

## THE LIFE OF FORGIVENESS: WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Central to the Christian faith stands the images of the cross and an empty tomb. It was there that the history of the world turned the corner and God began his new creation anticipated since the fall of man. One of the fundamental accomplishments of the cross and resurrection was the forgiveness of sin. Only through dealing with the problem of sin could God's intention for man and the rest of creation come to its completion. Forgiveness of sins is fundamental and, thus, essential for life to be lived the way God intended from the beginning. Sin disrupts and destroys peace intended between God and man *and* between man and man. In Christ God dealt decisively with sin by accomplishing the forgiveness of sins. This was the message of the apostles consistently after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Peter tells the officials in Israel that the one they crucified is the very one that God exalted to his right hand to be "Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Ac 5.31). Paul, teaching in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch concludes, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins" (Ac 13.38). Paul's mission was defined by Christ in part as preaching the forgiveness of sins to the Gentiles (Ac 26.18). It is through the blood of Christ that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1.7; Col 1.14). According to Peter we are baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Ac 2.38). Forgiveness of sins is central to the message of the gospel b/c God in Christ has accomplished this forgiveness. That is good news.

Knowing that our sins are forgiven is a glorious truth. As we believe God's promise in Christ, we enjoy that which he has accomplished: the forgiveness of sins. But the forgiveness of our sins personally is more than a privilege. It is a calling, a vocation. As we become a part of the family of God through forgiveness, we are called to take on the character of the family and learn to practice forgiveness with one another in the family. *As disciples of Jesus, Christians are called into a lifestyle of forgiveness which involves dealing appropriately with sin and seeking to restore a communion of peace with others.*

Having dealt with how we are to pursue and maintain peace by cultivating certain characteristics in ourselves and in our relationships, we now turn to how to pursue peace once the peace has been broken through sin. In other words, we will deal with forgiveness. This is a subject upon which we need to think deeply and apply regularly. In this and the following articles I plan to deal with questions such as "What is forgiveness?" "Why do I need to forgive?" "When should I forgive?" and "How should I forgive?" Hopefully, you will add some more tools to your collection so that you can more adequately build relationships of peace with others.

In this article we begin with the question, "What is forgiveness?" Next time, Lord willing, I will deal with the opposite of this and try to clear up some misconceptions about what forgiveness involves.

Forgiveness is easy enough to define. Forgiveness is *the refusal to exact revenge or demand payment on a legitimate debt*. While the definition may be simple enough, understanding the shape of forgiveness in this or that situation is much more difficult. So, while the definition is useful, it is better to describe what forgiveness is and/or what it involves. Jesus and Paul in In Matt 18.21-35 and Eph 4.17-5.2 respectively use two different words which both are correctly translated "forgiveness," but they emphasize different aspects of forgiveness. The word that Jesus uses in Matt 18 (as well as earlier in Mt 6.12, 14, 15) has to do with letting something go, giving it up, or abandoning it. It is easy to see how this word can be translated forgiveness because forgiveness involves cancelling a debt, letting it go, or giving it up (e.g. as the king did with his servant's debt in Jesus' story in Matt 18). Forgiveness involves a release; freeing someone from that which enslaves them in some form or fashion. When you forgive, you open the cage as it

were and let them go.

The word Paul uses in Eph 4.32 (twice), and is his preferred word for forgiveness in his epistles (cf. 2Cor 2.7, 10; Col 2.13; 3.13), has as its root the idea of grace. The word speaks about giving or granting freely as a favor. The word is, of course, translated correctly in particular contexts as forgiveness, but it seems to me that it emphasizes the freeness of the forgiver. When you forgive, you are granting pardon to someone who has a legitimate debt and, for all intents and purposes, is undeserving of what he receives.

While both of these words are essentially synonymous, I believe they show us two emphases of forgiveness that we need to see. Jesus' word in Mt focuses on the freedom *granted*, i.e., emphasizing the new condition of the forgiven. The word that Paul uses emphasizes the freedom of the *giver*; i.e., grace is the disposition of the one forgiving. Both aspects of forgiveness are true and must be involved if forgiveness takes place. There is release for the one in debt and the gracious disposition of the one who forgives. The gracious disposition of the offended releases the offender from the just penalty of his sin.

This is easy enough to understand by way of textbook definition, but there are many aspects of forgiveness, many things involved in forgiveness into which we need to dig deeper.

Gregory Jones, in his book *Embodying Forgiveness*, tells us generally what forgiveness involves. Much of what he says I want to unpack throughout these articles. For now, let me give you the dense statement that he makes.

... [W]e can indicate several features that are conjoined in the craft of forgiveness: truthful judgment about what has happened or is happening, a willingness to acknowledge both the propriety of anger, resentment, or bitterness and a desire to overcome and be freed from it, a concern for the well-being of the other(s) as children of God, recognition of the ways in which we have all needed to be forgiven (thus suggesting the close links between forgiveness and other virtues such as humility, generosity, and compassion), an acknowledgment that the truthful judgment requires accountability directed toward the grace of new life (which thus may require occasions where the fullness of forgiveness is 'withheld'), and the hope for eventual reconciliation (though in extreme cases this may be a matter of 'hoping against hope'). These are not inevitable 'stages' of forgiveness; they are diverse though interrelated themes that interact in different ways in the craft of forgiveness. How they are conjoined in particular circumstances, situations, and lives cannot be determined in advance; they are the focus of ongoing discernment within the craft, led by the exemplars who excel in the craft (and hence are gifted at wise discernment), and preeminently guided and judged by the work of the Holy Spirit." (231-2)

As you can hear, forgiveness has many components with a number of things that must be taken into consideration. As I proceed I will be moving from the more general to the more specific. For now, I want to describe what forgiveness is with six statements. First ...

### *1. Forgiveness involves the recognition of legitimate debt.*

Without a debt that needs to be paid, forgiveness is meaningless. If there is a need for genuine forgiveness, then there is the presence of a debt. The presence of that debt must be recognized by one or both parties involved.

Debt takes on many forms. We normally think of debt in terms of financial relationships.

I have loaned this person money and he is in debt to me. I am in debt when I owe money to the bank. This is certainly a form of debt. But debt—all debt, financial or what we might call moral—is all ultimately relational. I have heard it said this way: debt does not exist. People exist. This does not mean that debts aren't real. If you have borrowed money from the bank, then you owe that money. Ultimately, though, debts are concerned with the bonds or connections formed between us by words and deeds. Debts are what we owe to someone because of a relationship we have entered into. Money, for example, may be the substantive aspect of the commitment we have made, but we have formed a relationship with our word and through our deeds in which we have become obligated to another person (even though that person may be a faceless corporation; possibly a problem with credit cards and such the like which de-personalize debt). When you sign your name, you have entered a relationship in which you have made commitments with another person.

Understanding debt in relational instead of merely monetary terms helps us to understand part of the reason why we can pray in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Yes, this deals with larger themes of the Year of Jubilee, the forgiveness of monetary debts, and the release of indentured servants. But it can also be understood as sins. Sin involves not fulfilling a commitment or obligation. It is falling short of that obligation and thus puts me in debt to God and/or to other people. Debt, in terms of sin, means that I have not fulfilled my commitments.

Forgiveness is only appropriate when there is an unpaid debt. That debt has to be legitimate. It cannot simply be your unrealistic expectations of others that they constantly fall short of. This is a legitimate debt incurred by violating the standards of a particular relationship. Keeping this in monetary terms, let's say you have an expectation that certain people ought to give you money. You are entitled to the money simply because you exist in relationship with this person or these people. When you are offended and feel wronged that people don't give you money, that is not a legitimate debt. People are not obligated to give you money simply because you live. (May our government learn this lesson!)

The same is true with other actions of others that may rub us the wrong way but are not legitimate debts. A person's non-sinful difference in personality from you is not something that needs forgiveness. When we think it is, we do not take sin seriously and therefore we do not take forgiveness seriously. Forgiveness takes sin seriously. One who stands in a position to forgive recognizes that sin is the destroyer of relationships. Forgiveness, as Jones stated, involves truthful judgment about sin. It does not whitewash it or pass it off as if it were nothing. In order for the process of forgiveness to begin, there must be an acknowledgment that sin has altered the relationship. Bonds have been damaged that need to be restored. Commitments have gone unfulfilled that need to be made right. The person offended, the person who stands in the position to forgive, must make a truthful judgment of the action or non-action of the other person that has put him in this debt. Passing it off by saying, "It was nothing" is not adequate and does not begin the forgiveness to which we are called. Responding this way either takes sin too lightly or is a way to hold on to it to use at another time. Since we are called into lives of forgiveness and to practice forgiveness in particular situations, this means that we must take sin seriously and be truthful in our judgments of it.

This, of course, we see preeminently in the cross of Christ. For there to be the restoration of peace between God and man, sin had to be called what it was. The breach that it caused could not be dismissed willy nilly. A truthful judgment had to be made. It could not be denied. For us to follow Christ in this life of forgiveness with one another, the first thing that must be recognized is that there is a legitimate debt that must be dealt with before the relationship can be

at peace as God intends it.

Forgiveness involves the recognition of legitimate debt. Forgiveness can also be described a second way:

*2. Forgiveness is release and new life.*

The debt that is incurred in a relationship breaks the bonds of that relationship in some way. This is a form of death in relationship. This is something real that we actually feel in our bones many times. I am not saying that it is not “objective” in terms of violating a real, legitimate standard. I am saying that we know and can feel when our relationships are not right. God the Holy Spirit creates these bonds between us. When they are broken it is a spiritual matter that maybe we can’t describe perfectly. It is mysterious to us in many ways, but we know it is there. Not until those bonds are restored through the process of forgiveness and all that is entailed with it, do we experience a resurrection, a new life, in our relationships. Forgiveness of sins restores the bonds of a relationship because it releases the other from his debt so that the sin which destroyed the relationship bringing about its death, is no longer a factor. When the debt is gone the relationship can live as it was intended to live.

This, as you might rightly assume, is also grounded in God’s own actions in Christ in his death and resurrection. Paul tells us in Rom 4.25 that Jesus was delivered up for our sins and raised again for our justification, which involves the forgiveness of sins. In other words, Jesus took upon himself our sins and died for them. When he was raised from the dead, that was God’s declaration that our sins had been forgiven. Sin had to be dealt with decisively. But once it is dealt with, the declaration of forgiveness *is* resurrection from the dead. We know that sins have been forgiven because Jesus has been released from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the effective announcement that sins are forgiven. If Jesus stays in the tomb, Paul says in 1Cor 15, that we are still in our sins. Death remains. We are not at peace with God and, consequently, we cannot have true peace with one another.

It is in the death and resurrection of Jesus that we see the shape forgiveness takes. When full forgiveness is declared, there is release from the debt and a transformed relationship. (We will discuss some qualifications to this later, but generally speaking, our relationship is transformed and some type of new life occurs when we forgive one another.)

So, for instance, if your friend says some things to you that insult you or says some things that are untrue about you to others, he has created a breach in the relationship. If and when he comes to you asking forgiveness and willing to repent, you know that you have forgiven when you do not require any more of him and the hostility is gone between you. Barriers are broken down and the relationship is transformed from one of hostility to peace. (Again, I will deal with how sin changes some relationships drastically later. But again, this generally holds true. Be patient as we plod through these matters.)

Forgiveness, while looking different depending on the situation and the people involved, involves release from the debt and a new life in which that debt will not be required of the other person so that the debt itself no longer creates a barrier to reconciliation. Something else that we need to understand about forgiveness is that ...

*3. Forgiveness is costly.*

Commitments that are made to one another that go unfulfilled create a burden of some type on someone else. If it is a monetary debt, it means that person does not have the money that

he would have possessed had you paid him. If we are dealing with sinful words with one another, those words have created a history that cannot be changed. It will always be there. Certainly the history can be transformed, but the scars created by the words remain. When we don't fulfill our commitments in our marriages or in parenting, someone bears the burden of the unfulfilled commitment.

To forgive in any and all of these circumstances and in our various other relationships means that we ourselves must be willing to bear this burden without animosity or passing the evil on to someone else. Yes, forgiveness, as described earlier, is free, but it isn't cheap. Some debts are larger than others, so forgiveness in some situations is easier to grant than it is in other situations. But forgiveness costs the forgiver something rightfully owed him and becomes a burden that he must bear.

Once again the cross gives us the proper understanding of this. In order for forgiveness to be granted to us because of our sin against God, God himself had to bear the burden. Debts are real in relationships because people are real and covenants are real. Because of this the cost of unfulfilled commitments or the breaking of commitments must be borne by someone in the relationship. In order for there to be the forgiveness that brings about the new life of a relationship, the cost must be paid. To put it another way, in order for there to be a resurrection, there must first be the cross.

So, as you consider your calling to a life of forgiveness, understand that it means that it will cost you something. Some burden will have to be borne by you. The glorious news is that the cross and resurrection also give us the pattern of what happens to us when we forgive others. As we bear the burdens of others' broken commitments or sins against us, God promises us in Christ that there will be new life. There is not this perpetual sense of "You owe me." There really is new life created by God's Spirit in and among us so that the new life can be enjoyed.

Forgiveness is sometimes relegated to an act or particular acts in the history of our lives. We may tend to see forgiveness as dots along the continuous lines of our lives. But we need to know that for Christians ...

#### *4. Forgiveness is a way of life.*

Forgiveness is not only exemplified for us in the cross and resurrection of Christ, the cross and resurrection provide the pattern of our lives as followers of Christ. We live what can be called a *cruciform* or cross-shaped lives. Forgiveness of sins in others is part of what it means for us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses daily and follow Christ. Though forgiveness does occur at particular points in time with specific people in specific situations, it is more than that. Forgiveness is the shape of our lives.

Paul gives us an idea of this in his exhortations to the Ephesians from our epistle reading. In Ephesians 4.17ff. Paul is talking about living as the new humanity or the new man that has been re-created in Christ Jesus after the image of God. Jesus and his church as the new Adam and Eve are the new man and together are what God intended man to be from the beginning. Jesus brings to completion God's intention for man. Paul tells us what this looks like in our relationships with one another. As we put off the old man—the old age characterized by Adam and his sin—and put on the new man—the new age characterized by Christ and his righteousness and holiness—our relationships change with one another within this new humanity.

One thing that characterizes us as this new humanity we read about in Eph 4.32: we are to be forgiving one another even as God in Christ has forgiven us. Forgiveness of our sins shaped God's own life in relationship to us so that everything he did and does moves him toward

reconciliation with us and the fullness of a relationship of peace that he intended.

Forgiveness assumes and requires a commitment to others within this family. Underlying particular acts of forgiveness is fidelity to the relationship with the other person. Fidelity to that relationship and the desire to maintain and grow that relationship moves us learn, re-learn, and grow in creative ways to exercise and express forgiveness. Jones again is helpful here when he says, “For Christians, forgiveness is not simply an action, an emotional judgment, or a declarative utterance—though Christian forgiveness includes all those dimensions. Rather, forgiveness is a habit that must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community. This is so because ... in the face of sin and evil God’s love moves toward reconciliation by means of forgiveness.” (163)

Forgiveness is a habit of life that is learned and lived on a day by day basis so that we are living lives of grace with one another. But as a way of life, forgiveness is not something we ever completely master. I don’t mean to be discouraging, but none of us will ever come to the point where he can say, “I now totally understand how to forgive or what to do in every situation.” As we move through history and we and others around us change, so do the opportunities to learn new ways to express forgiveness. We are ever presented with deeper and greater challenges that cause us to think through fresh ways to demonstrate God’s grace to others in forgiveness.

Forgiveness must then be looked upon as a craft (as Jones so aptly characterizes it). The “learning never stops because the presentation of ever-new situations, circumstances, and lives never ends.” (227) We gain new tools through series such as this. But we only learn how to use those tools properly and even in new and interesting ways as we apply them in different situations. Hearing lectures on how to build a house is no substitute for picking up saws and hammers and having to apply them to actual wood. You will make mistakes along the way. Your walls may not be exactly straight so that you must go back and have to repair them. But through it all you are learning the craft. Each situation is like receiving a new and never-before-seen blueprint for construction on a new house. Your same basic knowledge and skills are applied, but they will be challenged by this new situation and building things you have never encountered before.

Judging your progress in this craft of forgiveness is not determined by one particular event. You must look back over a period of history and see how far you have come, how you handle things differently now than you once did. The life of forgiveness must be looked upon as an opportunity to be always growing and maturing in how you express this grace to others. It should be no more discouraging than the fact that you will never be completely mature and holy before the resurrection. Forgiveness, like the rest of the Christian life, is a journey on the road of holiness. We can and must practice forgiveness always, but we will never perfect it. We are always a work in progress.

The fifth description of forgiveness that I want you to consider is that ...

##### *5. Forgiveness is the facilitator of peace in relationships.*

In the articles concerning pursuing peace I spoke about peace as the goal of forgiveness. Peace is wholeness or health in relationships. We are looking for there to be health in relationships; for relationships to reflect the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Forgiveness, in this sense, is a means to an end. It is not the end itself. Forgiveness restores the bonds (to one degree or another) that have been broken by canceling those debts. I will explain in more depth later in the series why are to be concerned about forgiving and having peace in our relationships. For now, suffice it to say, that because sin is an inescapable part of our present

human existence, forgiveness will always be required of us to facilitate the peace that God wants us to have with one another. The goal of forgiveness is peace. It is not the peace itself. But it is necessary if there is to be peace.

The last description of forgiveness that I want to give you is ...

### *6. Forgiveness is complex.*

Complex does not necessarily mean the same thing as complicated. But the two do overlap. A situation is complex because there are many factors involved. We take many things for granted so many times that we do not think about just how complex our relationships are. Opening and closing your hand—a normal daily activity—is complex, requiring all sorts of brain, nerve, bone, and muscle activity. But it is not complicated (in normal circumstances). Complex does not necessarily mean complicated.

There are practically an infinite number of ways a relationship can go based on what is thought, said, or done at any particular point in time. Communication, for example, involves factors of personality, how I'm feeling at a given time, what has been going in my life that day, the way I was brought up to speak and hear things, as well as many other things. There are many pieces to our relationships that are simply so second-nature to us, that we rarely take time to think about them ... that is, until something goes wrong.

Forgiveness, while in many ways and at certain times quite simple, is also complex. It is complex in the sense that there are no templates to lay over every situation. The grace of forgiveness requires us to think about the other person involved and what is needful for him or her; something that will shape the way forgiveness looks in that specific circumstance. There are no handy techniques or shortcuts that will allow you to escape working through situations or avoiding the pain involved in forgiveness of others. Forgiveness, like much else in the Christian life, is a discipline of dying and rising with Christ and figuring out what that looks like when faced with the situation which calls for it to be embodied.

Forgiveness requires wisdom, and wisdom comes through exercising discernment in different situations and over a period of time to learn what is good and evil, right and wrong, or even good and best (cf. Heb 5.14). Wisdom, in part, is that which can take the principles and precepts given in childhood, the first principles and rules, understand their intent and goal, and seek to apply them in your present circumstance. There are no lists of rules that will cover every circumstance of forgiveness. You will learn the craft by doing it and gleaning wisdom from those who have practiced it longer than you.

This means that you need to be in a community in which forgiveness is practiced and find people who have matured in the craft of forgiveness and learn from them. They will not be able to give you all of the answers for every situation, taking from you the opportunity of struggling in the school of forgiveness. But they can help guide you through the complexities that you will face.

Remember, when dealing with forgiveness we are dealing with relationships. In dealing with relationships with one another, we are not dealing with machines or blocks of wood. Sometimes we may tend to think that our completely rational way of looking at things will settle the whole issue. Cold, hard reason that simply can't be refuted logically should be the silver bullet that takes care of the issue immediately. What we discover is that people don't always respond to our logic in this way. Many other factors must be taken into consideration. We shall get into some of those as we progress. For now we need to know that it is not a matter of 1-2-3 and the issue is settled. We are more than simply walking syllogisms for which "c" always and

irrevocably follows “a” and “b.”

So, as we start gathering tools for our craft, there must be a commitment to the discipline and hard work of living the life of forgiveness, pursuing the peace at which it aims. We must take sin seriously, calling it what it is, and deal with it properly. Sin cannot be taken too lightly and forgiveness cannot be cheapened by refusing to deal with sin. We must be willing to bear the burden of forgiveness so that others will not have to bear it, releasing them so that we can enjoy transformed relationships. The complexities of our relationships demand disciplines which cultivate discernment so that we may determine what the best tools are to use in a given circumstance. This life is not always easy, but because of the promise of God in Christ, it always leads to life. Are you committed to the life of forgiveness?