

TRUE FORGIVENESS

This message is about a subject that is ultimately impossible with man. Forgiveness is not only hard it is impossible in the economy of justice. Forgiveness is fundamentally Christian. It is not merely done better or made easier with Christ; it cannot exist apart from Christ.

Forgiveness without atonement is injustice! How can forgiveness be both good and bad, right and wrong at the same time?

Judaism had striven in vain to relate the goodness of God to His justice. That God's clemency was greater than His strict equity was only a flickering hope.¹

Forgiveness has been called the virtue we profess to believe, fail to practice, and neglect to preach. Forgiveness is an overloaded, undervalued, and largely misunderstood grace.

We must guard biblical forgiveness for all of its depth and richness. We must not impoverish its precious worth by mindlessly throwing it around. It must not be cheapened by human weakness or ignorance. Forgiveness should never be directed under the control of feelings.

Because our relationships are with sinners, we must live forgiving lives if we truly love one another. No one stands still in life; we are always advancing in one direction or another. Where there is sin, we will advance either in love through forgiveness or in bitterness and resentment through the withholding of forgiveness.

Here are ten principles of true forgiveness:

#1 — FORGIVENESS IS ULTIMATELY FROM GOD

Since sin is first against God, forgiveness is finally from God: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). We find forgiveness not in the things we do or the people we ask, we ultimately find forgiveness from God. This is also true concerning how we forgive others. When we forgive others we extend to others the grace of God that He extended to us in Christ.

#2 — FORGIVENESS IS A GRACE

Forgiveness is not only hard it is impossible in the economy of justice. Forgiveness without atonement is not a virtue, it is injustice. Forgiveness is not a mere overlooking of a crime; it is the promise that the penalty for the crime has been diverted to another on the guilty's behalf. Forgiveness is never deserved, merited, or earned. Therefore, forgiveness is ultimately the gift of divine grace through Christ and Him crucified. The "forgiveness of our trespasses" are "according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7). We don't understand the gospel if we don't understand forgiveness as a grace.

#3 — FORGIVENESS IS A PROMISE

¹ Gottlob Schrenk, Zürich; Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–), 204.

To forgive is to *for* + *give* = “not give” what is due or deserved. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the *for* prefix (as used in forgive) denotes the notion of passing by, abstaining from, neglecting, or withholding. It is in class with the word “forgo” (to abstain or refrain from) and related to the word “forbid” (to bid not). Thus, to forgive is to give not what is due.

Forgiveness is a promise. Not a feeling and not merely an attitude. To forgive a sin is to promise not to use the guilt of that sin against the offender. If I forgive, I resolve to acquit and not accuse. It is a promise to not bring up the charge of that sin to the person I forgive, to others, and to my own mind. This may be why it is often said that it is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend. To forgive is to bury in an unmarked grave. The Lord describes how He forgives with this notion: “He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19); “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12); “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions ... and I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25). The picture is that the Lord will blot out sin, thereby it can no longer be seen.

The best definition of forgiveness is a promise of pardon. Jeremiah 31:34 illustrates this through the hope of the New Covenant: “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Now, when He says that He will remember their sin no more, we are not to imagine that God will forget the sin altogether—as though He was oblivious to its reality. Forgetting is not a virtue, it is a disfunction. In the human being, forgetting is an organic function of the mind, not a moral one. Memory and recall are beyond our full control, they are not moral choices. Forgiveness is a moral choice. It is a deliberate resolve of the heart. If sin could be forgotten then it need not be forgiven. Thus, to remember no more means to willfully not recall for judgment. This is what the Lord means in Jeremiah 14:10, “Thus says the LORD concerning this people: ‘They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet; therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.’” When God says that He will not remember our sins, He is saying that He “does not retain” them (Micah 7:18). In another word picture, “you have cast all my sins behind your back” (Isaiah 38:17). As John Trapp reflects, “Discharges in justification are not repealed or called in again. Pardon proceedeth from special love and mercy, which alter not their consigned acts.”

Forgiveness is a promise to never recall what is forgiven as grounds for accusation and judgement. To forgive is to disarm an offense from its power to render a person guilty. This involves the principle of never bringing it up against the offender, to others, and to ourselves. To forgive someone is to promise to never bring up that particular sin against them. It is forgiven in love, which “does not take into account a wrong suffered” (1 Corinthians 13:5 NASB). It is a promise to not bring it up against a person to others: “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9). This promise involves the discipline of the mind to not bring it up against the offender in our own minds. Forgiveness pursues peace through the gospel and deliberately and actively disciplines the mind: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

#4 — FORGIVENESS IS BOTH (A) INTRAPERSONAL AND (B) INTERPERSONAL

Intrapersonal in that it involves the disposition of the heart. It begins within. It fundamentally is a promise of self-denial; a denial of one’s own right to accuse. In this sense, forgiveness is a heart disposition to always be “ready” to forgive. Although not everyone will be forgiven, yet God repeatedly reveals Himself as a “forgiving” God: “For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive” (Psalm 86:5 NASB). We typically describe this intrapersonal forgiveness, or attitudinal forgiveness, as being

“forgiving”—so: “For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving” (Psalm 86:5 ESV). Intrapersonal forgiveness is not conditioned on the repentance of the offending party. Therefore, Christ teaches us to pray to have a forgiving heart: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

Interpersonal forgiveness is transactional (Matthew 18:15; Luke 17:3). Interpersonal forgiveness is conditioned on repentance. This is where the promise of forgiveness is granted. This is where atonement is applied. This realized form of forgiveness is a key feature in the principle of salvation; God saves those who seek His forgiveness through repentant faith in Christ (Acts 5:31; 8:22; Romans 4:7).

#5 — FORGIVENESS IS CONDITIONED ON REPENTANCE

Conditioned on repentance as an act of faith not works, just as salvation is said to be conditioned on repentance as an act of faith. As with Esau, who without repentance remained guilty even though he was “sorry” with tears over his choice: “For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears” (Heb 12:17 NASB). That forgiveness is conditioned on repentance is plain in the “if” of Christ’s instructions: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents*, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

#6 — FORGIVENESS IS COSTLY

True forgiveness costs nothing less than the crucifixion of the Son of God (Isaiah 53:5, 11; John 1:29; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). The Father says to the Son, “It is too light a thing that You should be my Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make You as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Is 49:6). We must remember that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22; cf. Eph 1:7). The cost for forgiveness required God’s own blood (Acts 20:28)—forgiveness cost nothing less than “the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:19). Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until it costs them deeply to extend it.

#7 — FORGIVENESS IS AN ACT OF LOVE

God repeatedly links His gift of forgiveness to His love for sinners: “keeping **steadfast love** for thousands, **forgiving** iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:7); “For you, O Lord, are good and **forgiving, abounding in steadfast love** to all who call upon you” (Psalm 86:5); “But you are a God **ready to forgive**, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and **abounding in steadfast love**, and did not forsake them” (Nehemiah 9:17); “the LORD is slow to anger and **abounding in steadfast love, forgiving** iniquity and transgression” (Numbers 14:18); “Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the **greatness of your steadfast love**, just as you have **forgiven** this people, from Egypt until now” (Numbers 14:19); “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, as God in Christ **forgave you**. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in **love**, as Christ **loved us** and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 4:32-5:2).

#8 — FORGIVENESS IS RELATIONAL

Forgiveness is not merely a legal pardon; it is a means of relational restoration and harmony: “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-13). The Lord says to Israel that the purpose for which He “blotted

out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist” was so that they would “*return*” to Him: “return to me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22; cf. Isaiah 31:6; 55:7; Acts 3:19).

Our actions towards those we love should be driven by love, not justice. Forgiveness is not the end, but the beginning to healing and growth of relationship.

True forgiveness pursues the shalom of a relationship. It values the relationship and seeks restoration when offense occurs. It is never satisfied with simply cancelling a debt; nothing less than reconciling love satisfies the longing of the forgiving heart.

#9 — FORGIVENESS IS UNIQUELY CHRISTIAN

While we thank God for His common grace that restrains revenge and works in people of all of beliefs to extend a measure of personal pardon for offenses suffered, true forgiveness is uniquely Christian.

Sin is first against God (Psalm 51:4), repentance is first away from sin and to God (Isaiah 55:7), and forgiveness is finally from God (Daniel 9:9). Since forgiveness is based on a concrete transaction and not some whimsical strength to simply overlook a violation, it is uniquely afforded through the substitution of Jesus Christ on the cross. The gospel is the good news of forgiveness for sinners to be restored to a right relationship with God through Christ and Him crucified on their behalf: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Notice that “forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” Because Christ is the only substitute for sinners, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), in other words, “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

Forgiveness is uniquely Christian because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22) and yet “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4); the only possibility is a perfect human substitute. It is in Christ alone that “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Ephesians 1:7).

#10 — FORGIVENESS IS FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

Forgiveness makes much of God’s love and grace, His mercy and wisdom, His kindness and forbearance, His compassion and tender-heartedness—*forgiveness makes much of God*. We must forgive, *first*, because it glorifies God. Not *first* because it heals us, or helps us, or even because we were forgiven, but *first* because it makes much of God. We should forgive in the same priorities that God forgives: “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake” (Isaiah 43:25). May we cry out with David, “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great” (Psalm 25:11).

Forgiveness of others is made an express condition of our obtaining pardon and forgiveness from God (Matt 6:14, 15); and the nature hereof is expressly declared (Matt 18:23–35). Such evangelical conditions we have not many. I confess they have no causal influence into the accomplishment of the promise; but the non-performance of them is a sufficient bar against our pretending to the promise, a sufficient evidence that we have no pleadable interest in it. Our forgiving of others will not procure forgiveness for ourselves; but our not forgiving of others proves that we ourselves are not forgiven. And all these things do show what weight God himself lays on this duty. — John Owen