

Our Christian Faith

1 Word
at a
Time

Holy

Yahweh

Hell

Law

Preservation

FORGIVENESS

In order for us sinners to be in heaven with God, clearly something needs to be done about our sin and guilt. There are many different ways that God describes and pictures his solution for our sins—forgiveness being among the most frequent. But while we Christians talk a lot about forgiveness, being forgiven, and forgiving each other, we at the same time sadly harbor so many misperceptions about it.

When it comes to what forgiveness is, think of it as the cancelling of a debt that it is otherwise impossible to repay. This is the picture Jesus himself uses in Matthew 18:(21-35) in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. It begins with a servant being brought in, who owes his master “ten thousand talent,” which is roughly the ancient equivalent of 150,000 years’ wages! Obviously, this servant was in entirely over his head. There was nothing he could possibly do to pay back his debt or make his master change his mind, but in pure pity for his servant’s helpless state, the master decided to absorb the entire sum and bring the account to zero. It goes without saying that master in Jesus’ story is God, and the servant who owes him an incalculable debt is you and me. This simple story of how God forgives us teaches us the most vital facts about forgiveness and exposes where we so often get forgiveness wrong—both as the ones being forgiven and the ones forgiving others.

Let’s start with the source of forgiveness. By nature, when we have been wronged, we assume that if forgiveness is to be had it must start with the other person, with one who has done us wrong. THEY must be sorry and made to suffer as we have. THEY must repay and make right the damage they’ve done. THEY must change how they are treating us and clean up their lives as evidence that they are deserving of forgiveness. But Jesus says that’s all backwards. Expecting the wrongdoer to change and make amends *prior to forgiveness* is not only a not-so-subtle form of revenge, it is like insisting that a person who is hopelessly drowning in debt and has no resources buy us a new car. It cannot happen. In forgiveness, the one who has been wronged holds all the cards because forgiveness cannot be bought or earned or forced. For that reason, forgiveness must begin entirely in the heart of the person who has been wronged.

This is exactly how it was and is with us and God. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God did not wait for them to return to him to ask for forgiveness, much less to clean up their lives. They could do and did none of that! Rather in pity, God sought them. He confronted them in their sin and promised them a Savior.¹ The same is true for all the rest of humanity. Paul writes, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”² God didn’t wait for us to start to sweat, suffer, or come crawling to him on our hands and knees, much less did he wait for us to love him. He just did it. He sent Christ of his own accord and through his sacrifice forgave the sins on the whole world at the cross,³ and through the gospel message he now comes to each of us individually and announces, “Your sins are forgiven!” Again and again, the psalmists plead to the Lord, “Forgive our sins for your name’s sake.”⁴ In other words, forgiveness is not about us, who we are, our sorrow or what we’ve done to make amends, it is about who GOD is, and how infinitely rich he is in mercy that surpasses all our sins.⁵

¹ Read the fall into sin in Genesis 3:1-15.

² Romans 5:8.

³ 1 John 2:2.

⁴ Psalm 25:11; 79:9.

⁵ Romans 5:20-21; Ephesians 2:4; Psalm 86:5,15; 103:8.

This brings us to a second critical point: when forgiveness is granted, it needs to be clearly communicated. We cannot assume that the offender knows we have forgiven them just because they've said they're sorry, or we are treating them kindly again, or because so much time has gone by. None of these tell the offender that their guilt and our right to revenge have been forever cancelled.⁶ Imagine for a moment if the master in Christ's parable, after having confronted his servant with his mountain of debt, would have simply left the room. What might the servant have thought? "Is my master so enraged that he can't even speak to me or bear the sight of me? Is he expecting me to pay him back? Or is he just waiting to get me, that when the right moment comes, he will throw me into jail to be tortured?" Forgiveness needs to be plainly communicated or it does the sinner's conscience no good at all and in fact only leaves them more anxious and full of more questions than before.

Still our human nature might object, "If forgiveness is supposed to start with me, where do I get the strength to do it?" Yes, people can do awful and ungodly things—even those who are supposed to love and protect us. There is abuse and betrayal and abandonment. The hurt and pain may run so deep that we are unable to forget what has happened and as a result bear physical and emotional scars for the rest of our lives. ...Let no one think that forgiveness is the equivalent of saying, "Everything you did to me is OK." Rather forgiveness acknowledges that the perpetrator had no excuse, no good reason to inflict that pain, to cross that line, to say those words, but they did, and now the question is, what's to be done about it? There are three options going forward: 1.) We can hold their sin against them for the rest of their lives, making our own lives full of hatred, anger, and pain in the process. 2.) We can demand that they spend the rest of their days trying to pay us back for something that cannot be reversed and therefore a debt that cannot be repaid. 3.) We can make the choice to cancel their guilt and let them (and us) go, which brings us back to our question: where do we find the strength to let go?

Often people will plead, "If you can find it in your heart to forgive me..." But honestly our hearts don't have what it takes. Our human forgiveness finally hits the immovable bedrock of our selfishness. The only endless well of forgiveness is not in our hearts, but in the heart of God shown to us at the cross, where Jesus was crushed to death beneath the weight of our debt and three days later was risen again to prove that all our guilt is gone. Now God has nothing but forgiveness, love, and freedom for us, and in the freedom of forgiveness we are made new and empowered to change. We'll expound upon that change next time as we consider the word REDEMPTION.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- 1.) Who from your present or your past, needs to know that for Jesus' sake, you have forgiven them today?
- 2.) Why are we so hesitant to tell one another, "I forgive you?" How does God's forgiveness shoot down our excuses?



PRAYER:

Dear heavenly Father, when I find it difficult to forgive those who have sinned against me, bring me to the cross where you have fully and freely forgiven my countless offenses once and for all. Enable me to receive that forgiveness for myself and then apply the riches of your grace to all others who have sinned against me. For your name's sake. Amen.

⁶ This is not to say that sin does not have earthly and material consequences: loss of privileges, fines, jail time, etc.