

# 8

# FORGIVENESS

## BIG IDEA

The gospel that works in us always works through us. It shows its power in our relationships and actions. One key way this happens is when we forgive others biblically.

## NOTES:





# THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS US TO FORGIVE

Forgiving people who harm us is one of the most difficult things to do in life. And the deeper the wound, the more challenging it gets. We often feel confused about what real forgiveness looks like. Are we to “forgive and forget?” Is that even possible? And what exactly does it mean to “love my enemy?” What about the person who sexually abused me? Or the boss who furthered his career at my expense? Or the spouse who cheated on me? Or the friend who slandered me and damaged my reputation?

We have seen that when the gospel really takes root *in* us, it begins to work itself out *through* us. Forgiveness is one area where the gospel must “go to work” in our lives. In fact, forgiving others really isn’t possible unless we are living in light of God’s forgiveness ourselves. So let’s consider how the gospel moves us toward forgiveness.

The gospel begins with God’s movement toward us. God takes the initiative, though he is the offended party. He acted to reconcile the relationship “while we were God’s enemies” (Rom. 5:10). Our sin had separated us from him (Isa. 59:2). He had every right to condemn us, to resist us, and to sever the relationship, but he did not. Instead, he moved toward us: “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

However, reconciliation with God requires our repentance. By forgiving our sin, God extends the *offer* of reconciliation, but reconciliation is not complete until we repent and receive his forgiveness by faith. Notice how both dynamics are reflected in 2 Corinthians 5:19–20: “God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God!”

Scripture gives all credit, glory, and praise to God for our salvation, because it is only by his gracious initiative that we are able to respond (Eph. 2:8–9). But our response of repentance and faith is essential. Salvation is not universal. Only those who repent and receive God’s gracious offer will be reconciled to him.

So we might summarize God’s forgiveness this way: By moving toward us, God invites and enables us to move toward him. The gospel starts with God (the offended party) moving toward us (the offenders). He cancels our debt and opens to us an opportunity for reconciliation. If we acknowledge our sin and repent, we are reconciled to God and able to experience the joy and delight of relationship with him.

What, then, does it look like for us to forgive others as God has forgiven us? This, after all, is what the Bible commands: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32 ESV). Scripture assumes that if we have truly experienced God’s



forgiveness in the gospel, we will be radically forgiving toward others. By contrast, if we are unforgiving, resentful, or bitter toward others, it is a sure sign that we are not living out of the deep joy and freedom of the gospel.

Our forgiveness of others is intended to mirror the forgiveness God has given us. We are to take the initiative: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24 ESV). We are to offer forgiveness and open a door for reconciliation. But reconciliation is always contingent upon the other person’s repentance. Christian author and counselor Dan Allender has suggested a helpful analogy: “Forgiveness involves a heart that cancels the debt but does not lend new money until repentance occurs.”<sup>\*</sup> Like God, we take the initiative to move toward those who have offended us and we invite them to move toward us in repentance.

What this means is that our work is not done once we have forgiven someone. Our heart’s desire is not simply to forgive the offense but ultimately to see the other person reconciled to God and to us. We want to see sin’s power over this person destroyed. We cannot make this happen, but we are to pray for it, long for it, and welcome it. Where do we find the power to do this? After all, it’s hard enough just *forgiving* someone who has deeply wounded us. How do we find the grace and strength to long for restoration?

The answer, of course, is the gospel. The gospel doesn’t just show us *how* to forgive; it *empowers* us to forgive.

When we say, “I just can’t forgive that person for what he did to me,” we are essentially saying, “That person’s sin is greater than mine.” Our awareness of our own sin is very small, while our awareness of another’s sin is very big. Our underlying feeling is that *we* deserve to be forgiven but the person who offended us does not. We are living with a small view of God’s holiness, a small view of our own sin, and a small view of the cross of Jesus.

But when we embrace a gospel perspective on our own sin, we recognize that the sin debt God has forgiven on our behalf is greater than any sin that has been committed against us. And as we grow in our awareness of God’s holiness, we begin to see more clearly the distance between his perfection and our imperfection. As the significance of Jesus’ work on the cross grows in our consciousness, our willingness and ability to seek restoration with others will also grow. After all, if God forgave the massive offense of our sin against him, how could we not forgive the sin of others—which, though it may be severe, pales in comparison with our own guilt before a holy and righteous God?

Forgiveness is costly. It means canceling a debt when we feel we have every right to demand payment. It means absorbing the pain, hurt, shame, and grief of someone’s sin against us. It means longing for repentance and restoration. But this is exactly how God has acted toward us in Jesus Christ. And through the gospel, the Holy Spirit empowers us to do the same toward others.

<sup>\*</sup> Dr. Dan B. Allender and Dr. Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), p. 162.

# 8 EXERCISE

# GETTING TO THE HEART OF FORGIVENESS

## HOMEWORK

*(Answer these questions before your meeting. You may need a separate sheet of paper.)*

1. Think of one or two people you need to forgive (or forgive more deeply). If you have a hard time thinking of someone, ask God to reveal someone to you. Here are some scenarios and feelings that might bring someone to mind: someone you have distanced yourself from; people you feel uncomfortable around; people you no longer enjoy; relational conflicts you keep rehearsing in your mind; someone who said or did something that hurt you; feelings of anger, bitterness, irritation, fear, gossip, or a critical spirit.

*Write down one or two people who come to mind.*

2. What irritates or disturbs you most about this person?

3. What issues of “justice” are involved in the situation? How has this person wronged you, hurt you, or sinned against you?

4. What conditions do you instinctively want to place on this person before you truly forgive him or her? In others words, what does your heart want to require from this person before you release him or her? What specifically would you desire the person to say or do?

5. Describe your own debt before God. How is it far greater than the debt of the people you have listed (yet it is cancelled and forgiven)? Do not rush through this question. Take time to describe your indebtedness in terms of the specific ways sin manifests itself in your life.

6. How has your previous way of relating to these people reflected a small view of your own debt and a small view of Christ’s forgiveness?

