

Forgiveness and Repentance Overview Summary

Matthew 6: 12

Indebted to Paul Helm in “Forgiveness, Guilt and Harm” and to Derek Thomas, Ligon Duncan and Justin Taylor in “A Roundtable Discussion on Forgiveness” – both originally obtained through reformation21 in 2007

1. Read Mark 2: 5-7.
 - a. The accusation of the scribes is based on two assumptions, one that is true and the other that is false.
 - i. Correct assumption: only God can forgive sins!
 - ii. Incorrect assumption: Jesus is NOT God, thus He lacks the authority to forgive sins.
 1. To address the second false assumption of the scribes, that Jesus was not God, Christ performed a healing miracle, for which everyone then glorified God.
2. So, if God alone can forgive sins, why and how do we pray, “forgive us our debts (trespasses), as we forgive those who trespass against us”?
 - a. The answer is that our sin has two aspects to it that stems from the Great Commandment to love God with all our being, and the second commandment, like the first, to love others as we are to love ourselves.
 - i. Fundamentally, sin is disobedience to God stemming from our fallenness such as pride and unbelief.
 - ii. Secondly, there is the harm that our sins may cause ourselves and others. This harm to others is that which causes injury and is understood as offences and debts which have things in common with sin, and which may be sins themselves.
 - iii. The first aspect of sin, that which is disobedience to God, brings about guilt before God of our sinfulness and disobedience toward Him. This sin against God is the basis for our offences against each other.
 1. Furthermore, it is most importantly the guilt, or the sinfulness, of our sins that God forgives through the Atonement of Jesus Christ that serves as the foundation for our ability and desire to forgive those who have trespassed against us.
 - a. Atonement, simply put, is God’s work on sinners’ behalf to reconcile them to Himself.
 - i. Note, that **reconciliation** is the primary result of atonement and the larger picture within which forgiveness is a specific component.
 - b. When we forgive the sins, or the injury of sins, against us, we are showing forth a faint replica of God’s own forgiveness of the guilt of our sins toward Him. God’s forgiveness of our sins is the basis and means by which we are to forgive those who offend us. We do NOT forgive one’s guilt or sinfulness. This is God’s job. Instead, we are forgiving the harm they have committed against us.
 - i. READ Luke 17: 3,4
 1. Sin committed against another person causes harm and is serious; therefore, the repentance of the offender is required for forgiveness. To put it another way, there is no such thing as “unconditional forgiveness” in the Bible. It cost God the death of His only-begotten Son to forgive us the guilt incurred by our sins against Him. To receive this forgiveness requires repentance on our part which is a divine gift from God that accompanies faith through regeneration (*cf. Colin Smith in his book “Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life”). The same is true of one who offends or harms us. For there to be **true reconciliation**, the offending party must express a penitent attitude in word and deed, and the injured party must be willing to forgive which includes putting away bitterness, wrath and anger to, instead, put on Christ and the fruit of the Spirit.

- a. Note that I said the injured party must have a willingness to forgive. Another way of putting this is the injured party must have a desire to be reconciled. This means that one is predisposed to forgive one who offends them even if the offending party refuses to repent.
- b. It is important to see a distinction here. There is a difference between one's "desire to be reconciled" and "unconditional forgiveness." This difference exists because, it is true that a Christian can indeed love their enemies and put away bitterness and unrighteous anger while, at the same time, withholding judicial forgiveness in the absence of the required repentance. A Christian can, and should, withhold forgiveness for the harm committed to them if the offender does not express repentance while, at the same time, desiring and hoping for such biblical repentance on behalf of the offender. To forgive "unconditionally" is to lessen the offence of sin.
 - i. Much of this comes from the false view that forgiveness is something that we do simply for therapeutic benefit.
 1. Again, this denigrates the seriousness of the offense committed by the offender and may lead to the presumption that repentance is not needed; therefore, unconditional forgiveness must be granted.
 - a. However, where there is no repentance, there can be no *reconciliation*.
 - ii. As a side note regarding the culture of the church today which has been overly influenced by the hypersensitive and politically correct Western culture of ours, the NT presumes that we are adults with thick skins able to distinguish between the trivial from the substantial. When we recall that offenses committed against us are those things that cause us to stumble and fall, we must recognize that such offenses or harm do not include many of the petty things for which we either seek forgiveness or desire repentance in others.
 1. Instead, we are to forebear the fallen and troublesome nature of one another in patience and humility, recognizing that we, too, are fallen.
 - a. Contrarily today, in mainstream evangelical bodies, there is this bizarre and unhealthy cycle of offence and forgiveness which is nothing short of neurotic.
 - i. Overly sensitive consciences are created in such a cycle, and again, the true offense committed against someone is lessened by such a concept of being "offended" by another.
 2. The Bible articulates two ways in which we are to proceed when we feel offended by another.
 - a. One, intended to be used far more than the other, is the biblical category of allowing love to cover the multitude of sins. Thus, we forebear one another's fallen behaviors and personalities.
 - b. Two, intended to be used less frequently, is the process of repentance and reconciliation that Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 18 on which church discipline is to be based. (READ verses 15-20)

3. Conclusions

a. John 20:19-23

- i. Note the redemptive-historical context; the impartation of the 'Spirit of Reconciliation' to the Apostles and this paralleling the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 and as prefiguring Pentecost and the fulfillments of Joel 2.

1. Correct understanding of the forgiveness being offered here is in the context of preaching the gospel.
 - a. This entails Rebuking, Repentance & subsequent Church Discipline for those visible members who identify themselves with the Church Community.
 - i. If they one accused of sin and fails to repent and seek to be reconciled with evidence of amendment of life, what is their status within the community?
 - ii. If you do not acknowledge a need or possess a desire to be forgiven, are you forgiven?
 - iii. Are you reconciled if you refuse or deny a need to be forgiven?
 - b. Let's place these questions of interpersonal forgiveness within the larger framework of human/divine reconciliation based on the forgiveness that comes through Christ's satisfaction of our debt that we cannot pay. It is through this gospel reality, that we must first understand the nature of our forgiveness with one another.
 1. If you refuse to accept the payment for a debt paid on your behalf that you can never afford to pay off, are you out of debt?
 - a. The answer to this is, obviously, "No."
 - c. The condition to receive the benefits of these offers of freedom from indebtedness, of forgiveness from sins/offenses/guilt, and to be reconciled in peace, is to acknowledge our need for them and to thankfully accept them.
 - i. ***In a word, one needs repentance and faith.***
 - ii. Yet, if we are unable to recognize our need and complete dependency for these things, we must be made aware of our need and given a desire to receive and accept these gifts of forgiveness and freedom from debt.
 1. How is this awareness obtained?
 - a. ***In a word, regeneration.***
 - i. And this regeneration comes through the very means by which this debt is paid and forgiveness obtained, the death of Christ on the Cross, when Jesus declared, "It is finished," and when He prayed to the Father to, "Forgive us for we do not know what we do" that we may receive the enlightening and regenerating Holy Spirit of Regeneration and Reconciliations.
 - ii. By the Power of the Spirit, we are first made aware of our desperate need to be freed from a debt we cannot pay, to be reconciled by a peace the is beyond our understanding, to be forgiven our sins through the substitutionary work of Jesus which cost Him His perfect sinless life, so that may receive this gift.
 - iii. Indeed, this is a gift that, while freely offered to us, cost our Lord His life that we may **desire** its gracious offer and thankfully receive the reconciliation offered to us through such divine love and sacrifice.

- b. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the only unforgivable sin, is our refusal to see and accept the cost, condition and need for the foundation of our reconciliation Who is Christ alone and His Cross.
 - i. The work of Christ on the Cross is the foundation of our forgiveness of those who sin, offend, or are indebted to us, and the Spirit of Reconciliation is the means by which this is achieved; enabling the peace and communion we share in Christ.
 - ii. Therefore, the condition for reconciliation, both divine to human and, subsequently, human to human, is our need to recognize that which separates us (sins, offenses and indebtedness), desire to have it removed, be accountable to for the barriers we ourselves need to remove and break down in humility, and live peaceable with all so far as it depends on us. This means that we possess a desire to be reconciled by the Spirit of Reconciliation we have already received through Christ coupled with a willingness to forgive those who seek to be reconciled and who repent of their sins/offenses against us. This is what it means to forgive those as we have been forgiven.
 - iii. Romans 12:9-21

4. Sources to Reference

- a. <http://www.chrisbrauns.com/2008/02/others-on-conditional-forgiveness/>
- b. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2007/09/28/reformation-21-forgiveness/>
- c. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2007/01/10/is-forgiveness-always-right-and/>

5. Matthew 6: 14-15

- a. It is also important to clarify that our forgiving someone is NOT the basis or merit upon which God forgives us our sins as some would say this passage, and others like it, suggest.
- b. Instead, this is called an argument from the lesser to the greater.
 - i. This same truth is illustrated more explicitly in another way with an argument from the greater to the lesser as expressed in Ephesians 4: 32 (READ).
 - ii. Our willingness to forgive and our not harboring resentment and anger are a sign of the genuineness of our own reconciliation to God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ by the forgiveness of our sins. It is the fruit of Christ's Spirit working in us.
 - 1. If we are unforgiving, how can we in the same breath go to God for His mercy?
 - 2. If we find granting forgiveness difficult when genuine repentance has been offered and forgiveness asked by one who has offended us, we need to look hard at our own hearts and our own sin and study how much the Lord has had to forgive us and how much He continues to forgive us.
- c. Ligon Duncan stated, "Those who have received the gospel forgiveness are invariably and universally affected by that in their conduct towards others. So that having received mercy, they are merciful. Hence, if [one is continuously reluctant to offer forgiveness to one who has repented] it would be an indication of a heart unchanged by grace."