

Life In A Whole New Light *How Does Forgiveness Work?*

A Sunday School teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, “Can anyone tell me what you must do before you obtain forgiveness from sin?”

There was a short moment of silence and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. “Sin.”

This is our experience; we know it all too well. Our lives are not what they ought to be. There is something wrong, and there is a conscious need to find relief.

In his book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg writes about an experience he had. [Read from book: pp. 127-128]

We don’t need to spend a lot of time this morning talking about the reality of sin. The truth is, we have all stained the sofa – through our thoughts, our words and our actions.

The plain truth is that we do sin. There are two realities operative within us: the principle of sin and the practice of sin.

The principle of sin dwelling in me is the result of being born into the human family of Adam and Eve. One consequence of their disobedience is that every person ever born is born with a nature that is bent towards self and sin.

But it is not only the principle of sin with which we contend; it is our own acts of willful disobedience – personal acts of sin. Anything contrary to God’s perfection is sin. In Romans 3, Paul says: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Every one of us experiences the reality of the principle of sin and the practice of sin. Dr. Jay Adams makes the observation:

We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular styles of sinning.

Here’s a further truth from Scripture – a painful truth. Sin has consequences. What does sin do to us? Let me suggest three things:

1) Sin brings condemnation. Paul writes:

The wages of sin is death...– *Romans 6:23*

The penalty for sin is spiritual death; because of sin, we live under the just condemnation of God. God is holy and he must judge sin.

2) Sin brings moral pollution. In Romans 3, Paul brings the charge against every person in Adam's race. He quotes from the words of Psalm 14 in the Old Testament:

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. – *Romans 3:11-12*

3) Sin produces guilt. Psalm 32 is David's lament over his sin he committed through the acts of adultery, murder and cover-up. He writes:

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD;" and you forgave the guilt of my sin. – *Psalm 32:3-5*

When we sin, we stand before God as guilty. It is an objective guilt. We have broken God's law; we have violated his command; we have rebelled against his Word. There is true objective guilt before God. And God is serious about sin.

In the business world, financially troubled companies are often forced into bankruptcy. There are two options: Chapter 7 and Chapter 11. Chapter 11 is a temporary bankruptcy. It gives the company time and space to work through problems and to rearrange things.

A Chapter 7 bankruptcy is the end of the financial rope. The company not only is acknowledging that it is deeply in debt, but also acknowledges that there is no way out. No amount of rearranging will resolve its problems.

Spiritually, it is necessary for chapter 7 bankruptcy. It is not a matter of asking God for a little time to rearrange things. It is a flat-out acknowledgment that there is no hope apart from God's solution. This addresses the situation where one wants to say to God: "I'm really not that bad! I'm not perfect, but I haven't murdered anyone."

This "excuse-making" runs counter to the doctrine of depravity. Depravity isn't that you are as bad as you can be; it is that you are as bad off as you can be. "There is none righteous, no not one. All have sinned; all stand guilty before God under his judgment.

Paul writes to the Romans and says, “The wages of sin is death.” There is a debt owed because of sin. Our debt to God consists of all our sins which stand us guilty before him and accountable to him. This is the debt we owe to God and what stands in the way of reconnecting with God in the relationship he created us to have with him.

We have a problem! God has a solution – the Cross! The Cross is where the love of God and the justice of God meet. This is the historical place and event that makes forgiveness possible. God’s solution is forgiveness. So what does it mean to forgive?

Essentially to forgive means to release a debt. The Greek word means literally “to send forth, send away.” It has the idea of “to release, to let go.” When God forgives us, he lets the debt go; he releases the debt, sends it away.

Jesus, on the cross, said this last word: *tetelestai*. It is translated “It is finished.” The word means, “Paid in full.”

With that in mind then, let’s try and really understand what forgiveness means to us personally, how it works. I want you to consider the concept of forgiveness in three ways: positional, experiential and relational. Or perhaps an easier way: declared, experienced, expressed. Let’s start with forgiveness declared.

DIAGRAM

The first implication and, to be honest, the foundational implication is that God, positionally, forgives all of our sins when we repent and believe in Christ and God saves us. God declares us forgiven. This forgiveness is inclusive; it is complete; it is absolute. Turn in your New Testament to the book of Ephesians, chapter one.

Ephesians 1:3-8a

Now, turn over a couple of books of Colossians, chapter two.

Colossians 2:13

This is the consequence of being justified – declared “not guilty.” If there were yet any remaining sins that were not forgiven positionally, Paul could not write these words:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. – *Romans 5:1*

There could be no peace with God unless the debt was completely paid.

In the ancient world, when a debtor finally paid off his debts, his creditor would strike a nail through the certificate of debt. Look what Paul writes about the certificate of debt against us. Look again at Colossians 2.

Colossians 2:13-14

Horatio Spafford must have had this image in mind when he wrote the third verse of this great hymn in 1873– *It is Well with my Soul*:

My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought! –
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

So then we understand this statement: “Jesus paid a debt he did not owe for those who owe a debt they could not pay.”

There is no cancelling of the debt without the cross; there is no forgiveness apart from the cross; there is no salvation except through the cross. Oswald Chambers writes:

The only ground on which God can forgive us is the tremendous tragedy of the Cross of Christ; to put forgiveness on any other ground is unconscious blasphemy. The only ground on which God can forgive sin and reinstate us in His favour is through the Cross of Christ, and in no other way.

In the cross, there is an exchange that takes place. Look how Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians:

He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
– *2 Corinthians 5:21*

Ledger sheet; our side: sin, debt, judgment, condemnation – imputed to our account. At the cross, our side moves to the side of Christ. In return, divine righteousness is directly imputed (put over) to our side of the ledger sheet.

This is our position; it is certain, absolute, guaranteed, secured for eternity. This is forgiveness declared – declared by God, secured by God, guaranteed by God. So how is forgiveness “experienced?” It is wrapped up in another question posed this way: “If all my sins have been forgiven, then why do I need to confess any sins now?”

To begin to answer that question, let's look at an illustration first. Turn to John, chapter 13.

John 13:6-11

You have been declared forgiven – completely. But as you walk the path of life, your feet get dirty. You sin; you choose to disobey God; you do things and say things and think things that are displeasing to him. You don't need a bath again; you don't need to be saved again, but you need to have your feet washed.

Turn towards the end of the New Testament to the letter of First John. John is talking about how we address the principle of sin and the practice of sin in our lives. You can deny that the principle of sin is within you; you can deny that you commit sins; or you can confess your sins.

I John 1:9

The word confess in the Greek language is *homolegeo*. It is a compound word from *homos* (the same) and *lego* (to say or speak). So it means "to say the same" or "to agree." When I confess my sin, I simply agree with God concerning my sin. I agree that what I said was wrong, or thought or did was wrong. I also need to agree with God that his death was sufficient to pay the debt of that sin. I agree with God that he has declared my sin forgiven.

This is where faith is exercised. Faith is believing God's promises; it is taking him at his word. He has declared us forgiven; I believe what he has said is true.

The letter of First John was written to believers in Christ, not unbelievers. Therefore, he cannot be talking about forgiveness for salvation, but forgiveness in our experience. Let me put it this way. God has completely forgiven all our sins. Positionally, we are absolutely forgiven. Confession (that is, agreeing with God about our sin) makes real in our experience what is true of us in our position.

It has nothing to do with our salvation, but everything to do with our fellowship. When we sin, fellowship/intimacy with God is broken. We are still his child, but there is a need for cleansing in order for fellowship to be restored.

God is so patient with us, even in our sin. Why? Because he has already declared that the debt has been paid. Have you ever found yourself thinking: "Can God forgive me again?" It seems we often struggle with the same sin again and again. We wonder if God tires in his forgiveness.

But remember, God has already declared you forgiven. He waits for you to come and confess your sin, to return to fellowship with him, to experience his forgiveness through faith. He is patient because it is his nature to be patient.

How do we live out the concept of forgiveness in our lives? Let me attack that question three ways, on three different fronts.

First, we need to be willing to accept God's forgiveness. I guess that sounds so basic, but don't we often struggle to really believe and act as if it were true? Some of you struggle with knowing that you are forgiven. Some of you live as if you are not forgiven. You need to understand the fullness and completeness of God's forgiveness.

The story is told of a time, many years ago, when a father and his daughter were walking through the grass on the Canadian prairie. In the distance they saw a prairie fire, which would soon engulf them. The father knew there was only one way of escape: they must quickly build a fire right where they were and burn a large patch of grass. When the huge prairie fire drew near, they could stand on the section that had already burned. When the flames did approach them, the girl was terrified, but her father assured her, "The flames can't get to us. We are standing where the fire has already been."

If you fear the approaching judgment of God, you must remember that you are where the flames have already been and therefore are safe. Let me ask you – if this is all true, if these are the things God has done with your sins, how can you not accept the fact that he has truly forgiven your debt and that there remains no further payment due to God?

The second aspect of living out forgiveness may seem a little strange, but it is related to the first. That is, forgiving oneself. We need to forgive ourselves. Do you realize that if we fail to do that, we are actually guilty of pride? It is like saying that your standards are greater than God's. He may be able and willing to forgive you, but you aren't. Do you see how crazy this is?

James Garfield was a lay preacher and principal of his denominational college. They say he was ambidextrous and could simultaneously write Greek with one hand and Latin with the other.

In 1880, he was elected president of the United States, but after only six months in office, he was shot in the back with a revolver. He never lost consciousness. At the hospital, the doctor probed the wound with his little finger to seek the bullet. He couldn't find it, so he tried a silver-tipped probe. Still he couldn't locate the bullet.

They took Garfield back to Washington, D.C. Despite the summer heat, they tried to keep him comfortable. He was growing very weak. Teams of doctors tried to locate the bullet,

probing the wound over and over. In desperation they asked Alexander Graham Bell, who was working on a little device called the telephone, to see if he could locate the metal inside the president's body. He came, he sought, and he failed.

The president hung on through July, through August, but in September, he finally died – oh, not from the wound, but from infection. The repeated probing, which the physicians thought would help the man, eventually killed him.

This is a picture of some Christians who keep probing the wounds of their sins and failings. They die of infection. They dwell on their sins; they do the devil's work of condemning, when all along God is saying, "My child, I have forgiven you."

Certainly there are still regrets we have. There are many regrets I live with – things I have done or said. Do you think Peter ever forgot denying Jesus? Do you think Paul had lingering regrets that he had brought about the deaths of many Christians before his conversion? In spite of our regrets, memories we wish we could do away with, the reality is that God has forgiven us. We should seek to repair any relational damage we have caused, but they we have to release those things; they should no longer have sway over us.

The third way of living out forgiveness is in forgiving others. This is the evidence that our sins have been forgiven. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray: "Forgive us our debts even as we forgive our debtors." It does not say or mean, "Forgive us our debts because we forgive our debtors." It is not "Forgive us in the same way we forgive others." That's backwards.

Forgiving others is not the justification for God forgiving us; it is the evidence, the proof that God has already forgiven us. We are to forgive others in light of the fact that God has forgiven us.

Paul gives us this admonition in Ephesians 4:32 –

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. – Ephesians 4:32

This is the model that we are to imitate, the standard to which we must strive: "just as God in Christ has forgiven you." There are several things we should note about forgiveness and what it means in forgiving others:

- 1) It is based on Christ's work. God can't just overlook sin; he cannot just excuse our moral failings. To do so would be to contradict his justice and holiness. That's why Paul says that God "in Christ" forgives us. His work on the cross, perfectly satisfying God's justice, is what frees God to forgive our sins.

This is the same basis upon which we must forgive others. It is because Jesus has died for our sins, and then God forgives us, that we find we can and must forgive others.

2) Forgiveness is unconditional. This is the marvelous work of God's grace. He doesn't require some moral clean-up before forgiving us. Furthermore, God does not keep score. Peter asked Jesus, "How many times must I forgive my brother – up to seven times?" Jesus answered "seventy times seven." He didn't mean the magic number is 490. It was an idiom that meant an unlimited number of times.

3) It is based upon the one forgiving and not the object of forgiveness. It is within God's nature to forgive once his justice has been satisfied. And it was satisfied once and for all at the cross.

If we cannot forgive others we betray the fact of our forgiveness. And in the end, who loses? We do. Every time. That's why the writer of the book of Hebrews warns us against allowing a root of bitterness to spring up within us. So often we choose not to forgive others, rather we carry around a grudge, an unwillingness to release the debt of others.

William Walton says it so well: "To carry a grudge is like being stung to death by one bee." When others have incurred a debt against us, we have a choice to make. Will we choose, for Christ's sake, to release the debt? I can't think of a better way to illustrate the choice we have than this clip from the movie *Les Misérables*.

Jean Valjean has just been released from prison and is trying to find someone to give him any assistance.

Clip – *Les Misérables*

Forgiveness – declared, experienced, expressed. God declares we are forgiven; we experience God's forgiveness when we come to him and confess our sins and through faith experience his forgiveness and the restoration of fellowship, and we express forgiveness to others, modeling God's gracious gift of forgiveness.