

On Forgiveness

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Basics

Forgiveness is a pretty central concept in the bible. The Christian concept of forgiveness is closer to the legal system/term of “death row pardon” or “clemency”, “mercy”.

God is big on forgiveness and this is not simply a case of a small debt – rather it is a life debt.

There is an account in the bible in Exodus 34 which has always left me awed.

Moses wanted to see God, to know him. God told him point blank. “If you see my face – you will die.” He however granted Moses his request by saying: “I will pass by you and you will see my back.”ⁱ The bible describes what happened next.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, THE LORD and he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”ⁱⁱ

What we see here is that:

1. God came down to meet Moses and announced himself by his personal name: YHWH (the bible English translators in respect for Jewish tradition replaced “YHWH” with “LORD”);
2. He then passed in front of Moses and declared or seemed to announce his key attributes.
3. His First attribute – he is compassionate and gracious; and
4. He also declares that he is a forgiving God – he forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.

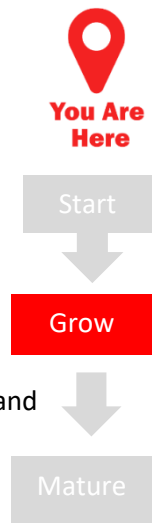
Why is this critical for Christians? If God declared who he was and then he commands us to be Holy like he is Holy – then we should be like him, including being compassionate and forgiving.

Forgiveness therefore, particularly when someone has done us wrong and can’t possibly repay is to be in God’s image – something you spiral upwards to become.

There is however another side to forgiveness which we must be aware of, if we are not to be deceived.

The revealed truth of God is that without atonement He cannot forgive— He would contradict His nature if He did. The only way we can be forgiven is by being brought back to God through the atonement of the Cross. God’s forgiveness is possible only in the supernatural realm.ⁱⁱⁱ

When God revealed himself to Moses, he made it clear that he forgives – but he also doesn’t forgive – hence why he punishes. That’s the meaning of the atonement of our sins by Jesus. There just cannot be forgiveness without the shedding of blood – God’s blood.



He however also in other places reveals another side to him – HE IS A GOD WHO DOESN'T FORGIVE if you commit the sin of not forgiving others. WHAT? Let's see how this reality is demonstrated in the bible.

Examples from the bible

The case of when God doesn't forgive you just like that... surprise surprise.

Peter, one of Jesus' 12 apostles asked him, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-times seven."

This means, not 7 times (pretty generous in themselves) as Peter thought but 490 times. That is about 7,000% more than expected. It would seem that in another gospel account this 70 times 7 might in fact mean not in a lifetime but in a day, 490 times in a day.^{iv}

Anyway back to the exchange with Peter. Jesus then went on to explain this further using the parable of the unfaithful servant told in Matthew 25 from verse 21.^v

A servant owed a king 10,000 bags of gold.

"Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go."

The one who was forgiven later found a fellow servant who owed him 100 silver coins.

100 silver coins are roughly equivalent to 0.1% of the 10,000 bags of gold^{vi}, and that is less than 1% of what the Master had forgiven this servant.

So, when this servant begged his fellow servant for mercy, he refused and put him in jail. The other servants went and told the master. What do you think the master did to this unmerciful servant?

Jesus summarised the story thus:

"In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.""

This is not the only time Jesus showed how serious forgiveness was.

Previous to this account of the unmerciful servant, when Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray, what is commonly called "The Lord's prayer" in Matthew 6: 9-13, he added an emphasis or "post script" to the model prayer for just one part, the part on forgiveness. He said:

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.^{vii}

But even before telling the disciples the parable of the unfaithful servant or the Lord's prayer, Jesus showed just how serious God is about forgiveness. So serious he gives you permission to stop worshipping him and first forgive others.

Stop worship 1 example

Jesus in Matthew 5: 21 – 22 first started by re- interpreting the magnitude of hate by saying:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.^{viii}

If you hate someone you are a murderer? Why? Jesus explained elsewhere that “Out of the heart the mouth speaks”, He was re-interpreting a proverb which exhorts guarding the heart diligently, for from it flow the issues of life^{ix}. What he meant is hate and murder have the same root. For murder starts with pre meditation.. in the heart, hence in saying a hater is a murderer, Jesus is dealing with the root of sin – the heart.

The IAM then gave this command in the very next verse of Matthew 5: 23-24:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Stop worship 2 example

In the bible days (Old Testament), offering a gift at the altar for example a free will offering to God typically meant sacrificing a male bull, sheep, or goat with no physical deformities or blemishes, and it was not to have been purchased from a foreigner. The offering was to include flour mixed with oil and wine. ^x

In the account below, similar to what Jesus said later, God was telling people to be forgiving, to be merciful before they came to him in worship. In fact, God rebuked his people very sharply in this matter of worshipping him with “dirty hands” as follows:

Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping around in my Temple? It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths, and your religious gatherings; they are all corrupted by your sins. I hate your New Moon Festivals and holy days; they are a burden that I am tired of bearing.

“When you lift your hands in prayer, I will not look at you. No matter how much you pray, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. xi

So here is God, who had told Israel in the Old Testament the first commandment being:

“Worship the Lord with all your heart”.

Now he was rejecting their forms of worship? What could be so important to him in regard to this all important commandment? God was always interested in worship starting in the heart, not with the lips only. The pattern as you can see right from the Old Testament is clear and God is saying the following:

- 1) *First act with mercy* – put things right with someone who holds a grudge against you (someone you have wronged);
- 2) *Next act with more mercy* – forgive the person who has wronged you;
- 3) *Forgive others as much as necessary* – you after all owe God a much higher debt. You owe others like less than 1% of what God forgave you. DO you really think you can compare what others owe you to what you owe God? The psalmist knowing this, declared:

“If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, And in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord More than those who watch for the morning— Yes, more than those who watch for the morning.”^{xii}

- 4) *Having forgiven others, you can expect God as is his custom to show you his mercy* which stretches to thousands of generations. You can expect to be forgiven by God, by the blood of Jesus which washes all your sins; and
- 5) *Having been merciful to those you can see, then you can worship Him who you cannot see* - in Truth and in Spirit!

Many atheists and non-Christians often accuse Christians of hypocrisy for acting without justice and harbouring unforgiveness and they are right. Don't the KKK for example claim to have been acting in the name of God? How about slave traders? Didn't many of these claim to be acting righteously – in line with the bible?

This pattern of biblical forgiveness highlighted above makes it pretty obvious, true Christians don't pay lip service to forgiveness for God says don't even bother worshiping me if you don't forgive others!

Today's perspective.

How do you forgive your neighbour who just tried to kill you?

That is literally what happened in Rwanda. In 100 days nearly 1 million mostly Tutsi people (and sympathisers) were killed. That's 100,000 people a day! An estimated 70% of the population of the Tutsis was extinguished.

The Government of Rwanda tried an experiment in reconciliation which it believes is working 20 years on. Its barometer on reconciliation shows they are at 94%.^{xiii}

So how did they do it? They work side by side to tackle a problem – with their (former) enemies in amongst others a monthly day of service called “umuganda”. Every able-bodied Rwandan citizen between the ages of 18 and 65 must take part in community service for three hours once a month. The community identifies a new public works problem to tackle each month.

It seems working together with your enemy can lead to forgiveness.

Other suggested steps to forgiveness include:^{xiv}

1. **Acknowledge pain.** You won't be able to work through the pain until you admit you're hurting. Tears are a pretty good indicator that something's wrong.
2. **Put yourself in the shoes of the offender.** Think about a time when you have wronged another person, maybe your parents, a sibling or a friend. You needed their forgiveness.
3. **Pray for the one who hurt you.** It may be impossible to restore a relationship with your offender. For example, you don't know where the person lives or contacting this person could

be a safety risk. But you can pray for the one who hurt you. Ask God to reveal his love to your offender. Doing so will help you to release any remaining resentment.

4. **Rest in him, God is supreme.** After it all, take comfort for God counts your tears and collects each one of them^{xv}. In another place he says: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay^{xvi}” and he shows that often he can use hurtful things or people for his purpose: “where we intended destruction, he goes ahead for he intended to save life”^{xvii} and finally, he gives us assurance: “All things – even pain from others will work for the good of those who Love the Lord.”^{xviii}

Your turn

What will you now do differently? Examples to think about include:

- Who do you need to forgive today?
- Who do you know is holding onto bitterness and unforgiveness, particularly if they are Christian and are forgiven themselves?

Write here

Notes

ⁱ Paraphrase from Exodus 33: 12 - 21

ⁱⁱ Exodus 34: 5- 7 (NIV)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://utmost.org/the-forgiveness-of-god/>

^{iv} Luke 17: 4

^v Matthew 25: 21 – 35 (NIV)

^{vi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_standard#Relative_value_of_silver_and_gold

^{vii} Matthew 6: 14 – 15 (NIV)

^{viii} Matthew 5: 21 – 22 (NKJV)

^{ix} Proverbs 4: 23

^x <https://www.gotquestions.org/free-will-offering.html>

^{xi} Isaiah 1: 12 – 17 (GNT)

^{xii} <http://bible.com/114/psa.130.3-6.nkjv>

^{xiii} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/africa/rwandans-carry-on-side-by-side-two-decades-after-genocide.html>

^{xiv} <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/advice/faithqa/8-steps-to-forgiveness.html>

^{xv} Psalms 56: 8

^{xvi} Deuteronomy 32: 35 (NJJV)

^{xvii} Adapted from Genesis 45: 5 (NIV)

^{xviii} Paraphrase from Roman 8: 28