

What Is Forgiveness?

Genesis 45:1-15

Early in his career, many had hoped A. N. Wilson, a brilliant philosopher, would become the next C. S. Lewis. But as a young man, he began to wonder how much of the Easter story he actually accepted. By the time he reached his thirties, he had lost all his religious belief and publicly repudiated his Christian faith, becoming an atheist. It wasn't long before he embraced the role of a harsh, cynical critic of Christianity and any faith in God at all. At one point he even wrote a book claiming Jesus was a failed messianic prophet (2004's *Jesus*). But on the Saturday before Easter in 2009, he wrote a shocking piece for London's prestigious newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, in which he shared his experience of participating in a Palm Sunday service. He writes:

When I took part in the procession last Sunday and heard the Gospel being chanted, I assented to it with complete simplicity. My own return to faith has surprised no one more than myself. Why did I return to it? Partially, perhaps it is no more than the confidence I have gained with age. Rather than being cowed by them, I relish the notion that, by asserting a belief in the risen Christ, I am defying all the liberal clever-clogs on the block...

But there is more to it than that. My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known—not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die ...

Sadly, [the secularists] have all but accepted that only stupid people actually believe in Christianity, and that the few intelligent people left in the churches are there only for the music or believe it all in some symbolic or contorted way which, when examined, turns out not to be belief after all. As a matter of fact, I am sure the opposite is the case and that materialist atheism is not merely an arid creed, but totally irrational.

Materialist atheism says we are just a collection of chemicals. It has no answer whatsoever to the question of how we should be capable of love or heroism or poetry if we are simply animated pieces of meat. The Resurrection, which proclaims that matter and spirit are mysteriously conjoined, is the ultimate key to who we are. It confronts us with an extraordinarily haunting story. J. S. Bach believed the story, and set it to music. Most of the greatest writers and thinkers of the past 1,500 years have believed it. But an even stronger argument is the way that Christian faith transforms individual lives—the lives of the men and women with whom you mingle on a daily basis, the man, woman, or child next to you in church tomorrow morning.¹

¹ A. N. Wilson, "Religion of Hatred: Why We Should No Longer be Cowed by the Chattering Classes Ruling Britain Who Sneer at Christianity," U.N. Daily Mail (4-11-09)

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We began a three-week conversation last week based on the topic of Total Forgiveness. In my introduction, I stated my conviction that the *practice* of forgiveness – person to person – would not only improve our culture, the Church and our families, but the main reason to do it is because the practice of forgiveness – freely sharing what we have received, in the *same manner* in which we received it – is one of the most basic, central teachings [*commands*] of the Jesus that we call Lord, if we truly are followers of Christ. And, again, I ended the message last week recalling the promise of God to us from Jeremiah 29:11

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord,
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

It seems to me that the most basic of Jesus’ teachings to us must be part of this great plan for us – God’s plan to prosper us, to give us hope and a future.

On the way out of a service last Sunday someone told me of a book that they read which tells the story of the Pennsylvania Amish community’s response to that horrible schoolhouse massacre in October 2006. By offering forgiveness. She said it was a fascinating book because it so honestly shared their struggle in doing this, it was terribly hard, yet they believed that this is what God wanted them to do. We likely all remember how the public noticed their grace-giving. They didn’t typically ‘get it’, but they surely noticed.

A. N. Wilson returned to faith after a long, public career of Christian bashing, a very unlikely happening, and note: it was the *lives* of Christians that convinced him of the truth of the message of Christ. Not words, or arguments, not syllogisms or charts, or impressive exegesis – Jesus said it, “They will know you by your love.” And there is no greater act of love than forgiveness, as Jesus demonstrated on the Cross.

If we truly want to share the love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world, we need to speak the language of the world. And our words will have credibility only when we combine them with humility, grace... and forgiveness.

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I made some strong statements last week, and I appreciate the honesty of so many of your responses (as well as the grace you have showed me – some of you said that this is making you uncomfortable already, but you are anxious to see where we go... so I guess that means I'm going to have the opportunity to convince you that while it may be hard to forgive, it truly is the best alternative for us, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.)

As soon as I started actually writing these messages, I saw that three weeks was going to be a challenge in addressing all the issues involved in forgiveness (not that I have any illusion of being able to answer every question – even if this were totally open-ended.) But I am attempting to discipline my preaching this year, and have sketched out a preaching plan that extends through July '11. I put that together with a lot of prayer, and I don't want to start messing with it after just a few weeks!

I have asked Pastor HY to share her perspective on this subject, as I deeply value her insights, so she will add a fourth week to the series, and that will be it for awhile. I'm sure we'll come back to this at some point, as it bears repeating. And if you are interested, we have six books (and a Veggie Tales tape!) all on the subject of forgiveness featured this week in our Church library – so you might want to check them out!

What I'd like to do with my remaining time today is share a definition of what forgiveness *is* and what it is *not*. Next week, we'll talk about *how* to forgive, and we're going to end our services with an opportunity for you to take some quiet time for prayer, at the communion rail or in your pew, and for some to begin the process of laying some baggage aside. Pastor HY will follow up and talk about the *aftermath* of forgiveness, and the importance of forgiving *ourselves*. So, there you go...

We can start with a baseline definition of 'forgiveness' which I think, is pretty much common sense: we know what it means to forgive. (Even though we may be hoping that it means something else!) Forgiveness means to 'let a person off the hook' (i.e., not holding them responsible to us) for something that they have done to us or to someone close to us – intentionally or unintentionally. Forgiveness means consciously leaving any punishment for a

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person's actions to God, with the understanding that God may also 'let them go' – as God has done for each of us who come to him in Christ. It is treating those who sin against us in the same way that God deals with our sin. And we pray it every time we pray the Lord's prayer: "Forgive our trespasses [*sins*] as we forgive those who sin against us." As = in the same, exact manner. It doesn't leave a lot of 'wiggle room', does it?

Now, our objections to this definition tend to go immediately to the extreme examples – to the rapists, child abusers, murderers, con artists, and on and on. And while I believe that the mandate to forgive even those crimes is included by Jesus' example, I also recognize that some situations are going to require much time, and grace in order to get there. I'm not suggesting that this will be easy or instantaneous. (And as I'm going to share in just a minute, once again, my belief that forgiveness and *accountability* are not mutually exclusive concepts.)

But the truth is that most of us, thank the Lord, do not encounter those extreme examples on a day-to-day basis. Most of what we have to 'deal with' when it comes to forgiveness are the small offenses that occur in daily life – these are the ones that most Christians struggle with: the insults, the dismissals, being overlooked, lies about us, misrepresentations, slander, etc. – these are the things that tempt us to harbor grudges and dream of revenge. And that has serious spiritual consequences. When we withhold forgiveness, we hurt our own souls. It negatively affects our blessing, it affects our relationship with Christ. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation, says the Apostle Paul. Those words *must* have real meaning in our daily lives.

I think it might be easier to get what that means in real life by parsing the definition I gave you earlier, a bit – and describe what forgiveness *is* and what it *is not*. So let's start with some of the latter:

What Total Forgiveness is Not. These categories are mostly from the Book Total Forgiveness, by R. T. Kendall, although I'll take responsibility for the descriptions I'm going to share, and some serious editing. But I think his outline is helpful

Total Forgiveness is Not -

1. ... Approval of What Someone Did

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Forgiving someone is not another way of saying, “I’ve come to realize that what you did wasn’t really *wrong*.” In John chapter 8 a woman is flung at Jesus’ feet; caught in the very act of adultery. And Jesus, you remember, scandalizes the crowd (who were holding the stones waiting to execute her as the Old Covenant Law demanded. But instead of giving them permission, Jesus forgives her. She is given a new start. She is set free. But remember what Jesus said to her after all her accusers walked away? He said, “Go and sin no more.” His forgiveness was not an approval of her actions.

2. ...Excusing What They Did/ Refusing to take Seriously

Similarly, neither is forgiveness *excusing* what someone did, or refusing to take it seriously. I think it *is* helpful to consider a person’s background if possible, or try to understand someone’s mental state, or motivation, when they might have said or did something that wounds us. These things can be helpful in generating compassion, and perhaps motivation to forgive them. “There but for the grace of God go I”... but at the same time, forgiveness does *not* require us to pretend “no harm/ no foul” and act as if they had no choice in the matter. Forgiveness is not excusing a sin.

This is especially important in those instances when reconciliation is a possibility. See, unless a person *understands* that what they did, or what they said was hurtful – painful – to you, the reconciliation could well be limited. We talk about this in our Stephen Minister training classes – if someone comes to you asking for you to forgive them, don’t be too quick in granting it. What I mean is, let them be specific in telling you what it is that they are asking to be forgiven for. And you can speak assertively as well, saying, ‘This is how I felt: _____’.

On the other hand, as we saw last week, reconciliation is not always going to be a possibility. And there will be times when we will have to forgive someone who is completely clueless and unrepentant – for our *own* good and to allow God his due. And that is difficult. But we *don’t* need to pretend that it was not a ‘bad’ thing, when it was.

3. ... Forgiveness is not Pardoning What Someone Did

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Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that the offender is going to simply ‘walk’ away from their actions. Now, sometimes it *is* going to mean that! We need to ask ourselves, and consider very carefully, whether this perceived offense is important enough for us to follow through with some sort of action (i.e., does it demand accountability). And we need to be careful to keep a clear distinction between an honest accountability and simply satisfying our own desire for their punishment – especially when their ‘sentence’ is receiving our continuing anger, and bitterness, etc.

We’re going to find, I suspect, that a great majority of times, we *can* simply ‘let it go’. The Lord knows how often *we* are forgiven for offenses just like that ourselves. And after all, he is our example in this. Jesus is our model of forgiving.

On the other hand, there may be times when some action is necessary. And then, we will be required to pursue dual paths – one, of perhaps ensuring justice (i.e., requiring a person to make financial restitution, or go for psychological help... in extreme, and tragic cases it may require your testimony against a person in a courtroom. And this will be the way of love – because it will be protecting others from potential evil, and ensuring that there is a consequence for a person’s actions, when that is appropriate.

But at the same time, we will need to find a way to turn the *eternal* consequences of their acts over to God. The Scriptures say, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”. When we harbor bitterness, and anger toward someone we are usurping God’s place in the matter. We are trying to do what only God can do. In forgiving someone, we are saying, “God, you do what you need to do with this situation, with this person. I am going to walk away from vengeance. I am going to allow myself to heal, to be released from their bondage over me. With your help.”

One last point as far as what forgiveness is not:

4. Forgiveness is NOT ... Forgetting. We use the expression “Forgive and forget” so often that we seldom stop to think of how this is simply impossible for us to do, humanly speaking, as an act of our will. I mean, it’s obvious, the more we *try* to forget something, the more we are actually *remembering* it! We are never commanded to forget sins.

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And you might say, but God ‘forgets’ our sins and God is our example! Well, not exactly! I know there are many things that I’ve felt the need to forgive – say, professionally. Pastors are recipients of hurtful notes, comments, unrealistic expectations... etc. And over time, as I look back, I know these things have happened, but I have a very difficult time remembering details of stuff like that. But there are some things, frankly, I will never forget. I just *can’t*. It would be even more difficult to imagine God, the omniscient One, forgetting *anything*. So actually, what the Scriptures tell us, is not that God ‘forgets’ our sin, but that he “will remember them no more.”

That may seem like a subtle distinction, but it is not, really, and understanding the difference may help us in our quest to be forgiving people. Maybe you are frustrated by your inability to forget an offense. The fact that you can’t forget means to you that you haven’t forgiven. What the Scripture is saying is that God *chooses* to not remember; i.e., he is promising that we will not be held accountable for our sins. He knows what they are, but he will not use them against us.

They have been, in that sense, removed – “As far as the East is from the West”. God is quite aware of what we have done, our sin is what drove him to the Cross, but he *chooses* not to hold them against us. They are, in that sense, forgotten.

Paul talks about a similar thing in the great “Love Chapter”, 1 Corinthians 13. In his listing of what love is, one thing he says is that “Love keeps no record of wrongs”. And that’s very similar to this, God’s ‘not remembering’ our sin. We may remember the offenses, but we’re not going to bring them up in conversation with the offender, *or with anyone else!* We’re not going to keep talking about this thing. We are not going to allow past events to negatively affect the way we relate to a person in the future.

Many marriages and other personal relationships could be healed overnight if both parties would simply stop pointing the finger at each other. If they would begin to relate to each other in this kind of love – a love that “Keeps no record of wrongs”. ‘Not remembering’ past failings to use as ammunition for winning fights and arguments.

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We see these principles lived out in a wonderful way in the scripture reading we looked at a few minutes ago from Genesis 45. Joseph is sold by his brothers to a slave caravan. His father grieves what he is convinced is the loss of his favorite son to wild animals and he loses him for years. But through God's blessing, Joseph ends up as a ruler in Egypt... and here is this emotional scene as Joseph reveals himself to the very brothers who sold him.

As you read the account, you can see that Joseph makes the brothers well aware of their sin. He knows what they did. He certainly remembers! And when they realize that this man they are begging grain from is actually the long-lost Joseph, they are scared to death. *No one* forgot what had happened! No one justified these actions – “You meant it to me for evil” Joseph says plainly. The brothers are awaiting Joseph's vengeance – which he is in a position to do!

But Joseph makes it clear that he is not going to hold them accountable. He will not ‘remember’ their sin. He accepts them, he gives them gifts, he kisses them...weeps with them. And calls them to bring his father to him. Joseph chose to ‘keep no record of wrongs’. He totally forgave. And there was healing.

I'm going to talk next week about how *we* can do this even when we really don't want to. And I want to add a word or two about how Total forgiveness must also include **Forgiving God** *and* **Forgiving Ourselves**. I believe there is going to be some healing here next week, please pray for our services, and come expectantly.

I'd like us to close this morning with the prayer for the Strength to Forgive, found in your bulletin:

Our Loving Lord, who endured death for me,
Your sacrifice of forgiveness was absolute!
Grant me the strength to also forgive others,
to excuse their transgressions against me.
So I may truly reflect this spiritual fruit,
obliterate any persistent feelings of malice
in my heart today.
Let each trespass end as a closing chapter,
that I might continue on the road of righteousness.
Forgive my sins as I aspire to forgive others.
You are truly our example of forgiveness.
You are a most forgiving Lord!
Amen.