

# Forgiveness

Most of you who have heard me talk know by now that I like to look at things from a little different perspective, that I tend to look at things from an intellectual basis as opposed to a spiritual basis and that I'm going to give you a perspective that you probably haven't heard before. Now, this is not to say that I'm some kind of intellectual, it just that I'm more comfortable looking at things from this prospective. Besides it was the way I came to Christ.

To reiterate, I'm not an intellectual. If intellect were compared to a bike race, an intellectual would be Lance Armstrong, as for me; you'd need to picture Pee Wee Herman riding his classic red bike with big fenders, ringing his little bell. He might finish the race, but no one would mistake him for one of the favorites. (Hopefully, I haven't seared that image into your head and ruined you for life).

To me, context is everything. I personally think that one of the worst things you can do when reading the Bible is to randomly pick out a verse and then somehow apply how it makes you feel to your life. You hear about people doing this a lot. Let's test it. (Use example from Mathew). The Bible is very clear that we are to test our feelings against the Word of God so that we are not swayed by our feelings. God programmed us and is trying to make us aware that feelings are fleeting but his Word is based on unchanging truth.

In addition, in reading the New Testament we have to refer back to the Old Testament or Torah. When Jesus taught, his audience certainly knew the Old Testament implications of His teachings. That's why they would act so seemingly unreasonable to apparently innocuous teaching of His, because they knew the Old Testament implications.

So what I'm going to teach on today is one of those examples where I feel the traditional teaching of the Church does not take into account the Old Testament and the Jewish cultural context. While much of traditional Christianity views what I'm about to say in a different light, there are several theological scholars who support what I have to say, more importantly, the Bible taken in context, I feel also agrees with what I have to say.

Ok let's get going. Forgiveness. How would you characterize the traditional teaching of the church? How about "forgive and forget". Most would use Mathew 18:21-22 as justification for this.

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Now, that sounds like we should forgive and forget, right? Right.... only if it is taken out of biblical and cultural context. First, all you have to do is look at the first part of this discourse on forgiveness and you'll see that Jesus says to confront the person who has sinned against you and "if he listens to you (or agrees with you), you have won him over". If he doesn't and others agree with you, you are to eventually treat him like a "pagan or tax collector". Now, that doesn't sound like "forgive and forget" to me.

As to the cultural context, who was Mathew's gospel directed towards; who did he write it for? Jews. So, therefore, we have to look at the Jewish customs at that time, not Greek or gentile customs. In Jewish society, of which Jesus was a part, forgiveness was only given to someone who asked for forgiveness; or in other words, someone who repented and acknowledged their sin and offered restitution. Restitution could be in the form of money or property or simply recognition of how the offense affected the person. Furthermore, it was the Jewish custom of the time to forgive someone only 3 times, so Jesus expanding on this custom implying unlimited forgiveness shocked his audience and gave them a glimpse of God's grace and forgiveness towards them. What's also interesting about this passage is that this grace appears to only apply to believers. "if your brother sins..." with the implication being your fellow Jew. But it is clear from other passages that Jesus was alluding to harmony among the church something Paul expanded upon in his epistles.

Now let's look at a corresponding passage in Luke 17:3-4: "...If your brother sins, rebuke him, and **if he repents**, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him". Isn't it interesting that in Luke, the repent part is added but it is left out of Mathew's version? The reason for that is all about context. Luke was writing to gentiles who didn't know Jewish customs. Whereas Mathew was written to Jews who would certainly know their own customs. Therefore, in Mathew, the audience would have known the whole custom of forgiveness and, therefore, repentance was implied.

So let's look into why this distinction is important.

Today in society and in a large portion of the church, we have what is technically called "therapeutic forgiveness". This type of forgiveness says that you are to forgive someone whether or not they ask for forgiveness and you are only to confront them if *you* feel right in doing so; In other words, if it benefits you. The whole process is about making you feel better and your feelings. It's the epitome of self-actualization, the "me first" mentality that infects our society. Now within much of the church, it is looked upon as a badge of honor to forgive someone unilaterally, that you are showing "Christ-like" attributes if forgiveness is granted under all conditions, whether it is asked for or not; therefore, whether it is deserved or not. But isn't this type of forgiveness all about you and not about your neighbor?

Biblically, would you say that putting yourself first is looked upon as a worthy attribute? No, of course not. What is? What did Jesus say were the greatest commandments? Yes, to "love the Lord God, with all your heart, soul and mind!" And secondly, "love your

neighbor as yourself”. Help me here...where does it say to put your feelings above your neighbor? Where did Jesus say how you *feel* matters at all? It seems to me that once you’ve accepted God’s grace that He wants you to feel for your neighbor and those less fortunate than you. I’m sorry but I’ve yet to find the passage in the Bible that says, “If it feels good, do it!” However, the Apostle Paul does say in Philippians, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others”. Jesus says to follow his commandments by loving God and loving your neighbor by serving them. But here’s the really cool part; by doing these things you will feel good because your life will have meaning and purpose not just an endless pursuit of self-gratification. Let me tell you, this little rant strikes home to me as much as any of you listening to me.

So what is the biblical formula for forgiveness? Well, let’s go to God for the answer. How are we forgiven by God? What’s the process? That’s right. We ask for forgiveness (or repent) and God forgives us. Does God forgive us if we don’t ask? Nope. It is a two-way street. Both parties must act.

There is a passage in Colossians (Col 3:13) where Paul says, “forgive as the Lord forgave us”. I would love to use this passage to prove my point by saying, see we are suppose to forgive in the manner that God forgives us but I’d be violating the rule of context. Because he really meant it in a different way when you read the whole passage. What he is really saying, we should forgive others because God forgave us. The full passage reads, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you”. While this passage in context doesn’t support or contradict my point, it is a wonderful passage on forgiveness and leads us toward the purpose of forgiveness.

So what is the purpose of forgiveness? Well, why did Jesus come? To restore our relationship with God. Jesus provided our restitution. His death on the cross paid for our sins and provides our restitution and completed that act of forgiveness so that we could have fellowship with God through Jesus. So forgiveness is about reconciliation and the restoration of relationships; it’s about restoring your relationship with your “neighbor”. It’s not about making your self feel good at the expense of your relationship with your neighbor.

So what do we do if someone does something that separates us from one another? Biblically, if someone has truly wronged you, or sinned against you, you need to go to the person and let them know the situation. Here’s why; God created us, he designed our human nature and He knows that most of as humans hold grudges no matter how “good” a Christian you are, no matter how hard you try, that most of us we *will* hold grudges. While some of us can continue to have some sort of relationship with that person that isn’t adversarial or hostile, with most of us there is underlying discord. It’s inevitable, it’s who we are as humans. Unrepented sin goes against God’s nature and since we were created in His image, it goes against our nature as well. If we put on a “good face” and

pretend nothing is wrong, for most of us, it will either lead to guilt because we'll feel that if we were "good" Christians, we'd be able to forgive this person, or it will lead to resentment because of the injustice or resentment because we feel guilty even though we were wronged. And I can tell you that a lot of Christians feel guilt because they are unable to "forgiven and forget" *unilaterally*.

I have a good friend whose father walkout on the family when she was in grade school. Her whole life she felt as though she was somehow inadequate because she was unable to forgive her father. Everyone told her she needed to just forgive him and forget about it, but she couldn't because he never showed any remorse. He would occasionally come around and act as if nothing happened. So here is a little girl, who not only is traumatized by a negligent father but also is made to feel guilty by well intending Christians giving unbiblical platitudes. I know from talking to her that once she realized God's biblical plan for forgiveness, it was a huge weight off her shoulders. She no longer needed to feel guilty and even lessened her resentment toward her father.

This also resonates with me personally. The very year I became a Christian, I had a conflict arise with my siblings. Now my brother and sisters are, in some respects, my best friends. I tried to forgive and forget. I did what people told me; I wrote a letter explaining what they'd done and how it made me feel. You know the advice, 'write a letter but don't send it so I could get it off your chest'. But it didn't work. I still felt resentment and I felt guilty because I could hardly talk to one of my sisters. I just couldn't get over it. Then one day, through a 3<sup>rd</sup> party, they realized what they'd done and they called me and apologized. It was one of the best days of my life. (Don't tell anyone but I actually cried it was such a relief.) How many times has someone told you they were sorry and all the angry and resentment you held toward that person just melts away. It's surprising how quickly it fades away but it really shouldn't be surprising.... it's how God designed us and what God planned for us.

So what if you don't like conflict and don't want to confront the person? Let's think about that. Are you letting that person off the hook if you don't go to them? If they did something harmful to you on purpose then they need to be confronted. And if it was unintentional, I don't know about you, but I'd like to be told if I'm doing something that has wronged someone. I certainly don't want to be jerk and sometimes we need to be told when we're being one.

This leads to another question; What if the person you go to blows you off and doesn't acknowledge what they've done? Or what if the person is no longer around?

Your only option is to give it over to God and have faith and trust that God will deal with this situation in His time and His way. We trust that God will give us salvation through Jesus; we also have to trust God in other areas of our lives. Not only is God a God of love but also is a God of justice.

Now some of you may be thinking that “giving it over to God” is a cop out. But what are your options? You can’t shoot ‘em “Thou shall not murder”; you can’t plot revenge, “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord”; you can’t gossip to other people for as the proverb says “.... gossip separates the best of friends”(16:28). So your only option is to give it over to God and know that God will deal with it.

You may also see this “giving it over to God” as semantics; “aren’t you just really forgiving that person”. No. Here is the controversial part; Biblically, there is no forgiveness without repentance. As I said earlier, it is a two-way street. What you are really doing is trusting in God and showing grace; the same grace that Jesus showed to us.

Let’s back up a little. Notice that I said, “If someone truly wrongs you or sins against you”. Let’s examine that a little bit. What would be someone sinning against you? Let’s see, thou shall not murder, thou shall not steal, thou shall not commit adultery, thou shall not covet, thou shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother...the rest have to do with God and not your neighbor. So aside from the last one, honor your father and mother, (children!) how often do the other ones happen to you?

Now, obviously there are sins other than the 10 Commandments, but let’s face it, we as humans sometimes look for reasons to be offended. How many times can you truly say that somebody, especially someone who is Christian, purposely tried to offend or harm you. Do you think people purposely go around thinking of ways to offend you? Think about yourself, when was the last time you purposely tried to offend or maliciously denigrate someone (aside from your spouse or siblings)? I know for me, the last time I can remember doing something like that was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I tried to pick a fight with John Menage because he was bad-mouthing me. I couldn’t bring myself to haul off and hit him, so I tried to pick a fight with him so I could beat the crap out of him. I called him names and made fun of him in front of group of people but he wouldn’t take the bait. And then I did it...I made fun of his nose which was bigger than most at the time. Can you believe it; I made fun of *his* nose. But this thing (my nose) wasn’t always like this. It didn’t get like this until after “The Confrontation”. “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the lord”. It was not one of my proudest moments.

My point is, aside from the rare occasion, that most the time we are offended it’s usually unintended. And have we really been sinned against? I don’t think so. I think much of the time we look for reasons to be offended or we attribute sinister motives to people who have no such intent. And most the time it’s *our* pride that is the problem. We feel slighted for some reason. So now who is the sinner and who is the sinnee? As the proverb says, “Pride only breeds quarrels...”

But let’s face it; there are a lot of EGR’s out there. And there are especially a lot of Christian EGR’s (extra grace required). But we as Christians are to show grace to one another and accept people for how and who they are since we are *all* creations of God.

Paul goes with this theme in Philippians 4:2-3 when he says,

“<sup>2</sup> Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. <sup>3</sup> And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News...”

Here Paul is writing to the “perfect” church and yet, this church that Paul cherishes because it is living out their faith, this church is having a squabble amongst two prominent members. It seems as though Paul is having a Rodney King moment: “Can’t we all just get along!!” This is a consistent theme throughout much of his writings; we as Christians need to get along and not let petty, unbiblical differences get in the way, in other words, “show grace to one another!” And were not even suppose to let petty biblical differences get in the way of church unity either. To paraphrase Paul, “in the essentials conformity, in the non-essentials liberty”. I guess that message didn’t get to all the denominations in time.

Just think if we did all get along, we could then concentrate our grace and forgiveness on those outside the church!

So here’s what we do; if you feel as though someone has wronged you in some way, examine the situation and see if it’s not you that is the problem, and if not, go to the person. And if you feel like you did something wrong to someone, go to that person and ask forgiveness.

I’ve seen good relationships go bad because neither party would act. I think we all have. I’ve also seen good relationships grow because one of the parties had enough love for their “neighbor” that they confronted them and the other person saw what they’d done and asked for forgiveness. That, my friends is what forgiveness is all about.

Let me finish with the Apostle Paul who said in Colossians and Romans “Remember, the Lord forgave us, we must forgive others” and “Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Amen