

Introduction

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 (Mat.6.14-15).

The passage is challenging because it tells us that forgiveness is ours provided we grant it to others. What does this conditional mean? We ask this because we know from the teaching of Jesus elsewhere that our part in this, our granting of forgiveness a) has *no merit* and b) flows from forgiveness we have *already* received. What can it mean to say that we have been forgiven and are to forgive in order to be forgiven?

The answer is that forgiving is an outflow of love to the Lord because of His saving love to us. His love causes us to love Him (1 Jn.4.19) and our love to Him causes us to work at forgiving others in meaningful, real, down to earth, and fruitful *though imperfect* ways (cf. Lk. 7.42, 47; 15.21; Mat. 3.6, 8). In repentance, we acknowledge these imperfect ways but in repentance, we also commit ourselves to forgiving and we work hard at it. On this path, we make our way to forgiveness in the Day of Judgment. Knowing what is at the end of this road encourages us to travel it. When we meditate on the end of the forgiving road, we are encouraged to travel this road despite the difficulties on it.

Pointedly, forgiving is a “mighty” difficult task. We have to work hard at it while we tenaciously cling to Christ. That is why I am going to devote another message to the theme of forgiveness. Today we will discuss how a Christian forgives. The outline will be in the form of some questions: what does it mean to forgive? How can a sinner forgive other sinners? How do we love in a forgiving way? How do we answer the objection (that we may raise ourselves) that says, “The injury I experience is too much to forgive”? (too much to allow me to forgive the person)

1A. What does it mean to forgive?

To forgive means to release someone from a sin debt. Luke 7 is instructive in this regard because in this text the Lord compares the canceling of a monetary debt with forgiveness of sins (cf. vs. 41-42, loving because of a cancelled debt with v. 47, loving because of sins forgiven).

Forgiveness is essentially releasing or letting someone go free from the debt of punishment that sin accumulates (cf. Mat. 18.27, the master...released him and forgave him the debt). When you release someone from a particular sin debt, you will not seek his or her punishment. Notably, we must do so often (cf. **Prov. 10.12, Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all [kinds of] offenses [i.e. a multitude of sins]**). You will not mention the sin to the person. You will not mention the sin to other people. You will not mention the sin if you grant forgiveness; if you do bring it up against the person in some way, then you are verbally punishing the person for the sin.

The punishing aspect of an unforgiving spirit may take many forms beyond physical punishment. It may take the form of a desire to return injury for injury, it may exist only in your mind, it may come out in speech about the person, and it may come out in speech to the person. An unforgiving spirit may take the form of actions that deprive someone of something good, and it may come in the shape of actions that simply neglect to advance the good of the unforgiven person. To forgive means that you will turn away from these forms of non-forgiving that are ways of punishing (and it helps to identify them as ways of punishing for we deceive ourselves).

One more clarification is necessary. Forgiving within the human family is a duty with exceptions. For example, in various stages of church discipline (church self-discipline), there are times when we do not forgive: when a person in sin refuses to listen, repent, and find

reconciliation (cf. Mat. 18.15-17). In short then, when you forgive someone, you do not punish him or her or “make them pay.”

2A How can a sinner forgive other sinners?

How do I as a human being grant forgiveness to other human beings in light of the obvious fact that I am not God (I have no right to forgive) and I am a sinner myself (and thus doubly have no right to forgive)? At this point, the problem becomes clear and the question merits an answer. In some ways, the answer may be obvious. Still we need to discuss some things that help us arrive at a better understanding of forgiveness.

1) First, it is a duty between men

It is a relationship between human beings on the horizontal plane of existence. Obviously, none of us can grant forgiveness on the vertical level between man and God. Only God can forgive the sins that are against Him and that offend His dignity, and righteousness.

2) Second, it is a duty to sinners.

In Matthew 6.14-15 in the context of the Sermon on the Mount (5.10-12), Jesus speaks about the forgiveness of sin that we see around us and that we feel; sometimes painfully feel, against us. The “men” that we are to forgive are sinful men, their sins are evident, and we are to forgive the sins of these sinners in various ins and outs of human relationship. We are to forgive *men* their *transgressions* (cf. Col. 3.13, “if anyone is hurt by the sin of anyone”).

3) Third, it is a duty before God

Behind human relationships, we always relate to God; in our relationships to other people, we have duty to God. We can exclude no sin from the “to be forgiven” category *except those that God tells us to punish. Punishment belongs to God.* “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord. The exceptions (in the civil arena, in the discipline of children, and in the process of church discipline) prove the norm. This is an important dimension. It dismisses a number of perspectives on forgiveness that are selective and arbitrary.

This perspective exposes how wrong it is for people to forgive their children but not the children next door, to forgive the boss but not a co-worker, or to forgive adultery but not homosexuality. Forgiveness in these cases amounts to nothing more than personal taste, eye service, duplicity, inconsistency, coping techniques, and various forms of cultural bias. These things may look like forgiveness but they lack focus on the commands of God. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves that the duty on a horizontal plane of forgiving the sins of sinners is a duty we have before our Father in heaven.

4) Fourth, it is a duty of sinners

Sinners grant it. Acknowledgment of our own sinfulness is qualifying. It qualifies us causing us to meet a necessary requirement for forgiving others. It is like the fact that the righteous are those who acknowledge their unrighteousness and the worthy are those who confess their unworthiness. The ones who can best forgive others are those who acknowledge their sins and in that way know the forgiving love of God. They have the right, privilege, and duty to forgive others. They are equipped to forgive others in a way that is unique within the human family of sinners. Forgiveness received puts the right and responsibility of forgiving on a level all its own because those forgiven much love much and they love much with forgiving love. Thus, it is a duty of sinners.

3A. How do we love with forgiving love (in a repentant way and from the heart)?

Here are some ways to forgive in a repentant way with forgiving love.

1) By identifying the sin (not minimizing it), we take the first step to forgiving; we see them as in fact transgressions. Forgiving love is realistic; it overlooks but it still looks and in fact

sees. When we forgive, we forgive sins identified as such. In this light, we can understand some responses that are compatible with a forgiving spirit. Some of these responses are, “I don’t like him or her. I do not want to be around so and so. So and so is not my best friend. So and so causes me to feel like vomiting.” To guard against a hot stove or to be sickened by stale air are not contrary to forgiveness. Of course, they become reminders and call for the right spirit. We would not want to tell people that they make us feel like vomiting. Much here depends on our intention: when we withdraw from some people for self-preservation and thus the good we may do for them may be lessened, we are not by this intending their harm.

2) By forgiving from the heart, from deep within our being in the presence of God (Mat.18.35), we show forgiving love. It has to be prayerful, based on confession to God of our own sins, and it conditioned by the fifth petition of the Lord’s Family Prayer (forgive me as I forgive).

3) By letting go of our expectations (not holding them too tenaciously), we focus on forgiving the transgressions against us, even though they hurt us in many biting ways. It is forgiving love when for the sake of the other person and in obedience to the Lord, we set our expectations (wants, desires) aside.

4) By noting and avoiding unforgiving responses mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 4.31-32, we show love by forgiving.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4.31-32).

On the negative side, the lack of forgiveness comes to expression in bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor (quarreling), and slander arising from malice. Malice is the desire to hurt so when it is present due to the sins of others against us then it will manifest itself in any of these ways (bitterness, wrath, anger, quarreling, and slander). On the positive side, forgiveness expresses kindness and tenderheartedness. We can set a good goal before us if we identify and define these things.

5) Finally, by focusing on Christ, we learn how to forgive others “as God in Christ forgave you”(Eph. 4.32). God forgives graciously, decisively, repeatedly, daily, consistently, lovingly, abundantly, and expansively. Therefore, if we keep our eyes on the Lord Jesus, we will work at forgiving graciously, decisively, repeatedly, daily, consistently, lovingly, abundantly, and expansively!

If we keep our eyes on Christ, we will ask, “What has my heavenly Father forgiven me?” We will then say, “I could never pay this debt. It is a debt of infinite punishment for infinite offenses against the majesty and holiness of God. By comparison, I am required to forgive little in relation to the much God has forgiven me in Christ.”

If we keep our eyes fixed on our risen Lord, we will argue *a fortiori* in our hearts: “If I have been forgiven so much (regarding my sins against God), how much more ought I to forgive so little (regarding the sins of others against me).” This is especially true when I put this duty in the light of the fact that the one who died for me requires this of me. How can I refuse to forgive when I know that I am refusing the Lord Jesus? How can I directly disobey Him by not working hard at forgiving others? Should I not think that this is the greatest possible ingratitude on my part as well as unwise, confused, and rebellious? If I decide not to forgive, am I not being willful? If I think I can find a safe path to travel in life by avoiding or neglecting the duty to forgive others, am I not arrogant thinking that I know better than Christ does?

In light of this argument, granting forgiveness is an extremely reasonable duty and a lack of forgiveness involves us in many other sins like arrogance before God.

4A. How do we answer the objection (that we may raise ourselves) that says, “the injury I experience is too much to forgive”?

In Charity and its Fruits, Edwards answers this objection. We can follow his line of thought with some modifications.

The injuries are intolerable and more than flesh and blood can bear. “Come on pastor, you do not understand the realities of how deep it hurts.”

In reply, let me say the following.

1) Yes, it is tough. However, you have not striven against sin unto blood as Jesus did, and did for you. **“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb. 12.4).** Then forgive as He has forgiven you.

2) You can bear them and forgive when you look unto Jesus; keep Him in the center of your endurance and you will not grow weary and faint. **“Looking unto Jesus... Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb. 12.2-3).** So go and do likewise, forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven you.

3) Some probing questions may help us get our bearings and keep balance.

a) Which is worse, for you to offend the Lord of heaven and earth, or for a man to offend you? Are your offenses against God greater than the offenses of others against you? Has God shown forbearance and forgiveness toward you? If God has forgiven you much, can you not see how reasonable it is for you to forgive little?

b) When you think of this forbearance shown to you by the Lord Jesus, do you approve of it, “and think well of it” and “think that it is excellent and even glorious?” Should you not then think this way about showing forbearance to others?

c) Would you have loved and respected God better, if he had not borne with you, but had long since cut you off in his wrath? If you approve of this action on God’s part toward you, why should you not approve of such action on your own part toward others?

d) Do you think that God is too kind in forgiving the sins of others? Do you think He is too kind in forgiving you for your sins? Is there any reason that you can offer for not imitating God? Your answers to these questions surely answer your objection in a decisive way.

g) In the future, do you want God to no longer bear with the sins you commit against him? Are you willing to go and ask God to deal with you from now on in precisely the same way that you intend by this objection to deal with those who hurt you? These questions sufficiently answer your objection.

Conclusion

We have no excuses or objections that hold water against a forgiving spirit.

The more we are aware of the forgiveness we have received, the more we will love and forgive.

Therefore, study the death of Christ in your place and you will love much with an abundance of forgiving love. Keep your eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of your faith and you will not grow weary or fainthearted in the great work of forgiving others their trespasses against you.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in recognition of the forgiveness we have received and may the Lord thereby enable us to grant forgiveness to others from hearts warmed by His love.