

Biblical Counseling 301

Class 3 – Forgiveness June 24, 2018

He made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

I. Forgiveness – A frequent counseling topic

- A. Some counselees know it's an issue and mention it. They tell the person providing biblical counsel, *"I can't forgive my ex-wife" or "my son-in-law" or "the people from my former church."*
 - B. Other people struggle with depression, anger, fear or feeling stuck spiritually, but as you get to know their story, you see that they are really struggling with an underlying issue of unforgiveness.
 - C. At times, a person may say they are having a hard time feeling forgiven by God. Other times people say, *"I'm having a hard time forgiving myself,"* (**though thinking that we need to forgive ourselves means we don't really understand forgiveness**).
 - D. Whether people are aware or not, and whether the forgiveness is of someone else or of themselves, this topic is common enough that we all need to think biblically through how to receive and practice forgiveness ourselves and how to help others do the same.
 - E. Defining forgiveness.
How would you define it in your own words?
-
-

My definition: **Forgiveness** is the withdrawal of personal judgment against another for an offense committed by the other, based not on the offender undoing the offense or making promises with regard to the offense, but on mercy granted by the one offended.

Wikipedia's definition is **Forgiveness** is the intentional and voluntary process by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitude regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions such as vengefulness, with an increased ability to wish the offender well.

Ken Sande (author of The Peacemaker) says, *Through forgiveness, God tears down the walls that our sins have built, and He opens the way for a renewed relationship.*

II. Understanding Forgiveness

- A. **Forgiveness is not the same as a restored relationship.** Restoration requires repentance on the part of the offender and agreement on the part of the offended. Rather, forgiveness refers to *"cancellation of the demand of satisfaction"* by the offended.
- B. Two examples are Jesus on the cross, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,"* and Stephen, the first Christian martyr, when he said in Acts 8, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* In both cases, a relationship was not restored, but each one cancelled their own right to judge against those who murdered them, and they even asked that the Father withhold His judgment against them for what they had done.
- C. Forgiveness as a counseling issue is important **because it is the point of the gospel.** The gospel, properly understood, is **good news** about **bad news**. If there was no bad news, there would be no need for good news. That is, if there were no sin against a holy God resulting in our judgment, there would be no need for Jesus to take all our sins upon that tree and be raised from the dead to put an end to the Father's enmity against us. That is what a person believes when they believe the gospel.
- D. Forgiveness as a counseling issue is also important because **it is a main way (if not the main way) the gospel shows up in our lives.** Though God gave every believer in Christ His forgiveness so we could go to heaven when we die, He did so even more so we would become like Him. (2 Cor. 5:21)

III. What does the scripture say about forgiveness?

Look quickly at a host of familiar passages.

1. *Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)*
2. *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)*
3. *You, child, will be called prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give people the knowledge of salvation by forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76)*
4. *The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)*
5. *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. (Mark 11:25)*
6. *This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:28)*
7. *"Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. "My heavenly Father will do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:35)*
8. *All the prophets testify about him, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.(Acts 10:43)*
9. *In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Eph. 4:27)*
10. *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. (Col. 3:13)*
11. *I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. (1 John 2:12)*

IV. Four Principles to Pass on

Here are four principles you as a counselor need to personalize for yourself before you can pass them on. If you personalize them, and see them as coming from the Lord, you will be able to use the scriptures and your life and help others take steps toward freedom.

A. **First**, to grant forgiveness to others, we need to **recall our forgiveness** from the Lord. (Matthew 6:12; 18:18-35; Ephesians 4:32) This is always the place to begin when we think of forgiving. Forgiveness starts with God. He is the one who did it first. We notice when we examine Col. 2:13-14:

- Although we were sinners (*dead in our transgressions*);
- Everything we ever did wrong (*our transgressions*) was nailed to the cross with Jesus;
- When Jesus' blood was shed, God canceled the debt our sin created;
- The ones Paul is talking to have received redemption – the forgiveness of sins;
- It involves the Lord paying the price for our sins instead of us.
- All we contributed was our transgressions which added up to a "certificate of debt" requiring blood be shed, since the Bible says, "*Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.*"

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells a story of a working man who owed his master 10,000 talents of gold – maybe \$11-12 billion. Needless to say, he could never have paid it off. (***That was meant to represent my sin and your sin and your counselee's sin.***) The man told his boss, “I’ll pay you back” – as if he could. He obviously was not in touch with the size of his debt and his limited resources. That is like us... “I won’t do that anymore, Lord.” Each one of us was that working man who owed a debt he couldn’t pay. And in the story, the master – representing God – forgave the debt. He absorbed the loss for his worker. That is just like God absorbing the loss our sin caused Him by sending Jesus to die.

The place all counselees (including us) need to start when it comes to forgiving those who have hurt us is to remember what God has done for us in Christ.

B. **Second**, withholding forgiveness **inhibits fellowship with Christ and opens the door to Satan.** (Mt. 6:14-15; Eph. 4:27; 2 Co. 2:11) These passages teach us these principles:

1. First, Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15, *If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your transgressions.*

2. And again in Matthew 18, He says, *Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way I had mercy on you? And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.*

In these two passages, Jesus says the ability to experience the Father’s forgiveness is dependent upon our forgiving those who trespass against us. The Bible is not teaching that we lose our salvation or that we never were forgiven in the first place. It is telling us that we will not experience the grace of God and His fellowship if we withhold forgiveness.

Perhaps the best example of that comes in Ephesians 4:25-27 which says, *“Speak the truth, each one of you, with his neighbor.... And be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and thereby give the devil a foothold.”*

This idea of anger remaining in place giving the devil a foothold brings to mind 2 Corinthians 2:11 where Paul says to the church that they need to forgive the erring brother who has repented. He says, *“But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.*

One of Satan’s main schemes is taking advantage of believing people who do not forgive. When forgiven people do not forgive, God has given Satan permission to have a foothold in their lives. I believe the reason God does this is because the believer who doesn’t forgive is testifying to the invisible world that our forgiveness by God is not a big deal. It is announcing that “although our paltry offenses against God were forgiven,” the offenses we have incurred at the hands of our fellow traveler on earth is much too great to forgive. This amounts to a rejection of the gospel – and that by a *recipient of the gospel*. It is almost like a spiritual law, an agreement between God and Satan, that anyone who comes under the blood of Christ will follow the example of his Savior, which strikes a blow to Satan (see Job 1, for example). And when by unforgiveness, we testify that the gospel is inadequate to provide us enough spiritual ammunition to forgive, we announce that the gospel is not powerful after all.

C. **Third**, unforgiveness is always **held in place by self-righteousness.**

It works like this. The power to forgive comes from Christ. We forgive because we were unrighteous and yet He forgave us. Romans 5:8 reminds us, *While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* Jesus did not wait until we were obedient, faithful people before He went to the cross for us. He went to the cross for us when we were at our worst. **That is why Paul wrote in Romans 4:5, *But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.***

So what basis does a person have for not forgiving? Generally, the idea is, “I never would have done this to him. This is no way to pay me back for what I have been.” People have an easier time forgiving someone for what they, too, have been guilty of. You can understand that kind of offense. But the hardest time to forgive someone is when they did something to you that you’d never have done.

What that means is, “*I didn’t deserve this. I deserve better treatment.*” Well, if we think **we deserve better treatment**, it means that although we believe we are a sinner and needed God’s forgiveness, we didn’t believe our sin ever justified this particular treatment.

And by the way, the offense we received may not have been deserved by us. Just think of Job. Even God says he was righteous. But Job’s eventual sin in the book of Job was that he believed God owed him an explanation for all that happened. That was a form of self-righteousness – I deserve an explanation. Similar to one who doesn’t forgive: I deserve better treatment than he/she gave me.

We also see this in Hebrews 12:14-15. There we read, *Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.*

Here we see that bitterness is the result of our coming short of utilizing God’s grace and failing to pursue peace with all men through granting forgiveness. If we do not pursue peace with all people and we fail to appropriate God’s grace by forgiving, the passage says “we will not see the Lord” at work. Instead, we will become bitter and it will defile many. But how does bitterness defile many? Each of us have been in rough circumstances that we did not cause, and been hurt in ways that we did not bring on ourselves. Few people escape the reality of being adversely affected by the fall beyond the effects of our own sin. But too often, those ways we have been ignored, mistreated, and abused have become for us the one justification for holding onto our offense.

Unfortunately, though, to hold onto an offense because we really did not deserve it is to say, “I have not deserved this behavior, and will therefore judge it.” That is saying, “I have some righteousness of my own on which I stand.” That flies right in the face of Galatians 6:14 that says, “May I never boast in anything but the cross of Christ my Lord.” In other words, may I not ever think there is something about me that is good *other than* Christ. From such a position and attitude, we can’t judge others.

D. **Fourth**, our ability to forgive grows as we get to **know Christ better and become more grateful**. Our ability to enjoy forgiveness as a recipient and grantor is directly related to how much we know we have been forgiven and how much we have been loved. Listen to Colossians 3:12-17: *So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell in you, all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. **Colossians 3:12-17***

Notice the connection between forgiveness and being thankful for the grace of God in our lives. Colossians 3:12 says we are “chosen of God, holy and beloved” – which refers to the fact that God had mercy on us and set us apart in His love. It is **because we were chosen by God** when we **didn’t deserve it**, that **we were set apart by Him for His purposes**, that **we are loved by Him**, that we should put on a “*heart of compassion with kindness, gentleness and patience. We are to bear with one another and forgive each other.*”

The kindness and compassion and gentleness we would need in order to forgive someone **is directly related to the way that we remember His love for us.**

VI. Discussion or Homework: Modified “Real Life” Examples

A. Denny and Brenda’s 17 year old son was in a car his friend drove too fast around a corner. The car flipped and crushed them both; they died at the scene. After much heartache and conflict, Brenda left Denny three years later. Now, two years later, he is asking for counseling for depression. He is a believer. **How might Denny’s struggles relate to forgiveness? How would you help?**

B. Terri is 41. She grew up fast in a home with lots of unresolved conflict. She went to church with her family in her early years. But after being sexually abused by an older cousin from age 10-12, and later being pushed into sexual stuff when she was 15 at a friend’s church retreat, Terri grew hard. She dated a fair amount, had a number of sexual partners, was married and quickly divorced. Then at 26, she had a daughter by a man she was dating. He didn’t want to get married. Now her daughter is starting to repeat some of her same behaviors. Terri is anxious about her daughter and asked for counseling help from your church because she heard you help people with counseling issues for free. **Where is forgiveness a possible stumbling block for her? What might she need in the way of help?**

C. Marc is 50. He grew up in a Christian home and went to a Christian school. He went to Bible College for three years, thinking he wanted to be a missionary. His girlfriend with whom he was serious broke up with him at the end of his junior year, right after his dad died. He left school and took a job and helped his mom for three years until she remarried. He took classes on-line and finished his degree at age 29-30. Along the way, he married. They had four kids under 6 at the same time. As he starts talking with you, he says he is there because he can’t figure out how to get his 15 year old son – his youngest – under control. He talks back, doesn’t take his school seriously, is lazy and complains a lot. Marc is fed up with him and admits that he stays angry at his son, and can hardly talk with him. **Where could forgiveness be an issue for him and how could you help him?**

VII. Appendix: Forgiveness Through the Cross (Homework to read through and consider)

When applicable, I recommend you walk through some of these with your counselee to help them better understand God’s perspective on offense and forgiveness.

A. Forgiveness is an Offer for the Gospel to Continue

When we forgive, we are like our Lord. When we forgive, we remove any impediments to another person from having a relationship with us. *Restored relationship* often requires recognition on their part (See Luke 17) and willingness on our part, even if in a guarded way. But forgiveness invites the person to deal directly with God, it invites us to do good to them (Romans 12:20, 21), and it allows people to see their sin and the forgiveness available in Christ. It argues against taking our own vengeance. If the people do not repent and if God considers it to require vengeance, He will repay (Romans 12:19). We need only trust Him and remove our judgment against them.

B. Principles of Forgiveness – It is not overlooking an offense, it is dealing with an offense.

1. All true forgiveness is rooted **not in ignoring**, but in **righteousness and justice**.
 - a. Genesis 3:21
 - b. Exodus 12:7-13
 - c. Leviticus 17:11
 - d. Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24
 - e. John 6:53-56
 - f. Acts 20:28
 - g. Romans 3:25

- h. Romans 5:9
- i. Ephesians 1:7
- j. Ephesians 2:13
- k. Colossians 1:20
- l. Colossians 2:14
- m. Hebrews 9:13-14
- n. Hebrews 9:22
- o. Revelation 19:13

- 2. It is always rooted in being sinned against & God more sinned against (Ps 51:4)
- 3. It's rooted in God's heart and character: mercy triumphs over justice (Js. 2:13)
- 4. It showed up at the beginning of recorded history when God promised a deliverer (Genesis 3:15) and even before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5, 3:11)
- 5. Forgiveness costs the one who gives it (Hebrews 9:22; See also Luke 9:23-24)
We are always **derivative** forgivers – never original. Forgiveness never starts with us. It is merely an extension to another what has been extended to us. (Mk. 11:25)
- 6. Available to everyone but is not experienced by everyone (Luke 23:34)

C. Model of Forgiveness
2 Corinthians 5:21

D. Practice of Forgiveness

- Matthew 6:12, 14-15 (We ask God to forgive us but He won't if we won't)
- Matthew 18:21-35 (Our forgiveness from God is like the man forgiven billions; our not forgiving others is like the same man not forgiving a few thousand).
- Luke 17:1-4 ("If he asks, forgive")
- Romans 12:14, 17-21 (Return blessing & leave room for God's vengeance)

E. Costs of Forgiveness

- 1. Releasing our (*imaginary*) right to judge (Romans 12:19)
- 2. Being willing to let them go free (Jonah 3:10-4:3)
- 3. Letting go of the offense (An application of Galatians 2:20)
- 4. Trusting God to deal with it if they haven't repented (Romans 12:20)