

Determined to Forgive



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“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” These are some of the first words spoken by the Lord Jesus as He hung on the cross on Good Friday. They’re also some of the first words people throw at you when you are struggling to face someone who’s sinned against you.

“You have to forgive him, you know. That’s what Jesus did. He even forgave the people who crucified him!”

But did He? And is it so simple that we are required to forgive another person no matter what the state of their heart or what they think about their actions?

God’s Forgiveness of Us

It hardly needs to be said that Good Friday is about the forgiveness of sins. In every Lord’s Supper celebration we remember and celebrate that on Golgotha our Lord’s body was broken and His blood poured out for the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Forgiveness is the wonder of the gospel that keeps us coming back for more – the cancellation of our debts in the once-for-all payment laid down by Jesus!

But there must be repentance. Forgiveness itself is a free gift of God’s grace. He asks no payment from us but only that we accept it in faith and repentance. Repentance means to turn away from our sin in sorrow of heart, to be contrite before the LORD on account of having offended Him. This is God’s clear message already in the Old Testament for example in Psalm 51 or in Ezekiel 18:30-32. “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone,” declares the Sovereign LORD. ‘Repent and live!’”

Forgiveness is wonderful for it means the wrath of God has been removed from over our head and in its place the peace of God fills our hearts. But if there’s no turning away from the sin, no changing of our heart, no repentance, there is no forgiveness. The Lord Jesus Himself also taught this from the beginning of His earthly ministry when He came preaching, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 3:2). He underlined this necessary condition in Luke 13:3, speaking to the crowds of Israelites, “But unless you repent, you too will perish!” Just read the ascended Lord’s letter to the church of Thyatira in Revelation 2 to see how unflinching He is about our need to repent to be forgiven by God.

Our Forgiveness of Each Other

But now what about from our side towards our neighbour? What does God expect of us when our neighbour commits a sin against ourselves personally? Perhaps someone cheated me out of big money or hurt me with lies or darkened my reputation by gossip. Maybe the transgression has been darker still: physical abuse, sexual abuse, adultery or rape – do I have to forgive such persons even if they do not repent? Is that what the work of Christ on Good Friday obligates me to do?

To support this, some point to a text like the fifth petition in Matthew 6:12, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The Lord’s added commentary in v.14 seems to make it categorical, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” There you have it, they say. Repentance is not mentioned much less demanded as a pre-requisite and thus we are required to forgive others unconditionally, hard as it may be.

Hold on a minute. Notice that the Lord’s Prayer does not specify either the necessity of *our* repentance before we are forgiven by God, though we know Jesus taught that. Apparently some things are assumed by the Lord as already being in place before these petitions are made. In this short, compact prayer one of those things is clearly we cannot expect God to forgive us our sins unless we repent.

In the same way, the Lord Jesus must assume that our neighbour has repented from his sin against us and desires to be forgiven. Christ brings that requirement out quite clearly in Luke 17:3, “So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” Here Jesus specifies that repentance is necessary also for forgiveness of human to human. If it were not needed, the Lord could not have made these statements.

Imitating God

What is necessary from our side is the *willingness* to forgive, even the determination to do the necessary work to bring about a person’s repentance and reconciliation. This is the posture of God toward us sinners and He insists that it be our posture toward fellow sinners if we are to be His children. Paul urges us in this direction in Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. *Be imitators of God*, therefore, as dearly loved children.”

The Lord Jesus teaches the very same thing in Matthew 18:15-18, the well-known passage about church discipline. However, it only becomes full-blown *church* discipline when the transgression against *one’s person* is not resolved in repentance, “If your brother sins *against you*, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. *If he listens to you*, you have won your brother over.” Jesus teaches us to seek out our neighbour’s repentance and subsequent reconciliation *by way of his repentance* (i.e. if he listens to you). If Jesus had intended us to forgive our neighbour’s transgressions against us without his repentance, he would not have commanded us to work toward the person’s repentance.

Besides, would it not be strange to personally forgive someone's sin against you but then still proceed with bringing along witnesses and even telling it to the church because he hasn't repented? What message would that send: "I've forgiven you but no one else has?"

Repentance Benefits the Neighbour

Consider it from another angle. Would it be helpful and spiritually beneficial to our fellow Christian if, after they have sinned against us in some way but not repented, we say, "Brother, I forgive you!?" In the first place, the person would not accept it because in his mind he has done nothing wrong. So reconciliation is no closer. But much worse, is this person's guilt now cleared away before God simply because we have personally forgiven him?

Not at all. Sins against our neighbour are still first of all sins against God (second table of the law!). David already recognized this. After he committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, he said, "Against *you* (the LORD), *you only* have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:3). Forgiving someone without their repentance might make us feel good for a while but it does nothing for their standing with God. Only when that person realizes in sorrow of heart that he has offended the LORD first of all will He then come to be reconciled both with his God and his neighbour – but not before. Forgiveness that does not lead to reconciliation – that isn't really forgiveness, is it? The debt still stands and God will one day bring it to account.

A Determined Saviour

Instead we must learn from our Saviour the grace to be fully *determined* to forgive. That is the attitude of our Father in heaven toward us as pictured in the parable of the prodigal son. All along the father is waiting for his son to repent. He is eager for it. He wants to give it. He looks for the opportunity to extend it. He shows that by daily keeping an eye on the road, hoping his son would return. Given the way his son had left, the very act of his return would show that he had humbled himself in repentance and his father was eager for that. Indeed, as soon as he spots his son "a long way off," he is filled with compassion for him, runs to him (breaking cultural protocol even!), throws his arms around him and kisses him (Luke 15:20)!

As with the Father, so with the Son, as our Lord Jesus showed on Good Friday, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." It's a moving prayer for the forgiveness of the crowds and soldiers who had ignorantly called for his crucifixion. Though they could have known better, they were ignorant of his true identity. The masses had not understood His work or His message. Whipped up by the hate-filled Jewish leaders, they had shouted for his crucifixion and helped to sway Pilate to bring down the frightful sentence of death.

Christ wants them to be forgiven but did you notice that He doesn't actually forgive them himself? He could have if that was appropriate. More than once in his ministry He had directly pronounced the sins of certain people forgiven. He showed that He had power on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2:9,10). But here he does not extend that forgiveness. Instead He asks His Father to as yet lead them to forgiveness. He's praying for His Father to bring them to repentance that they

might be forgiven for *that's what He came for!* Christ's mission was to seek and save lost sinners like those crowds, like you and me, and He was always *eager to forgive!*

And determined to make it happen too. Less than two months later this same Jesus now raised as Lord at the Father's right hand sent out a preacher to these same crowds in Jerusalem. Filling Peter with His Spirit, Christ impressed the call of the gospel on their hearts, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ...Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." What was their response? "They were cut to the heart" – and 3000 repented and were added to the number of the church that day! The prayer of Good Friday was answered on Pentecost Sunday in the repentance worked by the Spirit of God!

Eager to Forgive

And that, now, is to be our approach to our neighbour! As Christians we are to take on the mission of Christ, preaching the good news of the forgiveness of sins through faith and repentance and eagerly hoping and praying to see it happen in all our neighbours, also those who sin against us. This can be very difficult, especially when the sin has been very hurtful. But let us bear in mind that our sins against God are a million times more hurtful to Him and His holiness than anything we've experienced and yet He stands ready and willing to forgive us everything. That needs to be our posture now. Ready to let it go. Eager to cancel the debt. Hungry to reconcile and restore the peace.

Sometimes people don't want to be forgiven. They refuse to repent despite our overtures and admonitions. What then? In the church setting, the rest of Matthew 18 comes into play, of course. But from our side personally, we are called to live in peace with all men as far as it depend on us (Romans 12:18). Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Not bitterness but concern. Not hardness of heart but a spirit that longs to forgive. Not paying back evil for evil but doing good and kind things even to those who hate us. And also praying for those who have sinned against us as the Lord did, that as yet the Father may bring them into the joy of Good Friday's forgiveness through the avenue of repentance.

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