

## Rethinking Forgiveness: Conditions, Compassion and Challenges

Matthew 18:21-22, Luke 17:3-4, Ephesians 4:31-32

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21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven (Matt 18:21-22)

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4).

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph 4:31-32).

Last week we looked at an important and challenging passage in Matthew 18 that addressed the very relevant subject of forgiveness. We heard Jesus increase the graciousness of Peter's seven-fold forgiveness to seventy-times seven. The call of my sermon and the message of that text was understand, embrace, and deeply feel the beauty of the forgiveness that we have received from God so that we will be motivated to forgive others. I wanted you to see that **only the forgiven can really forgive.**

That is a very important starting point for two cultural reasons. First, if we are not careful forgiveness will be defined by our situation, our experience, our hurts, our exceptions, our emotions. And that can easily lead you to a less than forgiving spirit while feeling very justified and even self-assured. Secondly, it is important because we live in a world full of hurt and pain. We've got to understand forgiveness because living in a fallen world guarantees that we will be hurt. And then we've got to decide how to follow Jesus.

Last Sunday I identified a biblical concept that I knew would be somewhat controversial or challenging for some of you: **conditional forgiveness**. One of the joys of having a weekly pulpit ministry is that you never teach in a vacuum. There are real people who have real questions with real struggles, and most of them have email that works really well. Since Sunday I've received more questions on this subject than anything I've ever taught here. So I'm doing something that I've not done before: I'm going to extend last week's sermon so that we can dive more fully into how to practice forgiveness. In particular I want to clearly address some great questions such as:

- “How is conditional forgiveness biblical and unconditional not?”
- “Doesn’t conditional forgiveness lead to bitterness?”
- “Aren’t we commanded to forgive everyone?”
- “Didn’t Jesus pray on the cross for forgiveness for his persecutors?”

These are great questions, and I hope that my sermon today will help you answer them clearly. But even more, I hope to really help those of you who have been hurt by someone. We are not just talking about a theological issue here; this is a deeply pastoral and personal issue. So I want to walk carefully while walking biblically.

## **What is Forgiveness?**

Let’s start with a definition. There are four words that are used for forgive or forgiveness in the Bible:

- *aphiemi* – to send away (Matt 6:12, 1 John 1:9)
- *charizomai* – to bestow grace (Eph 4:32, Col 2:13)
- *apoluo* – to let loose (Luke 6:37)
- *aphesis* (n) – a dismissal or release (Mark 3:29, Eph 1:17)

Although the words are different the nuance and meaning is basically the same. Forgiveness is the act of clearing away an offense such that person is treated in a way that they don’t deserve. Forgiveness involves the release or canceling of a debt and the gracious treatment of someone who doesn’t deserve it.

Here’s a good definition from Chris Brauns who wrote an excellent book on forgiveness: *A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.*<sup>1</sup>

That’s a good starting point, but we need to go a lot deeper, starting with divine forgiveness.

## **How Has God Forgiven Us?<sup>2</sup>**

Ephesians 4:32 tells us that we are to forgive “as God in Christ forgave you.” Therefore, we need to start there because human forgiveness starts with divine forgiveness.

### **1. Sin is the problem**

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Brauns, Unpacking Forgiveness – Biblical Answers to Complex Questions and Deep Wounds, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishing, 2008), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the following material is a summary and restatement of the material in Unpacking Forgiveness, chapters 3 and 5.

We need to begin by identifying why forgiveness is even necessary. Sin created separation in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24); it brought the physical separation of death (Rom 6:23); it will lead to ultimate separation in hell (Rev 20:15). Forgiveness is only necessary because of the presence of sin.

## **2. Forgiveness is gracious but not free**

Forgiveness is amazingly gracious. The Bible says that God was unbelievably kind in his offer of forgiveness: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:4-5). But this rich mercy and great love, while free to humans, was not free to God. It cost him dearly. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). His Son, Jesus became the sacrifice and punishment for sin. The word propitiation means to satisfy the demands of justice or to turn away wrath by an offering. So the effect of Christ's death means that God can satisfy the demands of justice while being gracious; God can forgive sins without violating the principle of justice. Romans 3:26 summarizes this well: "...so that he {God} might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

## **3. Forgiveness is conditional**

Now some take God's graciousness in forgiveness to mean that everyone is therefore forgiven. But that is not what the Bible says. While God has made a way for forgiveness to happen through his Son, it isn't effective or applied unless there is confession, repentance, and faith. In other words, forgiveness is not activated unless a person recognizes the reality of their sin, turns from it, and believes in Christ.

- "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).
- "because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10:9).
- "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9)

## **4. Forgiveness establishes the process of reconciliation**

Forgiveness is not only about the problem of sin; it is also about the hope of reconciliation. In fact, this is the ultimate goal of forgiveness— the bringing together of two parties that were formerly separated. In 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 Paul identifies this important role of reconciliation as central to the gospel and central to the church's mission:

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17-21).

## **5. Forgiveness doesn't negate justice**

Finally, it is important to note that gracious, mercy-laden forgiveness doesn't negate the equally important principle of justice. Again, God made forgiveness possible by pouring out the demands of justice on Jesus Christ. The cross established the possibility of forgiveness. But even after that there are often real, legitimate consequences for forgiven sin. I could cite many examples in Scripture, but the most obvious would be David's adultery (2 Samuel 12). While he was forgiven, there were real and lasting consequences including the death of a child, long-standing conflict in his family, and a rebellion in the kingdom.

The point is simply that sin, in any form, is a really big deal. The possibility and the graciousness of forgiveness should not remove from our thinking the enormous problem that sin really is.

To forgive "as God in Christ has forgiven us" means that we really understand how God has forgiven us. It means that we start from the perspective of what God has done for us through Christ, and that we embrace the beauty of grace and the horror of sin.

## **The Problem with Therapeutic Forgiveness**

Now the reason why it is important to start with how God has forgiven us is because the church has nearly lost the meaning of the word forgiveness. In the last 50 years, many people have adopted a therapeutic definition and practice of forgiveness. And that is why the concept "conditional forgiveness" struck some of you the wrong way.

By therapeutic forgiveness I mean a view and practice of forgiveness that sees this issue primarily as an emotional health issue. In other words, forgiveness is important so that you aren't bitter or resentful. Now I'm not in favor of bitterness or resentment, but the blanket concept of unconditional forgiveness is, in my view, very far from a biblical concept.

I think it would help you if I laid out the difference between therapeutic forgiveness and biblical forgiveness:

### **Therapeutic Forgiveness**

- Forgiveness is a feeling. It is ceasing to feel resentment or bitterness
- Forgiveness is private or individual. It is primarily an activity that goes on within individual persons' hearts and minds
- Forgiveness is unconditional. It should be granted regardless of whether or not the offender is repentant
- Forgiveness is primarily motivated by self-interest. You should forgive others for your own sake...to be free from hate.
- A standard of justice is not critical – it is about how the person "feels." Therefore, you can legitimately choose to forgive someone who had not done anything wrong.
- Forgiveness can happen apart from reconciliation

### **Biblical Forgiveness**

- Forgiveness is a commitment to pardon the offender
- Forgiveness is something that happens between two parties
- Biblical forgiveness is conditional upon repentance
- Biblical forgiveness is motivated by love for neighbor and love for God; it is for God's glory and our joy.
- Justice is the basis of forgiveness. You cannot legitimately forgive someone if he or she has not done anything wrong against God's standards
- Biblical forgiveness is inextricably connected to reconciliation

Hopefully you will see the important difference here. However, some of you may think that this is really just a minor difference. So let me give you a number of reasons why this distinction is so important. Here's what therapeutic forgiveness does:

- It makes the main focus of forgiveness me and my hurts, not the problem of sin
- It diminishes the importance of Matthew 18, biblical confrontation, and true reconciliation
- It makes me the ultimate definer of what is offensive and sinful
- It downplays the real and just consequences of unconfessed and unrepentant sin
- It can lead to people saying that they "need to forgive God."

Hopefully you can see how the popular notion of unconditional forgiveness may sound like it is right and biblical, but it distorts and diminishes the reality and the power of what true forgiveness is.

### **Pastoral Reflections on Forgiveness**

Let's finally turn our attention toward what biblical forgiveness really is, and let me try and resolve some of the tension that you feel in your heart about this subject. How do we make this work? Let me give you a number of pastoral reflections:

## **1. Normally, cover minor offenses in love**

Life is full of minor conflicts, pains, and offenses. The Bible calls us to cover those minor offenses in love – to overlook them. “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

## **2. Always have a spirit of forgiveness**

Although I believe that forgiveness is conditional, I would not want you to think that bitterness and resentment are justifiable – ever! Instead we are to have a spirit of forgiveness, a willingness to be reconciled, and a hatred for sin that causes us to take radical action. We must offer forgiveness, seek reconciliation while at the same time recognizing that sin creates a breakage in relationship. We must always have a ready-to-forgive heart.

## **3. Don’t let sin drive you apart – go and attempt reconciliation**

Conditional forgiveness should drive you toward the person, not away. Matthew 5:23-25 tells us to go quickly. Unconditional forgiveness causes forgiveness from a distance, without discussion, without confrontation, and without clarification. This is why the passage on forgiveness is so closely connected to church discipline. It describes the process of determining what is really going on, and it balances an unwillingness to simply look the other way. Without conditional forgiveness, there is no basis for church discipline.

## **4. When you forgive, you are making a promise**

Ken Sande, in his excellent book *Peace Maker*, makes this point very well by identifying that forgiveness is a covenant that the offended party makes to the offender. He says that when granting forgiveness to someone you make a four-fold promise:

- I will not dwell on this
- I will not bring this up to use against you
- I will not talk to others about this
- I will not let this stand between us

This is the promise that we make when we grant someone forgiveness.

## **5. Begin the process of appropriate reconciliation**

Forgiveness means you enter on the path of reconciliation. It means you attempt to reestablish or to bring grace into the relationship. This will take time, wisdom, and discernment to know what this looks like. In some cases it means that you become very close friends. In other cases it means that there are still appropriate boundaries or consequences.

## 6. Pray for and be kind to the unrepentant

Nowhere in the Bible are we called to forgive persecutors and those who are unrepentant. Yet we are not allowed to be bitter either. Listen to the wise words of Luke 6:

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-29).

You see there is a powerful, biblical voice in humbling identifying the injustice of what is happening while at the same time being kind to those who don't deserve it.

## 7. Be just like Jesus

For years I've been discussing this issue of the conditional nature of forgiveness. Often people use the example of Jesus on the cross, and they say, "Even Jesus forgave the people who were crucifying him." But that is a misunderstanding of what really happened. In fact, Jesus said, "Father forgive them..." What is he doing there? He is praying for them!

Then I usually ask those who advocate an unconditional position this question: "Did the Father forgive them?" And their answer betrays the inconsistency of unconditional forgiveness when they inevitably say, "Well, yes **if** they received Jesus." Exactly. Forgiveness is always fundamentally conditional.

But let me be clear. That never justifies holding bitterness or resentment. We are called to be just like **Jesus**; to be **just** like Jesus.

Do you remember where we started this discussion? We began with Jesus saying that we are to forgive seventy times seven, and then he told a parable to help us understand the enormous debt that we've been forgiven. He wanted us to see that we are the man in the parable. He wanted us to see our sin and our debt so that the orientation of our lives would always be toward forgiveness.

He wants us to be just like **him**. He wants us to be **just** like him.

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