

Forgiveness—Cleaning the Books or Healing the Heart?

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Several years ago, because forgiveness was becoming such a relevant, popular topic and an area of sociological research, Christianity Today chose this topic for its featured, cover article. Often we think of the topic of forgiveness merely in religious contexts, but increasingly forgiveness has become a vital topic in the political, social, and secular world.

Look at the many areas of the world where genocide and ethnic cleansing have taken place. Observe how, formerly, the solution was revenge and retribution, whereas now, many cultures and governments are looking for non-violent solutions.

For example, in South Africa, after apartheid ended, rather than merely locking up or executing the perpetrators, the government decided to implement “Truth and Reconciliation” commissions. In these forums, the organizers and perpetrators of apartheid were allowed to publicly confess their crimes. In return, their victims and the victims’ families/friends were allowed to publicly express the pain and suffering they had experienced. At this point the wrong doer was publicly forgiven.

This was all done to avoid further bloodshed and revenge that all observed was an endless cycle which ultimately destroys *both* parties involved.

We see the lack of this approach and understanding at the root of continuing challenges in Iraq, the broader Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, and various places in Africa such as Rwanda and the Sudan. The list seems endless.

Over and over in the Bible, God’s forgiveness toward us is given as a model or template for our forgiveness of others.

Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you. Eph.4:32. (The Message)

Notice how Paul equates the quality and attitude of forgiveness that we are to have with others, with the quality and attitude of forgiveness that God has *already* revealed toward us in Jesus Christ. At times, we feel in our hearts that Jesus is the more forgiving member of the Godhead, while the Father is the more withdrawn -- the less likely or less willing member of the Godhead when it comes to forgiveness. But in this verse Paul clearly states that God is *just as forgiving* as Jesus, and that God is actually the *initiator* of forgiveness as manifested in what He accomplished through His Son Jesus. Jesus told us in Jn.14 that if we’ve seen Him, we’ve seen God the Father. They’re the same when it comes to forgiveness as well as everything else.

Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. Col.3:13. (NLT & NIRV)

The key to which empowers us to forgive others is a heart-felt appreciation for how much God has forgiven us. As we begin to appreciate that forgiveness we receive, we are enabled to extend forgiveness and benevolence toward those who have wronged *us*.

Over and over again Scripture tells us that our responses to God are reactions to His initiative and overtures toward us. *We* don’t start the process, *or* finish it.

*This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that **he loved us (first)** and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. 1 Jn.4:10. (NLT)*

Our love is responsive. God's love reveals Him as the initiator and is proactive.

Freely you have received, freely give. Matt.10:8. (NIV)

As we receive, we are empowered to give. God gave before we ever gave. He is always ahead of us in giving, loving, and forgiving.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. 1 Jn.4:11. (KJV)

Here, the beloved apostle John tells us that the power we may have to love or forgive others is relevant to our understanding and appreciation of God's own love and forgiveness toward *us* before we ever loved Him or asked Him to forgive us.

It is so vital to remember that God's forgiveness is not a *change* in God's attitude or thoughts or feelings toward us. The verses we just read reiterate how it is the initiative of love and forgiveness and pursuit on God's part toward us, which results in our response of love, repentance, and confession toward Him.

Forgiveness does not begin in the heart of God when we confess and repent. Forgiveness *already exists* in God's heart *before* we ever make any movement in His direction. When we acknowledge our failures through confession and a genuine desire for change, it is then that we can appreciate and sense the love and forgiveness from God toward us *that was always there long before we were ever aware of it.*

Forgiveness is not a merely a bookkeeping activity that God undertakes in heaven when we confess. So often we portray, pictorially, the idea that with forgiveness we say we're sorry, and then God takes a giant heavenly eraser and removes the record of our sin from the heavenly recording system.

God's goal for you and me is not clean books in heaven, but clean *hearts* here on earth. Forgiveness is not so much about changing things in heaven, but changing things *here*. The change is not first in God's heart, or His personal "books", but in *our* hearts and minds, which he then can justly record in His public book of record for all to see.

This is why to see forgiveness as God beginning a process of healing, is so much closer to reality than any picture of leather-bound heavenly books and erasers. Jesus shed His blood, not to make God willing to forgive us or enable Him to forgive us, *but to make us willing and able to receive* the forgiveness and the healing that the cross revealed was *always* in God's heart, and thus justify God's fairness in exercising His forgiveness and cleansing power.

If we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away. 1Jn.1:9. (CEV)

Notice that John doesn't want us to have any concern or fear whatsoever about the forgiveness in God's heart for us. We can be 100% sure that God will relate to us with forgiveness and mercy even when we don't deserve it. John goes on to say that above and beyond God's loving and forgiving attitude toward us, God wants to actually *heal* us from the sin itself and from its consequences. God wants to actually *take the sin away*.

We must remember that when we say God is "taking sin away", it means God wants to change our minds and hearts. Sin resides in our minds, in our brains. Sin lives in our thought patterns and emotional make-up. It is not some abstract object that God can just take away in some magical sense, but it is a psychological entity for which God wants to give us spiritual therapy.

That's why one of the best modern paraphrases for the Biblical term "high priest" is "Divine Psychiatrist". We have all been "messed up" to one degree or another by sin, and that "messing up" starts in our mental/emotional psyche.

... *the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.* Is.1:5. (NKJV)

Isaiah is telling us that sin has caused us to be, in a sense, sick in the head and sick in the heart. We have been intellectually and emotionally damaged by sin. By what we've done to ourselves, what others have done to us, and the guilt from what we've done. All of this has led to psychological and emotional damage.

God wants to give us rest and healing and restoration from all this damage. Listen to what Jesus offers us as treatment for the damage that Satan has done to us through sin:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. Matt.11:28-30. (The Message)

If that doesn't sound attractive then I don't know what does. It's almost as if God is offering us an extended trip to a beautiful spa—except it's a spa for the soul and mind.

Another way to think about forgiveness as healing instead of bookkeeping is to suppose you're an alcoholic. While it would be good news that you are forgiven, wouldn't you also want to know that you are *freed* from the alcoholism? If you're struggling with some other sin like lust or laziness, is it really good news to have someone tell you that you're forgiven, but you'll still be weak and struggle with lust and laziness? There would be no freedom or victory in your future from those things. That would be terrible news.

We have a God who is not only forgiveness personified, but also follows along with healing and restoration.

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. Heb.12:1. (NLT)

One thing important to remember about forgiveness is that when we are unable to forgive others, there is as much, or more, damage to *us* as there is to the offender. Even when we have been wronged—to harbor enmity, revenge, animosity, and hatred for another, sadly, works like a cancer or infection within us, often doing more damage than the original wrong that we may have suffered. That is why it is so important to have the right understanding of God's forgiveness. It is only then that we are enabled to change into His likeness—by beholding the forgiveness *He* had for us, long before we ever deserved it. Look at God's attitude toward us before we responded to Him, in Rom. 5:6-10:

*Christ died for us at a time **when we were helpless and sinful.** And God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, **even though we were sinful.** **Even when we were God's enemies,** he made peace with us, because his Son died for us. Yet something even greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by his Son's life.* (CEV)

Notice how it says that when *we were relating to God as our enemy*, when *we were helpless and sinful*—that is when God took the initiative, and as the Divine Physician, made a “house call” to our planet to save and heal and restore us.

So if *God* took the initiative with us, when we were relating to Him as our enemy, shouldn't that lead *us* to take the initiative with others, even when they are relating to us with enmity and hostility? Forgiveness is truly a high calling, but one in which God Himself has

led the way. He will accompany us onward, hand in hand, as we relate to others in the way He has related to us.

David learned this same principle. In Psalm 73, David tells us that resentment lead to foolishness in his own experience:

When my thoughts were bitter and my feelings were hurt, I was as stupid as an animal. Ps. 73:21-22. (NCV paraphrase)

It's true. Bitterness and cherished hurt feelings often lead us to act like animals. Just look at the Middle East and you can see the results of bitterness and anger. I was encouraged recently when I read the story about a Palestinian family whose twelve-year-old son was accidentally killed in a military skirmish. The parents donated all of the child's organs for transplantation into Israeli patients in need. The article also pointed out that in the recent past, Israeli families have donated organs of their fallen family members to Palestinian patients who needed transplants as well. I wish stories similar to this were in America's headlines and on the Arab television stations. I believe if we more frequently saw forgiveness in action similar to these stories, we would change the way we treat each other.

The Palestinian and Israeli families stated that they had based their decisions on the hope that the organ donations would be a gesture and symbol of good will between their two peoples. And this, in turn would lead to peace, order, and friendship among them. *What an awesome goal!*

One of the places that we so often have trouble forgiving seventy times seven times is in our families. Many marriages spend much of their time in frustration, resentment and anger because of an inability or refusal to forgive. When a problem needs to be discussed, each party usually looks to the other to take the initiative. Husbands ought to take the initiative in making their marriages successful. If there is a problem, let us, as "head of the household", take the initiative in establishing and maintaining harmony in our homes by forgiving first, even if we think we're in the right—even if we are right!

Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives, treat them with respect, and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. 1Pet.3:7 (NIV)

The apostle Peter encourages us as husbands to be "considerate, respectful, and gracious." Notice, Peter links how we treat our wives with the effectiveness of our prayers. If we are not happy with the results of our prayer life, perhaps we should consider treating our wives more considerately, more respectfully, and more graciously.

It's just as important to understand what forgiveness is *not*. Please do not think that your love and forgiveness toward another makes you their doormat, or leads you to "co-dependency" with them. These things that forgiveness is NOT apply to *us* as well as to God.

Forgiveness is *not* FORGETTING. Deep hurts are not removed from one's awareness or memory banks just by relating and treating the offender with love and forgiveness. The pain and heartache are still there and must be dealt with over time.

Forgiveness is *not* CONDONING. Forgiveness does not excuse bad and hurtful behavior nor should it encourage them to continue. Just as with a child who has wronged us, we assure them of our forgiveness, yet encourage and expect them to make better decisions in the future.

Forgiveness is *not* DISMISSING. Forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously and not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant.

Forgiveness is *not* PARDONING. Pardon releases the offender from the consequences of their actions. Unfortunately, many times, the consequences of one's actions are already

set in motion and cannot be easily turned back. I know we've all wished we could catch some of the words after they've left our mouths. While we're forgiven for what we've said, those words and actions still have their natural effects and results.

Remember, forgiveness is a personal action that releases the one offended from the offense. Don't deny the feelings of hurt, anger, or shame that you may feel when you've been wronged. Acknowledge these feelings and commit, with the grace of God, to do something about them. Notice how honest and open David was with his feelings in the Psalms. God already knows how we really feel in our hearts, and He still loves us. So, for your own benefit, tell God how you actually feel, not how you *think* He wants you to feel. He won't love you any less.

Remember the paradox of forgiveness. As you let go and forgive the offender, you are experiencing release, healing and restoration—whether the offender accepts, appreciates or is aware of your forgiveness.

Finally, remember that God loves you whether you are the victim or the offender. He has extended His forgiveness to you in order that full mental and emotional healing will be yours. Absolutely nothing will ever change His love for you.