that we’re standing on holy ground. The tension within forgiveness parallels other biblical tensions - the tension between divine sovereignty in salvation and human choice in response to God; between divine providence and human action in bringing things to pass; between all that is ordained and determined from the foundation of the world, and all that is contingent on decisions made or not made. The tension-laden mystery of forgiveness alerts us to the fact that this mystery is something to be studied, pursued, enjoyed, and explored, but never mastered. Forgiveness is divine – it exists fundamentally within the character of God himself – and thus it is ours to practice without ever fully grasping. Forgiveness is simple and yet unfathomable. We ought not worry but rejoice when, in the end, we practice forgiveness and receive forgiveness without fully understanding what we’re about. It is, after all, the “*...glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of [his kingly people]...to search things out*” (Proverbs 25:2, ESV).

Biblical Principles Concerning Forgiveness

Despite its mystery, biblical forgiveness is nonetheless something God intends for his people to understand, to pursue, to practice, and to enjoy. Scripture presents forgiveness to us in such a manner that we can describe it in the form of principles. By “principles,” I mean true statements about forgiveness that help me know what it is, and then help me to live consistent with that knowledge. Here then are nine principles concerning forgiveness. Please note, I’m consciously not saying all that must be said about forgiveness. Instead, I endeavor here to say a few key things about this mystery, things especially relevant to my own present experience with forgiveness. For each principle that follows, I’ll first state and explain the principle, and then I’ll offer a brief thought concerning application:

Fundamentally, to forgive is to remove the guilt that derives from sin. Forgiveness declares the guilty sinner “not guilty.” The Bible demonstrates this reality in the variety of words, pictures, and situations it uses to depict forgiveness. For example, the Hebrew word נָשָׂא (nāśā’) is one key Old Testament term that, depending on context, we translate in English as “forgive.”¹ The basic meaning of nāśā’ is to “lift,” or “carry,” or “take.”² Thus, when I forgive someone, I lift the guilt of their sin from their shoulders, such that, with respect to me, it no longer burdens them. Similarly, the English “forgive” also, depending on context, renders the New Testament Greek term, ἀφήμι (aphiēmi).³ One chief idea to aphiēmi is that of “leaving”; to leave behind, or to leave aside.⁴ Forgiveness leaves behind or aside the guilt that derives from sin. One helpful Greek lexicon says this concerning the word aphiēmi: “It is extremely important that the focus in the meanings of ἀφήμι...is upon the guilt of the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrongdoing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned.”⁵

Application Point: When I forgive someone, I don’t pretend their sin didn’t occur. I also don’t pretend the consequences of that sin aren’t real, or that some sins won’t have long-lasting (maybe life-long) affects that constrain relationship, even in a context of forgiveness. Rather than pretend, real forgiveness means that I don’t hold the one forgiven guilty for their sin against me. The guilt of their sin is not what defines them in my mind, or in my relating to them, or in my speaking of them to others. Instead, what defines the one I’ve forgiven is their relationship to God in Christ. In the best case, that means I rejoice in the person I forgive as someone redeemed by the blood of Jesus; someone in the process of being sanctified for eternal life with Christ. In the case where I forgive a non-believer, I remember not their guilt with respect to me, but instead their guilt with respect to God and their desperate need for a redeemer. My forgiveness of an unbeliever is, in essence, a prayer for their salvation.

While I may be the proximate victim of someone’s grievous sin, God is the ultimate offended party. Accordingly, when I forgive, I do so as a proximate representative of what must ultimately come from God himself. Sin at its core is rebellion against God. It is

¹ Transliteration taken from R. Laird Harris et al, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1421.

² Ibid.

³ Transliteration taken from Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries : Updated Edition*, entry 863, via Logos Bible Software.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 502.

a violation of God's character and commands. In any instance of sin, God is the offended party even if I, as his image bearer, am the one through whom the offense passes (Psalm 51:4). When I forgive someone – when I lift the guilt from their shoulders – I do so with reference to their debt to me, but in testimony of something deeper. My forgiveness of another person testifies either to what they *have already* received from God (if they're forgiven in Christ), or to what they *still desperately need* from him (if they're not yet forgiven in Christ). In other words, just as I may be the proximate victim of sin that ultimately offends God, so my forgiveness of another is a proximate representation of what must finally come from God. Jesus Christ forgives the sin of his people (Matthew 9:2-6, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26).

Application Point: When I forgive someone, it ought to be in such a manner as to explicitly represent the Great Forgiver to the one forgiven.

True forgiveness depends on Jesus Christ's sacrifice of himself at the cross. Genuine forgiveness depends on the blood of Jesus appropriated to a person's life by grace, through faith. From the advent of human sin, beginning in Genesis 3, removing the guilt of sin has always depended on blood sacrifice (see Genesis 3:21). Guilt cannot be unilaterally dismissed. That would be unjust, and God is just. Guilt must be dealt with, either by punishment of the guilty person or by means of transfer to a mediator, a redeemer, who pays the guilty sinner's guilt-debt. When God instituted the Mosaic Law for his people, he stipulated animal sacrifice as the temporary, mediating means for covering the guilt of sinners so they might approach him in worship. God established temporary and repeated animal sacrifice as a pointer to, and a prophetic sign of, the necessary final sacrifice for sin, namely Jesus himself. Jesus died on a cross as the mediating sacrifice on behalf of guilty sinners (Hebrews 9:1-10:18). Forgiveness depends entirely on the blood of Jesus Christ that washes clean even the vilest of sinners (Matthew 26:28, Hebrews 9:22). Only those who, by God's grace, come to Jesus in believing faith receive God's forgiveness (Acts 10:43, 13:38; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14).

Application Point: When I forgive a brother or sister in Christ, I glorify God by testifying to the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. I declare the total sufficiency of Jesus' shed blood to deal with guilt. An unwillingness to forgive on my part maligns the cross; it casts aspersions on Jesus' sacrifice of himself. When I forgive an unbeliever, someone not yet forgiven by God through the blood of his Son, I do so in hope that this person too will be brought into the compass of God's redeemed people. I forgive an unbeliever in hope that my forgiveness of them is a harbinger of God's work to save this person; hope that they too are among the elect for whom Jesus died.

Forgiveness is inherent to the character of God. Thus, God's people, by definition, are and must be a forgiving people. In the Bible, it's shocking (in a good way) how often God forgives, and what he forgives. Israel's long history testifies as much. God is a forgiving God (Exodus 34:7, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 130:4), which means his people are necessarily, by their very nature in Christ, a forgiving people (Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13).

Application Point: Forgiving others is not optional in, but essential to, the Christian life. I should expect the Holy Spirit to cultivate a heart of forgiveness in me, and I ought to pray confidently to this end. I can ask for and expect God's help, especially in situations where I find it difficult to forgive. An unforgiving Christian is an oxymoron. An attitude of persistent, willful, conscious, and unyielding unforgiveness calls into question the legitimacy of someone's profession of faith in Jesus.

Forgiveness - as a specific guilt-relieving, relationship-restoring act - only comes through repentance. Such forgiveness is not rightly given, or requested, apart from repentance. Repentance is turning away from sin to God. It is ceasing from sin in pursuit of righteousness. God does not forgive sin apart from repentance. To say this isn't to declare works-based forgiveness, because repentance itself comes as God's gift to a rebel sinner. Repentance is inherent to the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9, Acts 5:31). When God brings a dead sinner to life in Christ, that sinner necessarily, as a matter of their new heart's desire, walks in repentance (albeit fitfully and imperfectly). Repentance from sin is inherent to belief in Jesus Christ. Over-and-over again, Scripture demonstrates forgiveness through repentance (Genesis 50:15-21; the Old Testament sacrificial system; 1 Kings 8:30, 33-40, 46-53; 2 Chronicles 7:12-14; Psalm 25, 51, 32; Isaiah 55:7; Jeremiah 36:3; Daniel 9; Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 17:3-4; Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9).

Application Point: As a specific guilt-relieving, relationship-restoring act, I cannot forgive what has not been confessed and repented of in some manner consistent with God's Word. I am not to hold grudges, foster vindictiveness, and seek vengeance, but I also must not pretend to forgive absent repentance. If I do so, I effectively lie to the guilty party concerning their guilt. I hinder them in hearing the Lord's conviction and being truly relieved of that guilt.

The work, the faith-step, of forgiveness begins in my heart prior to the one who needs forgiveness walking in repentance. As a matter of my heart's posture before God, I can, and ought, to move toward forgiveness even before the person needing forgiveness repents of their sin. This "proto forgiveness," if I can label it such, is preparatory to the specific guilt-

relieving, relationship-restoring act noted above. It is, I think, the sort of forgiveness on display when Jesus prays from his cross, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34, NASB). It’s in view when Jesus commands in Mark 11:25, *“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions”* (NASB). Crucially, this proto forgiveness, this preparatory work of forgiveness, is not the full orbbed thing itself. It’s not the specific guilt-relieving, relationship-restoring act that depends on repentance. It is, rather, the act of releasing someone and their sin against me, in my heart and mind, to the Lord. It is foreswearing vengeance against the one who wronged me, not because vengeance isn’t right, but because it rightly belongs to God. I begin to forgive, and I prepare for full forgiveness, when I lay aside a heart of vengeance and acknowledge that the wrongdoer belongs to God.

Application Point: This is, if not the first, one of the earliest practical steps in forgiveness. It comes largely as a matter of prayer. In prayer, I release the wrongdoer to the Lord, and I ask the Holy Spirit for help in cultivating a heart of mercy and compassion toward the sinner. This does not preclude, and indeed shouldn’t preclude, also asking the Lord to work justice in his way and his time.

There is a type of forgiveness that comes through patience, or through a mediator, even to the unrepentant person. In the final judgment, God’s justice will not fail to address all unrepentant sinners. There is no wrong that will not be righted. But, in the near-term, God is often patient (Genesis 15:16, 1 Peter 3:20, 2 Peter 2:9), and patience in the face of sin – overlooking sin for a time – is a sort of forgiveness. David, for instance, displays such patience in his dealings with the likes of Shimei and Joab (2 Samuel 16:5-14, 19:18-23, 1 Kings 2:5-9). In Scripture forgiveness of this sort sometimes reflects the intercessory work of a mediator. On multiple occasions Moses intervened for the people of Israel and God turned from immediate judgment (Exodus 32:11-14, Numbers 14). Abigail interceded for her worthless husband, Nabal, asking that David count his guilt against her (1 Samuel 25:23-31). She atoned for that guilt in repentance (see vs. 18, 27) and sought forgiveness (vs. 28), such that David turned from his wrath against Nabal (Note: It’s also important to observe how Abigail’s intercession rescued David from sinning through an unholy exercise of anger). Forgiveness of the sort at stake here is not guilt-relieving and relationship-restoring. It is, rather, a patient endurance of affront in hopes of something better. It is, again, a foreswearing of vengeance in anticipation of what God will do, whether to judge or to redeem.

Application Point: In the context of God’s new covenant with us through his Son, we look to a mediator whose blood is sufficient to cover the sins of all men, namely Jesus. Because Jesus Christ is the final and all-sufficient mediator between God and man, I can patiently endure the affront of another’s sin in prayerful hopes of something better for them, and from them.

This doesn't mean I allow a sinner's sin against me to continue when I can otherwise check their behavior. That would be a disservice to the sinner, to others, to justice, to myself, and to God. It does mean I can be patient when justice remains yet undone, confession yet unarticulated, or repentance yet unrealized.

Forgiveness operates through holy forgetfulness. Humanly speaking, biblical forgiveness exists not only for the sake of the one forgiven, but for the good of the forgiver. It exists for the sake of the forgiver's freedom, and joy, and effective functioning in life. As finite human beings, we cannot often, if ever, hold conflicting passions or competing lines of thought in equal and complementary tension in our minds and hearts. We cannot be filled with even righteous wrath and indignation over sin while also being filled with happiness and a sense of flourishing and freedom. Only God can simultaneously be perfectly wrathful and perfectly happy, free, and filled with joy. We are not God. We cannot live constantly mindful of grievous sin against us, constantly remembering wrong done to us, constantly thinking of great injustice, and also be free and happy in the Lord. Rather, "*There is an appointed time for everything...*" including, "*A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance...A time to be silent and a time to speak*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1a, 4, 7b, NAB). Sin, wrong, and injustice constantly remembered and dwelt on steals our joy, energy, focus, and freedom. It becomes an obsession that replaces the joy of the Lord in our hearts. Thus, forgiveness operates through a sort of holy forgetfulness. I forget wrong done to me by refusing to call it to mind so as to dwell on it. I may, when necessary, recall what happened in order to deal with it through prayer or through appropriate confrontation, but I don't live dominated by the memory of sin done to me. Such holy forgetfulness walks in the way of God himself who, in forgiveness, no longer remembers the sin of his children (Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12, 10:17). Holy forgetfulness functions both in the aftermath of full-bore forgiveness (a specific guilt-relieving, relationship-restoring act) and as part of the proto forgiveness described above.

Application Point – The tenor and content of my thoughts is a helpful barometer of my heart's movement toward forgiveness. Holy forgetfulness of wrong done against me testifies to a forgiving heart. Conversely, a heart that continually calls to mind those who've sinned against me, and rehearses their sin, isn't moving well toward forgiveness.

No matter how much I forgive, I will never equal what God, in Christ, has forgiven me. When I suffer grievous wrong committed against me, it's easy to stumble into self-righteousness, self-justification, and self-pity. In such moments, I need the encouragement of Anselm's reminder that my sin against an infinite God yielded for me an infinite debt. If I am forgiven by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, then he has extended to me

infinite forgiveness. Will I ever equal that standard in forgiving another person? No wonder Jesus instructs Peter that he is to forgive his brother not merely “*seven times*” (a biblical number of holy perfection and completion) but “*seventy-seven times*,” or continually and indefinitely (Matthew 18:22; see also Luke 17:3-4, Colossians 3:13). Immediately after instructing Peter this way, Jesus tells the parable of a slave forgiven an astronomical debt who subsequently, will not forgive his fellow slave the measliest of sums. The point of the parable is clear: He who will not forgive is not forgiven (see also Matthew 6:12, Mark 11:25).

Application Point: There is nothing so oriented to cultivate a heart of forgiveness in me as contemplating the cross of Christ and my need for a Savior. How can I, who’ve been forgiven an infinite debt, withhold forgiveness from a fellow debtor? Such presumption would be monstrous indeed!

Conclusion

In closing, it’s helpful to recognize and even to admit that forgiveness is both an event and a process. As noted above, prior to forgiveness happening as a specific guilt-relieving, relationship-restoring act in response to repentance, there is the sometimes-lengthy preparatory process of proto forgiveness. Even in the aftermath of full orbbed forgiveness, living the reality necessitates an active and regular holy forgetfulness; forgetfulness that reflects the character and actions of God himself.

Our God is a forgiving God. May we as his people, covered by the blood of his divine Son, and empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit, be like him.