

Reconciling with One Another: Forgiveness, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

Let's consider our responsibility when someone comes to us, this person who's hurt our feelings, who has offended us, who's done something terrible, even horrible. But they come to us, they confess their sin using biblical language, they, they seek forgiveness. What do we do to complete that transaction of biblical reconciliation? Step number three, grant forgiveness. Grant forgiveness! It's pretty simple right? Pretty simple. When you've been offended by someone else's sin, and that person comes to you confessing sin, asking for forgiveness, you forgive.

In a book called *Forgive and Love Again* the authors cite a number of the biblical word pictures that portray the releasing power of forgiveness. They cite 88 different pictures in the Bible. To grant forgiveness is such a powerful virtue; it's so God-like. It's been said that you're never more like God than when you forgive. It's very healthy for us because it's righteous in God's sight. Here are just a few pictures that the

authors pull out from Scripture which are particularly helpful. To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door, and let the prisoner walk free. To forgive is to write in large letters a court room and declare, Not Guilty! To forgive is to loose the moorings of the ship and release it to the open sea. To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned criminal. To forgive is to loosen a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent. To forgive is to sand blast a wall full of graffiti, leaving it looking like new. To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be pieced together again. So helpful. The authors say when we forgive, we consciously before God, cancel the debt, we discard the note, we pardon the prisoner, we release the offender.

That's forgiveness. That's freedom, beloved. That's the freedom we have been brought into as Christians, to be able to forgive other people. This is why Jesus continually commanded his disciples to forgive others. In Luke 17:3-4, he said, "If your brother sins rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in the day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." He's, he's concerned about the health, the spiritual condition, of his disciples. Listen, when someone who's sinned against you, when that person comes confessing their sin, asking for forgiveness,

Jesus said you must forgive him. There are no options here. Why? Because God forgives all those who come to him confessing their sins and asking for his forgiveness. So if God, the greater, forgives those who come to him, who are you, the lesser, to withhold forgiveness? That's sound logic.

It's all patterned on the character of God the Father, the one who revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, reciting the attributes of that very nature. He said, when he revealed himself to Moses, Moses said, "God, show me your glory. If I'm going to lead this people I need to see your glory. I need to have a knowledge of you so that I can have the strength and the courage to lead a rebellious and sinful people because I'm rebellious and sinful myself. Help me, let me see your glory." And the Lord said, "I'm going to put you in a rock, and I'm gonna hide you and protect you from the full glory of my presence, so that you don't die, because no one can see me and live. But I will pass by and I will declare to you my glory."

Notice it's not in some goose-bump experience that Moses gets here. It's in words. Words. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." He goes on from

there, but for Moses' purposes he needed to know that. He needed to know that when those people wanted to stone him and go back to Egypt, that God is by nature a forgiving God. And as the mediator of the people, as the leader of the people, he by nature needed to be a forgiving man. God doesn't excuse sin, but he does forgive sin and he doesn't do it reluctantly either.

If you are still in Luke 15, let's finish that story, by observing the father's response to the prodigal's return. Look at it there in Luke 15, starting in verse 20, "He arose," probably wiped off some muck from the pigsty, tried to clean himself up as much as possible, "came to his father. while he was still a long way off, his father saw him." How did he see him a long way off? His father was looking for him. Isn't that awesome? He's got out the first-century binoculars, and he's looking for his son. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him "and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead,

and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."

Casting aside all cultural expectations of appropriate retribution, of proper decorum, this father, he's beside himself with joy. He's, he's filled with compassion. He's filled with longing for this son. He runs. He embraces. He kisses his repentant son. That is forgiveness portrayed. The fathers not trapped in bitterness. He's not trapped in sulking anger over the son wanting him dead. So ready is the father to forgive his son, the son isn't even able to finish his, his prepared speech. He didn't even get through it all. His father's eagerness to forgive and reconcile cuts off his son's confession in mid-sentence. "Quickly, get the best robe, cover him in it, put a ring on his hand." He covered him in his best robe because he didn't want anybody to see the shame of his filth. Isn't that beautiful.

Put a ring on his hand, show he's mine. Shoes on his feet, kill the fattened calf, let's have a banquet, rejoice over my son. He was dead and lost. That is no relationship possible with someone like that, but now he's found, he's alive, let's restore him. That's the attitude of a loving father full, complete forgiveness, profound love, profound joy, and all of it

expressed outwardly, exuberantly, lavishly. He didn't care what other people around him think. Listen, beloved, Jesus told that story to illustrate the attitude of our father. That's his love for us, whenever we come to him in a spirit of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

At this point I want to stop and just do a little bit of theology, all right, on forgiveness, because I want to clarify something, here, that comes up from time to time and causes confusion for people. If we have been fully forgiven as a result of being born again and putting our faith in Jesus Christ, why do we need to ask God to forgive us when we sin? Aren't we already forgiven? I mean, can we be more forgiven than what we were at the foot of the cross? Or is it the case that whenever we sin we have fallen out of the grace of God, that we have lost our salvation, we somehow need to be re-saved? Is it that kind of theology that you may have heard? Maybe you know some people who go to churches like that and teach that.

But this issue of forgiveness and reconciliation, admittedly it's been a perplexing issue in the realm of theology which often confuses how we practice reconciliation. But if we start with the nature of God's forgiveness as it's supplied to

each one of us, his children, we're going to discover a pattern we can follow as well. And when we, when we first come to God, think back to before you were saved, you first come to God, it's, at that time, it's in a relationship of you the condemned sinner standing before the just and holy Judge. He's not going to bend the law in your direction, not one fraction of an inch because of our guilt before him. Because we transgressed his holy standard, we face an eternal death in Hell. That is our just and only reward for our sin. So the guilt we feel in our lost condition, this sense of fear we have over this foreboding, this looming punishment, the just sentence for our crimes, that sense of guilt and fear is intended to drive us to repentance. Sadly, most people refuse to reconcile.

But God is gracious and he brings us to himself, and when we come to God, we come repenting of our sins. We come embracing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and God forgives us. He covers us in Christ's righteousness. He adopts us into his family. We once related to God as a holy lawgiver and an impartial judge, and as such he was like to us a terrifying enemy, a powerful enemy, one we were unable to contend with. Because of his grace here in granting forgiveness, the relationship is changed. That's what Romans 5:1 says, "By faith we have peace with God." Do you know what peace means? It doesn't mean at this point in

Romans 5:1, it doesn't mean, happy feelings of contentment and security. It means, literally, you were once at war with God, and now you are no longer at war with God. It's an objective peace between two warring parties, you and God. And God made you reconciled and gives you peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We were once enemies; God has made us friends. We who were once aliens and strangers, God has made us family. He's our father, we're his children. And now, now when we sin against God, no longer as enemies but now as his children, as a result of the change in our relationship, our sin against God is interpreted differently. Sin still fractures the relationship but not eternally, not fundamentally. That question about our sin was answered forever by Jesus Christ when he died on the cross. And when we, when we were born again and when we embraced him in repentance and faith, that atonement that he provided was complete.

Now when we sin against God, it's like a disobedient child who sins against his father. Sin disrupts the relationship between Parent and child; it doesn't destroy the nature of that relationship. We're still God's children; he's still our father. As the Apostle John assures us in 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, we are God's children now." Now we are God's children. I love that

word, now! Because our sin has been fully paid for, we're never in danger of losing God's forgiveness, never in danger of being cast out of the family. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ," Romans 8:39. But our sin does disrupt the fellowship, it does fracture the unity and it does destroy the harmony in our relationship with God the Father, not, not from his end, from our end. When we realize it, when we really understand the insolent nature of our sin against our beloved father, its ingratitude, its ugliness, its self-centeredness, its rebellion. Our sin against our loving Father breaks our heart, that's what it should do.

He wants us to learn to walk in all of his ways. When we obey the father, particularly in this issue of forgiving others, we find that this is the path to joy and satisfaction. We find it's the way of peace and full contentment. So look, when we sense our guilt before God our Father, it's to produce remorse over our sin. It's to produce a repentance that leads to life. When we confess our sins to him, we confess like a child confesses to his father, and of course, as any loving father would, God embraces us immediately, instantly. He snatches us up into his arms, we're restored in security and the joy of that loving relationship.

So when we come to God for the first time, as back when we were unredeemed sinners, repenting of our sin, seeking forgiveness, we want to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God stood there at that time ready to forgive. And he demonstrated that forgiveness in that transaction by actually forgiving us. The judge became our father; the enemy became our friend. Thereafter though, every time we sin against him, it's in the way that a child sins against his father. When we come to him confessing our sins, asking for forgiveness, he stands ready to forgive. He demonstrates that in that transaction by actually forgiving us. He lovingly, quickly, restores us back into full fellowship like a loving parent would with a beloved child.

What does that have to do with us? Everything. The example of God's readiness to forgive, the immediacy with which he forgives, that example isn't just something for us to observe and to sing songs about. It's for us to follow. His example becomes our mandate. We read earlier how God described himself to Moses as "merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." He is a God who's ready to forgive, and he actually forgives whenever we come. We learn from God's heart to reconcile when we're first reconciled to him, when by his grace we hear that appeal of the Apostle Paul,

"Be reconciled to God" when we draw near to him. Then and only then could we experience his heart to reconcile, and that transaction of reconciliation, it's not merely for the sake of principle. It's for the sake of experiencing his love and forgiveness. Why? So we might worship and rejoice.

So because of God's magnanimous compassion, his tender mercy, he's quick to forgive each and every one of us. We need to have the same heart toward one another. Paul said Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another." How, Paul? Well, "as God in Christ forgave you." Fuller expression of that same principle, Colossians 3:12-13, "Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, if anyone has a complaint against another forgiving each other. As the Lord has forgiven you, you also must forgive." Like God we need to have that same heart of compassion toward sinners. They're people just like you and me, standing in need of God's forgiveness.

Any offense that people have committed against us, it's petty in comparison to the offenses they've committed against God. That's why it's actually sinful to withhold forgiveness from others when they ask. In fact, to refuse to forgive

somebody it may be evidence that there is no relationship with the father. That's what Jesus explained when he taught his disciples to pray. He said in Matthew 6:12, he told them ask God, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Did you get that comparison? "Forgive us father when we sin against you in the same way as I forgive everybody else." If you withhold forgiveness, are you asking God also to withhold forgiveness? That implies that everybody who belongs to God's family, they all bear the same forgiving nature of the father of that family right? Like father, like children. Jesus unpacked it further, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses."

The only person that God withholds forgiveness from are those who do not come to him to seek his forgiveness. That is, unbelievers. Jesus is saying, if you don't forgive, you are not a forgiving person, that means you are not one of his children. It's such a clear family trait, that if you don't forgive at all, it's evidence you are not in the family.

In closing, I'd like to illustrate this by having you turn to Matthew 18. Matthew 18, because this really lays it out here.

The whole chapter is about Jesus helping us to understand how to think about sin among believers, reconciling within the fellowship of the church. Jesus describes in Matthew 18:15-20 how to restore a sinning brother back into the fellowship. Peter follows that by asking a rather pointed, astute question. He knows forgiveness is required for a repenting brother who confesses sin and asks for forgiveness, but he's wondering just how far does this go. Look at verse 21. Peter came up and said to Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him, as many as seven times?" He thinks he's being rather magnanimous here, maybe even going a bit overboard with this seven times of forgiving offenses. I mean how, how far does this go, come on? Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times but seventy times seven." Peter's doing a little math, okay? Seven times seven, forty-nine, seven times, drop the zero down, that equals 490 times. Four hundred and ninety times!?

The Lord's not asking Peter to do some quick arithmetic here; he's calling Peter to be ready to forgive to have an attitude of eagerness to forgive and then to actually forgive and to forgive repeatedly. And that's the way of the father who has forgiven each and every one of us, and listen beloved, far beyond the 490 sin limit. I'm so thankful, aren't you? I don't know how long ago I crossed that limit.

In case Peter misses the point, Jesus reinforced it with another story. Look at verse 23. Jesus said, "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. And when he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents." I won't do the math on that; let's just say you need to know that is an unpayable debt, a thousand lifetimes, he could not pay that debt. For him it might as well have been infinite money. It's an eternal debt, he cannot pay this, and Jesus, he's telling the story and has the right to put as many talents as he wants in there. He's saying it's unpayable. He owed him ten thousand talents in verse 25, "Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made."

It's not to make him repay the ten thousand talents. It's just to get something out of this worthless slave. "So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" No he won't, "but he's says 'I will pay you everything.' Out of pity for him," not because he's fooled into thinking he's going to be repaid, but "out of pity for him the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out," isn't that interesting, right out of the, the courtroom, right? "when that

same servant went out he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, seizing him, began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed." Knowing they probably owed him money, too. "So they were greatly distressed and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. And then his master summoned him and said to him, '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?' In anger his master delivered him over to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt." Need I remind you he'll never be able to repay it, especially when he's jailed. How's he going to make any money there? "So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother," look at that last prepositional phrase, "from your heart."

That's powerful, that's penetrating, that's convicting, isn't it? Those who do not forgive, doesn't matter if they call themselves Christians, doesn't matter if they walked the aisle when they were young, doesn't matter if they signed the card, if

they got baptized. It doesn't matter what they say about themselves. If they don't forgive, they are not members of the family. Because God forgives those who belong to him, and those who belong to God demonstrates the nature of the father by forgiving in the same manner as he does, and they do it from the heart.

So if you've confessed your sin to God, the other person you've offended, you've sought forgiveness, granted forgiveness, all that process there is called the transaction of forgiveness. That's what it is, that's biblical reconciliation in a nutshell. This is the basis of reconciliation. This provides the platform for growing and maturing in our relationships with one another. This is how we fulfill James 5:16, "Confess our sins to one another and pray for one another that we may be healed." This is how we, beloved, as a church, as a family, as Christians, this is how we protect, we maintain our unity, which promises all the benefits of the harmony, which are joy, fruitfulness, safety, security in the body of Christ.