

October 18, 2009

**THE LIFE OF FORGIVENESS:  
WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?  
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.*

*Forgiveness is the refusal to exact revenge or demand payment on a legitimate debt.*

Jesus' word in Mt 18 (also 6.12, 14, 15) has to do with letting something go, giving it up, or abandoning it.

Forgiveness involves a release; freeing someone from that which enslaves them in some form or fashion.

Paul's word in Eph 4.32 (also 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. Emphasizes the freeness of the forgiver in releasing the undeserving.

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.

Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*: ... [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."

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

Without a debt that needs to be paid, forgiveness is meaningless.

Debt takes on many forms. Debt—all debt, financial or what we might call moral—is ultimately all relational. Debt does not exist. People exist. This does not mean that debts aren't real.

Debts are concerned with the bonds or connections formed between us by words and deeds. Debts are what we owe to someone b/c of a relationship we have entered into.

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.

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.

Forgiveness takes sin seriously. 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.

Note the cross. Sin taken seriously.

*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.

Forgiveness of sins restores the bonds of a relationship b/c 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.

Death and resurrection of Christ: Rom 4.25. Resurrection = the declaration sins are forgiven.

When full forgiveness is declared, there is release from the debt and a transformed relationship.

### *3. Forgiveness is costly.*

Commitments that are made to one another that go unfulfilled creates a burden of some type on someone else.

To forgive in any and all of these circumstances and in our various other relationships means that we ourselves must willing to bear this burden without animosity or passing the evil on to someone else.

In the cross God bears the burden. Debts are real in relationships b/c people are real and covenants are real. B/c of this the cost of unfulfilled commitments or the breaking of commitments must be borne by someone in the relationship.

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.

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

The cross and resurrection provide the pattern of our lives as followers of Christ. We live *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.

Cf. Eph 4: 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.

4.17ff. - what it is like to live as the new humanity. One of those characteristics: forgive one another (4.32)

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.

We never master forgiveness. As we move through history and we and others around us change, so do the opportunities to learn new ways to express forgiveness. It is a craft that we learn

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

Forgiveness is not that peace but it is a means to that peace that we seek.

### *6. Forgiveness is complex.*

Complex does not necessarily mean the same thing as complicated. A situation is complex b/c there are many factors involved.

Forgiveness is complex in the sense that 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.