

Christian forgiveness

2 Corinthians 2:5-11

As we get ready to enter the New Year, would you say that you have become more willing or less willing to forgive? In his book: Ten questions to diagnose your spiritual health, Don Witney asked the diagnostic question, “Are you a quicker forgiver?” This question speaks to the heart of Christianity. If we are becoming more like Christ, than we will increasingly become more willing to forgive.

Don Witney explains: “Three times in the Gospels, Jesus directly connects our forgiveness of others with God’s forgiveness of us—Mark 11:25, Matthew 6:14-15, and also Luke 6:37, where He says, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” He did not mean that we earn God’s forgiveness for the sins we commit against Him by granting forgiveness to others for their sins against us. This would make our salvation conditional on doing something to earn it—in this case, dispensing forgiveness to others.

Rather these texts show that a forgiving spirit characterizes those who have been forgiven. Repenters toward God are forgivers toward others. Those who find themselves unable to forgive reveal that they’ve never experienced the transforming forgiveness of God. But those who are willing to forgive as God forgives may be hopeful that they have received the grace of God. And this grace causes them to truly want to forgive, even when the flesh rages against that impulse.”

In contrast to the increasing willingness to forgive, which ought to characterize the life of a spiritually maturing Christian, in our culture today there seems to be a decreasing willingness to forgive. Along with the rise of the punitive movement known as the “cancel culture,” many in our society have become increasingly resistant and even antagonistic to the virtue of forgiveness.

Cancel culture not only feels contempt toward people with contrary views, but also see them as unredeemable. On the other hand, spiritually mature Christians see no one as unredeemable. Instead, they are convinced that repentance and change are always possible,

and forgiveness is available. Spiritually mature Christians see no one as an object of scorn. They're persuaded that God's love is always available. There are no lost causes.

In an interview about his recent book titled, *Forgive*, Tim Keller argues that there is a cultural crisis going on. In recent years, he began noticing that with the rise of "cancel culture" came a disturbing trend: "Young people were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of forgiveness." He observed, "They don't know how to forgive, and they're not even sure they should." The emphasis of young people on doing justice is important, and forgiveness seems to contradict justice. It seems like, 'Well, I can forgive or I can pursue justice.' That's one problem. And then secondly, we live in a culture where people don't do face-to-face stuff ... they don't know how to deal with conflict or disagreement. We live in a culture that is very fragmented, polarized, there's an awful lot of anger, and people are really after each other. Forgiveness is not in the air." (Christian Post)

Now this anti-Christian idea that forgiveness is more of a weakness than a virtue, also characterized the culture in first century Corinth. And like the church in Corinth, the church today must resist conformity to an increasingly unforgiving culture if we are going to be agents of restoration and effect positive change in our marriages, in our churches and in our world.

Main idea: Christian forgiveness does not minimize the pain caused by an offender, but instead receives God's grace to deal with the hurt and turn away from the pursuit of personal vengeance or retribution.

This morning we are going to learn 3 lessons that will help us to restoratively extend forgiveness, and to overcome conformity to a culture that increasingly views forgiveness as a hindrance rather than essential to human flourishing.

1. Recognizes the pain

First of all, Christian forgiveness recognizes the pain. After explaining that the reason he refrained from coming to them was rooted in the

love and faithfulness of God, Paul continues: “*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,*” (2 Corinthians 2:5-6).

In these verses, although he doesn’t name anyone, Paul appears to be speaking of someone that hurt the church in some way. Because the person is not named, there’s a lot of speculation among commentators as to who Paul is referring to.

Some suggest that Paul is speaking of someone who opposed his gospel ministry and apostolic authority causing division in the church. Others suggests that Paul may have been referring to the man referenced in 1 Corinthians 5. Because he was engaged in a sexually immoral relationship with his mother-in-law, he was removed, with Paul’s urging, from the fellowship of the church as an act of discipline.

Although I lean towards the person in question being the man in 1 Corinthians 5, the more important thing is not who the man was but how the Corinthians were to deal with him. Now, Paul is going to exhort the church to forgive the person in question. But before he does, he acknowledged the pain that the person caused.

Christian forgiveness does not minimize the pain that the person being forgiven has caused. It’s not telling yourself or someone else to *just get over it already*.

When Paul wrote, *if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me*, he’s not saying that he was unaffected by the sin of this man. Rather, that he was not the only one pained by the actions of this man.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul felt great displeasure because of the immorality being tolerated in the church. In addition, in 2 Corinthians 2:4, Paul also felt anguish over other sin issues that were prevalent in the church of Corinth.

To feel anguish is to feel the pain of another. This is the heart of God. Because God is holy, He feels hot displeasure over sin and injustice,

but because He is also love, He also grieves over the sin of His children.

So, Paul is not saying that he was unaffected by the pain that the man caused, but rather that his sin painfully affected the whole body. This speaks to the interdependent nature of the body of Christ.

When someone in the church sins or suffers pain, we should never feel indifferent about it. If we know the love of God, we will confront a brother or a sister in sin with the ultimate aim of restoration. And we will also protect and care for those who have been sinned against. This is what a healthy church looks like. If one person suffers, we all suffer.

Do you know, in ministry, I've discovered that some people struggle to forgive others because they believe that to forgive means they must get over the pain. God is not asking us to get over the pain or to forget the pain.

Often, we hear people say that we must forgive and forget. Although forgiveness involves not dwelling on past hurts or reminding others of the hurt they caused us, it doesn't mean that we will never remember the pain.

Christian forgiveness means availing ourselves of the grace of God to deal with the pain and to overcome other maladies, like the poison of bitterness and resentment. Forgiveness empowered by the grace of God will not make us get over the pain, it strengthens us to get through it.

Furthermore, although there are times when we may choose to overlook certain offenses, forgiveness doesn't mean that offenders should not be confronted or suffer any consequences for their wrong actions. Notice that after acknowledging the pain that the church suffered, Paul continues, "*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough,*" (2 Corinthians 2:6).

Keep in mind that the person Paul is referring to in verse 6 may likely be the sexually immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5, who was removed from their fellowship. Now whether Paul is referring to him or another person who rightly received church discipline, Paul appears to be admonishing the Corinthians for going too far with their discipline.

The ultimate aim of removing the person from the fellowship and the provisions and protection it afforded, was not pay back. The aim of church discipline is restoration. And apparently the person disciplined had come to genuine repentance, marked by deep contrition and sorrow.

Therefore, Paul suggests that the punishment enacted by the majority had exceeded its intended purpose. In light of this, Paul exhorts the church in verse 7: “*so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*” (2 Corinthians 2:7).

This brings us to us to a second lesson about Christian forgiveness, namely that it releases the person.

2. Releases the person

Once again, the person under church discipline in Corinth had come to a place of genuine repentance. Therefore, he was not in need of further discipline, but of forgiveness and restoration.

Notice that one of the reasons Paul gives regarding the man’s need for forgiveness and restoration was so that he would not be *overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*. This man was in dire need not of more discipline but of comfort.

Nowhere in Paul’s letter is there even a hint that the man submitted a grievance against the Corinthians or was making any demands to be allowed back into fellowship. This man was broken over his sin and had accepted the consequences of his sin, which is a mark of genuine repentance (2 Corinthians 7).

The great concern of Paul was not that the man would bring a law suit, but that he would be overwhelmed with grief. This man needed to be restored to fellowship or his sorrow would be a means for the enemy to gain an advantage over him and bring spiritual ruin to his life.

Why did the Corinthians continue to keep this contrite man outside of their fellowship? Was it pay back?

Remember that before the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 was disciplined, the Corinthians were indifferent about the open sin he was engaged in, which even the pagans in Paul's day did not tolerate (1 Corinthians 5:1).

Because of the gravity of the sin and the indifference of the church, Paul had to exercise his apostolic authority and instruct the Corinthians to assemble together in the name of Jesus for the purpose of removing the man from their fellowship.

At one point, the church was complacent in confronting the immoral man. But later after the man repented, they acted with excessive discipline against him. It appears that the majority of the church went from indifference to perhaps resentfulness for not only the pain the immoral man caused but also for the rebuke they received from Paul for their indifference.

As Chuck Swindoll suggests, "Whereas in his previous letter Paul virtually had to force the church to act against the sinner, in this letter he finds himself in the ironic position of serving as the sinner's advocate. How baffling the Corinthian church must have been! That chaotic church had pushed Paul from executing the prosecution to coming to the sinner's defense. To prevent the repentant brother in Christ from being "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2:7), Paul exhorted the Corinthians to "forgive and comfort him."

In light of this, what does Christian forgiveness look like practically. To forgive means that we release the person from whatever we've been holding against them. It means that we cancel the debt. It means that we genuinely say before God, they do not owe me anymore.

Let me clarify that in the case of the man Paul urged the Corinthians to forgive, he had demonstrated the marks of genuine repentance. Therefore, Paul not only exhorted the Corinthians to forgive, but to comfort the contrite man, which implies restored fellowship.

Now, it's important to note here that although God has called us to forgive those who sin against us, the restoration of the relationship is not always possible. The reason restoration is not always possible could be that the person we forgive is no longer with us or is inaccessible. Restoration of the relationship may also not be possible because of the absence of genuine repentance. Forgiveness is freely given, but trust and reconciliation requires genuine repentance.

There are two key passages in the gospels where Jesus gave instructions about forgiveness. The first passage is Mark 11:25 which reads: *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."* Notice that Jesus doesn't say forgive unless the person doesn't repent.

But now in Luke 17:3 Jesus taught: *"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."* Now in this second passage there are two types of responsibilities that Jesus gives in regards to forgiveness.

The first responsibility is to rebuke the person who has sinned. To rebuke means to frankly and pointedly address their error. This doesn't mean that we go around correcting every person who commits an offense. The New Testament gives us further instruction on how we are to approach a brother or sister in sin. For example, the word of God in Galatian 6:1, instructs the spiritually mature to restore a brother in sin with a spirit of meekness.

In addition to rebuke, the second responsibility that Jesus gave was to forgive, if the person repents. Now is Jesus contradicting himself when he instructs his disciples in Mark 11:25 to forgive on the spot, but later makes forgiveness conditional upon repentance?

In his book titled, *Forgive*, Tim Keller explains: “The answer is that forgiveness can have two meanings that overlap. ‘Sometimes the forgiveness of which the New Testament speaks presupposes repentance on the part of the offender and sometimes not’ (D.A. Carson). Luke 17:3 is an example of the first, while Mark 11:25 is an example of the latter. When Stephen died praying, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60), it is clear that there was no repentance from the wrongdoers, since they were stoning and killing him as he spoke. Yet Stephen forgave them. How can these two directives both be true? The answer is that the word forgiveness is being used in two somewhat different ways. In Mark 11:25 “forgive them” means inwardly being willing to not avenge oneself. In Luke 17 “forgive them” means “reconcile to them.”

There is, then, a kind of forgiveness that ends up being inward only and another kind that issues outwardly toward a possible restored relationship. These are not two kinds of forgiveness but two aspects or stages of it. One could say that the first (inward forgiveness) must always happen, and the second (outward forgiveness) may happen but is not always possible.

We learn two important lessons from these two directives. First, Christian forgiveness is never simply individualistic—concerned only with inner healing of the heart. It is at least that, but it is much more. God’s concern is for the outer and social healing of the community as well. Inward attitudinal forgiveness wants and seeks reconciliation even if the offender does not. So forgiveness is never only about the inner peace of the victim, as important as that is.

Second, Christian forgiveness never undermines the pursuit of justice but promotes it. Why? Inward forgiveness changes the attitude of the heart from a desire for the wrongdoer’s pain to a desire for his or her good. That is the essence of inward forgiveness, and it means going from animosity to love. Love is genuinely willing someone’s good, putting one’s happiness “into” the happiness of others, so that their thriving brings you joy. Love, then, is the essence of granting forgiveness.”

So, when we forgive we release the person who has wronged us from whatever we are holding against them. We say before God in view of Christ love for us, this person doesn't owe me and I will not pursue payment or retribution. Moreover, the ultimate goal of forgiveness is not just individual healing. "To forgive is to aim for reconciliation and restoration of the relationship that was broken by the wrongdoing" (Tim Keller).

This brings us to our final lesson about Christian forgiveness, namely that it reaffirms our patronage to the forgiven.

3. Reaffirms our patronage

After exhorting the Corinthians to *forgive* and *comfort* the contrite man, Paul continues: "*So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him*" (2 Corinthians 2:9). It's important to reiterate that the ultimate aim of forgiveness is a restored relationship that magnifies the love of Jesus. Like Jesus on the cross, forgiveness is not just something we do in our hearts, it's something that we demonstrate with our words and actions.

As Chuck Swindoll explains, "We forgive when we speak words of liberation to the offending party: "*I forgive you. We are putting this behind us and moving on.*" We comfort when we come alongside those who offended us, not only forgiving them for their wrongs, but offering to help them rebuild and strengthen areas of weakness. We reaffirm when we restore them to their former level of relationship, inviting and involving them in our lives, trusting them with the rights and privileges they had before. Of course, every time we forgive like this, we risk. They may fail us again. We may place our trust on an unreliable soul. But that's grace. Grace is risky."

Now knowing that his admonition would be a test of their faith, as we read in verse 9, Paul adds in verse 10: "*Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ,*" (2 Corinthians 2:10).

The reason Paul assures them that whoever they forgive, he also forgives, is likely because he had previously instructed them to remove the man from their fellowship. But now he's instructing them to forgive and love on the man. Paul is not being double minded. His previous instructions to discipline the man when he was in sin and now to forgive him were both ultimately aimed at restoration.

So Paul is not flip flopping. Paul's aim in both cases was the same. Therefore the Corinthians could be assured that if they acted in that same spirit of grace as Paul, that he would support them.

Moreover, he's not telling them to do something he has not already done, namely to forgive. And to further assure them, he reminds them that his pattern of forgiveness was not motivated by personal gain, but done in the *presence of Christ* (v.10).

In other words, it was Paul's awe inspiring knowledge and awareness of the glory of Christ that compelled him to extend forgiveness for the sake of others. We are willing to forgive when we are in awe of God and how much we've been forgiven at Christ's expense.

Notice that Paul also encouraged them to forgive and restore their repentant brother by reminding them of their adversary the devil. Paul continues, "*so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*" (2 Corinthians 2:11).

When we fail to pursue forgiveness and restoration, we open the door to the enemy's evil schemes and ends. We give place for him to sow bitterness and resentment and to use us to bring discord and division.

Chuck Swindoll put it this way: "God's goal is not ridding the church of sinners, but reconciling sinners back to the church. When we forget that, we are no longer pursuing the Lord's will, but rather the devil's wiles."

As I was preparing this message, someone came to mind who had wronged me in the past. And based on some recent observations, I

felt a strong sense that I needed to reaffirm my love to him, as God constantly reaffirms His love to me. So I sent him this message: “I want to reaffirm to you that you don’t owe me anything. You are forgiven. I owe you love. Praying for you today.”

Conclusion

It’s not always easy to forgive. Sometimes it can be very difficult. But an unwillingness to forgive is a strong indication that we have not experienced the transforming love and forgiveness of God in Christ. If we know His transforming grace, then we must continually seek His face to resist conformity to an increasingly unforgiving culture.

If we are going to be agents of restoration and effect gospel change in our homes, in our churches and in our communities, we must forgive others as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven us.

Is there somebody today who needs to hear and feel your forgiveness, comfort and reaffirmation? In light of God’s costly forgiveness in Christ, may we seek His grace today to extend the grace of full forgiveness to the glory of His name.