

Article: Lasting and Godly Forgiveness.¹

General Facts about Forgiveness.

When we discuss forgiveness, we must first orient ourselves to sin else we may not understand the nature and gravity of forgiveness.

- Consider the following definitions of sin:

[Sin is any want of conformity to or transgression of the law of God]

[Lawlessness vs. God the Lawgiver]²

[Rebellion vs. God the Ruler]

[Missing the mark vs. God the Designer]

[Guilt vs. God the Judge]

[Uncleanness vs. God the Holy One]

J.I. Packer cites his own Anglican Prayer Book:

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...We have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done (79)

German Reformer Caspar Olevanius (1536-1587) explains his understanding of sin:

*I believe that whatever is and is called sin – whether it be **original sin** in the form of that transgression in Adam's loins and the consequent corruption that I carry around in the flesh or **actual sin** in the form of the wicked thoughts, words and deeds that arise out of original sin...³*

Original sin, the corruption in our natures that we inherited from Adam, and actual sin are different aspects of our failure to be who we were created to be. We are plagued by our very nature and eventually by our actions. We need to be delivered, rescued, redeemed, and saved from these things: original sin *and* actual sin.

The Apostles' Creed meets us by telling us that forgiveness of sins is a core component of the Christian faith. Timothy Cross in his study (69) says:

God's full and free forgiveness of all our sins by virtue of the death of his Son on the cross is a basic fundamental of the Christian faith. It is the forgiveness of sins through the shedding of the blood of Christ at Calvary, which constitutes the very heart of the Christian gospel and makes it the Good News that it really is.

The Scriptures alone are the bearers of this good news. It has always been true that God's inclination towards His people has been to rescue them from their plight:

Genesis 3:15

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.

Psalms 130:4:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared.

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² These are from the first paragraph of J.I. Packer, *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway Books; 1994), 79.

³ Caspar Olevanius, *An Exposition of The Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books; 2009), 133.

Psalm 32:1-2:

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

Jeremiah 31:34

I will forgive their iniquities and their sins I will remember no more

Psalm 103:2-3, 10-12

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases....he does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities for as high as the heavens are above the earth so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; so far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Luke 24:46-47

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

Acts 10:43, 13:38-39

To him [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

[Paul in Antioch] Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Ephesians 1:7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

1 John 2:12

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

HOW DOES FORGIVENESS WORK WITH GOD?

Just as the reality of our sins is clear, the reality of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ is also clear. The Creed might say a lot more about this. What is comprehended in “forgiveness of sins” in the Creed? What does it sum up?

*[Justification, adoption and sanctification: we're **acquitted**, **adopted** as Mine, now **live** like Me]*

[All of the forensic and legal transactions that needed to occur to pay for our sins are complete]

Further, what is the basis of our forgiveness? In other words, how are we forgiven the guilt of our original and actual sin?

[The blood-bought satisfaction of the debts of our sins to God, the debt-holder]

[Romans 3:25, 5:9; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2, 4:10]

What is the means of our forgiveness? How does this become ours?

[Applied to us by the Holy Spirit]

[Zechariah 3:1-5; John 3:3,5; Ephesians 1:13]

Is it certain? How can it be trusted?

[God made a new covenant promise: Jeremiah 31:31-34; esp. 34, “I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more”]

[God took an oath to keep this promise by His blood; a blood-oath by His death: Hebrews 9:11-17]

The forgiveness of sins is certain *because* of the death of Jesus. Anyone who was promised an inheritance from a family member in his will did not receive that inheritance while the person was alive. But, once that relative died, the promise became a reality: the inheritance was gained. And, because of the will, it cannot be taken away.

God has always forgiven His people. He made the promise in the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) that went fully undelivered until Christ’s death. But, with Christ’s death, the promised inheritance is ours and it cannot be taken away! Olevanius is again helpful when he asks and answers the question, “But surely we may not say that we are forgiven and cleansed of our sins in such a way that there are no remnants of them in us, may we?”

Absolutely not! For even though there are and will continue to be sins in us all the way to death, nevertheless we believe that they will not be imputed to us but pardoned on the basis of the merit of Christ.⁴

Though the omnipotent God knows all our sins from beginning to end, He promises **not** to continue to count us guilty of our sins because we have been washed in the blood of Christ; this is what Jeremiah 31:34 and Hebrews 9 tell us!

We will return to this in a moment, but the omniscient God *chooses* to forgive our sins by promising to forgive them and then holding Himself to that promise. Does God remember our sins? Of course! But does He remember them to hold us accountable to them? No.⁵

We already discussed the basis of forgiveness with God: the death of Christ. Christ’s blood has satisfied the justice of God, having broken down the walls between God and us. What else does Ephesians 2:13-15 say about barriers between us?

[There are no barrier between us]

HOW ABOUT BETWEEN PEOPLE?

What is important to note is the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13b) is the **same basis** of forgiveness between believers. In other words, between Christians:

[When we are brought near to God through Christ, we are also brought near to all others who were previously brought near to God through Christ]

[Since what kept us alienated from God was overcome, what alienates us from each other is also overcome]

Objectively, believers *are* reconciled (in Christ), *are being* reconciled (to each other in repentance and forgiveness⁶) and *will be* reconciled (in perfected humanity). Because we are

⁴ Olevanius, 134.

⁵ In a similar way, does a bank, with whom we had a mortgage debt, still “remember” the debt after it’s paid? Of course! All that’s required is to check their historical records. But, do they still send out reminders that we owe them money? No. They choose to “remember” our account is paid in full and closed.

⁶ See Ephesians 4:32.

reconciled to Christ, we are made one with Him and with each other (Ephesians 4:4). This oneness with each other is objective and subjective. In other words, it is finished (objectively completed in the “Christ event”) and we are finishing it (subjectively completing it amongst each other as we engage in the forgiveness process).⁷

EVENT AND PROCESS.

The nature of biblical forgiveness, dealing with our sins against each other is two-fold: an **event** followed up by a **process**.

Event: *asking and granting* forgiveness because of Christ’s objective work

Process: *remembering and living* in it in the strength of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work

- The “events” of forgiveness between God and us:

[When each of us first repented and believed in Him]

[Each time we repent and believe in His promise: 1 John 1:9]

- The “process” of forgiveness for God and us:

[He chooses to remember the blood of Christ on our behalf instead of our sins: Psalm 103-10-12]

[We continue to repent when we sin]

- On what basis does God keep doing this?

[Because our forgiveness is not founded on our perfections but Christ’s]

[We have Christ’s perfection counted to us rather than our imperfections counted to us]

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

When we consider these things between men and women in the faith, it is functionally no different. For the Christian, forgiveness is always a **possibility**.⁸ In other words, no sin against us is as great as our sins against the Lord—yet He forgave us. We sometimes act as if what someone has done against us is so serious that it is beyond our forgiveness—there may be genuine and horrific sin against us but the Scripture tells us even that it is not unforgiveable.

- It is important to self-diagnose: when are we typically unforgiving people?

*[When we **forget** what God has done in forgiving us: Matthew 18:23-33]*

*[When we **belittle** our own transgressions against God]*

*[When we **forget** just what had to happen so that we could live as free-people]*

For the Christian, forgiveness is a **duty**—we are not given the freedom to withhold forgiveness from others. As we will see from passages like Luke 17:3-5 and Ephesians 4:32, we must choose forgiveness. God clearly holds us to forgive even so that we might be forgiven:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)

⁷ In John 19:30, He said, “It is finished.” However in John 14:12-14, Jesus tells the disciples they will do His works that are as yet unfinished. “Finished” and “unfinished.” The reason the church can finish Christ’s works is because they are “finished,” that is, what would keep us from finishing them is complete so our work can be done. Forgiveness is similar: all of us in Christ are forgiven by His blood but there is forgiveness yet for us to do.

⁸ What follows is adapted from the premarital counseling curriculum, *More Than A Wedding* (Gabe Sylvia, ©2012).

There may be times when we do all the work. That is, we may have to overlook offenses (Proverbs 19:11) or we may only ever be able to adopt a “disposition” of forgiveness (a readiness to forgive) due to an unrepentant sinner, but these at least we must do.

For the Christian, forgiveness is a **gift**. One of the two principal words for forgiveness in the Old Testament has as its core idea, “to lighten by lifting.” We will discuss the nature of sin as incurring a debt. Many know what it is like to carry debts: houses, cars, credit cards, etc., none of these is desirable and we long for a time when we are debt-free.

Forgiveness is the means that God has ordained that we would experience relationships debt-free. In other words, through forgiveness we may have freedom, closeness, openness and safety that we would not have without it.

Forgiveness is not.

We often persist in sinful un-forgiveness because we don’t know what it means to forgive! Or we have a view of it that makes forgiving too hard. In the Bible, forgiveness is not:

A **feeling**. Therefore it isn’t only required when someone has recovered a sense of affection or good will towards a sinner (how easy would that be?). Instead, it is an act of the will that God commands us to do so.

Forgiveness is also not **passive**. As we said above, to forgive involves someone sinned against canceling a live debt that he is owed. It involves both the sinner and the one sinned against to think-speak-act.

In the Bible, forgiveness is also not **forgetting**. Forgetting is passive and is never guaranteed. We cannot think that until we have forgotten we have forgiven or that if we’ve forgotten we’ve forgiven.

In the Bible, forgiveness is not **excusing**. As we will see, forgiveness is transactional and so it automatically *assumes a wrong done*. Following? When we consider forgiveness, we have to consider the sin committed. Nothing is excused in biblical forgiveness.⁹ Sin creates debts that we as humans instinctively recognize (cf. Romans 2:14-15). We also recognize that as we sin against others we are saddled with a deepening burden for that debt over time.

Forgiveness does not allow this as it doesn’t automatically release a wrongdoer of the consequences. Consequences are often our teachers that instruct us and keep us from repeating sins against God and other people. Forgiveness takes the reality of sin into account and sets us on this path of learning (cf. Numbers 14:20-23 and 2 Samuel 12:11-14).

Forgiveness is.

As an event, it is a **one-time seeking and granting** freedom from a wrong done. As a process, it is **keeping no active record** of wrongs. In other words, though we might remember the sins someone has done against us we don’t allow those things to burden, darken or dampen our relationship with another. If we do this, we are living like God lives with us. Though He knows us with omniscience, He doesn’t actively hold our wrongs against us:

⁹ In the world, wrongs are often ignored or minimized so victims don’t experience the freedom of forgiveness and perpetrators are not held accountable.

Jeremiah 31:34b: "...For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more."

Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins."

Psalms 103:11-12: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Psalms 130:3-4: "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

1 Corinthians 13:5: "...[love] does not take into account a wrong suffered" (NASB)

Forgiveness is **canceling debts** people owe you or releasing people from the obligation of paying you back for what they've done. When people sin, they create a debt; they owe you. Ken Sande writes that to forgive is, "To release from liability to suffer penalty or punishment and to bestow favor freely and unconditionally."

- Read Matthew 18:15-35 and Luke 17:3-5.

#1: Jesus equates **sin** (18:15, "if your brother sins...") with **debts** (18:23, "settle accounts with his servant").

#2: Jesus equates **forgiveness** (Luke 17:3, "...and if he repents, forgive him") with **releasing from debt** (18:27, "And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave his debt...").

Sin creates a debt while forgiveness cancels the debt. In other words, forgiveness means that someone has done a wrong against you and they owe you / deserve punishment but you give up your right to recoup what they owe / punish them by forgiving them.

Forgiveness is **costly**. Though forgiveness cancels relational *debts*, it doesn't immediately fix relational *destruction*. Sin-debts are real: they violate the covenants between people. Sin-debts are specific: those violations are never vague as they transgress real boundaries (see the Ten Commandments for example). Sin-debts are costly: they weigh on both parties – particularly the one who's being asked to forgive. And sin-debts have lingering effects. Forgiveness minimizes *none* of these things. It actually highlights them so they cannot be ignored and begins the process to correct them.¹⁰

Forgiveness is **hard work**: Matthew 18:22. What must've the disciples thought when Jesus answered the way He did!?

¹⁰ What about consequences? If the sin was also a crime against the law, the sinner (who should be forgiven his sins) must deal with the legal consequences. If the sin was destructive to a relationship (e.g., adultery), the sinner (who should be forgiven his sins) may not be able to have the same relational intimacy at first or ever again (divorce in such a case is biblically sanctioned, for instance: Matthew 19:9). In the latter case, for the victim to restrain himself from the former relationship isn't necessarily violating forgiveness. He may simply be acting with wisdom. Care must be taken in this case.

Forgiveness works.

There is a distinct process in forgiveness written in many places. Luke 17:3-5 provides a condensed and effective summary.

First, forgiveness is an **event** that involves a confrontation: 17:3, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him.” In order to bring about forgiveness, there must be a confrontation. It must either be initiated by the one sinned against as in this case (cf. Matthew 18:15) or by the one who committed the sin (Matthew 5:23-24).

- So, the burden of forgiveness falls on both sinner and victim.

Still, Jesus highlights that it is also a **process**: 17:4, “and if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent’ you must forgive him.” Someone who commits sin and repents must be forgiven – again. Lane and Tripp say, “The principle [of Luke 17:5] applies to countless offenses and even the same endlessly repeated offense. We’re tempted to think that once we have forgiven someone we’re done. But forgiving someone is not just a past event. It’s something we must continue to practice even when we’re dealing with an offense we have already forgiven.”

In other words, the process of forgiveness is on-going. Or acts of our conscious choice each time we have the opportunity or the need. Remember that God holds our sins against us no more when He forgives. He certainly remembers, but **chooses not to act on a past, forgiven incident**. It is a canceled debt. When we say, “I forgive you,” we are pledging ourselves to this process where we actively say to each other:

1. I will not think about this incident anymore;
2. I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you;
3. I will not talk to others about this incident

For each incident “I forgive you” means an affirmative answer to each of these questions about the incident. No one should suggest forgiveness is easy. In order to absorb the wrongs done, God will have to strengthen the offended party. Forgiveness in the strength of self-will lasts a very short time, if at all. Each offense contains painful detail, a decision to absorb them, a looking past the urge to punish and a commitment to treat the offender almost as if he never did them! Who is up to this task?

Forgiveness’ language.

Language in forgiveness is very important. What is the difference between “I’m sorry” and “Please forgive me”? On the surface it may simply be word choice with the same intention. But the normally “I’m sorry” can mean:

[Dealing with accidents “Oops! I’m sorry”]

[“I’m sorry I got caught”]

[“I’m sorry you’re such a wimp and you can’t handle this,” etc]

Too often, “I’m sorry” is also quite confusing. What does a person say in response? “It’s OK [when it really isn’t]” or “No problem [when it really is]” or “I understand [how could you understand a sin against you?]” or “It’s not your fault [no one makes a person commit sin—he does so because he wants to]” and so on.

Jay Adams says, “Seeking forgiveness is not apologizing. There is nothing in the Bible about apologizing...[it is] the world’s substitute for forgiveness that doesn’t get the job done. You apologize, and say ‘I’m sorry’ but have not admitted your sin. The offended party feels awkward, not knowing how to respond. You are still holding the ball. You have asked him to do nothing.”

The nature of sin is to create a debt, something objective. The nature of forgiveness is to forgive that debt **in detail**.¹¹ Repentance and forgiveness must carry specificity in the language. When we confront an offense, we must be specific. We must be able to point to specific violations of God’s law. So, for the victim, our confrontation must be specific:

“I believe you have sinned against me by your coarse language”

“I believe you have sinned against me by not leading our family and asking me to do so”

You see that to use this language does two things: a) points out a biblical wrong has been done not just a preference that’s been violated and, b) it calls the offender to action.

The response mirrors the confrontation. When we are confronted about our sins in detail, we admit in detail and we ask for the transaction in detail:

“Please forgive me for using coarse language treating you as if you aren’t valuable to me”

“Please forgive me for failing to lead our family”

You see that to respond in this language admits to both points above: a) a sin’s been committed and, b) action is being taken.

A Note about “Un-forgiveness.”

An *unrepentant sinner* should not keep us from forgiveness. Mark 11:25 says,

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (see also Luke 6:28 and Acts 7:60).

God calls us to an *attitude of forgiveness* towards those who sin against us. We may have to hold onto an attitude of forgiveness until the offender repents. The *attitude* of forgiveness will transition into *actual* forgiveness when a sinner repents and asks for forgiveness. However, this may never happen. To fail to have an attitude of forgiveness violates Mark 11:25 and will inevitably lead to bitterness (Ephesians 4:31; Hebrews 12:15).

¹¹ The Peacemaker Ministries “7-A’s of Forgiveness” is a great tool to drive being specific. Address everyone involved; Avoid if, but and maybe; Admit specifically; Acknowledge the hurt; Accept the Consequences; Alter Your Behavior; Ask for Forgiveness.