

What Forgiveness Does and Does Not Mean

The Bible never gives a dictionary definition of forgiveness. More often than not, the Bible gives us illustrations and stories communicating to us what forgiveness is; the father embracing his prodigal son, not holding his son's disrespectful and foolish behavior against him (Luke 15), or the king canceling the unpayable debt of his servant (Matt. 18). These stories speak more powerfully to us of what forgiveness is than any precise definition can. They pull on our heart strings leading us to be dumbfounded and in awe of God who is like the father running to his prodigal son and like the king tearing up and throwing away the page in his accounting book which tells of the servant's inordinate debt. Brothers and sisters, no matter how many times you've heard these stories don't fail to be in awe of God's forgiveness through them. Forgiveness is not a mild-tempered thing. Forgiveness is lavish and outlandish.

But what is forgiveness? Well, guilt is the prerequisite of forgiveness. Before forgiveness can take place there has to be an offense, a crime, a wrong done by a person or party to another person or party. Before the father in Luke 15 forgave his son, the son wronged his father by asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive, and then further wronged his father by squandering his inheritance. Before the king in Matthew 18 forgave his servant of his debt, the servant amassed a stupendously large debt he could not repay. Forgiveness is needed when one has been wronged. This is the difference between forgiveness and forbearance. We forbear with those who at times annoy us or have different views than ours. We forgive those who have lied to us or have done us harm. Those who have habits that annoy us or have political views that differ from ours have not wronged us. We forbear with such

people. But those who have lied to us or harmed us have wronged us. We forgive such people.

Forgiveness then begins with the open acknowledgment that we've been wronged. Neither the father nor the king in the above-mentioned parables ignore that they've been wronged. They do not pretend it never happened. You have not forgiven if you've suppressed the wrong committed against you. Not thinking about what they did, is not the same as forgiving them for what they did. To forgive we must acknowledge to ourselves, God, and, if possible, the person who has wronged us, that they did wrong us.

Then, having been wronged and acknowledging that wrong, we pardon the one who has wronged us. We release them. We don't hold what they've done against them. We lay down our right to have them owe us anything. We embrace them. We tear up and throw away the record that stood against them. And this is not conditional. We don't forgive IF they are really sorry and promise to never do it again. No, though they don't deserve it, we completely and totally pardon and absolve them just as the father did his prodigal son, just as the king did his servant, and just as God has done so of us.

This does not mean that forgiveness is condoning what the person did. Nor does forgiveness necessarily mean we place ourselves back in a context to be hurt by the same person in the same way. Forgiveness is not contrary to healthy boundaries. Forgiveness is completely exonerating the one who has wronged us. And in family, church, work, school, in any area of life in which we are side by side with other people, forgiveness is necessary. So, may we by the grace of God look again and again to our Lord's forgiveness of us, and being so in awe of his lavish kindness to us, may we forgive each other.

-Pastor Matt Peery

Forgiveness

In this issue we focus on Forgiveness and its importance in the life of the Christian.



"We love those who know the worst of us and don't turn their faces away."

-Walker Percy

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

-Colossians 3:13

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

-Ephesians 4:32

"Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you until seven times, but until seventy times seven.'"

-Matthew 18:21-22

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us..."

-Ephesians 1:7-8

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."

-Psalm 32:1-2

"For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you."

-Psalm 86:5

Does Forgiveness Add Up?

To start off this article about forgiveness, I thought it's only right to talk about math. This past semester, I decided to take an upper level math course. I had taken the prerequisite class for it a year and a half earlier, so I felt like I was prepared for the challenge. Day one, I arrived in class, and in true S&T fashion, we dove right into the content. It was at that moment that I realized I was not quite as prepared as I thought. I could remember almost nothing from that class I had taken so long ago. The new math flew right by me, and I was caught in the middle of lots of vaguely familiar words and numbers without being able to solve even the most basic problems that day.

Now you might be wondering why I am discussing my failures at differential equations in the church's journal, and that is a valid question. While writing this, though, I realized that math is not so different from the Christian walk, so bear with me as I attempt to make some leaps.

This past semester, at the same time as my math struggles, I found myself unable to forgive someone I had never met. One of my friends had been deeply hurt by someone years ago and is in the thick of the healing process. I felt justified in my anger, let it fester and held tight to it for months. One day though, my friend threw a wrench in my plan to stay angry when she told me that she was praying for that person's salvation. I can honestly say that my first reaction to that was almost disgust. I was so mad at this person that I couldn't even imagine praying for them.

Weeks later, I was still in a pretty constant state of anger at this person, and I went to an on-campus ministry event that again cut right into the state I was in. The pastor listed off a group of pretty much the worst types of people. I'm not just talking about rude coworkers but those who have committed horrible crimes. He asked us if we would rejoice if we saw them in heaven, and my honest answer was "No." All I could think about was my friend and the anger I was sitting in.

But what had I done to deserve grace? Why was I hoarding the forgiveness for myself and not wishing others to have it? Why was I actively choosing not to pray for the salvation of those who are just as far from God as I had been?

By this point you may have thought you had escaped the math I had begun with, but alas, you have not; this is where it actually becomes relevant, I promise.

The further into that math class I got, the more I used the concepts that I had learned in the prerequisite class to solve harder problems. Because I hadn't refreshed myself on the basic math, I couldn't do the more difficult math that came later.

Last semester, I was attempting to do some really complex math – forgiving someone that had hurt someone I care for – while not actively studying and refreshing myself on the basics – the fact that I too am a sinner saved solely by grace. I had let my own sinful heart, the busyness of life, and other excuses get in the way of focusing on the gospel and its role in my life.

I know firsthand that it is not an easy thing to forgive someone in general, let alone someone who has hurt a loved one. But when we aren't consistently reflecting on and centering our lives around the good news of our own depravity being overcome by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we have no hope of being able to forgive, pray for, or even share the gospel with those who are hardest to love.

I wish I could say that I have forgiven this person and am living a life that exudes grace and love in even the hardest relationships, but that is not always the case; I still struggle with this almost daily. Lately though, the Lord has brought me to realize more and more my dependence on Him, and from that slowly growing well of humility, I have been learning to work through forgiving others.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" – Ephesians 2:8

-Elizabeth Stump

As Christ Forgave Me

In this world today of praise and everyone gets a trophy, forgiveness seems to be foreign to most. It's hard to forgive when we feel we are not at fault or we live in a world where taking responsibility for our actions is often not a concept that is taught. It seems we are quick to point the finger at others rather than accept the responsibility of our actions. As the old saying goes, when we point a finger at others, we have four fingers pointing back at us.

The Bible tells us in Colossians to forgive as Christ forgave us. Think about that one. Is that even possible? Well, I believe I can honestly say, "No, not for me." I tend to say I forgive, but never forget. If I never forget, have I really forgiven? It's also easy to hold on to the grudges of people who we feel have not forgiven us. If you get their side of the story, it's totally different from yours; and, they have nothing to forgive. So, here we are, deadlocked. How do we deal with that?

So, did I really say I cannot forgive as Christ forgave me? Yes, I did. I cannot on my own. Fortunately, I don't have to. In my weakness of remembering unforgiveness from others and harboring grudges, I have two choices. I can either wallow in self pity and let those things gnaw at me day after day; or, I can turn to God and not only ask Him for forgiveness, but also seek His help in leading me to forgive others. The wallowing option gives you ulcers and gray hairs. So, obviously, the best option is to turn to God. It's not rocket science.

Can I say, I have this perfected? Nope; but as the song goes, "He's Still Working on Me." Praise the Lord!

-Mary Dablemont

To Forgive

To forgive is not easy to do
when someone has wronged you.
It is hard to let go
of the hurt you know.

An apology is nice
though it may not suffice.
If bitterness takes heart
it will tear us apart.

It can last for years
the cause of many tears
hinder the Spirit
to where you can't hear it.

The way to get free
is to let it be
truly forgive
fully live.

Trust in the Lord.
Live out His Word.
Forgiveness came through Jesus.
His grace will free us.

-Ed Dunn

Forgiveness

My heart was heavy, for its trust had
been
Abused, its kindness answered with
foul wrong;
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-
men,
One summer Sabbath day I strolled
among
The green mounds of the village
burial-place;
Where, pondering how all human
love and hate
Find one sad level; and how, soon or
late,
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with
meekened face,
And cold hands folded over a still
heart,
Pass the green threshold of our com-
mon grave,
Whither all footsteps tend, whence
none depart,
Awed for myself, and pitying my
race,
Our common sorrow, like a mighty
wave,
Swept all my pride away, and trem-
bling I forgave!

-John Greenleaf Whittier

Forgiveness in a Children's Book (Book Review)

My wife and daughter regularly get after me for not reading fiction. The three of us love to read, but our reading tastes are quite different. Finally, this past December with some time off, I indulged them and decided to read *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo. Over the years both my wife and daughter have lavished praise on DiCamillo for her masterful storytelling. But DiCamillo writes children's books, FICTIONAL children's books! Fictional children's literature is the section of the library or bookstore I turn my shoulder on and quickly walk by to the more fascinating material of theology, history, and even poetry. Stories for children are, well, for children and I am not a child. Oh, how my foolish arrogance gets in the way of so much the Lord has for me.

First off, *The Tale of Despereaux* while written with simple language is a book that provokes reflection from all ages, particularly reflection on forgiveness. The story tells the tale of a young mouse, Despereaux. Despereaux is, how shall I put it, different from other mice. He is smaller than usual, sickly, and has abnormally large ears even for a mouse. What makes Despereaux distinct though runs deeper than his physical appearance and health. Despereaux asks questions. And Despereaux's probing curiosity shakes things up. Unfortunately for Despereaux, mice, like men, rarely appreciate probing questions.

Despereaux, like Jesus, and the Hebrew prophets before him, will not be tolerated for his seeking after what is true, good, and beautiful. Despereaux is turned into the authorities, and a mouse close to Despereaux, very close to him, chooses to send Despereaux to the castle dungeon where he will certainly be killed by the rats. Reader,

can you imagine being sentenced to death by someone close to you? Someone dear to you, someone who should love you, delivering you over to have your body burned at the stake, or your head cut off by the guillotine. Can you imagine it? You should be able to imagine it because history is full of men and women, especially those who sought the truth and asked hard questions, being delivered to death by those nearest and dearest to them.

Despereaux is plunged down into the dungeon, the dark, his certain death. Despereaux though is not an ordinary mouse and with courage and honor he lives, he rises to new life out of the darkness and into the light, coming face to face with the one who sent him to his demise. Will Despereaux forgive? Read *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo to find out. Read it to your children and grandchildren, and find out not only whether or not Despereaux can forgive, but if a girl sold by her father can forgive him, or whether a Princess can forgive a rat that accidentally killed her mother, the Queen. These tales are all delightfully wrapped together in a form that both entertains and causes us to pause and ask hard questions. Like a parable, *The Tale of Despereaux* reaches around our natural defenses, pricks our consciences with questions of love, hope, and forgiveness. Yet, the book can at the same time comfort us in the God who became a man, a man who asked probing questions, and though he was handed over to die by us, rose the from the darkness to the light, and has forgiven us. Dear reader, all light points us to this most brilliant reality, that in Jesus Christ we are fully forgiven. May that put a bounce in your step today. Though you have wronged God and others, in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. What a blessing! Bless others forgiving them with the very forgiveness you've received.

-Pastor Matt Peery

Forgiveness

By Law or by Grace?

In the olden days, I used to think that my salvation was by a gift from God in the sacrifice of Jesus, yes, but that it must be received and made effective by some effort by myself. In my case, it was some selective keeping of law from the Old Covenant that was necessary to be fully approved by God in the new covenant. This became a problem. If I were to precisely keep the Passover (and Feast of Unleavened Bread which immediately follows for that week), the Feast of Firstfruits (Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles, I am commanded to attend at the temple in Jerusalem as detailed in Exodus 23:17, and other places, where God commands, "Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD." I rationalized that the need for sacrifices at the temple were no longer needed because they were taken care of by Jesus' sacrifice for me. But I still needed to go to Jerusalem, to the temple – but there is none! This led to other questions such as, "Can I really eat perfectly kosher?" and "Can every thought and action I take be pure, and if not, what must I do to perfectly follow the law in those instances to invoke by my action the sacrifice of Jesus to clear me of those sins?" As you can see, this "system" I was in absolutely does not work, but condemns me to death, the same as it condemned Israel, those under the law (and indeed ALL mankind, because as any righteous judge would say, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse.") I was in serious trouble! Then I carefully read the book of Galatians. God caused me to read it with a fresh set of eyes, putting

aside any pre-conceived notions, and I read this clear statement, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." (Gal. 3:10) Oh, no! What do I do? Praise God I found the answer in verse 11 which says, "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." So, the answer is to live by faith!

What does this have to do with forgiveness? The point is that I can do nothing of any value to atone for my failures nor give God any reason to forgive me. I desperately need God to forgive me, and to do so continually and eternally if I am to have any hope of being in His presence forever. How can this be possible? I should have known this, being a Christian, but it had not fully sunk into my whole being until Galatians 3:13-14 fully answered how this can be done, where the apostle Paul writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." There it is! God forgave me, earning God's blessing for me, nearly 2000 years ago by coming to this world as a man, God in flesh, as the perfect sacrifice that paid for all my failure to keep His law. Then, I realized that I needed to give up on any thought that anything I do can "assist" God in freeing me from the death penalty of sin. Forgiveness can not come from some combination of God and myself, but from God alone.

While in the flesh, I will suffer fleshly consequences for my sins, and the sin of this world, but the ultimate penalty was paid by Jesus, and the faith that God placed in me will cause me to trust in God's forgiveness. Jesus told us in John 16:33, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Jesus forgave us, and that should bring us peace with God, and each other, even though we still have troubles.

My response to this forgiveness at its foundation is immense gratitude. As a result of that gratitude, what is the outcome of my faith in God's forgiveness through Jesus from this point on? It's not to make some feeble attempt to keep a rationalized version of some law (Old Covenant, or otherwise concocted), but to rely on the forgiveness extended to me into a new kind of non-legalistic, faith-based life made possible by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Instead, I am now under the "law of Christ" as mentioned by the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:2, meaning that I love God first, then my neighbor as myself, as Jesus says (Mt. 22:37-40). Paul admonished us in Ephesian 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you," and the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 4:10-11, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

-Joe Council

Forgiveness in Marriage

We have been married for over 30 years. Like any couple we have had ups and downs, joys and sorrows, heartbreak, and forgiveness. Though times have been very difficult we can look now and give thanks to the Lord for a wonderful relationship.

Everyone knows forgiveness is an important part of a good marriage. Whether told by a pastor, a parent, or their own conscience to forgive is just the right thing to do. Scripture proclaims over and over that we are to forgive. But questions do pop into our mind like, "How do we or why should we forgive?"

You will be familiar with Jesus' parable about two people that owe money to a lender. One owes a small amount, the other owes a large amount. The lender forgives both debts. Who loves the lender more? The answer of course is the one with the larger debt. When we have been completely forgiven but we didn't have much to be forgiven of then we will love God a certain amount. But if you have been completely forgiven from a large debt you would jump for joy. You would be so thankful for the forgiver. To us, that makes sense because this is the way it should work. This is reasonable.

However, there is another parable. This one is about a man that owed a king an extremely large debt. The amount was such that the man would never be able to pay it. He begged to be shown mercy and mercy was given to him. Now what did he do immediately after receiving such good news? What effect would that kind of forgiveness have on a person? Well one might think he would be happy and offer forgiveness to others. That would be the right response. Again, reasonable. But

instead, this wicked (that is Jesus' assessment) servant was shockingly ungrateful and unforgiving of others. One takeaway from this story is that God has forgiven so much in our lives, we ought to love and forgive others. If we realize that we have been exceedingly forgiven, then when others hurt us, it is right to forgive.

This plays out in all aspects of life. Whether an overly demanding teacher, a wayward child, or an unpleasant coworker, we see the need for forgiveness. However, this plays out most vividly every day in marriage. God brings together two imperfect, sinful people, and says, "Now do life together, live in the same house, sleep in the same bed, and eat at the same table." As a couple, we spend as much time as possible with each other. In those times we will impact each other in positive and negative ways. We have loved each other more deeply than anyone else could love us. Conversely, we have hurt each other more deeply than anyone else could. Looking back at 30 years of marriage we can see the highs were very high and the lows were so very low. We have needed forgiveness from the Lord and from each other many times. Will we be the ones who have been shown amazing grace then reciprocate that grace to each other? Again that would seem reasonable. Our answer is an emphatic... sometimes. Maybe even usually, but not always. Before you judge us, remember Peter's question, "Lord, should I forgive my brother up to seven times?" Jesus responded, "No. Seventy times seven!" (Mt. 18, 21-22)

Well at 2-10 times a day, for the last 30 years, we surpassed Jesus' small number long ago.

Some days, honestly, forgiveness does not come easily. "Why would she say that," or "He did that again?" Our natural response would be revenge and frustration. Now to be sure, we don't take revenge violently at our home. We do it with a coldness toward the other, sulking, pouting, and brooding. This may seem mild compared to some of your situations, but the effect is distance, a breaking of the sweet fellowship and intimacy between us. Thankfully the distance is short-lived. Like the prodigal in the pig sty, God will bring us to our senses, and we will return in hopes of repairing the relationship.

There are many resources out there to help people as they seek to be more forgiving. We aren't trying to give a ten-step plan but here is something that has helped us. A little trick.

First, we take seriously God's commands. For instance, Colossians 3:13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Also, in Ephesians 4:32 we read, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."

So, we are told to be forgiving. If this is your desire, then here is the trick. When it is hard to forgive go to Ephesians again but start at verse 1:1 or go to Colossians again but start at verse 1:1. There you will be reminded who you are and who God is. He is holy but full of mercy. You were dead but God made you alive. You have been completely blessed, you are chosen, adopted, redeemed, and loved. You are a sinner, but God calls you saint. Though your sins are many God has forgiven each and every one. Read and meditate on that truth. Then revel once again in His amazing grace to you.

-Toby and Joy Parker

Forgiveness And Marriage An Interview with the Malones

In your own words describe God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other.

Kyle- "Forgiveness from God is unconditional. Forgiveness from us is dependent upon who it is, what the offense is and the circumstances surrounding the offense."

Mary- "I would agree with Kyle, forgiveness from God is unconditional. I would also say that I'm thankful that forgiveness doesn't depend on me! My forgiveness to another person can be sketchy and full of conditions that are often unreasonable and selfish."

Why do we need God and others to forgive us?

Kyle- "God's forgiveness alleviates guilt. When you are guilty of an offense you don't feel good at all. You need God's forgiveness to feel better. About the forgiveness of other people, you don't want people to think badly of you, so if you do something wrong you like to think people have forgiven you for it."

Mary- "I need God's forgiveness to function in daily life. God's forgiveness helps my heart to be tender toward others and is a constant reminder that I'm gonna sin and I don't deserve the grace of God. God has blessed my life by giving me Jesus. Knowing and being reminded of my own failures helps me remember that God isn't just for me. He's for everybody. The forgiveness of other people can be tricky. Some people that I offend, I am bothered by the offense; while some people I have offended, I just don't care if they will forgive me or not."

What Bible passage or story comes to your mind regarding forgiveness?

Kyle- "Mathew 18:21-35 comes to mind. If our heart is like God, He forgives all things. I just can't forgive all things. I would like to be able to be more like God and forgive it all like this parable says. At the end of the passage, The Master takes the first servant and since he didn't forgive his debt that was owed to him, he was then cast into prison. This is the passage that comes to mind, that man

didn't forgive and he went to prison. So how does it affect me if I don't forgive people?"

Mary- "The story of Mary anointing Jesus with oil and wiping his feet with her hair... John 12:3-8...I think of the humility and love it took for Mary to get down on her knees and anoint Jesus feet. I think of the humility and love it took for Christ to take my sins. I find it amazing that Jesus says to Judas (the ultimate betrayer!) 'leave her alone (vs.7)'. Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray Him and He also knew that Mary loved Him and wanted Him to know how much. She needs him desperately and she shows her love for him in the only way she has available. Jesus loves us so much we can seek his forgiveness for anything at any time. The cost of that oil monetarily was astounding but the cost Christ paid was beyond my ability to repay Him. I'm just amazed by His love, grace and care for me."

How does being forgiven feel? What happens to your body, your heart, and mind when you are forgiven?

Kyle- "A heaviness is lifted off of you and you are refreshed. It's like a new beginning. It's like you are washed clean. You are at peace."

Mary- "Forgiveness is full of relief! I feel so relieved that the weight is gone and that God knows my heart and that the weight of my sin is gone. My mind relaxes and my body relaxes too. It reminds me of the way a baby sighs when they are truly satisfied and they feel safe in the arms of a loved one."

What happens to us when we withhold forgiveness from another person?

Kyle- "Bitterness! Bitterness! Bitterness! If we forgive and we don't forget, have we really ever forgiven at all?"

Mary- "I start to feel angry and bitter. I often avoid the person. Fellowship is lost."

What would you say to someone who believes they could never forgive a person for what that person did to them?

Kyle- "If I were to use an example from the Bible, Jesus forgave the Israelites for killing him."

"Mary- I have done this and I have seen this. It's a choice. God forgives us and our unforgiveness of another person is our choice. The consequence of that choice is our loss. It doesn't achieve what we hope it will, it doesn't harm the person we aren't forgiving. It can ruin our health and our lives by harboring unforgiveness. The loss of fellowship, the loss of connection and the opportunity to show grace and mercy is also lost. I'm not saying that I have perfected forgiveness. I'm a sinner and I know it."

We tend to forget that we are completely forgiven by God. What practices can help us remember that we are forgiven in Christ?

Kyle- "Reading scripture, praying and going to church!"

Mary- "Prayer and studying God's word as well as fellowshiping with other believers and living life alongside our church family, reminds us we are not alone and that God intends for us to live in a community that points us to Christ. Our fellow believers can help hold us accountable and pray for us as we go through a fallen world."

What has marriage taught you about forgiveness?

Kyle- "Forgiveness is continuous, everyday. The hardest one to forgive is your own self. When you are married it's the closest relationship you will ever have aside from God. You must put the other person ahead of yourself."

Mary- "We are two sinners that love God and each other. We need God and we cannot hope to maintain a relationship in a fallen and crazy world without God and without forgiveness. Living with someone that I care about and love has been a constant reminder that I have to let things go and not harbor grudges or keep score on who was right and who was wrong. I am thankful that God has used marriage to point out how much I need Christ! I'm also thankful that my husband prays for me and wants us to be in church!"