

**“Understanding Forgiveness, Part 2” Eph 4:32, Sermon Notes**  
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**Saving Grace Bible Church**  
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**Morning Worship Service**

**Text**

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32 NAS)

**Introduction**

- As we have seen forgiveness is hard
  - Not only are we in a messed up world filled with sin which is inventing new ways to lead us into sin
  - But we are also forced to deal with the personal pain and suffering which comes with dealing with the sins of others
  - Forgiveness is hard because we feel like we have faced double jeopardy when it comes to forgiving others. First we have been sinned against and then secondly we need to release the person of their personal debt against us
- Forgiveness is difficult to understand because doctrinally it is hard to reconcile all that God says about forgiveness
- Forgiveness is hard because there are many different definitions of what forgiveness is. We will look at these definitions today

But before we do let me add one more difficulty to forgiveness

- Forgiveness is hard to understand because our language is limited. In particular the English language

First let me illustrate this by talking about love

- What is love? I am not talking about the 90’s song by Haddaway – which asks what is love
- The Bible describes love in various ways
  - Familial love or Brotherly love (*phileo*)
  - Attraction or sensual love (*eros*)
  - There is sacrificial love (*agape*)

All three of these Greek words are translated by the one English word “love”

- But clearly the idea of love is different
- When someone says I “feel in love” they do not mean they have a sudden urge to selflessly sacrifice themselves for the benefit of someone else
- There are laws against having an attraction and acting on that attraction for your brother or sister
- You see language has limits. Language is complex
- There is a reason why dictionaries, which explain lexical meaning of words, have various definitions
- This is because these words are used to explain ideas and concepts

Often in theology we are running up against the weakness and limitations of language as we are trying to explain the greatness and complexities of God and His work

Do you not marvel when you consider the idea of love?

- When your baby is born into this world you say “I love this child”
- When you found the person you were going to marry you said “I love her”
- When you go help someone move, fix their house, or care for a physical need and you say to them “let me love you”

All of these ideas of love describe how God has loved us

- He has made us His children and so loves us as His children
- God is a jealous God and loves His people with a Holy affection
- The most predominate expression of God’s love

You see love can be described as colored yarn

- You can have a meter long piece of colored yarn and the yarn can have three colors: Red, yellow, and blue
- The yarn can be predominately one color, red for example
- The yarn is one piece and yet has three clear distinctions
- It would be wrong to say that the yarn which is predominately red is only red
- Just as it would be wrong to say the same piece of yarn is only of one color
- The yarn is both the same and different

This is often true in describing God and His ways. God loves and yet He loves in many diverse and complex ways. Each way is equally love. While certain kinds of love may have more importance and impact each expression is still love

- Each expression of love we still demonstrate
- And as we demonstrate it we reflect God and His character

The same is true about forgiveness

- Forgiveness has many aspects to it and is multifaceted
- The simple declarative statement of “Forgiveness is [Fill in the blank]” is not so easy
- Just like it is not precise to say love is only an attraction or personal sacrifice
  - IE to say Forgiveness is unconditional is hard to explain when you are committing Church discipline on someone
  - To say forgiveness is conditional is hard to defend when Peter says love covers a multitude of sin
- Forgiveness is a multifaceted doctrine and like love it has many features

For example the NT has 3 predominate terms used to describe Forgiveness. Brauns pg 215-218

- Aphiemi – to release, to abandon, and it is used 143x in the NT
- In fact the word is so broadly used that the NIV has 28 different translations for the same Greek word. -Brauns pg 215
- Aphasis – appears 17 times in the NT and means to release or dismiss

- Charizomai – used 23x in the NT. It comes from the same root word charis which is where we get the word grace. It means to freely give favor, to bestow, or to grant

You see like love the Greek speaks of forgiveness in many dimensions. We can speak of forgiveness as letting go of something, we can speak of it as granting pardon or releasing a debt, we can also speak of forgiveness as a gracious gift and in every sense each of these explanations this is what forgiveness is. Along the way neither definition fully explains the vast complexity of forgiveness

How have past teachers explained forgiveness?

- As I said last week forgiveness has predominately been described as being “unconditional” or “conditional”
- Rare is the book which acknowledges that forgiveness is both “unconditional” and “conditional”

Here is what I want you to think about: What view of forgiveness allows us to uphold a normal and natural understanding of forgiveness?

- Let me give you the first two views and show you how they fail exegetically

First view of forgiveness is this: Forgiveness is unconditional

- This view says that forgiveness is entirely unconditional
- Many of the modern day secular views of forgiveness is built on this idea.
- Forgiveness is unconditional and therapeutic
  - It is more for us to deal with the difficulties of people sinning against us

Those who take the idea that forgiveness is entirely unconditional believe then we should just release people of their debts. Other than secularists, there are few who present an entirely unconditional view of forgiveness. At least so far in my findings

- This is the Amish view of forgiveness
- Secular Psychological or Therapeutic view

From a biblical standpoint we can see from passages like:

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions." (Mark 11:25 NAS)

"And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. ' 14 "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." (Matthew 6:13-14 NAS)

"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8 NAS)

"Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions." (Proverbs 10:12 NAS)

"A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression." (Proverbs 19:11 NAS)

The point is that these passages talk about covering sin, overlooking transgressions, covering with love irrespective of the response of the other person

Some then try to argue that forgiveness is only unconditional

- There is a problem with trying to force forgiveness to be defined in this way and that is it cannot explain other passages of scripture
- For example Matt 18:15-20 - How can you have Church discipline on someone and unconditional forgiveness?
- You cannot hold the person to repent if you have unconditionally and unilaterally forgiven them
- Right?

Now someone who has been here at SGBC might be confused and be asking, Pastor is this not your position?

- No, I would not explain as entirely unconditional
- Or to say another way, I do not believe, as you will see, that forgiveness is “only unconditional”

The Second view of forgiveness is this: Forgiveness is only conditional

Forgiveness definition by Chris Brauns: “A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.”

- As I said last week this is the predominate view among Biblical Counselors
- This view has made a strong push today in Christian circles and this view says basically you cannot forgive until someone repents. Forgiveness then is viewed as a gift which we unconditionally offer but must be taken by another person through repentance and then opened up

“God has provided a means for handling the multitudes of offenses that we commit against one another. But it is not by forgiveness.” Jay Adams pg 34

“... those offenses that break fellowship and lead to an unreconciled condition require forgiveness. Otherwise, we simply learn to overlook a multitude of offenses against ourselves, recognizing that we are all sinners and that we must gratefully thank others for covering ours sins as well.” Adams pg 34

- You can only forgive conditionally or you overlook the transgression
- There is no forgiveness apart from reconciliation

“complete forgiveness can only take place when there is repentance” Brauns pg 21

“God’s forgiveness is conditional. Only those who repent and believe are saved.” Brauns Pg 47

“God’s forgiveness is a package that he wraps up and offers. But the package of forgiveness must be opened. The Bible teaches that the way that the package is opened is through repentance and faith.” Brauns pg 47

“Christians are to forgive others as God forgave them. God’s forgiveness is conditional. To be sure, God offers grace to all people, but he forgives only those who repent and believe. Likewise, Jesus said that Christians should forgive if the other party repents.” Pg 57 Brauns

“Remember, the Biblical definition of forgiveness includes the condition that the one receiving the forgiveness is repentant. . .” pg 142 Brauns

“But it is not the offense that conditions forgiveness but the repentant heart. Whether or not they unwrap the present and accept the gift so that forgiveness takes place is up to them.” Pg 147 Brauns

“Biblical forgiveness is conditioned on repentance and results in the elimination of guilt.” Pg 218 Brauns

The reason why forgiveness must be conditional is because forgiveness is connected to reconciliation

“God’s forgiveness is inextricably linked to reconciliation. No one is forgiven by God without being reconciled to God.” Brauns Pg 48

“Forgiveness is inextricably linked to reconciliation. When God forgives, he not only pardons sinners from guilt. He also begins a new relationship with them. The Bible never speaks of God’s forgiveness apart from reconciliation.” Pg 58 Brauns

The Biblical Case for this view:

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup>"And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4 NAS)

“Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” (Colossians 3:13 NAS)

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32 NAS)

The problem with this understanding:

- What about people who are not repentant? Are we left holding on to their sin until they repent? Yes
- What about passages which tell us it is our glory to cover sin?
- Isn’t dropping a matter, letting go, ignoring it, moving on the very definition of forgiveness?
- To view forgiveness as entirely conditional fails to account for how someone can still be holding on to sin when the Bible’s whole message is that we are to be forgiving. Basically this view predicated our obedience on the repentance of others
- Creates in the victim room for them to hold on to an offense while they wait for the sinner’s repentance
- It fails to deal with bitterness. I know those who hold this view say this is wrong. They say no we are not bitter, as one author said, because we are waiting for the wrath of God. We turn the sinner over to let God’s wrath punish them. We are not bitter because we know God will have His vengeance
  - This argument is unsatisfying
  - I am not going to be bitter at the sinner but I am going to be happy that God will punish them some day. How does this work?
  - “Well, I can’t be bitter at you because God does not allow it. But I tell you what I can’t wait till God judges you.”

- All you have done is put a white robe on your bitterness
- If you think you are less bitter because you have moved from the thought of “I want to hurt you for your sin” to “I want God to hurt you for your sin” you are naive. Please don’t be bitter at me for saying that
- It also fails to understand how God can be forgiving by nature and yet need us to respond in repentance so that He can forgive. I will seek to demonstrate that viewing forgiveness as only conditional presents a problem to our Orthodox view of God

Question for you to ponder: If no one ever responded to forgiveness would God still be forgiving?

- If you say no then we humans make God something and by very definition then God is no longer God. He is influenced and changed by His creation. Don’t tell some of the early church fathers you believe that because they would string you up or brand you a heretic
- On the other hand if you say yes then you see there is a heart attitude of forgiveness which flows from our nature and thus unconditional

Friends this is what I want us to understand. Forgiveness is not defined by how it functions. Forgiveness is defined by what it is

- Forgiveness is simply this: to release someone from a debt, to abandon a debt, or to graciously give freedom from a debt
- Forgiveness operates both conditionally and unconditionally

(At this point we are going to look at the big picture then we will look at particular texts and demonstrate how those texts fit into the big picture)

You have to catch this. If you understand this concept your understanding of what the bible says about forgiveness and what others are trying to say about forgiveness will make sense

- The fundamental mistake we are making today when explain forgiveness is trying to explain forgiveness by what it does rather than by what it is
- The way this mistake is manifested is in when we force forgiveness to be defined by what it is doing and when we do that we fail to capture the full Biblical picture of forgiveness

I think the best way to systematically describe forgiveness is to say that forgiveness is expressed in attitude and action

- Attitude vs Actions

These categories break down but here are the ideas

- Parental vs Judicial

This is a very popular way of describing forgiveness as it shows there are two different kinds of forgiveness

Illustration:

- Parents who lost their child to drunk driver
- Columbine school shooting

In neither case did the attitude of forgiveness or the expression of parental forgiveness nullify the legal forgiveness or judicial forgiveness

- Temporary vs Final

A parent forgives but that is not like a judge forgives. The judge pardons and it is finally removed forever. A parent may forgive one event and see another event and piece them together to deal with the transgression

- Private or Personal vs Public or shared

There is a kind of forgiveness that only helps the victim. That is releases him from the burden of bitterness as they have released the sinner from a debt

Then there is a kind of forgiveness which is public or shared where the victim and the sinner reconcile and both enjoy the benefits of forgiveness

- Unconditional vs Conditional

Freely and unilaterally given verses offered and waiting for a response

- Disposition vs Commitment

One side of forgiveness speaks of forgiveness as a disposition of the heart. The idea of a character or nature of forgiveness. The other side of forgiveness speaks of a commitment and promise. Both are true. Forgiveness is both the attitude of releasing a debt and the commitment to release a debt

- Inward vs outward
- Demonstrated in the heart vs demonstrated in practice
- Inward peace vs outward reconciliation
- Beginning of process of forgiveness vs end of the process of forgiveness
- Gift vs Transaction
- Comes from one's nature vs Comes from one's commitment
- Promised vs Performed
- Incomplete vs Complete
- Nature vs Practice
- Informal vs Formal
- Heart vs Practice

So then we can view forgiveness as either two puzzle pieces which fit together in an overlap or as two sides to the same coin

So one side of the coin of forgiveness is:

- An attitude of releasing someone from a personal debt
- It is expressed like a parent that lovingly covers a child's sin
- It is unconditional and unilateral
- It can be temporary as the child keeps sinning and in need of more formal discipline and confrontation
- It is private and personal benefitting the victim as they release bitterness and demonstrate a forgiveness from the heart and who are not allowing sin, as much as it is possible with them, to cause a division and separation in the relationship
- It is a disposition, and attitude, and part of their character
- It produces inward peace as the victim releases the sin debt
- It is demonstrated from the heart
- It is where all forgiveness must begin. The victim of sin willing to let go of the transgression and the sin debt and actively seeking the sinner
- It is still informal as the sinner has not yet taken part in the fullness of forgiveness. It is informal as the terms of release have not been expressed publicly to be received. Or they have been expressed but they are still informal because the terms of release have not been accepted
- Therefore this kind of internal, attitude of forgiveness is incomplete as it has not yet fully matured full reconciliation and freedom for the sinner
- This is the kind of forgiveness demonstrated to us as we are sanctified and fail to confess our sins

This is forgiveness. It is not all there is to say about forgiveness but it is still forgiveness

- In our sanctification
- We express this kind of forgiveness when our kids sin against us
- In our marriages
- When people sin in ignorance against us
- When sins are small and inconsequential
- When a sin is only against us and we can cover it
- When unbelievers sin against us
- When people sin seriously against us and are unwilling to repent
- As far as this forgiveness goes it is not final and complete, it does not produce reconciliation or restoration, but it nonetheless reflects that reconciliation is readily available to the repentant sinner

On the other side of the coin of forgiveness:

- Is the action of forgiveness which seeks to reconcile and actively demonstrate that the debt has been removed
- This forgiveness is judicial. It makes a legal and declarative statement that says this debt has been removed based on the fulfillment of the condition of your repentance
- This forgiveness is what was demonstrated to us when we were saved. When we repented and believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ

- This is the kind of forgiveness which is coupled with reconciliation. Without repentance on part of the sinner and without forgiveness from the victim there cannot be reconciliation. Forgiveness is one of the necessary parts to have reconciliation
- This forgiveness is the ultimate and most mature expression of forgiveness as it allows for the sharing of the benefits of forgiveness. The victim is set free from bitterness and carrying the weight of sin's debt because they have released it. The sinner is set free as the debt is removed never to return
- This kind of forgiveness manifests itself in clear and undeniable steps to reconciliation

It is easy to see this kind of forgiving work in God

- We don't have to look any further than the cross and our own salvation and we see how God has worked in our hearts and lives
- It is easy to see our need for redemption and the work accomplished when we embraced the gospel
- It is easy even to see the value of reconciliation and restoration and each of us ultimately desires this with those who are children of God

This kind of forgiveness is demonstrated:

- At our salvation
- In the context of Church discipline
- When serious sin has caused a separation in our relationship with someone.
- When reconciliation needs to take place

This side of forgiveness is limited by the other party

You see forgiveness is releasing a debt or graciously giving someone freedom from their sin debt

- We are to be lavish in our releasing of others from their sin
- We do this by having a heart disposition towards forgiveness and releasing people of their sins before we even come to them and seek restoration
- We seek to offer the sinner a formal, conditional forgiveness which allows them to experience freedom from sin's debt
- They may, because of hardness of heart, unbelief, or ignorance reject our offer of formal forgiveness or judicial forgiveness and thus lose out on reconciliation and restoration but the one forgiving can still live in peace knowing they have forgiven from the heart. They have willingly released the sinner of the sin debt. They are ready to see the sinner return and enjoy restoration

You see forgiveness is not either conditional or unconditional. Forgiveness is both. Two sides to the same coin. Two pieces of the puzzle. Both are needed to have full and rich forgiveness

- To forgive from the heart and fulfill Matt 18:35 you need to be forgiving unconditionally
- To have reconciliation and restoration you need to forgive conditionally

Let me answer some objections

OBJECTION 1: If we forgive unconditionally and that is forgiveness then what motivates the victim to seek restoration and reconciliation?

ANSWER: There are two motives to reconciliation and restoration

1. Most importantly love – love seeks to restore
  - a. 1 Cor 13 says love does not take into an account a wrong suffered
  - b. Col 3:14 says put on love which is the perfect bond of unity
  - c. Love for the sinner and love for God is what motivates us to peace and unity with God's people
2. A desire for a mature and full forgiveness
  - a. Desire reconciliation
  - b. Desire that the sinner share the freedom of forgiveness
  - c. Desire to be free from the burden of knowing there is a separation

OBJECTION 2: If you are saying forgiveness can be conditional are we not just saying the same thing?

ANSWER: No, because unconditional forgiveness is as much forgiveness as conditional forgiveness. I am saying that forgiveness is both conditional and unconditional. Someone responding to the conditions does not make our offer of releasing a debt more forgiving. Someone's response to my offer of forgiveness can mature and formalize my forgiveness but it does not turn my actions into forgiveness

We are saying the same thing if we both are saying that we willingly and regularly forgive from the heart and when necessary we seek the repentance and restoration of sinners so that our relationship is restored

Or if we are both saying no matter how the other person responds I can still be forgiving

OBJECTION 3: This does not make any sense. How can you forgive someone and they still have to repent?

ANSWER: Our forgiveness does not release the sinner from their duty for reconciliation and restoration

- Nor is our forgiveness the only condition for a final release from debt
- Your struggle is that you see forgiveness as only the formal judicial process of restoration That is you only see forgiveness as what happened at Calvary and the moment you embraced the gospel

Oh friend, you have missed the great picture of God and His work

God is a God of forgiveness

"But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Thy commandments.<sup>17</sup> "And they refused to listen, And did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which Thou hadst performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But Thou art a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness; And Thou didst not forsake them." (Nehemiah 9:16-17 NAS)

"For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee." (Psalm 86:5 NAS)

"Yet you have not called on Me, O Jacob; But you have become weary of Me, O Israel.<sup>23</sup> "You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings; Nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, Nor wearied you with incense.<sup>24</sup> "You have bought Me no sweet cane with money, Neither have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices; Rather you have burdened Me with your sins, You have wearied Me with your iniquities.<sup>25</sup> "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins." (Isaiah 43:22-25 NAS)

- God forgives because this is His nature

Dear Calvinist listen up

- If you believe, as the Scriptures faithfully teach, that God has chosen us and given us to the Son Eph 1:3-6
- If you believe that we were sinners and in need of salvation
- If you believe that God as an act of His will choose us to be covered and find forgiveness in Christ
- If you believe that this was a work of God before the foundation of the world

Then you necessarily believe that God was unconditionally forgiving. Even before we came to Christ

- For if God choose any of us before we even existed, and He choose us to demonstrate His forgiveness in us through Christ, He then by necessity was showing us forgiveness FOR God was demonstrating that He was not going to hold our sins against us
- By His act of election He was showing that He was willing to release us from the debt and that he was working to release us
- You might say but we were not released until all his work was finished and until we believed
- Yes formally, but none the less God was forgiving

The point is that God is by very nature forgiving and is demonstrating His forgiveness in many small and wonderful ways both before our salvation and after

- Every act of mercy is rooted in the love and forgiveness of God
- Even if those acts of mercy are a temporary expression of forgiveness they are still forgiveness
- The unbeliever is not dying on the spot because God is showing him a temporary forgiveness. And he has breath because he is given the opportunity to experience to the full forgiveness which comes at salvation

Let's Pray!

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