

Forgiveness and Repentance

Part 4

Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?

With Study Questions

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3/14/2009*

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Psalm 103:11-14

For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father pities *his* children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him. ¹⁴ For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:11-14).

Preface – Categorical Distinctions

I recently heard an atheist on a popular radio show argue how fruitless it would be for the Christian faith to win over the souls of those committed to Islam. He argued that there is no benefit in replacing one vicious deity with another vicious deity. He began quoting the twenty-first chapter of Judges in support of his argument. This passage of Scripture, according to this man, was an account of God commanding the Israelites to molest women.

It today's popular and aggressive new atheism, it is common for people to learn just enough of the Bible to make public declarations regarding how awful the teachings in it are. These declarations are generally based upon a misunderstanding (perhaps willful) of the context of the passages quoted.

What this accusing man failed to recognize is that the record in Judges is not an account of what God had commanded, but rather what the Israelites had sinfully decided to do of their own accord – as is evidenced by the final verse in the chapter – a verse repeatedly given in Scripture as a testimony to man's indifference to the commands of God – a verse that described the atheist's own convictions all too well; the verse reads:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25)

I begin with this to highlight the necessity of contextual and categorical distinctions we must make, not only in our study of the Scriptures, but in life. That something is recorded in the Bible does not mean that it is a record of something of which God approves. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas is in the Bible; that doesn't mean God approved of it.

These types of categorical or contextual distinctions are critical when it comes to this morning's first topic: Is There a Difference Between Forgiving and Forgetting?

Review

In our series on forgiveness and repentance, we defined forgiveness as a decision on the part of the offended person to "send away" the debt of the offending person – to acquit or pardon others the way we, as Christians, have been acquitted by God. Whatever ailments may accompany the issue of forgiveness by the offended party or the offending party, the unwillingness to make a commitment to forgive stalls and corrupts everything; in addition, and more importantly, it is dishonoring to God.

We then pursued understanding why it is so difficult to forgive others. The bottom line of this difficulty is an unawareness or ignorance of the incalculable abyss of our own sin before God – the immense unpayable debt we all owe – as we discussed in the parable of the unmerciful servant, "ALL THAT DEBT!"

We then sought to answer the question 'should we always forgive, even if there is no repentance?' If we're going to forgive as we have been forgiven, there must be repentance on the part of the offender; if there is no repentance, we misrepresent forgiveness. But that is not to say that we are to remain inactive in the life of the offender. We are to love, pray and minister to the very person who offended us, in hopes that "**God perhaps will grant them repentance**" (2 Timothy 2:25).

Those were the first three issues in the series. The remaining three topics are:

4. Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?

5. What is repentance? What does it look like?

6. If there is no repentance on the part of the offender (and even if there is) how do we spiritually, emotionally, psychologically or functionally deal with the wound? How do we reconcile forgiveness as a necessary virtue to salvation?

This morning we look at question four.

Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?

Forgiving and Forgetting

Does forgiving mean forgetting? Like so many things, it all depends on the context or category of the statement. Consider God's forgiveness of our sins:

I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins (Isaiah 43:25).

Yet, at the same time we read this reminder from Moses:

Remember! Do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD (Deuteronomy 9:7).

In 1 Corinthians 13:5 we read that love "**does not take into account a wrong suffered**" yet an account of man's past behavior becomes a necessary determining factor as to whether or not he should be an elder or deacon (1 Timothy 3:1-13). So, as we seek to imitate the way we've been forgiven by God, in one sense we are to forget and in another sense we are to remember.

This question often surfaces when it comes to people who have been repeatedly taken advantage of by another person. You may lend some money to a brother who fails to pay you back, or allow someone use of your property, or let them babysit your children only to find they've been untrustworthy. When this person comes to borrow more money or ask for use of those things again and you say 'no, you're not really trustworthy,'

he may respond by accusing you of being unforgiving. Is that a legitimate accusation?

I would say that is not a legitimate accusation any more than it would be legitimate for a candidate for a church office to accuse a church of being unforgiving because, upon observation, he has not lived up to the standards required for that responsibility.

One example of how necessary it is to get these distinctions worked out surfaces with Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. Jesus teaches that unfaithfulness is just cause for divorce (Matthew 5:32), yet in the same sermon teaches that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven (Matthew 6:14).

So when Jesus tells the offended spouse they may divorce, He is not at the same time allowing them to withhold forgiveness. In other words, the offended spouse, in this case, can both forgive and divorce their unfaithful partner. A person, who has been in prison for theft, can and should be forgiven if they repent; that does not mean they should be put on the trustee board to oversee the church's bank account.

Making Distinctions

So how do we make these distinctions? How do I know if my responsibility to remember is somehow invading my responsibility to forget? How do I know if, when I say "**remember**" I am not taking rank with the devil who is the "**accuser**" (**Revelation 12:10**)?

Since outwardly, bringing up another persons' past for the right reasons or wrong reasons may look exactly the same, it gets down to why you're saying 'remember.' Are we saying "remember" to vent and condemn or to be wise and cautious – wisdom and caution being in the best interests of all?

We tell the candidate for a church office to remember so he will understand how it may not be in the best interests of the church or him for him to hold this office – since Paul warns of the propensity for elders to be "**puffed up**" or "**fall into reproach and the snare of the devil**" (**1 Timothy 3:6, 7**).

In other words, it's not good for anybody (the offender or offended or future offended) if we forget. To continue to use the mundane example, when you lend an irresponsible person money, not only are you being foolish with the finances for which God holds you responsible, you are

putting the other person in a position where they are tempted to fail and fall into sin yet again.

Perhaps you can see the subtle (at least from an observer's standpoint) yet monumental distinction. If I am reminding someone of their past failures in an effort to keep these things from happening again (which is in the best interests of all) then I am remembering in a virtuous manner. If I am reminding someone of their past failures to somehow discharge pent-up emotions or anger then I clearly have failed at sending the past sin away.

So the answer to this morning's first question is 'yes and no'. Forgiving does not mean forgetting if it means allowing an environment where the offense can easily continue. Forgiving does mean forgetting what happened in the context of seeking to punish the offender for their past sins.

It is here that we must make an important distinction between civil punishments for sins which are crimes, which the civil magistrate is called to enact (Romans 13:4). It is precisely here that **"an eye for an eye"** is not contrary to **"turning the other cheek"** (Matthew 5:38, 39). Here is yet another passage the world loves to display in some sort of tortured, serpentine manner – as if Jesus is contradicting His own law.

"An eye for an eye" is the responsibility of the civil magistrate, **"turning the other cheek"** is Jesus' call to exercise love, forbearance and a charitable disposition toward evil people. This has serious application to our next question – "What is repentance, what does it look like?"

God Remembers/Forgets

In order for this message to extend beyond our horizontal relationships with others, let us be reminded of the love and wisdom of God in His remembering and forgetting of our own sin and weakness. Notice how the word of God, which we normally and rightfully associate with the Scriptures, transitions into the personal pronoun *autou* 'him'.

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. ¹³ And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to

the eyes of Him to whom we *must give account* (Hebrews 4:12, 13).

This is almost exactly what Jesus says of Himself in His letter to the church at Thyatira, saying “...and all the churches shall know that I am **He who searches the minds and hearts (Revelation 2:23)**. Jesus, as the Master Sanctifier knows our every weakness, our every sin. And He is determined by Word, Spirit and all of providence to conform us into His very image (Romans 8:29).

God is aware of our sins the way a general is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of his soldiers as they relate to the enemy. He is aware of our sins the way a coach is aware of the shortcomings of his athletes. He is aware of our sins the way a good father is aware of the sins and failings of their own children. For this reason the author of Hebrews writes,

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸ But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹ Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected *us*, and we paid *them* respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they indeed for a few days chastened *us* as seemed *best* to them, but He for *our* profit, that *we* may be partakers of His holiness. ¹¹ Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:7-11).

The general, coach, father may hold the soldier, athlete or child as their own with the inseparable bonds of love and commitment. But the loving leader is never satisfied to leave the ones he loves in their current estate. A sign that we are God's own is the uncomfortable chastening which does not seem joyful, but painful.

But it is toward the holy end of our knowing the “**peaceable fruit of righteousness**” that this painful chastening comes. Of this Calvin wrote:

And by the *fruit of righteousness* he means the fear of the Lord and a godly and holy life, of which the cross is the

teacher. He calls it *peaceable*, because in adversities we are alarmed and disquieted, being tempted by impatience, which is always noisy and restless; but being chastened, we acknowledge with a resigned mind how profitable did that become to us which before seemed bitter and grievous.¹

The Christian should never view their trials with the despair of the unbeliever – knowing that in these trials, no matter how painful they may seem, God is refining our hearts. It is not without reason that James writes,

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2-4).

The faithful Christian is not to have a grin and bear it attitude in their affliction as if it is all toward no good end. Even in our tears there is the joy of knowing that God is producing virtue in our hearts, **“patience” that we “may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.** What Paul teaches amounts to the same:

And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope.⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:3-5).

We are to, in this context, praise God that He remembers our sins, and, as our loving Father, with all of creation at His disposal, orders all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11) to the effect in us patience, perfection, completions, perseverance, character and a hope which does not disappoint **“because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5).**

Not only do we praise God for remembering, **“we count it all joy”** and **“glory in”** tribulations and trials in which God, as the Master Teacher, refines us.

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Hebrews* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Heb 12:11). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Yet there is one more thing God remembers about which yields the greatest consolation, He remembers that we are dust.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; ¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father pities *his* children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him. ¹⁴ For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:11-14).

Because remembers, and never forgets, just how sinful we are, He has committed by the blood of His own Son, Jesus, to forget our sins and remove them as far as the east is from the west. All these distinctions are of great value to understand as we seek to wrestle through the trials of life. But let us never forget the answer is found in a Person – a Person who is both God and Man – a Person who suffered like no other and who rose victorious over death and all its defeat.

It is the person of Christ who must be presented as the answer to all our woes and the remedy to the calamity of sin which would otherwise cast us into despair, death and hell itself. And it is this person who should consume our thoughts as we prepare for the Table designed to bring our remembrance to Him and His sacrifice for us.

Questions for Study

1. Why is it important to make categorical or contextual distinctions when reading the Bible (pages 2, 3)?
2. Review and discuss the first three points in the series of forgiveness and repentance (page 3)?
3. How is remembering a person's sins a good and necessary thing (pages 4, 5)?
4. How would you respond if you pointed out someone's past failing and they accused you of failing to forgive (pages 4, 5)?
5. In what context is it either good or bad to remember someone's sins (page 6)?
6. Why is it valuable for God to remember our sins (pages 6, 7)?
7. How should this affect our response to trials and tribulation (pages 7, 8)?
8. In what context does God forget our sins? What has Jesus provided to help us remember that God forgets our sins (page 9)?