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THE BIBLICAL REVELATION OF FORGIVENESS





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TOM NETTLES

Introduction: The Biblical Revelation of Forgiveness

This Founders Journal considers the doctrine of forgiveness from a number of biblical standpoints. The articles are relatively short. Each gives a pungent exposition of a single idea or application contained in the biblical revelation of forgiveness. These writers serve as pastors and teachers in church and in educational institutions. As editor, I express a deep and sincere gratitude for their willingness to write and a word of praise to God for the grace that has taught them to look at biblical, gospel forgiveness with such humble receptivity and spiritual consideration. Thanks, therefore, to Tom Ascol, Craig Biehl, Mark Coppenger, Jeff Johnson, Reagan Marsh, Eric Smith, Charles Spurgeon, Paul Taylor, Tom Winn, and Fred Zaspel. Mack Tomlinson provided one of the Spurgeon contributions. Each of these has proved to be a gospel friend (Yes, I consider Spurgeon as a friend for his work has so blessed and encouraged us all) and all are faithful teachers and practitioners of gospel truth prompted by the grace of forgiveness. May the Lord bless each reader with soul-stirring worship and gratitude that in Christ we have “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.”



TOM NETTLES

Without Forgiveness, Nothing Else is Possible

As theology is the queen of sciences, so forgiveness is the queen of graces. It opens the door for all others and embodies all the justice, holiness, wisdom, and love that give form and matter to the saving operations of God's grace. God's having chosen a people of every generation and from every nation and people group to be his for all eternity made necessary the means by which this would be accomplished. Considering us as fallen and thus under condemnation and corrupt of heart, God's decree of election involved everything necessary to maintain justice and moral purity in our eternal presence with him. Forgiveness constitutes the first grace, the first historically-accomplished salvific work, from which all blessings flow "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Ephesians 1:6). If his elect are to be "holy and without blame before him" (Ephesians 1:4), their corruption of heart must be transformed toward holiness and their guilt must be removed. The first is done by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the New Birth (John 3:3-8), that great grace of the "washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). In this work the elect sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:4, 5) is made alive spiritually and, on his part, seeks union with Christ in his saving work. The spiritual dynamic, however, that sets this work of regeneration and consequent faith in motion is the objective reality of "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Ephesians 1:7). That the moral perversity of "trespasses and sins" in which the deadness of the sinner consists has concretely and once-for-all received its just due at the cross brings about the gift of the Spirit. Paul's argument throughout Ephesians proceeds on that assumption.

This order is germane to Paul's argument also in Romans 4:23 through 5:11. Jesus was "delivered up because of our offenses" (Romans 4:25) and vindicated the work of God by which righteousness is imputed to the believer. On that basis, we find the transformation of tribulations into graces that result in perseverance, character, and hope—a hope that does not disappoint but grasps the coming reality of presence in the glory of God. Paul reiterates the order for his readers to enter more deeply into the initial grace of forgiveness. Having summarized the development (5:1-5), Paul goes back to the beginning. Before the "love of God was shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit," a satisfaction of condemnation had to take place—"For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Paul wants to intensify the depth of this initiatory and pivotal grace in repeating, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Then, to show the flow of grace, Paul gives a narrative of connection: "Much more then,"—look at the flood gates of grace now opened, and then the phrase repeated, "much more" (10)—"having been justified by his blood ... from wrath"—never overlook the moment that our sin was punished and forgiven in our new Head (5:19). Again, "For if when we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). All of the graces that flow from the living Christ come because first he has died to procure forgiveness. Even the regenerating work of the Spirit whereby we are brought experientially into the joy and freedom of his forgiveness-procuring death comes only to those for whom he has died. His holy labors operate effectually and internally on those who were in Christ in eternity and thus in Christ as he achieved the verdict, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," for only by that verdict can it be true that they "walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

Again, from forgiveness flow all other graces: "He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and" because the price of sin had been paid and forgiveness justly and gloriously procured, "furthermore is risen" (Romans 8:32-34).

How fitting and truly a marvel of purity, mercy and wisdom in the revelation God gave to Moses In Exodus 34:6, 7: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." God is "keeping mercy" for the thousands of those whom he has chosen in Christ in whom they have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. He does not clear the guilty in defiance of his justice but in accordance with it as he set forth Christ as a propitiation through his blood (Romans 3:24-26).

As the Psalmist considered, under the inspiration of the Spirit of Christ, the marvel that the Lord God Almighty forgives, the transaction struck a reverent fear into his heart. He is crying to God “out of the depths” and looks at the phenomenon of forgiveness, that in such a mode this God may be called on to be attentive to the voice of his supplication. Reflecting perhaps on God’s declaration that he will by no means clear the guilty, the Psalmist wrote, “If you Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” None could, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But God has said that he forgives “iniquity and transgression and sin.” What transaction could possibly bring this God to pass over this accumulation of flagrant, evil, and corrupt disregard for God’s law. Whatever it is, it strikes fear into the heart of the worshiper to consider it: “But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared” (Psalm 130:4). And so it is that the “Lord pities those who fear him” for they are the ones whose transgressions have been removed as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12, 13). And the seriousness of the issue of forgiveness should multiply a reverent fear in those who consider it and embrace it in truth: “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ his Son is cleansing us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7, 9). He does not violate his character in forgiveness but is faithful. He gives intimate consideration to the death of Christ and is faithful. He does not violate his absolutely just character in forgiveness but is just. He has before him the obedience of his Son even unto the death of the cross and is just, not denying to him any of his purchased possession. “*What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Nothing can for sin atone, nothing but the blood of Jesus. This is all my hope and plea, nothing but the blood of Jesus.*”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom has most recently served as the Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He previously taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where he was Professor of Church History and Chair of the Department of Church History. Prior to that, he taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Along with numerous journal articles and scholarly papers, Dr. Nettles is the author and editor of fifteen books. Among his books are *By His Grace and For His Glory*; *Baptists and the Bible*, *James Petigru Boyce: A Southern Baptist Statesman*, and *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles H. Spurgeon*.



TOM ASCOL

The Measure of Our Forgiveness

In the last half of Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul gives Christians practical guidance on what it means to “put on the new self, created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (v. 24). He concludes his list of applications with a positive admonition regarding forgiveness. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (v. 32). The measure of the forgiveness that Christians owe to one another is the forgiveness that God has shown to us in Christ.

These words are not hard to understand. They are simply hard to do. Forgiveness is a specific act that grows out of a gracious disposition. It is a plant that springs out of the soil of kindness and tenderheartedness. To be kind is to treat people with compassion. It is an attribute of genuine love (1 Corinthians 13:4) and is characteristic of God, whose “kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:4).

To be tenderhearted to others is to be gentle and welcoming to them. It is an idiomatic term that suggests enlarging your heart so that your sincere affection for someone becomes evident. To have a tender heart toward someone is to want what is best for them, to desire their welfare. Like kindness, tenderheartedness is characteristic of our Lord who will not break a bruised reed nor quench a smoldering wick (Isaiah 42:3-4).

It is no wonder, then, that Paul follows up his admonition in Ephesians 4:32 in the very next

verse with “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (5:1). Neither is it surprising that he prefaces this admonition by telling Christians that we must put away “all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander” (4:31). Such bitter weeds pollute the soil and prevent forgiveness from sprouting.

By mortifying deadly vices and cultivating godly virtues, we become spiritually equipped to live in forgiveness, which is what we are commanded to do in v. 32. “Forgiving one another” includes specific, intentional decisions, but Paul here considers such decisions as an ongoing activity of the Christian life. We can sympathize with Peter’s question to Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). He probably thought he was being generous. But Jesus’ answer is the foundation of Paul’s admonition: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22).

As children of the forgiving God, Christians must cultivate a lifestyle where forgiveness is the norm. As we seek to be kind and tenderhearted, we should stand ready to forgive and to forgive “as God in Christ” has forgiven us. That is the standard, the measure of our forgiveness. What did God’s forgiveness of us cost Him? The cross is the answer to that question. Then how far, at what cost, and how often should we forgive one another? Only as far as and to the same degree that God has forgiven us through the sufferings and death of Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom Ascol has served as a Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL since 1986. Prior to moving to Florida he served as pastor and associate pastor of churches in Texas. He has a BS degree in sociology from Texas A&M University (1979) and has also earned the MDiv and PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. Tom serves as the President of Founders Ministries and The Institute of Public Theology. He is the Author of various books, and regularly preaches and lectures at various conferences throughout the United States and other countries. In addition he contributes articles to the Founders website and hosts a weekly podcast called *The Sword & The Trowel*. He and his wife Donna have six children along with four sons-in-law and a daughter-in-law. They have eighteen grandchildren.



CRAIG BIEHL

Providence and Forgiveness

God reigns over all—even the smallest things. “Random” and “chance” may invade our vocabulary as we interpret the universe from our dim and limited perspective, but they misrepresent a world created and sustained by God. Sparrows, the hairs of our head, and every atom have their place and purpose in God’s providence. And more, “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom. 8:28 KJV). Yet, while Scripture clearly teaches these marvelous truths, we struggle to apply them to our daily lives. When was the last time you bumped your head and immediately thanked God for the spiritual lesson to be gained by the pain? And what about the application of God’s providence to His command that we forgive those who abuse and spitefully use us? Along with “love your enemies,” forgiving those who hurt us ranks among the more difficult duties of God’s children.

Scripture speaks a great deal of forgiveness and provides many examples. Indeed, Christ’s death purchased God’s forgiveness of our sins, even as He asked the Father to forgive His tormentors in the midst of His agony on the cross, “for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34 KJV). And imagine how our spiritual growth would suffer without God training us with trials and adversity, or if God granted our every wish for a carefree life? Yet, we are often slow or unwilling to view our injuries, and for the present purpose—those who bring them—as God’s gifts for our good and the good of others. We can fail to see that God’s providence calls for forgiveness.

Consider the life of Joseph. From a worldly viewpoint, He could easily justify unforgiveness and revenge. His jealous brothers hated him as their father’s favorite, they hated him for his honest report concerning their work (or lack thereof), they hated him for his dreams, and they threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave. Further, when he held fast to God in the face of the

temptation by Potifer's wife, he landed in prison—and that for many years. And if that wasn't enough, the tall tale that he was torn to pieces by a wild beast nearly killed his father with sorrow, a pain and deception his brothers let stand for years.

Nonetheless, it ended well. Having earned his degree in the seminary of hard knocks, God appointed Joseph to Pharaoh's right hand in order to save lives, including God's chosen people. But did Joseph discern God's plan as he languished in the pit or woke up each day in prison? Not likely. Yet after a few more dreams and the feeding of a nation during the seven-year famine—like Job's epiphany at the end of his suffering—Joseph understood. His worldly brothers, however, braced for the worst when they saw his position and power, and, apart from God's grace, they likely would have received it. But to their surprise (and for our instruction), the beauty of God's design in their younger brother's words calmed their hearts: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:19-20 ESV). God's providence fashioned Joseph's forgiveness.

Above all, we love because He first loved us, and we forgive because He first forgave us. As God has forgiven our infinite debt of sin against Him through Christ's saving work, so we should forgive others their relatively minor sins against us. At the same time, we live in God's world, created, sustained, and orchestrated for His glory and our good. Edwards writes,

That the hand of God is a great deal more concerned in all that happens to us than the treatment of men is, should lead us, in a great measure, not to think of things as from men, but to have respect to them chiefly as from God—as ordered by his love and wisdom, even when their immediate source may be the malice or heedlessness of a fellow-man.

What others intend for our hurt, God uses for our good. Thus, when we rightly view God's providence in every facet of our lives and respond accordingly, we will forgive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Craig Biehl writes and teaches on various theological topics. He launched Pilgrim's Rock to develop material to boost the believers' joy, comfort, and faith in Christ and Scripture. Craig received his AB in economics from Cal Berkeley, MBA from UCLA Anderson School of Management, ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, and PhD in Systematic Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary.



MARK COPPENGER

John Mark, Forgiven

We Baptists would agree with Catholic Canon Law when it proscribes baby names “foreign to Christian sentiment.” So ‘Jezebel’ and ‘Judas’ are out of bounds. No right-minded parents would touch those names with a stick. Unfortunately, my namesake, Mark, has a black mark on his record, and it’s only by the grace of God, and the godly forgiveness of the apostles and disciples, that this young disciple was given opportunity to up his game to the point that my parents felt free to enter it on my birth certificate.

John Mark (aka Mark per his surname) dishonored himself in Pamphylia by bailing out on the First Missionary Journey. The Bible just says he headed back to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Maybe he got homesick and ran home to mama’s cooking; or didn’t appreciate the tone of Paul’s wakeup call one morning; or didn’t think Paul should be giving instructions to his cousin Barnabas; or tired of foreign dialects; or was unnerved by the “nuclear” exchange with Elymas (“I didn’t sign up for this!”). Whatever it was, most of us can identify with letting folks down because we’re “sleepy, dopey, grumpy, or bashful” or “wimpy, lazy, piggy, whiny, spacey, surly, onery, nasty, or unready.”

Subsequently, Paul vetoed Barnabas’s plan to bring the kid along on a second trip (Acts 15:38). So that was that, done and done. But was it? Apparently not, for in Colossians, we find him at Paul’s side, being commended to others (Colossian 4:10). And in Paul’s last letter, written from prison in Rome, he urges, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Helpful, indeed, for he’d go on to pen a Gospel and have the Apostle Peter call him “my son.” (1 Peter 5:13).

So, was Paul wrong to block Mark from the Second Missionary Journey? Where was the forgiveness? And for that matter, is the Bible an unforgiving book for leaving Demas and Diotrephes out in the cold? No, since forgiveness is not obliviousness; it's a process that can begin with wariness, even as it sheds resentment and rancor (*aphiemi*) and as it extends grace and pursues reconciliation (*charizomai*), albeit mindful of civil and ecclesiastical restrictions. Forgiveness is good for the soul that releases gratuitous bitterness, and it's also good for the Kingdom as evidence of genuine discipleship—in the forgiver and forgiven—comes to light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Mark Coppenger, retired professor of philosophy at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a former professor at Wheaton has given us an excellent study of how God's lordship in creation lays the groundwork for aesthetics. Mark is an effective writer and author, an engaging teacher, has served in numerous positions of service among Southern Baptists at the national and state levels and also been pastor of churches. He is the author of a new book entitled *If Christianity is So Good, Why are Christians so Bad?* Also, he is an author/editor of a book highly pertinent to the topic of this Journal, *Apologetical Aesthetics*. Since the triune God is Creator and Sustainer and Owner of the earth, it is impossible that every aspect of it not reflect some element of his glory. The existence of everything is dependent on him and his power, intelligence, beauty, purpose, and glory. The study of aesthetics is the investigation of principles underlying our perception of beauty and awe. This could be applied to art, music, poetry, physics, chemistry, or the mere pleasure of standing in awe of natural things. Mark has given a narrative of how aesthetics has its foundation in the reality that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." He has shown the confluence of nature and art in how the beauty, symmetry, threatening danger, and power of the one inspires the other. His article itself is an engagement with aesthetics of language.



JEFF JOHNSON

John Mark, Forgiven

Forgiveness is divine. That is to say that it takes divine and supernatural grace to forgive. It could be argued that only those who have been forgiven by divine grace are empowered by divine grace to (properly) forgive. There are several reasons why divine grace is needed for forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness may seem easy until we have been deeply wounded and offended by a close friend. The closer the friend and the greater the offense, the more difficult it is to forgive. It is one thing to overlook a stranger accidentally stepping on our toes, and it is another thing to forgive a spouse who has been having a year-long secret affair. Nothing within our fallen nature would motivate us to forgive such an evil act. In such situations, we learn that we need outside help from God to forgive.
2. Forgiveness may seem easy until we learn what it demands from us. Forgiveness is not “letting it go” and moving on with life. Forgiveness is not living with an unfaithful spouse as if nothing is wrong for the sake of the children or financial stability. Forgiveness is not ignoring the offense. Forgiveness is hard because it requires something positive from us. Forgiveness is not a passive response but an active responsibility. We have to give to those who have taken from us. We have to love those who hate us. We have to pay the debt of those who have stolen from us. How is this possible without divine grace?
3. Forgiveness may seem easy until we learn all that it requires of us. First, forgiveness is an act of love because it requires us to pursue after those who are actively running away from us. The Lord didn’t wait for us to repent before He pursued us with the gospel of forgiveness.

Even while we were sinners, He died for us (Rom. 5:8). And while the crowds were saying, “Crucify him,” the Lord was saying, “Father forgive them” (Luke 23:34). What kind of grace do we need to display this type of love towards our enemies? To desire reconciliation and show acts of kindness to those who are not even shown signs of repentance is extremely hard, if not impossible without divine grace. Second, forgiveness is a sacrificial payment. It is the opposite of revenge. It is the opposite of retribution. This is why it is so hard. Why should the perpetrator get out of jail free while the victim is called by God to endure the imprisonment? What is the imprisonment? It is the pain and hurt one feels when he or she is transgressed against. To forgive is to commit to absorb the pain without reflecting any of it back on the guilty person. It is gracious to pay for someone’s meal, but it is doubly gracious to pay for someone’s meal after they have stolen from you. But this is forgiveness—and this is why it is so hard.

4. Forgiveness may seem easy until we have to find the strength to forgive. To have the desire and power to do good to those who have done us evil is not a work of the flesh but a fruit of the Spirit. Jesus said, “apart from me, you can do nothing.” If we need the power of Christ to do the least charitable deed, how much more do we need the power of Christ to forgive those who have transgressed against us.

Where does this grace and power come from? How can we even begin to have the love and compassion to forgive others? The answer comes from God. We can forgive because we have been forgiven. God will take care of justice but thank God that He has paid for our sins and has cancelled out our debt. Because of the cross, not only is God able to forgive us, but we too are able to forgive all those who sinned against us. This is the power of the gospel, and o’ how we need it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jeff Johnson is the founding pastor of Grace Bible Church, the Owner/Operator of Free Grace Press and a graduate of Veritas Theological Seminary. He serves as the Director of Academics at Grace Bible Theological Seminary. Jeff is the author of several books including *The Fatal Flaw of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism*, *Behind the Bible: Introduction to Textual Criticism*, *The Church: Why Bother?*, *The Kingdom of God*, *The Absurdity of Unbelief*, *The Pursuit of Glory*, and *He Died for Me*.



REAGAN MARSH

Forgiving God?

Plans sputter, hopes crumble, relationships derail, or evil exposes itself. I know I did my part – but God didn't come through. Because life is full of disappointments, modern pastors and writers inform me, it must also be full of forgiveness. Their sage advice? Loosely commandeering Psalm 142:2, they urge cultivating a lifestyle of forgiving others, forgiving myself, and forgiving God to move forward. After all, they assert, forgiveness is “for me.” Some go so far as to assert that forgiving God is required, arguing unforgiveness affects my faith, intimacy with God, and eternity.

As with the error of forgiving myself, this is an argument from silence – not from Scripture. Isaiah and Jeremiah faced unspeakable horrors under God's providences toward Israel; Paul's list of sufferings for Christ makes me wince every time I read it (2 Cor 11:16-33 and 12:5-10); but none of these men forgave God. Saint after saint in Scripture “endured as seeing him who was invisible” (Heb 11:27). There's not a hint of charging God with wrongdoing.

But what goes unrecognized? Forgiving God is deeply theological in nature. It forges my working confession of faith: shaping my worship, framing my life, and demonstrating my operative approach to Scripture. Consider the articles implied in my “forgiveness.”

1. God failed; and fundamentally, he failed me. In my disappointment, I learn God made a mistake: this means he was wrong, he erred. This instance may have been something he couldn't handle, foresee, or accomplish...turns out he's mostly sovereign, though perhaps not meticulously so.

2. Therefore, God must be somewhat imperfect. Nobody is entirely perfect; limitations and flaws characterize all beings in a fallen world, which necessarily includes God. The Creator is more like his creatures than his word attests; even his wisdom and judgments stumble sometimes.

3. Hence, I must consider God insufficient. I may cast many of my cares upon him, perhaps even most of them; he cares for me, but can't always do anything about it. I must face facts: sometimes God loses, evil wins, and hope is deferred, awaiting "next time."

4. Because of this, God might not always be trusted. He means well in Scripture, though he can be a bit unreliable or unrealistic in what he says there. Like a kindly uncle who does his best, he's usually good for what he promises.

5. Consequently, God isn't entirely truthful in the Bible. He means most of what he says there, but everyone exaggerates periodically. Most of his ways are just; many of his paths are lovingkindness; and his mercies are over a majority of his works. In quite a few things, he works for my good; but "all" doesn't always mean all in these verses.

6. My conclusion must be, God raised my hopes and handled my situation in a misleading way. He thus wronged me, which means he sinned – and he sinned against me. Since God is a sinner, I must forgive him.

These unspoken assertions may be unconscious, unintended, and unconsidered, but they're active. Advocates immediately distance themselves from such conclusions, but they ultimately can't: against the plumbline of God's word, "forgiving God" belies utter egocentricity. It smacks of self-realization, not Scripture, anchoring in theories of positive thinking and pop psychology. My final decision clarifies and codifies my operative theology, irrespective of any creedal orthodoxy I may recite on Sundays. It displays human wisdom at its finest, but not the wisdom of the Cross.

And make no mistake here – to forgive God is to assert that he wronged me. Scripture is replete with its praises of God's perfections, wisdom, and faithfulness: "all his ways are just" (Dt 32:4). "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ps 25:10). His "goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life" (Ps 23:6). If God deals wrongly with me, God has sinned, and he is no God at all – certainly not the perfect God Scripture describes.

God's answer is to behold his character in his word. He is my Rock, strength, fortress, and deliverer (Ps 18:1-2). He alone is good (Mk 10:18). He has no shadow of turning due to change (Jas 1:17). His faithfulness surrounds him (Ps 89:8); righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne, while steadfast love and faithfulness go before him (Ps 89:14). His wise purposes

are infinitely higher than my puny pay grade merits clearance to understand (Isa 55:8). I must humble myself under his mighty hand (1 Pet 5:6), not think of myself more highly than I ought (Rom 12:3), submit myself to his faithful disposal of my life (Isa 64:8), and repent of such shameful pride as to think the thrice-holy Lord needs anything from me – much less my forgiveness.

Job charged God with wrongdoing and received three chapters of rebuke (Job 39-41): “where were you when I formed the earth by my wisdom?” I must learn the humility of a creature, that there are many – if not most or all – things beyond my grasp, and that God’s ways and wisdom are not my own. Scripture assures me this King is for me, not against me (Rom 8:31ff), calling me to entrust myself to him amidst the hardest providences. It is not my place to lash out in sinful anger against God (1 Pet 4:19), for “in him there is no sin” (1 Jn 3:5). He alone who is “holy, blameless, and undefiled” (Heb 7:26) is full of mercy to every sinner who will look to him – mercy and grace to help us in time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Reagan Marsh serves as Founding Pastor-Teacher to Reformation Baptist Church in Dalton, GA. He is a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and has served in gospel ministry since 1998.



REAGAN MARSH

Forgiving Myself?

“Forgiving myself” is common practice among Christians today, almost taken for granted as right, necessary, and biblical. The idea runs roughly like this: when I sin, I must confess my wrongdoing to God, accept his pardon, and then forgive myself. Poignantly reflecting the heavily psychologized world in which the Church walks, to witness how vigorously this historically-recent practice is advocated (and defended) bears testimony to just how much water the Old Ship of Zion is taking on.

Christians confess the sufficiency of Scripture for doctrine and practice (2 Pet 1:3; 2 Tim 3:16-17) – that is, the Bible contains all that is necessary for me to know who God is, what he requires of me, and how to do it. But forgiving myself draws from culture, not Canon; since Scripture is silent about this construct, it “goes beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6). The Bible tells us “a broken heart and a contrite spirit he will not despise” (Ps 51:17). “Return to me and I will return to you” (Ps 34:8). “...the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin...if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:7,9). Scripture highlights the all-sufficiency of God’s pardon by Christ’s work, calling me to rest in it – and nowhere else. My sin and guilt must be laid at the foot of the Cross alone.

The danger is subtle, but strikingly real. Consider what I’m telling myself in practicing self-forgiveness: I softly say that God’s absolution in Christ is insufficient for peace with him, that having my heart sprinkled to cleanse a guilty conscience (Heb 10:22) isn’t enough. I confess in it that his poured-out wrath on his only Son might pass muster for heaven’s judgment, but not for mine. To “forgive myself” is fundamentally an argument that the suffering and death of Jesus

served for “peace with God” (Rom 5:1) – just not for peace within me. Jesus said “it is finished,” yet since I must forgive myself, his grace truly isn’t sufficient for me (2 Cor 12:9). Instead, I supplement the grace of the Cross, completing his pardon by adding my work to it.

Precisely here is the quiet shift from well-intentioned error to genuine heresy. To forgive myself is to substitute God’s standard with mine, to append my judgment and assessment of Christ’s work to Scripture’s, to exchange the Father’s mercy and approval for what I think is best. It’s a gentle replacement which “makes the Cross of none effect” (1 Cor 1:17; Mk 7:13), ultimately relying on “what is right in my own eyes” (Jdg 21:25), on my terms. It makes my sin out to be so great the Jesus couldn’t handle it, or so insignificant that Jesus couldn’t be bothered with it; but either way, I deify myself. In the name of faith in Christ, I put faith in me. At its core, forgiving myself is self-pardon, self-absolution, self-salvation.

I must learn rather to “set my heart at rest in his presence” (1 Jn 3:19-24) when conscience condemns me, by full confession and repentance before the only One who can forgive sins (Mk 2:5-11). I must “still and quiet my soul” by the mercy and merits of Jesus alone (Ps 131:2), for he “is faithful and just to forgive.” By the Spirit’s gracious help, I must learn to look solely to Christ, stricken for sinners like me, to know peace with God (Isa 53:4-6).

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ERIC C. SMITH

His Forgiveness and Our Love

Our love for Jesus flows directly from our awareness of how much he has forgiven us. I do not minimize the compelling nature of his attributes when I affirm this. His excellence should move us to love him in and of himself apart from any favors we receive. In forgiveness, however, we see all of his excellence in action; all of his wisdom, power, righteousness and holiness as well as the revelation of a number of tender mercies conspire to produce the truly divine disposition of passing over our abundant offenses. All of them were necessary in order to find forgiveness from the One who is “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty”(Exodus 34:7). Luke illustrates this gospel principle at a memorable dinner party (Luke 7:36–49).

Simon the Pharisee had invited Jesus over for a meal with his friends. Luke does not say if the invitation is sincere or a trap, but when Jesus arrives, Simon’s greeting is less than enthusiastic. He provides no water for Jesus’ feet, gives him no kiss of welcome, and neglects to anoint his head with oil—all basic tokens of hospitality. Is Simon’s inattentiveness to Jesus calculated, or just careless? In either case, his love for the Savior is underwhelming.

Soon, another figure enters the room, as different from Simon as we could imagine. She is an unnamed “woman of the city,” known to all as “a sinner.” She was likely not invited to Simon’s distinguished home. But, apparently, she has met Jesus before; at least she has heard his message

about God's grace. When she learns Jesus is at Simon's house, she shows up with an alabaster flask of ointment. Finding Jesus reclining at table, the woman kneels behind him. Weeping, she bathes his feet with her tears. She wipes his feet dry with her own hair, kisses them, and anoints them with her oil. It is an extravagant display of love.

As Jesus goes on to explain in a story about debt, our love for him is always proportionate to our sense of how much he has forgiven us. The notorious woman knew that her sin-debt was massive. When Jesus canceled her debt and sent her away in peace, she loved him much. Simon is, of course, every bit as spiritually impoverished as this woman. But his external righteousness has blinded him to his crushing need before a holy God. He does see himself as a debtor; he feels no need for mercy. He assumes that he requires little forgiveness, and it shows in his little love for the Forgiver.

Our story suggests that few practices can yield greater spiritual fruit in my life than considering just how much and how freely Jesus has forgiven, is forgiving, and will forgive me (cf 1 Tim 1:15). As our story suggests, such reflection produces humble gratitude to God, loving commitment to the Savior, sympathy and tenderness toward my fellow sinners, and unshakable peace in my heart as I reenter the world.

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CHARLES SPURGEON

Divine Forgiveness Admired and Imitated

“Divine Forgiveness Admired and Imitated”

Colossians 3:13

Charles Spurgeon

MTP, May 1885 Sermon number 1841

Taken from Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia 7:401, 402, 405, 406.

When He forgives He forgives the whole of our faults, follies, failures, and offenses. There is a certain solidarity about sin, so that it makes up one lump. I read the other day of a certain theologian speaking of Christ having put away original sin while He left actual sin. Nonsense! Sin is one and indivisible. Iniquity is not to be done up in separate parcels. The sin, the iniquity of men, is spoken of in the Bible as one thing. Although we sin multitudes of times the various streams all flow into one sea of evil, when sin is forgiven all sin is put away, not a shred, nor fragment, nor particle remains. The Lord Jesus drowns all the hosts of sin in the depths of the sea, and the whole of our guilt is swallowed up forever. This is great forgiveness, indeed. Glory be to Him who gives it! Let us follow Him in His truth and heartiness. This forgiveness, again, is given by the Lord Jesus Christ in the completest possible manner. He keeps no back reckonings;

He retains no reserves of anger. He so forgives that He forgets. That is the wonder of it, He says, "I will not remember your sins." He casts them behind His back; they are wholly and completely gone from His observation or regard. Alas, such is poor human nature, that even fathers, when they have forgiven a wayward child, will, perhaps, throw the offense in his teeth years after, when he again offends, but it is never so with Christ. He says, "Your sins shall not be mentioned against you any more forever." He has done with the sins of His people in so effectual a way that not a whisper concerning them shall ever come from His mouth so as to grieve them. They will themselves remember their sins with deep repentance, but the Lord will never challenge them on account of their past rebellions. Blessed be the name of Christ for such complete forgiveness as this. The Lord Jesus Christ forgives His people in a continuous manner. He forgave us long ago, He still forgives us. He does not forgive and afterwards accuse, His forgiveness is eternal; it is not a reprieve He gives to you, believing ones, but a free pardon, under the King's hand and seal, which shall effectually protect you from accusation and punishment. "In those days, and in that time, says the Lord, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for I will pardon them whom I reserve." He has finished transgression, made an end of sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness. Send to hell a pardoned sinner! It is a contradiction to the very nature of God. Condemn those for whom Jesus died! Why, the apostle mentions that death as a conclusive answer to the challenge, "Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yes rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." How shall He intercede for us and yet accuse us? It is impossible for Christ to be both Redeemer and Condemner to the same persons. So perfect is His pardon that our sin has ceased to be, He has put away sin forever by the sacrifice of Himself.

...

In urging you to this copying of Christ, let me notice that this forgiveness of those who offend against us is gloriously ennobling. We are not asked to perform a duty which will in the least degrade us. Revenge is paltry, forgiveness is great-minded. Was not David infinitely greater than Saul, when he spared his life in the cave, and when he would not smite him as he lay asleep on the battlefield? Did not the king humble himself before David when he perceived David's forbearance? If you would be the greatest among men, bear injuries with the greatest gentleness; if you would win the noblest of conquests, subdue yourself. To win a battle is a little thing if it is fought out with sword and gun, but to win it in God's way, with no weapons but love, and patience, and forgiveness, this is the most glorious of victories. Blessed is that man who is more than a conqueror, because he inflicts no wounds in the conflict, but overcomes evil with good. In the process of such a conquest the warrior is himself a gainer. A nation in fighting, even if it wins the campaign, has to suffer great expense and loss of life, but he that overcomes by love, is the better and stronger man through what he has done. He comes out of the conflict not only victor

over his adversary, but victor over sin within himself, and all the readier for future war against evil. He glorifies God and himself becomes strong in grace. Nothing is more glorious than love. Your Master, who is King of kings, set you an example of gaining glory by enduring wrong, if you would be knights of His company, imitate His graciousness.

Notice that this imitation of Christ is logically appropriate to you all. Brothers and sisters, if Christ has forgiven you, the parable we read just now shows that it is imperative that you should forgive your fellows. If our Lord has forgiven us our ten thousand talents, how can we take our brother by the throat for the hundred pence, and say, "Pay me what you owe"? If we are indeed members of Christ, should we not be like our Head? If we profess to be His servants, are we to pretend to a dignity greater than our Master, who washed His disciples' feet? If He forgave so freely, how dare we call ourselves His brethren if our spirit is hard and malice lingers within us?

I say, to conclude, that this copying of Christ is most forcibly sustained by the example given in the text. We are to forbear and to forgive. "Even as Christ forgave you, so also do you." I have heard it said, "If you pass by every wanton offense, and take no notice of it, you will come to be despised, and regarded as a person of mean spirit, your honor demands vindication." When Christ forgave you, did His honor suffer by that forgiveness? You transgressed most wickedly, and yet He forgave you, do you regard Him as less honorable because of that readiness to pass by offenses? Far from it, it is His glory to forgive. The hallelujahs of saints and the songs of angels are sent up to His throne the more heartily because of the richness of His grace, and the freeness of His mercy. Dishonor indeed! What pride it is on the part of such poor creatures as we are to talk about our honor! Where is the honor of revenge? It is a dishonorable thing to put yourself on the level of him who injures you. A heathen philosopher used to say, "If an ass kicks you, is it necessary for the maintenance of your honor to kick that ass again?" That speech looks like a noble one, but yet it is too much flavored with contempt. When you speak, or even think, of another who has wronged you as though he were only worthy to be regarded as a beast, you are not right in spirit, a degree of evil remains in your heart. Think of the offender without contempt, as well as without resentment. Believe that he is a brother worth winning. Say, "If he does me an injury, for that very reason I will do him a double service. My only vengeance shall be double love. I will not allow myself to even think harshly of him. I will put the best possible construction on all that he does, and thus show that the spirit of Christ is in me, conquering the spirit of fallen humanity both in me and in him."



CHARLES SPURGEON

Great Forgiveness for Great Sin

Great Forgiveness for Great Sin

Charles Spurgeon

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I like the way Luther talks upon this subject.... He says, "Jesus Christ is not a sham savior for sham sinners, but He is a real Savior Who offers a real atonement for real sin, for gross crimes, for shameless offenses, for transgressions of every sort and every size." And a far greater One than Luther has said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa 1:18). I have set the door of mercy open widely, have I not? There is no one here who will dare to say, "Mr. Spurgeon said that I was too guilty to be forgiven!" I have said nothing of the kind. However great your guilt, though your sins, like the great mountains, tower above the clouds, the floods of divine mercy can roll over the tops of the highest mountains of iniquity and drown them all. God give you grace to believe this and to prove it true this very hour!

The greatness of God's forgiveness may be judged by the freeness of it. When a poor sinner comes to Christ for pardon, Christ does not ask him to pay anything for it, to do anything, to be anything, or to feel anything, but He freely forgives him. I know what you think: "I shall have to go through a certain penance of heart, at any rate, if not of body. I shall have to weep so much, or pray so much, or do so much, or feel so much." That is not what the gospel says. That is only your false view about it. The gospel says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Act 16:31). Trust Jesus Christ, and the free pardon of sin is at once given without money and without price (Isa 55:1).

Another thing that indicates its greatness is its immediateness. God will forgive you at once, as soon as you trust Christ. There was a daughter, well beloved by her father, who, in an evil hour, left her home and came to London. Here, having no friends, she soon fell a prey to wicked men and became an utter wreck. A city missionary met with her, spoke faithfully to her about her sin, and the Holy Spirit brought her to the Savior's feet. The missionary asked for her father's name and address; and at last, she told him. But she said, "It is no use for you to write to him. I have brought such dishonor on my family that I am quite certain he would not reply to any letter." They wrote to the father and stated the case; and the letter that came back bore on the envelope, in large text hand, the word Immediate. Inside, he wrote, "I have prayed every day that I might find my child and am rejoiced to hear of her. Let her come home at once. I have freely forgiven her, and I long to clasp her to my bosom." Now, soul, if thou seekest mercy, this is just what the Lord will do with thee. He will send thee mercy marked Immediate, and thou shalt have it at once. I recollect how I found mercy in a moment, as I was told to look to Jesus, and I should be forgiven. I did look; and, swift as a lightning flash, I received the pardon of sin in which I have rejoiced to this very hour. Why should it not be the same with you, the blackest and worst sinner here, the most unfeeling and the least likely to repent? Lord, grant it; and Thou shalt have the praise!



PAUL TAYLOR

Children Forgiven in Light of the Facts

1 John 3:2-6

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be.

We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.

You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.”

John calls those whose sins are forgiven “children of God” (1 Jn. 2:12), yet in these verses he observes that we do not look like the Father who has begotten us: “it has not appeared as yet what we will be.” Furthermore, we are told that everyone hoping in Christ should “purify himself, as He is pure.” But how can we do this since we fall short of our calling? To encourage us in pursuing holiness, John reviews three indisputable facts, regardless of our external appearance:

First, sin is lawlessness (v. 4). When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they transgressed

God's law, rejecting His standard and substituting their own. They, and their posterity with them, became lawless and thereby separated from God. As long as we are sinful, as long as we are lawless, we cannot be reconciled to the law-giving Lord. This fact would drive us to despair, were it the end of the story.

But the second fact answers the need of the first: Christ appeared in order to take away sin (v. 5). As the Godman dwelling with us (Jn. 1:14, 6:38), He lived perfectly because "in Him there is no sin"; He obeyed where we did not. Additionally, in His work on the cross, Christ takes our sin upon Himself, bearing its punishment in our place. His death settles the matter of sin. If Christ took away my sin, and in Him there is no sin, then where is the sin He took away? "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12).

These two facts, (1) sin is lawlessness and (2) Christ takes away sin, lead to John's concluding third fact: God in Christ justifies His children: "No one who abides in Him sins" (v.6). While God's children prescriptively should not practice sin (cf. 1 Jn. 3:9), here they are told that they do not sin. Whereas lawlessness is applied to those "practicing sin" (v. 4), the absence of sin is applied to those "abiding in Christ." Those forgiven in Christ are not judged by their present shortcomings but according to the effective righteousness of Him in whom "there is no sin."

These facts should fill us with joy, and hope for our sanctification! In Christ God the Father has forgiven our sins and named us His children. Whether we feel worthy or not, those who abide in Christ are the Father's children and still will be when Christ returns (1 Jn. 3:1-2).

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift (2 Cor. 9:15)!

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THOMAS WINN

As You Have Been Forgiven

“Merciful LORD, pardon all my sins of this day, week, year, all the sins of my life, sins of early, middle, & advanced years, of omission & commission, of morose, peevish & angry tempers, of lip, life & walk, of hard-heartedness, unbelief, presumption, pride, of unfaithfulness to the souls of men, of want of bold decision in the cause of Christ, of deficiency in outspoken zeal for his glory, of bringing dishonour upon thy great name, of deception, injustice, untruthfulness in my dealings with others...”

This is the beginning of a Puritan prayer entitled SINS. As I preached through the Lord’s Prayer, I came to Matthew 6:12, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Jesus links God’s forgiving us and our forgiving others. When we forgive others we can know that it does not merit God’s forgiving us, for salvation and forgiveness is by grace alone. The emphasis is on forgiveness we receive, due to the work of Christ. When we grasp God’s forgiveness, then we are able to forgive others. Forgiving others reveals that we understand how gracious and merciful God has been to us. We cannot be like the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21-35), though he was forgiven much, he would not forgive the one who owed him so little. This parable is a good commentary of 6:12. I am not implying that forgiving others who wrong you is easy, “the flesh lusts against the spirit”. I believe this is one reason Jesus adds verses 14-15 immediately after the Lord’s Prayer: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This is the only petition reiterated from the Lord’s Prayer. I believe He reemphasizes forgiveness because He knows we are prone not to forgive. We must remember how often we have sinned against God, and yet He has forgiven us. No one has ever sinned against us as much, so how

can we not willingly forgive them? A Christian must forgive, we cannot withhold forgiveness or be bitter in our hearts toward others. Let us demonstrate God's forgiveness by forgiving others. Christ demonstrated forgiveness as He hung on the Cross. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." This IS Amazing Grace! As often stated: "men of grace should above all be gracious."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Pastor Thomas is a native of Laurel, Mississippi. He came to Grace Baptist Church as Elder in 1999 and was called as Senior Pastor in 2001. He began his preaching ministry in 1981, and has served as pastor of churches in Mississippi for over 30 years now. He earned an Associate of Arts Degree from Clarke Memorial College in 1976 followed by a Bachelor of Music Degree from the University of Southern Mississippi in 1978. Upon graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi, he continued his education at New Orleans Baptist Seminary and earned a Master of Religious Education in 1981. To better equip himself to pastor, he continued his studies for a Master of Divinity at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. His pastorate ministry began as an Associate Pastor at Trinity Baptist Church in Laurel Mississippi from 1981 to 1983 and Briarwood Drive Baptist Church in Jackson Mississippi from 1983 to 1988. He was then called as Senior Pastor to Halbert Heights Baptist Church in Brookhaven Mississippi from 1988 to 1993, followed by Graceway Baptist Church in Jackson Mississippi from 1993-1998. Pastor Thomas married Lawanda Wells Winn, of Laurel, in August of 1978 and they have three daughters and a son. Bethany who is married to Cody Wallace, Bridgette who is married to Chris Kimbrell, Allyson who is married to Terry Leach, and Dawson. They also have eleven grandchildren.



FRED G. ZASPEL

Forgiven and Forgiving

In all the Christian vocabulary there is scarcely a word more cherished than the word forgiven. It is basic to all our hope. We stand before God accused, guilty, and owing a debt greater than we could ever pay. But resting our case on Jesus Christ who in the place of sinners paid that debt in full we are released from it, judicially pardoned, and accepted as God's children.

Jesus' instruction on forgiveness (Matt. 18:15–20) and parable of the two debtors (Matt. 18:21–35) brims with significance on multiple levels. Here we will highlight only a few. First, we learn something about the nature of forgiveness. This is only implicit in the passage, but it is difficult to miss. The two debtors—one with an insurmountable debt, the other with a perhaps manageable debt—were both forgiven. The king released them from obligation to pay. They were frankly and fully forgiven. What we must not miss is that in so doing, the king absorbed the loss himself. He, in effect, paid the debt for them. Their forgiveness demanded a substitutional payment which, in this case, was paid by the king himself.

So it is with us. God forgives us absolutely; he releases us from our sin-debt. But he does not forgive by divine fiat merely. He forgives on just grounds: the God against whom we have sinned has himself, in the person of his Son, paid the debt for us. This is the very meaning of the cross and the glad announcement of the gospel. Jesus Christ took the curse of our sin to himself, and we are released from it. The lesson is clear: forgiveness demands substitutional payment.

The leading point of the parable, however, concerns us who have been forgiven. Focus lands on the debtor who was forgiven that insurmountable debt, who afterwards exacted full payment of

one who owed him a manageable sum and sold him and his family into servitude to even the score. To him the king says, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (vv. 32–33).

The point here painfully obvious: forgiveness demands forgiveness, and this is what our Lord presses. When a brother sins against us and then repents, we are obliged to forgive—and this without limit, even “seventy times seven” (vv. 21–22). We ourselves have been forgiven an insurmountable debt, and thus we are implicitly obliged to forgive others. It’s the gospel way.

Your brother slanders you, harms your reputation, and then comes in repentance. He may seek to repair the damage as he is able, but damage is done. To forgive him you must absorb the loss. You accept the consequences of his sin against you. We cannot say, “That is the last straw!” or “I’ll never forget this!” Recalling the infinite debt that we have been forgiven we resist the urge to get even or even hold grudge. We forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven a much greater debt.

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