

Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart

BY J. R A N D A L L O ' B R I E N

The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ. But as Clarence Jordan remarked, "We'll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says." Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? What precisely is forgiveness? And why should Christians forgive?

WHY FORGIVE? The words jumped off the face of *Time* magazine, January 9, 1984, even as the cover picture shocked the world. With his left arm in fatherly fashion around Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman who had attempted to take the Pontiff's life, Pope John Paul II tenderly embraced the right hand that had aimed and fired a near deadly round into his person on May 13, 1981. Whispering words of pardon, the Pope forgave his would-be assassin.

A whisper, perhaps, to Agca, the Patriarch's words and action reverberate loudly around the world till this day as an altar call to the spiritually deaf. In forgiving his young, misguided enemy the Head of the Catholic Church offered a troubled, hate-filled world an unforgettable image of grace. Even among Christians, many of whom appear to be more comfortable with Christ in print than in practice, the Pope's action was

disarming. The church leader known to millions of Catholic Christians worldwide as The Holy Father shared, “I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned, and who has my complete trust.” Later, addressing women inmates in the prison housing Agca, John Paul went even further proclaiming, “I was able to meet my assailant and repeat to him the pardon I gave him immediately. . . . The Lord gave us the grace to meet as men and brothers, because *all the events of our lives must confirm that God is our father and all of us are His children in Jesus Christ, and thus are all brothers.*” [emphasis mine]

In forgiving his potential killer, Pope John Paul II was taking the Word of God to heart. For the whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:5-6; 1 John 4:9).

With his action the Pontiff was giving verbal and visual testimony that for him Jesus Christ is Lord. Moreover, his example sounded a clarion call for believers to move from their life-defined margins of Christianity to the biblically defined center of the faith: Jesus is Lord!

To proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord is to confess the church’s earliest baptismal creed (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 8:6). A believer’s proof, however, lies not only in his or her profession of Christ, but also in the practice of Christ-like living. “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’” Jesus warned, “will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Clearly forgiveness is the will of God. “If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other;” Paul wrote. “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13). Preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ elsewhere, the Apostle admonished,

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. . . . whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? . . . For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:7-10).

In capitalizing on the opportunity to forgive his assailant, the Pope provided the world a story with a moral. Any hope for personal and global peace rests with taking the Word of God to heart. Clarence Jordan, the radically-Christian founder of Koinonia Farms and publisher of the *Cotton Patch Version* of the Gospels, once lamented, “We’ll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says.” Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? What precisely is

forgiveness? And why should Christians forgive?

FORGIVENESS: WHAT?

God created us to live in relational harmony with Him and each other. Sin breaches relationships, causing separation, alienation, and estrangement. Barriers arise. Oneness is lost. What then does the Gospel call us to do? First receive forgiveness from God through Christ and then forgive others. This is God's cosmic plan (Colossians 1:13,14; 3:13). Forgiveness removes the barriers between persons caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined.

The history of forgiveness lies in Scripture. The Hebrews used three main words to express the concept. *Kippur* (atone) and *shalach* (let go) speak of God's forgiveness exclusively, never humankind's. *Nasa'* (lift up, bear, dismiss, send away) is the term for forgiveness most often used in the language of the Old Testament, and may refer to either human or divine forgiveness.

The New Testament translates three Greek words to speak of forgiveness. *Apoluo* (let go, loose) and *charizomai* (be gracious) appear far less frequently than *aphiemi* (let go, send away, pardon, forgive), which more nearly serves as a parallel to *nasa'*, the Old Testament term. In forgiveness, barriers are removed as sins are sent away and persons are drawn together in relationships.

"We pardon to the degree that we love," La Rochefoucauld observed. Faith, hope, and love are, in fact, all virtues prerequisite to forgiveness.

However, love, Paul revealed, is the greatest of these. Love is the "mother of all virtues." Thus two additional biblical Hebrew and Greek terms (several could be mentioned) should be cited in connection with forgiveness. *Chesed* (steadfast love, mercy) in the Old Testament refers to the love of God that refuses to let wayward Israel go. The LORD's *chesed* or steadfast love leads logically to the exercise of mercy and forgiveness toward his covenant people (Exodus 34:6,7). Moreover, Micah (6:8) and Hosea (6:6) leave absolutely no doubt that God expects God's people to extend *chesed* to each other.

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In the New Testament, *agapao* or *agape* (love) refers (among other

things) to God's constant love toward undeserving sinners. *Agapao* or *agape* denotes a love determined by the character of the subject rather than the merit of the object. "It is," as Emil Brunner put it, "not a love that judges worth, but a love which bestows worth." It is a giving love on behalf of others. This is the kind of love God wills that God's people show toward each other. Jesus exclaimed, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). The word for love in each occurrence derives from *agapao*.

Both of these kinds of love, *agape* and *chesed*, give birth to forgiveness. For as W.E. Vine put it, "Love can be known only by the action it prompts." Barriers erected by sin collapse before the virtues of love and forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS: WHY?

Why should we forgive? After all, could not a moral case be built against forgiving? There is a natural revulsion against it. Why be a doormat? The complaint is that forgiveness is an invention of weakness. Besides, it is unfair. Is it not true that when we ask people to forgive we ask them to suffer twice: the initial hurt, and then again as they wish the one hurting them well at their own expense?

But if forgiveness is unfair, what is the alternative? The obvious option is rage, hatred, and revenge. "I am accustomed to pay men back in their own coin," Bismark boasted. The problem with getting even, however, is that it never happens! Revenge chains victims and offenders to the wrongdoing, with both parties hopelessly stuck on a merry-go-round of pain where each takes turns hurting the other. "If we all live by the law, an eye-for-an-eye," cautioned Gandhi, "soon the whole world will be blind."

Forgiveness is an option. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you," Jesus instructed, "for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). To be sure, opposing ideologies compete for the believer's soul. "You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you," Jesus enlightened, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). Then this warning: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14,15).

Christians should forgive others for three reasons. *First*, we should forgive for the sake of Christ. "You are not your own," admonished Paul, "for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). "You have been freed from sin and enslaved to God," he reminded us (Romans 6:22).

“Never avenge yourselves,” the Apostle urged (Romans 12:19). “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” Jesus challenged, then commanded: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:46,48).

For Christians the cross becomes the paradigm for living. Jesus preached, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians, who were struggling to get both their theology and their morality right, that Christ “died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (1 Corinthians 5:15). He continued, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18).

God is re-creating the world through Jesus Christ in the church. As Richard Hays puts it in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, “The church community is God’s eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.” Thus he notes, “The church community is a sneak preview of God’s ultimate redemption of the world.” God wills, Paul wrote, that “the life of Jesus be made visible in our mortal flesh” (1 Corinthians 4:11). So Christians forgive, first and foremost, for the sake of Christ.

Secondly, Christians should forgive for the sake of others. Contrary to the popular view, forgiveness *precedes* repentance. Typically the question asked is, “Do I have to forgive her if she doesn’t repent?” The better question is, “Can she repent if I don’t forgive?” Here our model and mandate is the cross. No one had repented when Christ cried from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Such love and grace disarm us. Our cold, hard hearts melt in the warmth of the Son. We repent. We love. But only “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:20).

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Repentance is a result of God’s forgiveness, not the cause of it. That is, God does not love us and forgive us because we repent; rather we repent because God loves us and forgives us. Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in that while we *still* were sinners Christ died for us” [emphasis mine] (Romans 5:8). Repentance preceded neither God’s love nor Christ’s

atoning death on the cross. Yet the innocent, sinned-against Christ forgave. What the cross teaches us, then, is that reconciliation is the task of the victim. Tim Noel is correct. “The naiveté of that statement is the naiveté of the cross.” Of course, we are uncomfortable with the ethical implications of the theology of the cross. We who are wronged prefer that the villain make amends. Instead, the model of the cross portrays the injured party taking the initiative to restore the relationship. Wrongful injury becomes an opportunity to display the life-changing grace of God.

“God is love” (*agape*), and “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (1 John 4:16; Romans 5:5). What God expects us to be, God empowers us to be: agents of grace and unconditional love. This unconditional love (*agape*) catches the villain off guard. Reconciliation becomes possible. *Agape* is the genius of the cross and the life to which we are called. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19). So, we forgive for the sake of others. Who knows? By forgiving the sinner, he may yet repent and become part of the new creation, or at least be reconciled to us.

Two additional words are necessary at this point. First, while forgiveness from the cross precedes repentance, redemption and reconciliation do *not* result until we accept God’s forgiveness and return his love. In other words, forgiveness is a necessary, but insufficient condition for reconciliation. Reconciliation is always conditioned upon the response of the forgiven. The same is true between persons. Second, no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation. God personally can only give us the model of the victim forgiving, since God can only be sinned against. God cannot sin. Therefore, there can be no picture of God seeking forgiveness for having transgressed. Surely, however, when we wrong God or neighbor, we should rush to seek forgiveness. As Jesus directed, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). The larger context leaves no doubt that Jesus is placing the initiative for reconciliation squarely upon the shoulders of the wrongdoer. Thus *all* are accountable.

Christians should forgive for the sake of Christ and others, but, *thirdly*, for our sake also. Some might argue that this is a pagan appeal rather than a Christian one. I do not agree. It is certainly true that, as opposed to hedonism and narcissism, Christianity calls persons to deny themselves, to

become other-centered rather than self-centered. However, the biblical call to salvation and godly living often contains a dreadful warning intended to appeal to the best interests of the hearer. In particular, the threat of a fiery judgment in Hell arouses an understandable self-interest. When Jesus, in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), vows that any one who refuses to forgive a debtor will meet with unspeakable torture, he drives home the point: among other reasons, we should forgive for our sake.

Forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future. Not to forgive is to suffer endlessly the torment of yesterday as both present and future are hopelessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Only forgiveness sets us free.

Finally, given Jesus' revelation on God's forgiveness of our sins correlating with our forgiveness of others (Matthew 6:14-15), forgiving others offers witness that we ourselves have been forgiven. Forgiveness is not just about the past; it is about the future, in this life and beyond. Always the best is yet to be when we take the Word to heart.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Everett L. Worthington, ed., *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives* (Templeton Foundation Press, 1998)—reviewed by Katheryn Rhoads Meek in this volume—is a fine introduction to recent studies of forgiveness. On the place of forgiveness in the Christian life I have found useful: Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (HarperCollins, 1996); H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1927); John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Herald Press, 1986); T. B. Maston, *Why Live the Christian Life?* (Thomas Nelson, 1974); and Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget* (Harper & Row, 1984). My study of the history of forgiveness language in the Bible follows Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (Macmillan Co., 1966).



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