

A Closer Look at Forgiving

by David Servant

True forgiveness requires repentance and reconciliation, and we should only forgive those who humbly ask for our forgiveness.

Scripture: Matthew 6:15, Matthew 18:23, Luke 17:3, Acts 7:60, Revelation 6:9

Topics: "Forgiveness", "Reconciliation"

Description

David Servant preaches on the importance of forgiveness, emphasizing the need to show mercy to others as we have received mercy from God. He delves into Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, highlighting the consequences of unforgiveness and the requirement for us to forgive others in order to receive forgiveness from God. Servant explains that forgiveness leads to reconciliation, illustrating this through biblical examples and teachings. He addresses common misconceptions about forgiveness and provides insights on when and whom God expects us to forgive, emphasizing the significance of repentance in the process of forgiveness.

Transcript

It's Friday after prayers in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and worshippers are streaming from Al-Jafali Mosque to surround an area in the adjacent square that has been cordoned off by police. In the center of that square kneels a man with hands tied behind his back, flanked by an imam, a prison warden, and an executioner grasping a four-foot sword. The condemned man faces the victim's family some yards away, from whom he begs forgiveness. Behind him, on the other side of the square, the prisoner's family is weeping, also begging the victim's family to forgive.

A government official reads the charges and then the verdict, while the kneeling man closes his eyes and begins to recite verses from the Qur'an. The executioner lifts his gleaming sword. The faint look away.

Just then, at the very last moment, the victim's father steps forward, announcing that he forgives the condemned man. If the crowd was sympathetic towards the man who was about to be beheaded, they begin cheering and blessing the family. It is a celebration of mercy---which everyone instinctively knows is their only hope in the face of justice. Mercy, magnificent mercy, a fragrance of grace.

Not every intended public beheading in Saudi Arabia ends so joyously, because the families of many victims prefer justice over mercy. I suspect that even those families who choose to show mercy generally wait until the last moment---just so the condemned will suffer at least some justice as he agonizes in

dread. How well they represent all of us. We're apt to prefer justice for others who wrong us, yet prefer mercy for ourselves when we wrong others. From this hypocrisy, we need to be cured.

The Cure for Unforgiveness

Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant was certainly intended to be that cure (see Matt. 18:23-35.) The primary character in the story wanted mercy for himself and justice for another, something that is fundamentally unjust and that angers God. We who have received such great mercy from God are obligated to show mercy to others. This is so important to God that Jesus warned that if we don't forgive our brothers, God will not forgive us:

But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matt. 6:15).

That truth is fully illustrated in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, where we read that the master re-instated his unmerciful servant's formerly-forgiven and insurmountable debt, and then, "moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (Matt. 18:34). Lest anyone mistakenly assume that the master's reaction in the parable was not representative of our gracious God, Jesus then added, "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

Although professing Christians have been known to ignore, soften, or reject Jesus' clear teaching revealed in that parable, He undeniably and solemnly warned that His Father will reinstate the formerly-forgiven sins of His own children if they will not forgive. Finding themselves once again to be unforgiven sinners, they will ultimately be cast into hell to pay their impossible-to-pay debt. Their they will join all the other unforgiven people to receive the justice they deserve (and so desire for others). This doesn't exactly harmonize with the popular idea of "once saved, always saved," but I don't think Jesus stands to be corrected on it.

This being so, it seems as if it would be a good idea to make sure we forgive as Jesus commanded. This is a matter of eternal significance. Additionally, our forgiveness must not be just cosmetic, but it must be, as Jesus said, "...from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

The Application

Many who take Jesus seriously regarding forgiveness have found that granting forgiveness is not always easy. Those of us who struggle to forgive are often plagued with fears that, in the end, God will declare us unforgiven, just as the unmerciful servant in Jesus' parable. These kinds of thoughts can be absolutely tormenting for those who are struggling to forgive others who have wronged them.

Those struggles, however, are quite often the product of a misunderstanding concerning (1) what it means to forgive and (2) whom God expects us to forgive. It may surprise you to know that God does not expect us to forgive everyone. In fact, there are people whom He definitely does not want us to forgive. If you don't believe me, keep reading.

Let's begin by first considering what it means to forgive. What some define as forgiveness is not really forgiveness at all. Their acts of "forgiveness" could be better described as attempts to be less angry with those whom they resent and whom they avoid as much as possible in order not to agitate deep-seated feelings of bitterness. I know what I'm talking about! I'll bet you do as well.

We can best learn what forgiveness is from God, since He practices forgiveness all the time.

When God forgives me of a sin, He is no longer holding that sin against me. He is no longer angry at me for what I did. I do not need to fear that He will punish me for that sin. The breach that previously existed in our relationship because of that sin is no longer there. My fellowship with Him is restored. That is forgiveness. Forgiveness results in reconciliation.

Forgiving someone is like canceling his debt. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the first servant owed his master a vast sum of money. He knew that if he didn't repay what he owed, he would suffer due punishment. He begged for mercy, and his master completely forgave his debt. The servant no longer had any obligation to repay it. He no longer had reason to fear his master's wrath or punishment. His relationship with his master changed from discord to peace. That is a picture of forgiveness.

The second part of that same parable illustrates unforgiveness. Although the second servant requested mercy, the first servant refused and had him thrown in prison. There was no debt cancellation. There was no reconciliation. That is a picture of unforgiveness.

Some readers may object, saying, "But in some cases there is no reconciliation simply because the offending party does not desire reconciliation. I might forgive someone who never admits that he has sinned against me, or who never requests my forgiveness, and who doesn't care if we are reconciled."

I think that is often true concerning small offenses. We may graciously overlook small offenses, and so we should most of the time, reminding ourselves, "If people knew better, they'd do better." Overly-sensitive people and those who are easily offended have few friends.

Imagine, however, a spouse, or a brother or sister in Christ, saying something to your face that is highly insulting and deeply wounding. Now, just try to pretend as if you never heard the insult, continuing your relationship without making mention of the offense to the offending person. Good luck! You instinctively know, of course, that if there is going to be forgiveness and reconciliation, there must first be confrontation and confession. And because you value your relationship with that person and desire reconciliation, you confront the offender, hoping that he or she will ask for your forgiveness, which you will then grant in order to achieve the desired reconciliation.

Surely every reader will agree that it is vastly easier to forgive someone who asks for it than it is to forgive someone who does not ask for it. And surely every reader can understand the evil of a forgiven person refusing to grant forgiveness to another person who requests it.

All of this is to say that forgiveness, true forgiveness, results in reconciliation. Even in a small offense, if we think we have forgiven someone and yet we find ourselves avoiding the offender, then there exists a breach in our relationship. Since there is obviously no reconciliation, that exposes the underlying unforgiveness.

Continuance in Confrontation

This is precisely why Jesus instructed us not to forgive a brother or sister in Christ who has sinned against us, but rather to confront him or her, with the goal of working towards reconciliation (Matt. 18:15). If that private encounter does not bring the offender to confession (which should then result in forgiveness and reconciliation), the offended party is to solicit the help of one or two others who will join him in again confronting the offender (Matt. 18:16).

If after that second confrontation there is still no repentance on the part of the offender, the matter is to be brought before the entire church (which, incidentally, during the first 300 years of church history would have been a small group that likely met in a house, of which all the members would have likely known the offender and the offended person).

If that third confrontation does not bring the offender to repentance---if he stubbornly refuses to yield to the consensus---Jesus said, "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Matt. 18:17). That is, excommunicate him from your fellowship and treat him from then on as an unrepentant, unholy outsider. That is not a picture of reconciliation! And that is not a picture of forgiveness either. What would you think of a church that said of one of its unruly members, "We forgave him, and then we excommunicated him"? Would that not sound somewhat contradictory?

So, according to Jesus, the church is not to forgive such people. If we did forgive such people, we would not excommunicate them. Again, forgiveness results in reconciliation. And there can be no reconciliation unless there is confession and repentance. Thus, there can be no forgiveness, generally speaking, without confession and repentance. Forgiveness is predicated upon repentance.

Notice that in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the first servant humbly requested mercy. Then, his master forgave him. The second servant in the parable also requested mercy, but the first servant refused to grant it. That is what so angered the master, and that is what so angers God.

Whom Does God Forgive?

God, of course, does not forgive everyone automatically. He only forgives those who confess their sins and repent. Those who do not confess their sins and repent, He does not forgive. He is not holding us to a higher standard than He holds for Himself. He does not expect us to forgive those whom He does not forgive. He does, however, expect us to forgive everyone who humbly asks for our forgiveness.

Moreover, we are not absolved of all responsibility if a fellow believer sins against us and does not ask for our forgiveness. In such cases we are expected to confront the offender and work towards reconciliation, a reconciliation that can only occur if the offending party humbly admits his sin and requests forgiveness. This is, of course, exactly how God operates. When I sin against Him, He confronts me, and if I yield and confess my sin, He then forgives me. He works towards forgiveness and reconciliation by means of confrontation.

This is precisely why Jesus taught:

If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," forgive him (Luke 17:3-4).

Jesus expects us to confront fellow believers who, by sinning against us, cause a breach in our relationship. And He expects us to forgive them if they repent and only if they repent. Again we see that forgiveness, true forgiveness, is predicated upon repentance by the offender.

A Few Objections

But was not Jesus' prayer for the soldiers who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), an example of God forgiving people without them requesting forgiveness? And what about Stephen's prayer for those who stoned him: "Lord, do not hold this sin

against them!" (Acts 7:60)? It sure seems as if he forgave them without their asking for it.

First, notice that neither of these instances fall in the same category as what we have been considering, namely the issue of confrontation, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation between two believers. In both of these two particular instances just mentioned, believers were showing extraordinary mercy towards unbelievers. Dealing with offending unbelievers is much different than dealing with offending believers. There is often no relationship with them to mend. Even if Jesus or Stephen would have had time and opportunity to confront the unbelievers who were murdering them, how well would their confrontations have been received? Can you imagine Stephen saying to the folks who were throwing stones at him, "You are sinning against me! But I would like to reconcile with you, so let us first meet privately, and if that doesn't bring you to repentance, I'll go and get one or two others, and if that doesn't turn you around, let's meet with the whole church...."?

Jesus undeniably displayed an amazing degree of mercy towards the soldiers who crucified Him, a mercy that was offered due to their ignorance. They did not know Him as being any different from any other criminal whom they crucified.

But what about others who were responsible for Jesus' death? Did Jesus not hold Judas' sin against him? Did He ask His Father to forgive Judas? No, concerning Judas Jesus said, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24). Jesus actually prayed for God's wrath to fall upon Judas (see Psalm 109:6-8 with Acts 1:20). Judas was not ignorant of what he had done as were the soldiers who crucified Christ.

And did Jesus pray that God would forgive the Sanhedrin or Pilate? If He did, there is no record of it in the Bible. He told Pilate to his face that he was sinning (John 19:11).

This being so, I do not think, based on the examples of Jesus' prayer for the soldiers or Stephen's prayer for his murderers, we should conclude that God expects us to forgive all unbelievers who sin against us. Certainly we should love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and do good to those who hate us (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27). But it is quite possible to love our enemies without forgiving them. God loves everyone, but generally speaking, He only forgives those who repent. There are quite a few more examples in Scripture of Him not forgiving the unrepentant than there are of Him forgiving the unrepentant.

May I also point out that neither Jesus' prayer for the soldiers nor Stephen's prayer for his murderers guaranteed eternal life for any of their persecutors. At most, Jesus' and Stephen's prayers would have only resulted in God forgiving their persecutors of one specific sin. There is no reason to think that God forgave all the sins of those for whom Jesus or Stephen prayed.

Finally, I must ask: If Stephen had not possessed such a forgiving attitude, would God have been angered and reinstated his formerly-forgiven sins? Would he have been cast into hell---after he was martyred for his faith? That seems unlikely. Had he not prayed his gracious prayer for his murderers, he still would not have been comparable to the unforgiving servant in Jesus' parable who refused to forgive a repentant offender who begged for mercy.

A Few Final Thoughts on Forgiveness

In Revelation we read of some saints "harboring some unforgiveness," and not only were they not denied access to heaven, they were already in heaven!:

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also (Rev. 6:9-11).

Note that those who prayed were not rebuked for their desire for revenge upon their murderers. Neither were they told to forgive as they had been forgiven. Their murderers were not brothers and sisters in Christ (of course); nor had they humbled themselves to request forgiveness. These factors must all be considered in order to determine whom God expects us to forgive.

You may recall that Joseph, son of Jacob, did not immediately forgive his brothers who had so grievously sinned against him. Rather, he put them through a degree of agony that brought them to repentance over what they'd done, and then he tested them to ascertain if their remorse and repentance were genuine. Only then did he speak gracious words of forgiveness to them, and only then were they reconciled. What Joseph accomplished for his brothers by not at first forgiving them was good for them. What if he had revealed himself to them during their first visit to Egypt, saying, "I'm Joseph! I'm holding nothing against you! Let's have a party!?" Would they have been brought to a place of repentance? Or would they have turned to each other with smiles and exclaimed, "Wow! Crime does pay!"?

The father of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable by the same name is certainly a good example of one who forgave. But what would his reaction have been had his wayward son returned with a girl in each arm and a bottle of whiskey in each hand, saying with a slur, "Hey my old man, I'm a little low on cash! Could you lend your fun-loving son a few bucks?" Kill the fattened calf? I doubt it.

Finally, it seems to me that forgiving and being forgiven is an issue between two parties, an offender and one who has been offended. I can't forgive someone for his sin against you, nor should I. If I do, I unjustly side with your offender against you. Imagine that I see someone strike you to the ground and then kick you until you are unconscious. Imagine coming to consciousness for a moment and hearing me say to your attacker, "I forgive you for what you just did, because Jesus commanded me to forgive everyone. I will not let what you did stand between us. I will not hold you accountable for what you have done, nor will I testify against you in court. I will treat you as if this never happened." You would consider my act of "forgiveness" towards your attacker to be a sin against you. And so you should.

It is absurd to say, as some do, that we as Christians must "forgive everyone, even Adolf Hitler." Adolf Hitler did not sin against me, so I have nothing for which to forgive him. If I did declare that I had forgiven him, what kind of a message would that send to all who suffered and died because of his evil? May I add that it seems quite unlikely that God forgave Adolf Hitler, so why would He expect me to do what He would not do?

Over the past thirty years, I've heard a lot of sermons about forgiveness that are based on a few scriptures, sermons which I think sometimes leave people worse off than they were before the sermon started. They only scratch the surface, and they end up being unbalanced in regard to everything Scripture has to say. This article is certainly not the final word on the subject, but I hoped to go a little deeper, just to provoke all of us to think. As always, I welcome your thoughtful and kind feedback, and I read every response. (Although please don't hold me to reply, as I am swimming in emails as usual).

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