

Forgiveness

A Series on the Difference Between Grace and Forgiveness: Part 3

The concept of forgiveness took some time to develop. The Mosaic Covenant teaches the nation of Israel what sin is (Rom 7:7) and develops the idea that the process of forgiveness begins with a payment for sin, an act of atonement to appease God's wrath and liberate one from the penalty of sin.

When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness. (Lev 16:20-22)

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.' (Lev 17:11)

Some, who disobeyed God's word, were not forgiven and faced expulsion in recognition that they were not of "God's own possession" and a member of His "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Ex 19:5-8).

But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant. (Gen 17:14)

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. (Ex 12:15)

But the man who is clean and is not on a journey, and yet neglects to observe the Passover, that person shall then be cut off from his people, for he did not present the offering of the Lord at its appointed time. That man will bear his sin. (Num 9:13)

Within the context of the Mosaic Covenant, forgiveness takes on the sense that one must cleanse themselves of the impurity or stain of sin.

"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Cease to do evil,
Learn to do good; Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow."
"Come now, and let us reason together,"
Says the Lord,
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool." (Isa 1:16-18)

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (Isa 6:6-7)

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Because of the nation of Israel's inability to remain loyal to their Mosaic Covenant and cleanse themselves, God made the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-33) and provided His own Son as the means of atonement.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the **throne of grace**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)

Recognizing that God's Son died in atonement for the sins of mankind, in sympathy and identification with human beings, Believers can confidently approach the throne of God, because He was the One who sent the Savior. In full display, the compassion of God can be seen and felt.

Against the background of God's wrath, Jesus asks for forgiveness of those who persecuted and tortured Him.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, **forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.**" And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. (Luke 23:33-34)

It appears that Jesus' plea for forgiveness is not wholly within the context of restoring a divine relationship but with the recognition that people were being deceived and did not know what they were doing nor understood what judgement lay ahead.

While one can understand how divine forgiveness is obtainable, how does all of this affect our understanding of forgiveness between human beings?

1. Faith in Jesus Christ establishes a new perspective and sets forth the goal of helping others receive forgiveness and reconcile with God.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:17-19)

Like His Father, Jesus has the power and authority to forgive.

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home." (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24)

2. With faith, God bestows the Holy Spirit who, as the author of the Bible, provides the means for Believers to know and remember God's words (John 14:26; Acts 1:8).

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom 8:11)

The spirit of God is within you.

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Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. (Phil 1:19)

The spirit of Jesus Christ is within you and is reflected to the world by your life.

3. When Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray with the Lord's Prayer and ask for forgiveness (Matt 6:9-13), He emphasizes the magnitude of God's forgiveness; it is not something one takes for granted. If you comprehend the depth of your personal sins and unworthiness, then you would have a sense of the magnitude of God's forgiveness and love and forgive others.

For if you **forgive** others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also **forgive** you. But if you do not **forgive** others, then your Father will not **forgive** your transgressions. (Matt 6:14-15)

In another instance, in response to Peter's question of forgiveness, Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates this further. The servant who was forgiven of so much, fails to comprehend the magnitude of the king's forgiveness and does not extend the compassion to forgive another who owes him so little.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I **forgive** him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and **forgave** him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 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 also do the same to you, if each of you does not **forgive** his brother from your heart." (Matt 18:21-35)

In a second instance with His disciples, Jesus provides another example to illustrate the attitude of forgiveness towards another person. The disciples find that repeatedly forgiving another is very difficult to do and cry out for "more faith." Using an example of the obedient slave, Jesus makes two points: a) genuine faith "like a mustard seed", the belief in the reality of God and placing their trust in His word, is placing your full trust in God, and b) a bond servant of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 7:22; Eph 6:6) is obedient and can do anything that God wants (1 John 5:13-15).

He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, **forgive** him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven ... (continue)

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(continue)... times, saying, 'I repent,' **forgive** him." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you. Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'?" But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" (Luke 17:1-10)

Jesus is stating that forgiveness, regardless of the severity and number of one's offenses, is a command which should be obeyed. Jesus sets the example with His torturous murder and the plea to His Father, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus sets the example as the suffering servant (Isa 53:5-12) for Believers to follow:

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt 6:24)

So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. (John 12:13-16)

It is the recognition of the magnitude of receiving grace upon grace juxtaposed against the depth of our immoral sinful character that causes us to change our mind and attitude towards others. It is through the prism of a bond servant and love for God and His Son that enables us to overcome the anger, resentment, and vengeance we might have towards another so that we may forgive. Forgiveness is the intentional act of obedience, because we are doing only that which we ought to have done." (Luke 17:10)

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).