

Forgiveness and Trust

[In response to a query July 6, 2009 on the ACMI List. The following is intended to be a brief summary of biblical teaching on key issues involving forgiveness.]

Your student is to be commended for his care in trying to work out this important issue. He has pinpointed some crucial ideas. I would suggest, however, that more of the Bible's teachings need to be considered in order to get a complete picture of forgiveness and vengeance, mercy and justice.

1. In both the Old and New Testament, it is necessary to distinguish between the obligations of the individual and those of the governing community.
2. In both Testaments, forgiveness is a godly characteristic, with God himself setting the example.
3. In both Testaments, forgiveness does not wipe out the need for justice—not in God's actions and not in man's. God is both just *and* forgiving.
4. Forgiveness requires repentance (but see below). It does not require "forgetting," and it does not require trusting the one who had committed the sin.

Comments

1. "An eye for an eye," etc.

As encoded in the Mosaic Law and elsewhere, "an eye for an eye" is believed by many to be a limitation on man's tendency to do overdo vengeance. The tendency is seen as early as Gen. 4:23-24 in the story of Lamech. An unnamed person does him an injury. Lamech responds by killing him and feels justified in doing so.

Under the Law, the punishment for a crime or injury had to be in accordance with the nature of the crime—but not necessarily a literal maiming of a body part. The exception would be capital punishment for murder (which goes back to Genesis 9) and a few other crimes that were considered to have severe consequences in society.

Individuals in the Israelite community did not have the right to take vengeance on their own. When the Law was followed faithfully, individuals who had complaints against another took their issues to Moses, the elders, and judges. When towns and cities developed, "elders" sat in the town gates to hear and decide matters among the people. When Israel became a kingdom, the same principles applied.

Provisions were made for those who accidentally killed another by establishing cities of refuge, so that the human tendency towards vengeance would not be unfairly meted out.

2. “Turning the other cheek” (Matt. 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount)

An important observation to note in considering “turning the other cheek” is that Jesus is speaking about how God’s followers are to treat their brothers. He is not addressing governments who have the responsibility of maintaining order and justice in society. Note that the command in 5:39, “turn to him the other [cheek] also” [στρέψον αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην], is singular.

Another important observation is that Jesus introduces the various statements in this passage with “You have heard that it was said...” and not “It is written.” Jesus is not at all changing what was written in the Law but rather correcting the interpretation of the Law with which the people were familiar from the teachings of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders of the day. The principles found in the teachings of Jesus were already in the Law, but because of the extreme legalistic approach to the Law, the principles embodied in it were largely lost.

Looking at “turning the other cheek” (as well as the other commands) from this viewpoint makes the irony of Matt. 5:20 more understandable: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” In fact, they were not keeping the principles of the Law, only a form of it. They took advantage of what they considered loopholes. (But then, we don’t need the Pharisees to teach us about loopholes.)

3. Forgiveness and justice

God’s character remains the same. He is totally just and totally merciful. One attribute does not erase the other.

Justice demands that sin be paid for. When we sin, we owe a debt that must be paid, whether it be to an individual or to God—for all sin is ultimately against God. The idea of sin as debt is part of its definition. We can get a sense for it in the two traditional translations of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts...” and “Forgive us our trespasses....”

Forgiveness is the erasing of the debt. It does not ignore the aspect of justice and consequences, however. God will forgive when a person comes in repentance, but there may still be consequences. Two memorable examples from Scripture are the following:

A. The Golden Calf (Exod. 32, Num. 14).

While Moses is talking with God on the mountain, the people make an idol and prostrate themselves to it. Moses begs God to forgive them rather than destroy them. God responds, “**I have forgiven them**, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it” (Num. 14:20-23). God forgave, but he also punished.

B. David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12)

No one could repent more fervently than David did after being confronted by the prophet Nathan. God forgave him, but he brought serious consequences upon him, including the death of a son.

4. The way we forgive is to be like the way God forgives (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:13)

God has set the pattern for forgiveness. Forgiveness is freely offered, but it is only effective for the one who repents. Those who do not repent perish (Matt. 11:20, 21:32; Luk. 13:3,5; Acts 2:38; et. al.).

Our instructions are to forgive those who sin against us, freely and sincerely. Luke adds a nuance not present in Matthew and Mark: repentance. “If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (17:4). Does this mean, then, that if he doesn’t repent, we don’t need to forgive?

Evidently not. Although we are to forgive in the same way that God has forgiven us in Christ, there is a difference. God is the Righteous Judge, and all sin is ultimately against him. He has a right to exact vengeance appropriate to the sin; we do not. (I am talking here about individuals, not about the state, which acts as God’s representative.) “For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’ . . .” (Heb. 10:30; see also Deut. 32:35.) David acted upon this principle when he refused to kill King Saul. “May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you” (1 Sam. 24:12).

It is always desirable that the offending party repent of his or her sin, but even if that does not happen, we still must forgive. Instead of taking vengeance or demanding payment of the moral debt, we turn it over to God. He is the Judge and understands far better than we what is the appropriate way to handle the situation. Only by releasing the debt to the Father are we freed from the anger and bitterness that rises when we are wronged.

This does not eliminate the need for justice in cases where crimes have been committed. Those who ignore issues of societal justice participate in the sin (Lev. 5:1). We are to be just in the same way that God is just.

5. “Forgetting” sin

Many have tried to live by the adage, “Forgive and forget,” only to find that it is not easy to do. Since our forgiving is to be like God’s, we need to “remember the sin no more” (Jer. 31:34, Heb. 8:12, et. al.). However, *remembering* and *forgetting* in this context is not a matter of memory. Rather, it is calling into account the debt of sin. The debt has been erased or forgiven; it is no longer something that has to be paid.

Christians do not need to feel guilty because they cannot erase in their minds what happened. How well they have accomplished the process of forgiveness can be assessed by what happens when the incident is remembered. Does remembering produce anger and

bitterness, or a desire for revenge? Then the process needs to be repeated so that Satan doesn't gain victory over us (Eph. 4:26-27, 31-32).

6. Forgiveness and trust

Many have been taught that if we truly forgive someone, we will make it evident by showing trust. This is not the scriptural description of forgiveness.

When I teach on this issue, I frequently use an example from our experiences in the jungles of Borneo. Since there were no banks in the area, church funds were held in the home of the elected treasurer. Repeatedly, the treasurer would encounter personal emergencies—often the illness of a family member—and use the church money to pay for medicine. Of course, it would be kept secret until the end of the year when the treasurer was supposed to present the cash at the annual meeting. Usually, when confronted, the treasurer would repent and promise to repay what was used. However, he was not elected treasurer again.

If we found that our own treasurer embezzled church funds, would we elect him again? It is true that we would encourage repentance and offer forgiveness, but we are not required to trust him again with the position. Similarly, if a man raped your daughter, even if he repented with tears, would you trust him again with your daughter or any other young woman?

Biblically, trust and forgiveness are not tied together. Forgiveness is commanded. Trust must be earned.

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