

Gospel-Centered Forgiveness Part Two

In this message I hope to show what forgiveness from the heart is and is not. If bitterness is poison to the soul then the healing power of the gospel applied in forgiveness is the antidote.
Key words: bitterness, forgiveness, reconciliation, peacemaking
Scripture: Matt. 6:7-14; Matt. 18:21-35; Lk. 17:3-4

Introduction: Forgiveness is Good Medicine

A. Studies are showing forgiveness is not only good theology, but good medicine as well.

1. According to the latest medical and psychological research, forgiving is good for our souls—and our bodies.

2. People who forgive:

- a. benefit from better immune functioning and lower blood pressure.
- b. have better mental health than people who do not forgive.
- c. feel better physically.
- d. have lower amounts of anger and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- e. maintain more satisfying and long-lasting relationships

3. Self-Confrontation, In Depth Manual for Discipleship...notes that the result of focusing on self (victim orientation) in your thought life results in bitterness-i.e....

- a. leads to unbiblical speech and actions but also to possible bodily damage such as:
 - b. Heart problems, colitis, migraines, high blood pressure, cramps, ulcers, insomnia, stomach disorders, etc..

“When we allow ourselves to feel like victims or sit around dreaming up how to retaliate against people who have hurt us, these thought patterns take a toll on our minds and bodies,” says Michael McCullough, director of research for the National Institute for Healthcare Research and a co-author of *To Forgive is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (IVP, 1997).

B. The Necessity of Forgiveness (Matt. 6:9-15)

1. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15 ESV)

2. An unwillingness to forgive is an indication of bitterness, the seeking of vengeance and a hardening of the heart. Jesus uses these strong words to help us examine the condition of our hearts and the state of the faith we say we have.

I. What Forgiveness is Not (or looking for loopholes)

A. Peter Looks for a Loophole

1. Matt. 18:21-35 is the best treatment in the Bible of what it means to be willing to forgive from the heart.
2. The context indicates that Peter, like us, was looking for loopholes.
3. Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22 ESV)

B. Common Reasons to Withhold Forgiveness from the Heart (credit Macdonald's seminar)

1. It's too big a deal to forgive.
 - a. What is more apt to ruin your life, the small stuff or the big stuff?
 - b. The other problem is that people can have an odd sense of proportionality.
2. I have to learn to forget, then forgive.
 - a. This is called "cherishing the hurt."
 - b. To cherish means to "to hold or treat as dear; feel love for or nurture."
 - c. Every time you choose to dwell on the offense and hurt you obviously are not going to forget about it.
 - (1) You will not forget, until you learn to forgive. When you forgive it, you release it and then in time, you will begin to forget.
3. Time will heal the pain. I don't have to forgive.
 - a. Assuming time will take care of it is avoidance.

b. It's assuming the magic formula is time but it's just an excuse to bear a grudge.

c. Time without forgiveness heals nothing, it's just another way to cherish the sin of bitterness in your heart.

4. I'll forgive when they say they are sorry."

a. In Luke Chapter 17:3-10 there is a passage that parallels Matt. 18:21-35 on forgiveness.

(1) Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4 ESV)

(2) At first glance, it appears that granting forgiveness is conditioned on the person actually asking for it first.

b. The argument goes something like this:

(1) "God forgives us when we ask for forgiveness and repent of our sin."

(2) In other words, God's forgiveness is conditional in some sense and not unilaterally applied to everyone whether they ask for it or not.

(3) God does not forgive everyone, everywhere for all their sins- only those who trust in Christ and His finished work of the Cross are forgiven.

(4) I think the confusion is from equating forgiveness and reconciliation.

"The question might be asked, "But in the process of bringing about forgiveness and reconciliation, does the entire obligation rest upon the person who has been sinned against? Does not the offender also have an obligation?" The answer is, "Indeed, he does." He must repent and with the message of this repentance he must gladden the heart of the one whom he has injured (Luke 17:3, 4). But this does not remove the latter's obligation to do all in his power to open wide the gate toward reconciliation. If in that case there is no co-operation from the other side, the blame will rest not on the offended person but on the offender, who originally inflicted the injury.¹ Hendriksen-Kistemaker

(5) So, in a best case scenario, people admit their sins and pursue forgiveness with the appropriate parties-this in turn sets the stage for real reconciliation and fellowship.

c. What is “conditional” about Luke 17:3-10. I think it is this.

(1) Matt. 18:21-35 teaches forgiveness from the heart and unless the “victim” is willing to forgive from the heart then Luke 17:3-10 does not matter much because no reconciliation would even be possible even if the perpetrator asked for forgiveness because the victim would have a hard heart anyway.

(2) In other words Matt 18:21-35 has to come first in order for Luke 17:3-10 to even have an opportunity.

5. “If I forgive they’ll just do it again.”

a. This is the “I don’t want to take any risks” loophole.

b. Keep in mind that trust and forgiveness are two different things.

C. What Forgiveness is not.

1. Forgiveness is not enabling (1 Cor. 13:6)

2. Forgiveness is not rescuing foolishness. (Pro. 9:9)

3. Forgiveness is not giving blind trust.

D. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring other biblical responsibilities or principles.

II. Biblical Examples of Forgiveness from the Heart

A. Esau and Jacob (Gen. 33:4-11)

B. Joseph (Gen 45:8-15)

C. Stephen (Acts 7:59-60)

D. Paul (2 Tim. 4:16)

E. Jesus (Luke 23:34)

III. What is Forgiveness from the Heart (Matt. 18:21-35)

A. Forgiveness is a matter of the heart, not calculation. (Matt.18:21-22)

1. Avoids bearing a grudge or accumulating offenses
2. Does not discount other biblical principles.

B. The kingdom of heaven is like...(Matt. 18:23-27)

1. The kingdom is all about grace and mercy to those who do not deserve either.
2. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Col. 2:13-14, ESV)

C. What not to do (Matt. 18:28-30)

1. The first servant received grace and mercy.
2. He then doled out the law to collect the debt (with anger/bitterness).

D. One chooses to forgive on the basis of what one has been forgiven. (Matt.18:31-34)

1. Unforgiveness is wicked, evil.
2. We have been forgiven much; we are too forgive much.

E. Taking Jesus's teaching seriously (Matt.18:35)

1. Similarity to Matt. 6:12-15
2. God does not cancel justification, but does expect repentance.

This is not to suggest that God will withdraw justification from those who have already received the free pardon He extends to all believers. Forgiveness in that sense—a permanent and complete acquittal from the guilt and ultimate penalty of sin—belongs to all who are in Christ (cf. John 5:24; Rom. 8:1; Eph. 1:7). Yet, Scripture also teaches that God chastens His children who disobey (Heb. 12:5–7). Believers are to confess their sins in order to obtain a day-to-day cleansing (1 John 1:9). This sort of forgiveness is a simple washing from the worldly defilements of sin; not a repeat of the wholesale cleansing from sin's corruption that comes with justification. It is like a washing of the feet rather than a bath (cf. John 13:10). Forgiveness in this latter sense is what God threatens to withhold from Christians who refuse to forgive others

3. A Word of Caution

III. How To Forgive From the Heart

A. The Basic Definition

1. “Forgiveness is a lifting of the charge of guilt from another, a formal declaration of that fact and a promise (made and kept) never to remember the wrong against the person in the future.—Jay Adams, *Theology of Christian Counseling*.--

B. Forgiveness is an Act of Faith.

1. Forgiveness is not a feeling.

2. Forgiveness is an act of the will that triumphs over the feeling to not be forgiving and the feeling to seek revenge or remain bitter.

3. “Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.”--Corrie Ten Boom—

4. Forgiveness is remembering that we ourselves are sinners who get into the kingdom not on our merit but by our Savior’s merit.

C. Forgiveness is series of promises.

1. Forgiveness is a promise to not dwell on the incident mentally.

a. Dwell on the grace of forgiveness rather than dwelling on the poison of bitterness.

2. Forgiveness is a promise to not bring the offense up to the person (as a weapon).

a. If you have forgiven you will drop it, whatever it is.

3. Forgiveness is a promise to not bring it up to others (gossip/slander).

4. Forgiveness is a promise that opens the door to reconciliation

a. Do not allow the incident to hinder your personal relationship.

- b. Not always possible
- c. Does not negate other biblical principles.
- d. Forgiveness from the heart, is nothing more, nothing less, than living out the Gospel of Grace in-so-far as it is up to you.

Recommended further reading.

UnPacking Forgiveness-biblical answers for complex questions and deep wounds by Chris Brauns. *This book delves into the complexity of forgiveness. It features discussion and study questions. The author acknowledges the influence of John MacArthur, Jay Adams, Ken Sande and others who have written extensively on the subject of forgiveness. The forgiveness quiz in the front of the book or on Chris's website is great food for thought on forgiveness. Keep in mind that all biblical counselors do not necessarily agree on all aspects of what forgiveness is and is not. They all do agree that it's poison to remain bitter or bear a grudge or to brood on offenses.*

The Peacemaker by Ken Sande-a biblical guide to resolving personal conflict. *This is a classic in my opinion. Gospel-centered forgiveness and reconciliation as the goal. There is a version for young people as well.*

Trusting God by Jerry Bridges. Our problems with unforgiveness are often because we do not understand in a biblical manner the sovereignty of God and how God works in adversity. It is taught in some circles that it is okay to forgive God for adversity but a careful read of this book will teach why it is not and why trusting God in adversity is the issue.

Questions for Community Group Discussion

1. What does Php.1:6, 2:12-13 say about the circumstances that lead to bitterness and what God is doing.
2. Chris Braun defines forgiveness as 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. What is the difference between this definition and what P. Bruce said about forgiveness from the heart?
3. Bitterness is a problem common to man and sooner or later it will surface in the context of your community groups. Is there someone you need to forgive or something you need to confess to God as you've resented His sovereignty? How will you handle it or how will you help others in your group apply the gospel of forgiveness to their circumstances?

