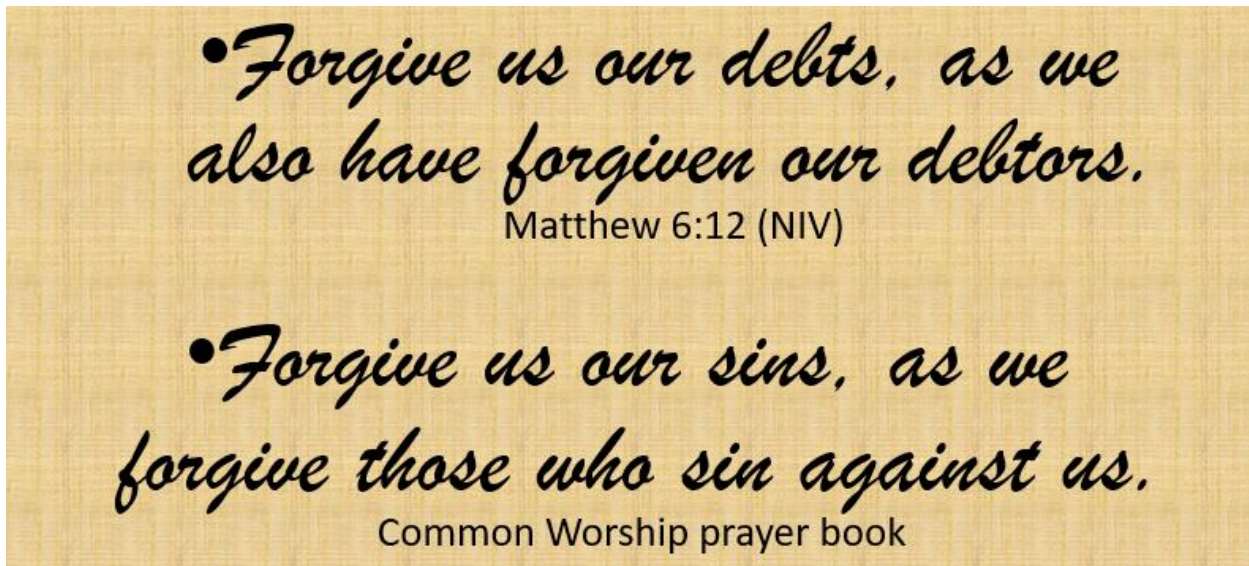


FORGIVENESS

Matt 6:12-15, Matt 18:21-35

Colin Wood LF 19/06/22.



1 QUOTES FROM THE PRESS

1.1 Daily Star

When Judy and I are in Waitrose, I often pause by the newspaper counter to scan the day's headlines. On April 15th the Daily Star had a banner front-page. Apparently, Home Secretary Patel had said, if law breakers say "Sorry", we should forgive them. And the Daily Star screamed outrage.

1.2 Tebbitt

A more respectable newspaper quoted Lord Tebbitt as saying that his late wife Margaret had died without ever forgiving the IRA for the 1984 Brighton bombing, which left her paralysed in a wheelchair.

1.3 Guardian 21 May

A captured Russian soldier asked a Ukrainian widow to forgive him for killing her husband. He said "I acknowledge my blame. I ask you to forgive me."

1.4 BBC News 23 April

In 1994, hatred between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Rwanda, erupted into all-out genocide and 800,000 Tutsis were murdered by their Hutu neighbours. One of these Hutus was Gratien. He walked to his neighbour's farm and killed his Tutsi friend Kabera, leaving Kabera's widow Bernadette with a 14 year-old son Alfred away at school, and no one to support her.

Ten years later, Gratien was required by the community court to confront Bernadette and face up to what he had done. **Before that court, Bernadette forgave him**

During the years between, Gratien's teen-age daughter had tried to make amends for her dad. She spent time with Bernadette, helping with the farm. Alfred too had grown up, and despite all that had happened, the young couple fell in love.

With Bernadette's blessing they married, and her forgiveness spread healing through the family.



Gratien is on the right. In the middle are Alfred and his young wife, Gratien's daughter. On the left is Bernadette holding her grandchild - and Gratien's

1.5 Comment

If the press reflects the attitudes of society, then we are looking at widespread interest in forgiveness. Whether outraged by it, heart-warmed by stories of it, or saddened by the absence of it, everyone has an opinion. What an opportunity for Christians to build relationships through conversation and shared interest!

*•Forgive us our debts, as we
also have forgiven our debtors.*
Matthew 6:12 (NIV)

*•Forgive us our sins, as we
forgive those who sin against us.*
Common Worship prayer book

2 JOSEPH

Enough of newspapers. Let's have a Bible story. Genesis chapter 50.

Returning to Egypt after the funeral of Jacob their father, Joseph's brothers were very frightened. They had sold Joseph to slave traders and now, as governor of Egypt, he had power of life or death over them.

Desperately, they concocted a fictitious death-bed request from Jacob. *"I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins they committed in treating you so badly."*

Did Joseph realise the deception? It doesn't matter. The story just says that he was overcome and wept. All that Joseph's heart had ever wanted was to forgive.

When the Bible tells a story like that, God is telling us something about Himself.

3 CAN YOU ASK FORGIVENESS FOR SOMEONE ELSE?

That story leads to a question. Forgiving is about me forgiving someone, or someone forgiving me. **But can you pray that someone else be forgiven, when you are not involved?**

3.1 Dick

A Christian student had some kind of bizarre mental crisis, and tried to poison a fellow student. Shocked, the Christian Union met to pray, and Dick, one of my engineering students, asked me to come.

I listened to the prayers. Time and again I heard *"Lord forgive him for the dreadful thing he has done."* Then, one voice was different *"Lord we are all in this together, please show us how we can help him"*

I opened my eyes in surprise, to see who was speaking. It was Dick.

3.2 Daniel

Daniel, among the Jewish exiles in Babylon, prayed the same way.

"Great and awesome God, we have sinned and done wrong. We have rebelled and turned away from your commands and laws."

It is a wonderful prayer. Read Daniel chapter 9 sometime, and notice that the whole time, Daniel is saying, not "They" but "We"

3.3 Lord's Prayer

In the Lord's prayer we say 'Forgive US as WE forgive.'

I guess that most of us, praying that prayer, say "Us" and "We" really meaning 'Me' and 'I' That is OK of course, but the Lord's Prayer is a 'Kingdom come' vision - Far bigger than we can imagine.

My question was:- 'Can you pray for someone else to be forgiven, when you are not personally involved.'

Perhaps we are more involved than we realise. Worth thinking about?

QUESTIONS

That is just one question. I have four more. Here is a list so you know what to expect. I don't have answers. They are for us to think about together.

Five difficult questions

- 1 Can you pray forgiveness for someone else?
- 2 Can you forgive without an apology?
- 3 What if you are not forgiven?
- 4 Can you both forgive and punish?
- 5 Does God punish those who do not forgive?

4 CAN YOU FORGIVE WITHOUT AN APOLOGY?

The second question. **Can you forgive without an apology?** Or is forgiving only for someone who is genuinely sorry?

The Bible makes clear that God forgives when we repent. The Old Testament said it and Jesus applied it to our relationships with one another.

Luke 17:3 If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them.

So maybe the answer is “Yes, Repentance is necessary”. But suppose you have no contact with the person who hurt you. Or suppose that person neither remembers nor cares. Are you then stuck, unable to forgive and therefore cut off from God’s forgiving?

I would love to know what you think about that.

5 WHAT IF YOU ARE NOT FORGIVEN?

Now a third question: What is it like to regret deeply what you have done; to long for forgiveness but find no way to seek it? Or worse still, to seek forgiveness, but find forgiveness denied? I have been there. Maybe you have.

For this, I find one supreme comfort. **It is for God to forgive, and his forgiveness overrides all human unforgiving. This is everywhere in the Bible. It was for this all-embracing forgiveness that Jesus died.**

6 CAN YOU BOTH FORGIVE AND PUNISH?

Did you know that the Bible mentions punishment more frequently than forgiving?.

The score is 162 to 119! I offer no comment on that, but let’s turn it into a question for parents with children.

How does it work, forgiving your child when punishment is necessary? **Can you forgive and punish at the same time?**

Tell us what you think.

7 DOES GOD PUNISH THOSE WHO DO NOT FORGIVE?

Finally, the really uncomfortable question

In Matthew 6:14-15 , Jesus says *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.*

I don’t like the idea of being punished for not forgiving. We are all aware of situations where to forgive might be impossible, or take years; Situations of personal harm so damaging that the

ability to live and trust are irretrievably gone. My psychologist friends tell me that to create blame and guilt for being unable to forgive, can only make worse the damage already done.

7.1 Finance only?

The forgive stories in the Bible don't give me an answer to this. In fact, some of them seem trivially concerned only with finance and debt.

OK, Let's go with finance for a lighter moment. Have you ever lent money to a friend and not got it back? I have. How is your friendship? In the law of Moses there is a Year of Jubilee when all debts are written off. **A fantastic festival of forgiving!**

7.2 Soft option?

Returning to the psychology of forgiving, I often wonder about the sad, but all too frequent, fact that people who refuse to forgive, find themselves trapped in obsessive bitterness. I am assured that there is no theological justification for equating this with what scripture says about punishment from God, so I guess this is just me, trying to dodge what I find uncomfortable

Still looking for the soft option; Can you imagine anyone, holding an unforgiving grudge, ever **wanting** to ask God for forgiveness? Tom Wright puts it this way *"The heart that is not open to forgive others will remain closed when God's own forgiveness is offered."*

Attractive though these wishful explanations might be, the hard truth remains that if I am **deliberately** unforgiving, then I will find that God denies me forgiveness in the same way that I myself have denied it.

The word "Deliberately" is mine and I think you will understand why.

7.3 God forgives first

Think about the parable Jesus told to Peter in Matthew 18. (P.986) The sequence of events is important. The first servant had been forgiven **already**, before he refused to forgive the one below him.

God forgives first, and it is in response to His forgiving, that we forgive. The tragic ending in the parable, was that the King's forgiveness, once given so freely, then had to be withdrawn.

8 ATONEMENT

No more questions! To finish, I want to think about something else that has a powerful connection with forgiving. The word is Atonement

• Thinking about Atonement

Remember what Gratien's daughter did, trying to make amends for what her dad had done.

8.1 Ritual atonement

Leviticus and Numbers set out complex rules for priests to offer sacrifices, for the sin of the people. Let's call them "Sorry gifts to God".

Lev:5:18. They are to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for them - -, and they will be forgiven.

So what is this 'atonement' all about? Here are three thoughts

- (1) To win forgiveness, an innocent life is sacrificed in place of the guilty person.
- (2) The priests had to be sanctified themselves and made holy, before they could do it.
- (3) The whole ritual was only symbolic. In itself, it achieved nothing.

8.2 Moses

With all that in mind, I can't help thinking about Moses. Moses who talked with God face to face as a man talks with his friend.

While he was away, alone with God on Mount Sinai, the people made a golden calf and worshipped it. Moses came down in holy rage and confronted them. Then amazingly he said

"I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

*Moses went back to the LORD and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot **me** out of your book."*

God said. "No; It is not for you to sacrifice yourself in their place."

9 JESUS THE ULTIMATE ATONEMENT

And I ask How could this man Moses, understand the heart of God so intimately that, in wishing to sacrifice himself to win forgiveness for his people, he could anticipate the sacrifice of a Saviour he would never meet.

But perhaps they did meet - On that mountain of transfiguration, when he talked with Jesus about his coming death and what it would achieve.

- The writer to the Romans understood it. (Romans 3:25) *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood*
- The prophet Isaiah understood it (Isaiah 53:5) *He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities; with his stripes we are healed.*
- Moses begged “*Blot me out of your book. Reject me but forgive my people*”
- Jesus cried “*God, why have you forsaken me.*” And for his tormentors: “*Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing*”

10 CONCLUSION

We have thought, together about some difficult questions. Do we understand forgiving a little better now?

The bottom line is that forgiving is not about rules and penalties. We pray “*Our Father in Heaven, your Kingdom come*”. Forgiving is about relationships in that Kingdom where our highest joy and aim, is to forgive like the King.

In the last analysis, forgiving is when the Christ of God, stands in our place and dies, taking our guilt upon himself;

10.1 Last word

I have often wondered why, in those last moments of life, Jesus asked for a drink. Could it be that he needed a strong clear voice for his final words?

Mark and Matthew remembered only that his final shout was loud. Luke only heard about it second-hand. John alone was near enough to hear and understand.

“It is finished”. “I have done it. The World I love is forgiven.”

11 PRAYER

Silence: Here is a little prayer we can say together.

• *A Prayer*

• **Teach me, Holy Spirit.
Change me until my heart
reflects the heart of Jesus,
and the love that took him to
the Cross for our forgiving.**

Silence:

• *Accept forgiveness from
Jesus*

• *Then you can live
forgiveness toward others*