

Toward Understanding Forgiveness

Introduction:

Someone once said, “Nearly all the personal problems that drive people to seek pastoral counsel are related in some way to the issue of forgiveness. Some need to understand how God’s forgiveness is extended to sinners, and there are others who need to learn to be forgiving.”

While this certainly seems accurate, there is a great deal of confusion as well as just plain bad teaching about forgiveness. This series of lessons is designed to bring clarity to our thinking on this topic with the goal that God will be glorified as we better understand, experience, and practice forgiveness.

The three best resources currently available on the topic of forgiveness are: *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns (2008); *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* by John MacArthur (1998); and *From Forgiven to Forgiving* by Jay E. Adams (1989)

Part 1—The forgiving God

The God who forgives

- 1) The **revelation** of forgiveness
 - a) This truth is not found in *general* revelation.
 - b) This truth is found only in *special* revelation contained in the Bible.

- 2) The **Person(s)** who forgive
 - a) Unspecified—Daniel 9:9, 19; Amos 7:2
 - b) God the Father—Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 11:4; 23:34; Acts 5:31; Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:14; 2:13; 1st John 1:9
 - c) God the Son—Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26; 7:47-50; Colossians 3:13; James 5:15?
 - d) God the Spirit—is never recorded in Scripture as forgiving

- 3) The **meaning** of forgiveness
 - a) Lexically
 - i) Old Testament
 - (1) Cover—*kasah* [# 3680]—Nehemiah 4:5; Psalm 32:1; 85:2; Proverbs 10:12
 - (2) Provide atonement—*kaphar* [# 3722]—Deuteronomy 21:8-9; Psalm 78:38
 - (3) Blot out—*machah* [# 4229]—Nehemiah 4:5
 - (4) Take away—*nasa'* [# 5375]—Genesis 50:17; Psalm 99:8
 - (5) Pardon—*salach* [# 5545]—Numbers 30:5; Psalm 25:11
 - Always used of God forgiving people, but never of people forgiving
 - (a) Ready to forgive—*sallach* [# 5546a]—Psalm 86:5
 - (b) Forgiveness—*selichah* [# 5347]—Nehemiah 9:17
 - ii) New Testament
 - (1) Forgive, dismiss, set free—*apoluo* [# 630]—Luke 6:37
 - (a) Pictured in Pilate’s release of Barabbas at Passover (cf. Matthew 27:15-26)
 - (2) Forgive, release, cancel—*aphiemi* [# 863]—Matthew 6:12, 14; 9:2, 5-6; 12:31-32; 18:21, 27, 32, 35; 1st John 1:9

- (a) Forgiveness, remission—*aphesis* [# 859]—Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; 3:29; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 4:18; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 9:22; 10:18
- (3) Forgive, deal graciously with—*charizomai* [# 5483]—2nd Corinthians 2:7, 10
- b) Theologically: “A commitment by the one true God to pardon graciously those who repent and believe so that they are reconciled to him, although this commitment does not eliminate all consequences.” (Brauns, 51)
 - i) God’s forgiveness is gracious but not free.
 - ii) God’s forgiveness is conditional. Only those who repent and believe are saved.
 - iii) God’s forgiveness is a commitment.
 - iv) God’s forgiveness lays the groundwork for and begins the process of reconciliation.
 - v) God’s forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.
- 4) The **ground/basis** of forgiveness
 - a) God’s character—Exodus 34:6-9
 - i) God’s compassion [*racham*]—Psalm 78:38; Daniel 9:9
 - ii) God’s grace [*chanan*]—
 - iii) God’s slowness to anger—
 - iv) God’s abundant loyal love [*chesed*]—Psalm 86:5b
 - v) God’s truth/faithfulness [*emeth*]—
 - vi) God’s goodness [*tob*]—Psalm 86:5a
 - b) God’s gifts exercised
 - i) Repentance—Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 26:18
 - ii) Trust—Acts 10:43; 13:38
- 5) The **process** of forgiveness
 - a) A sin is committed
 - i) Not just a matter of having our likes or preferences unmet
 - ii) A violation of God’s standards, resulting in genuine guilt
 - b) Repentance
 - i) Acknowledging that what God says about my sinful behavior is accurate and just—Psalm 32:5; Jeremiah 14:20; 1st John 1:9
 - ii) Confessing—Psalm 32:5
 - (1) To God
 - (2) To those against whom I have sinned
 - c) Forgiveness is granted
 - i) See above.
 - d) Choosing not to remember
 - Forgetting is generally passive while choosing not to remember is active
 - i) Old Testament—Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34
 - ii) New Testament—Hebrews 8:12; 10:17
- 6) The **purpose** of forgiveness
 - a) Immediately
 - i) Removal of sin’s guilt
 - ii) Release from sin’s penalty
 - iii) Restoration of broken relationship

- b) Ultimately
 - i) Stated as a request—Psalm 25:11; 79:9; Daniel 9:19
 - ii) Stated as completed action
 - (1) Awe/fear of God—Psalm 130:3-4
 - (2) God's glory—Isaiah 43:25; 1st John 2:12
- 7) The **results** of forgiveness
 - a) At salvation
 - i) Justification—Acts 13:38; Romans 3:24; 4:5; 5:1; 1st Corinthians 6:11
 - ii) Redemption—Romans 3:24; 1st Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14
 - iii) Reconciliation—Romans 5:10-11; 2nd Corinthians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:20-21
 - iv) Made heirs/Adoption—Acts 26:18; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5
 - b) In sanctification
 - i) Forgiveness and cleansing—1st John 1:9

The God who does NOT forgive

- 1) Stated: Joshua 24:19; 2nd Kings 24:4; Isaiah 22:14; Jeremiah 14:10
- 2) Requested: Nehemiah 4:5; Isaiah 2:9; Jeremiah 18:23
- 3) Ramifications
 - a) Should we ask God not to forgive certain people today?
 - b) Does God forgive everyone?
- 4) Exception—the unpardonable sin
 - a) Referred to in: Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10
 - b) Seems to be the sin of the Jewish leaders in their rejection of the Messiah

Why God's forgiveness is the standard by which our forgiveness must be measured

- 1) Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13

Is it right for God to forgive people who are undeniably guilty?

- 1) Romans 3:25-26

Did Old Testament sacrifices result in true forgiveness?

- 1) Yes: Leviticus 4:26, 31, 35; Psalm 32:1-2; 51:9; 103:12; Isaiah 38:17; Micah 7:19
- 2) No: Hebrews 10:4, 11

Part 2—The ones who are forgiven by God

VERTICAL forgiveness

- 1) We need to be forgiven by God
 - a) At **salvation**
 - i) What takes place when God forgives sinners?
 - (1) See above
 - ii) Can one be sure God has forgiven them?
 - (1) Ultimately this is the work of the Holy Spirit—Romans 8:16

- (2) Eternal security is something that exists because of the gracious work of God in the lives of His children. True believers are secure for all of eternity. However, some people may begin to question if it is true.
 - (3) Assurance is both objective and subjective.
 - (a) It is **objective** in the fact that we can look at the absolute truth of God's Word and be assured we are His children (Romans 8:38-39; Hebrews 13:5; 2nd Corinthians 13:5).
 - (b) It is **subjective** in that we can lose our assurance based upon how we live or think as believers (2nd Peter 1:5-10; Romans 15:4; 1st John).
 - (4) There are three resources that God has graciously granted to us to help with assurance of salvation: His Word (1st John), His Spirit (Romans 8:15), and the walk of the child of God (no believer who is deliberately walking in disobedience should expect to have assurance of salvation).
 - (5) The book of 1st John was written to help us know that we are God's children—1st John 5:13
 - What are some evidences of salvation to encourage people to look for in their lives?
 - (a) Consistent obedience to God's word—1st John 2:3-6; 4:6
 - (i) Doing what pleases God on a consistent basis—1st John 2:28-3:3
 - (b) Being loving toward Christians—1st John 3:14-18; 4:7-21; 5:1-3
 - (c) Being aware of the ministry of the Holy Spirit—1st John 3:19-24
 - (i) Assurance before God
 - (ii) Confidence in prayer
 - (6) Do not give someone a false sense of assurance. Don't tell them that just because they went forward, prayed a prayer, etc. that they are saved.
 - (a) There are those who claim to be believers who are not genuinely saved.
 - (b) There are those who claimed to have believed but were confronted by Jesus with the proof that they were not (John 8:30-59).
- b) In **sanctification**
- i) What takes place when God forgives His children who sin?
 - (1) See above.
 - (2) See 1st John 1:9
- 2) Do we ever need to forgive God? Can we? Should we?
 - a) No, no, and no.

HORIZONTAL forgiveness

- 1) The meaning of forgiveness by the forgiven
 - a) Forgiveness is: "*A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.*" (Brauns, 55)
- 2) Forgiving of others
 - a) If they repent and confess
 - i) Matthew 18:15-35
 - ii) Luke 17:1-10
 - iii) 2nd Corinthians 2:5-11
 - b) If they don't repent and confess
 - i) Seek grace to practice Proverbs 10:12; 12:16; 17:9

- ii) See grace to follow the pattern of Matthew 18:15-20
 - iii) Remember that forgiveness cannot be granted to the unrepentant
 - iv) Be alert to the dangers of bitterness toward the unrepentant
 - c) What if I can't stop thinking about it? What if I can't forget about it?
- 3) Forgiven by others
- a) What if someone falsely claims that I have sinned?
 - b) Why saying "I'm sorry" is not enough
 - c) Why mere apologies are not enough
 - d) Why confession of sin is crucial
 - e) What if someone I have sinned against will not forgive me after I confessed my sin?

Why our forgiveness is the standard by which God forgives us

- 1) Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:23-35

Part 3—Practical applications of the theology of forgiveness

- 1) Can we forgive the dead? Can the dead be forgiven?
- 2) Should we forgive ourselves?
- 3) What about the Judgment (Bema) Seat of Christ? Will all my sins be dragged back out in front of everyone?
- a) "There is the matter of the Christian's final judgment of his works and his unconfessed sin. The doctrines of justification, the final perseverance of the saints and the eternal security of the believer, among others things, preclude the eternal perdition of a truly saved person. All sin, past, present, and future, is forgiven and expiated at saving faith. But, only God in Christ can untangle all of the intertwining factors of one's life and works. Only He can truly assess the long range effects of both sinful and righteous acts. Only He can comprehend the big picture and reward that which is truly rewardable and withhold reward from that which is not rewardable. It is not necessarily the case that one sin or scandal completely wipes out all reward for a past life of service, witness, teaching or preaching. The living God will be absolutely fair and equitable in the distribution of rewards at the judgment seat." (McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:417)