

Forgive One Another

Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13

Our subject last week was confessing your sins to one another. We looked at,

James 5:16 “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

If you remember, I focused much of that sermon on the broader context of our relationships with one another within the church, the humility to live before one another without hiding the reality of your sins. More importantly, I focused upon our need to live that way before God, with the dangers of trying to hide your sinfulness from God. So we looked at,

Ps. 32:3 “When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. 5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

This morning I want to focus on one particular aspect of that same subject, though not from the perspective of the one who is guilty, the one who has sinned, but instead from the perspective of the one who was sinned against—the victim of someone else’s sin, the one harmed by the offense committed by somebody else. And so, as I emphasized last week, confessing your sins to one another is necessary when you have wronged another person. Today I want to address that relationship from the perspective of the person who was wronged. Thus the subject is forgiveness, and that topic is clearly embedded in the whole of our humble and loving willingness to live with one another in this fallen world, especially as fellow Christians. Forgiveness is not isolated from the others of these one another commands, but still it is identified

with some measure of stress and importance in the Bible. For example,

Eph. 4:31 “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Similarly,

Col.12 “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. 14 But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”

I read both those passages with a little bit of added context, because forgiveness has to be seen and understood in that context, especially those words we studied a few weeks ago, “bearing with one another.” So what does all of that mean for us today, with particular reference upon what it means to forgive one another.

I. FORGIVENESS: WHAT IS IT?

Definitions are good, so what is a definition of forgiveness? What are we talking about? Let me begin the answer to that question by noting that,

A. Forgiveness is a decision.

It’s a choice you make. It is not so much a matter of the emotions, not so much a matter of feelings as it is a choice. And it is a judicial choice, a legal choice. It is a choice to discharge a debt, a debt that is owed you. It is a choice to cancel a debt, to remove the obligation of the debt from the one who owes it. That’s why the language of “debt” is sometimes used in the Bible

instead of “sin” or “trespass.” For instance, in the Lord’s prayer we pray thus,

Mat. 6:11 “Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.”

When Luke records that same prayer, we read,

Luke 11:3 “Give us day by day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.”

So which is it? Sins or debts? Answer, both words refer to the same thing. Surely we are not praying to God about anything monetary in the Lord’s Prayer, so the reference to debts is not that God would free us from our earthly, monetary debts. But that he would free us from the debt incurred by our sin, the debt of his justice! More simply, we pray, forgive us our sins.

So forgiveness is the decision to cancel someone’s debt. And personally, privately, that is what we are called to do as Christians. We free someone from the liability incurred by their sin. And that is a choice or decision to be made. It is a promise. Thus it is commanded.

Luke 17:3 “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”

Jesus emphasizes just how important this is.

Mat. 21:25 “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. 26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Let me add further definition to that promise.

B. Forgiveness is a personal commitment not to hold an offense against someone.

As I just read, “If you have anything against anyone, forgive him.” If someone is indebted to you, cancel the debt. You removed their guilt as the barrier to your relationship with them. You don’t hold them guilty in your eyes. And that means that you won’t raise that issue again as an offense. You won’t bring it up again, later, holding it against them. You won’t bring it up again to others.

The NIV has a particularly helpful translation of 1 Corinthians 13 here with reference to love.

1 Cor. 13:5 “It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”

The NKJV translates, it “thinks no evil.” Literally, love does not take an inventory of evil. It doesn’t keep a record. And that is the idea of forgiveness. You make a personal commitment not to keep that record of wrongs. You make a promise not to hold that offense against someone as an offense for which they stand before you “guilty.”

Yet we do, don’t we? How many husbands and wives when they get into an argument, and though they might settle the argument at the moment, they write down the offense in those little books that we all keep in our mind, that list of offenses. So when something else happens, when some other conflict arises, out comes the whole list. Again and again, whenever it is to your advantage to do so. To the contrary, however, forgiveness is the willingness not to keep that list, not to refer to it, not to bring up offenses of the past that are forgiven.

I should add, that doesn’t necessarily mean you forget. You can’t be commanded to forget something. The human mind

doesn't work that way. Sometimes we forget things unintentionally, without wanting to forget. Sometime we forget because of our own neglect, and sometimes our minds just fail us. Sometimes we are actually commanded to resist that inclination, and to remember! So we are commanded to remember some things, but we cannot be commanded to forget. We don't have that ability to control over our minds in that way. But we are commanded not to keep a record of wrongs, not to hold against those to whom we have granted forgiveness. So when you say to someone, "I forgive you," you make a commitment not to raise that issue as an offense against the person you are forgiving. Which is to say, as we read in the book of Leviticus,

Lev. 19:18 "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Forgiveness means you no longer seek vengeance. You give up any right to pursue retribution. And so we read,

Rom. 12:18 "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. 20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Vengeance, getting even, is replaced by the personal commitment not to hold an offense against someone who has sinned against you. That's forgiveness. Having said all that, I need to ask another question.

II. FORGIVENESS: HOW DOES IT WORK?

The simple answer to that question is that forgiveness is

requested! In other words, the way that forgiveness works is that the guilty party, the one who sinned, seeks the forgiveness of the one whom he sinned against. Forgiveness is something you ask for, and only then, as a response, is forgiveness granted. Specifically,

A. Forgiveness is a response to repentance.

And true repentance, sincere repentance, includes that request. That's why just saying "I'm sorry" isn't good enough. And not even "I apologize." Because if I say "I'm sorry" to you, you don't have to respond. I'm not requesting a response. And often, sadly, when I say "I'm sorry," I'm really not taking all the blame for myself anyway. I'm probably going to add the word "but" or even "if." I'm sorry, but you were provoking me. That's not repentance. I'm sorry if I hurt you. Even that is not repentance. For repentance is owning your sin and its consequences. Repentance is admitting your fault and accepting the consequences of your actions, including realization of the harm you have caused to the other person. So instead of "I'm sorry if I hurt you," something along the lines of "I was wrong to hurt you" is far better. Even better, confess what you did, "I know that I hurt you by doing I did, and what I did was wrong." That's what needs to be communicated.

Then, and really only then, can you add the words, "Please forgive me." I said last week that the three hardest words to say seem to be the words, "I was wrong." But when you do say them, and mean them, don't stop there. Add those additional three words, "Please forgive me." Then let the victim of your offense respond. That's how this works.

Sometimes, if you are the innocent party, if you are the object or victim of someone else's sin, you actually have to go to them to start the process of forgiveness. If there is a private matter, a

private sin that doesn't have another witness to do that with you, you actually need to bring up the offense in the hope and expectation that the one guilty of sin will repent. So we read,

Mat. 18:15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother."

"If he hears you" must certainly mean if he confesses his sin against you, admits his fault and failure, and asks for your forgiveness. In that case, in Jesus' words, "You have gained your brother." Praise the Lord.

Jesus' instructions go further, that if the offender doesn't repent, you have the opportunity to obtain a second witness to the offense,

Mat. 18:16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

Obviously in that case of matters most severe, the elders of the church are brought in to render judgment. Our denomination has a detailed procedure for pursuing discipline, and as a final outcome, if there is no repentance, there is the censure of excommunication. But the goal all along is for repentance, for restoration, for reconciliation. So a study of the matter of forgiveness must be built upon this emphasis of repentance.

But here's another problem. Words are cheap. Many people can say those words "Please forgive me" and aren't truly grieving or hating their sin. They learn these words as a formula, and though they are the ones guilty of sin, they impose themselves upon those whom they have hurt and demand a response as if it is

their right to do so. It isn't. If you sin, it is your duty to repent. If you sinned against another person, personally, it is your duty to admit that sin to them, but not to demand of them their response. That's manipulation. It can even become abusive.

True repentance is something described by the phrase "godly sorrow," as we read in,

2 Cor. 7:8 "For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

Godly sorrow produces a diligence to turn away from the sin, an earnestness to clear yourself, to seek reconciliation with those you have offended. It produces in you, the guilty party, "vehement desire" and "zeal" to be done with your sin. In the language of our confession, true repentance requires a recognition of the "filthiness and odiousness of [your] sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God." It requires that a guilty party "so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God."

And in that godly sorrow, there must be a recognition of harm done. Sometimes that harm can be redressed, like if your sin was stealing money. Repentance must include paying it back. Sometimes that harm can be especially traumatic, and

repentance must include the realization that you have caused the harm of trauma to someone else, and that might require significant healing. As well as time to do so. So the need to heal from trauma is not a contradiction of forgiveness, and some relationships are altered even after repentance, some even permanently. Earning trust can take time as well, if the sin confessed was a particular breach of trust. And sometimes the fruit of repentance is necessary to demonstrate the sincerity of it.

Further, asking for forgiveness, as a mere formula, without the full evidence of godly sorrow, does not require a good response, for there is not genuine repentance. Neither is minimizing your sin acceptable in this context of seeking forgiveness. Or excusing it. Or blame-shifting, convincing the offended party that he is really the one who is in the wrong. I've learn a new word in past few years, referring to that as gaslighting. Gaslighting is a way of making others think they are really the ones at fault, that they are crazy or misguided, while in reality you are the guilty party who needs to repent.

All that is to say, forgiveness is a response to repentance, and the guilty party has no claim on the victim to grant forgiveness. Rather,

B. Forgiveness is an act of grace.

It is given freely. It is our responsibility as Christians to be ready and willing to forgive, and to do so. But still, it is granted as an act of grace. Saying "I was wrong" doesn't give you the right to demand forgiveness. You are asking for grace, asking for something you don't deserve.

But with godly sorrow, with true repentance, we are called upon as God's people to forgive. To cancel the debt, to decide and determine that you are willing to allow that offense to be in

the past, that you are willing to agree that you will not raise that offense again.

One further thought before moving on the perfect model of forgiveness, and that is the matter of justice. Especially justice in terms of the civil authorities. And the point is that,

C. Forgiveness is not contrary to justice.

This is especially evident with criminal offenses. Forgiveness doesn't mean you are forbidden to press charges with regard to a criminal offense. Forgiveness on a personal level doesn't eliminate the need for justice on a civil level. There are all too many examples of Christians and churches actually covering up criminal offenses in the name of forgiveness, offenses ranging from financial embezzlement to sexual abuse. Yet, since the civil authorities are ordained by God, we read in,

Rom. 13:4 "...for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil."

The context there is criminal offenses. Forgiveness, granted in our personal relationships, does not contradict nor cancel out the propriety and necessity of the civil authority exercising its power rightly. And actually, if you are repenting of a sin and seeking forgiveness, and if that sin is also a criminal offense, you ought to voluntarily turn yourself in to the governing authorities and accept civil responsibilities for your sinful actions. That would be the fullness of repentance—accepting responsibility for your sin in every way.

So let's come back to the main idea of those two verses I began with.

Col. 3:12 "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one

another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”

Eph. 4:32 “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Both of those verses make explicit reference to the perfect model for our forgiveness, namely God’s forgiveness of us.

III. FORGIVENESS: THE PERFECT MODEL.

You are to forgive one another, “even as God in Christ forgave you.” “Even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” So it is that you must understand exactly what God in Christ has done for you. You must understand what forgiveness is by the example of the definition which God himself exemplifies.

A. The forgiveness of God defined.

In reality, it is the same definition I have used in terms of the forgiveness we grant to one another. Namely, the decision and the commitment not to hold an offense against you. So we read,

Ps. 103:10 “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; 12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

Similarly,

Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. 19 He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea.”

God removes our sins from us. He casts them into the depths

of the sea. That’s forgiveness. He will no longer hold us accountable for the guilt of our sins. Praise the Lord.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And the central focus of the gospel itself is that you and I might be able to experience that very thing.

B. The forgiveness of God experience.

Truly that is freedom, freedom from the condemnation which our sins deserved. Restoration from the alienation which our sins brought about. Living before God freed from the guilt of our sin, cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

In so many ways, this is the primary felt-need of all mankind—the need to be freed from the guilt and condemnation of sin, the need for forgiveness. And only in Christ, only in the context of the Christian gospel, is that great hope promised. And only in Christ, only with a living faith in Jesus combined with the godly sorrow of repentance will you be able to experience what it means to be forgiven.

So beloved, you who belong to Jesus, you are forgiven. Not because I say so, but because the promise of gospel says so.

Eph. 1:7 “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.”

Col. 1:13 “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”

With the faith to believe those promises to be true, and in order to experience the blessing of reconciliation with God

through the forgiveness of your sins, turn to one another and be ready and willing to extend that same grace to each other, when others sin against you.

Eph. 4:31 “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Col.3:12 “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”

For love keeps no record of wrongs.