

October 25, 2009

**THE LIFE OF FORGIVENESS:
WHAT FORGIVENESS IS *NOT*
MATTHEW 18.21-35; EPHESIANS 4.17-5.2**

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.

It can be just as damaging to grant forgiveness in the wrong way as it is not to attempt to grant forgiveness at all. Not handling the opportunity to forgive properly short circuits the goal of forgiveness which is biblical peace in relationships.

1. Forgiveness is not refusing to deal with sin.

One form: *escape from reality*. The person doesn't want to deal with the real issues and finds a way to avoid dealing with the sin.

Can be done by *denial*. Just deny that the problem exists and it will go away. Dealing with sin issues in relationships through denial is not adequate or right. Sinful actions denied don't just go away. They express themselves in different ways in the relationship.

Flight = another escape-from-reality. This person realizes the problem but doesn't want to deal with it. He runs from it.

Biblical forgiveness, as I mentioned last time, begins by make a truthful judgment about the sin involved in the situation, naming it for what it is, and then deals with it straight up and straight on. Only in this way can true healing take place.

Second form: *cheap grace*. Cheap grace is that so-called grace that "forgives" without taking into account the seriousness of the sin, how it affects the other person and the long-term relationship, does not consider any of the complexities of the situation, and simply says, "I forgive" as if it were a magical incantation.

Jones: "Cheap grace denies any real need for deliverance from sin since it justifies the sin instead of the sinner. As such, cheap grace offers consolation without any change of life, without any sense of either dying or rising in Christ."

Goal of forgiveness—peace—must be taken into account. That goal controls and shapes what form forgiveness takes. For there to be peace in the fullest sense, *both parties* involved must be pursuing peace in the relationship; thus, each person needs to be dealing with his sin, the destroyer of peace.

Sometimes the grace of forgiveness may look like retributive justices (i.e. paying the person back for what he has done) b/c it requires him to deal with, own up to, and meet his responsibilities for the health of the long-term relationship.

Important for him (a) so that he will learn the seriousness of his sin and the fact that it will destroy him and those around him, (b) so that he be encouraged to avoid this sin the next time, and (c) so that he will learn to live up to his responsibilities.

Vengeance is not concerned about restoring the relationship. The grace that motivates forgiveness is concerned with peace.

Overlooking may be appropriate if something is uncharacteristic, but if it is harmful to him, to the glory of God, or to others, then forgiveness might need to take the shape of helping the person realize his responsibility.

Cheap grace in its justification of the sin actually *encourages* the sin and, therefore, the further destruction of the relationship.

Third form: *giving carte blanche forgiveness*; i.e. forgiveness which is given that disregards the complexities of a situation.

This can happen when you are sinned against and the person demands that you forgive them w/o them facing their responsibilities. People are not interested in the relationship, only doing what they want to do.

If we are to forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ as our epistle says, we must take sin seriously and deal with it. One need only look at the cross to understand the fact that God takes sin seriously. When he forgives he expects us, as we are commanded in our epistle, to live up to our responsibilities of being a part of his family.

2. Forgiveness is not being "healed" through therapy or counseling.

Going through counseling in difficult relationships and were sin is involved may be a wise move and even necessary. But the *act* of counseling or simply going to a counselor to unload week after week cannot be taken as a replacement for forgiveness.

Goal is not my psychological peace, but peace with those against whom I have sinned or who have sinned against me. (cf. Mt 18.15-17).

Counseling should encourage and hold you accountable for engaging in those actions that will seek to restore the relationship. And if you are not willing to go through that difficult process, then the counselor should say that he can help you no more.

One of the basic problems in much of today's counseling and therapy that actually undermines biblical forgiveness is the abdication of personal responsibility through blaming others for the sins that I commit. E.g. "I did this b/c of society, parents, etc."

Extending and/or pursuing forgiveness means owning up to one's responsibilities and particularly the failure to fulfill those responsibilities. The faithful Christian will own his own responsibility and not blame others for his own sin.

Forgiveness is not unloading on a counselor and coming to psychological rest for another week. Neither is it finding excuses for why you are sinning in a situation or why the other person is sinning in a situation and then passing it off as some type of disease.

In order to forgive, we must deal with the person(s) involved and take the steps necessary to restore the relationship. That person may not always respond as he should and you desire, but your responsibility is to pursue that peace with him through extending the promise of forgiveness to him no matter how he responds.

3. Forgiveness is not necessarily complete restoration of a relationship to the way that it was before the sin occurred.

Some sins can be forgiven and the relationship actually be better in the future. But this should not be a blanket rule.

E.g., one spouse sins so grievously against the other that a divorce is the result. If the sinning spouse does not repent until years later and possibly after the other spouse has remarried (depending on the situation), the level of intimacy enjoyed previously is not possible.

Note God and Adam from the beginning. Did God forgive Adam? Yes, evidenced by the shedding of blood and the clothing. But Adam could not have access to the Tree of Life any longer. Sin radically altered the relationship.

Ultimately sin will not prevail. As Christians all of our relationships will ultimately be one of peace. But as we continue to live with sin before the resurrection, we must take into account the ways in which sin may alter our relationships.

We are called, to be sure, to seek the reconciliation that we *will have in the future* in the present. We can do this, but we must realize that it may only be restored at the most fundamental or basic relationship that we have with one another: as brothers and sisters in Christ; maybe not at other levels of "extended" relationships (marriage, close friends, business, etc.).

Serious sin does not preclude forgiveness, but it does change the way the relationship will look after forgiveness has taken place.

4. Forgiveness does not always mean reconciliation.

This is rooted in the fact that for reconciliation to take place, both parties involved must pursue it.

Forgiveness can be granted to a certain degree to another person apart from reconciliation. That is, you may refuse to exact revenge and hold bitterness. You refuse to treat this person in the way that he justly deserves.

But that person must respond to your actions of forgiveness with the appropriate response—admission of guilt, confession, repentance, etc.—in order for reconciliation to take place.

Again, God's own actions in Christ give us an example of this. When Jesus was dying on the cross he prayed for those who crucified him, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Israel received a reprieve for 40 years (= to forgiveness; cf. Ps 78.38). Given space to repent of sins.

Cf. also 2Cor 5.19-20; God has reconciled all things to himself through Christ. Now, be reconciled to God; respond to him in faith.

You may extend the promise of and true forgiveness to someone, refusing to take vengeance in thought, word, and deed, w/o being fully reconciled to the person.