

Understanding Forgiveness
Matthew 6:14-15
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction to them through the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. These chapters are the first of five long discourses by Jesus that Matthew recorded in his Gospel.

In Matthew 6:1-18, we will find three examples of giving, prayer and fasting that demonstrate the flawed motivation of self-service by the hypocrites and instruction of how to avoid their sinful practices. In Matthew 6:5-8, the Lord teaches us how not to pray and in Matthew 6:9-13, the Lord teaches us how to pray.

Matthew 6:14-15 expands upon the portion of the Lord's model prayer in 6:12, *"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions"* This explains the connection between forgiveness and being forgiven. To be forgiven without being forgiving is fallacious.

While Matthew 6:12 uses the term "debts" as a synonym for sin, Matthew 6:14-15 uses the term "transgressions" (PARAPTOMA). The word for debt in Matthew 6:12 (OPHEILEMATA) is only used one other time in the New Testament, in Romans 4:4 where it refers to a financial obligation. In the parallel passage of Luke 11:4, the term "sin" (HARMARTIA) is used so the usage of debt to refer to sin occurs in Matthew 6:12. Both Aramaic and Hebrew use the term debt as sin (cf. Psalm 51:4). This sense that our sin is a moral obligation that we owe to God is a Jewish way of thinking.

The word translated "transgressions" in Matthew 6:14-15 is used several times in the New Testament (Mark 11:25-26; Romans 4:25; 5:15, 16, 20; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 1:7; 2:5; Colossians 2:13). It means to misstep or take a false move, and is a synonym for sin.

The topic of forgiveness is so fundamental to the Christian life that we will cover several aspects of forgiveness that Christians can be confused about. There are ways that people seek to avoid this responsibility to be forgiving and dismiss the relationship between God's forgiveness of our sin and our practice of forgiveness of the sins of others.

1. Our forgiveness by God results in our forgiveness by others

The most important issue in reading Matthew 6:14-15 is to understand the relationship between the forgiveness of God for us and our forgiveness of others in light of the biblical context of how forgiveness is obtained. There is a direct result produced by our forgiveness, which is our desire to be forgiving of others.

While this relationship is evident in Matthew 6:14-15, it requires additional biblical context to understand that we do not receive forgiveness on the basis of our forgiving others but rather, we forgive others as the manifestation of God's forgiveness toward us. To reverse these two and believe that our forgiveness of others brings God's forgiveness of us leads to salvation by the work of forgiveness rather than by God's grace through faith.

God's love for us is the basis of forgiveness. God initiated this love to us and we love as a result of His love for us. *"We love, because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). It is through our relationship with Christ that we are able to love others and this love leads to our being forgiving people. *"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins"* (1 Peter 4:8).

Just as God loved the world to send His son so that we should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16), so we should love and not desire judgment upon anyone. If it is not the Lord's wish for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9), then we should not desire any to perish either. This love produces the forgiveness of sins that we are called to practice in our life.

2. The importance of our need for forgiveness

This desire for forgiveness is an essential component of the Christian faith in that we must recognize our sinfulness. The Lord's model prayer in Matthew 6:12, *"And forgive us our debts"* teaches us to pray for forgiveness. Similar to our request for daily sustenance to exist in the physical realm, this request is fundamental for life in the spiritual realm.

Those who do not recognize their sinfulness have no sense of any need for forgiveness. *"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us."* (1 John 1:8, 10).

The context of 1 John 1 and the need to recognize our forgiveness helps us to clarify another area of misunderstanding among professing Christians regarding the role of confession in forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 is used by some to teach that we must confess specific sins in order to receive forgiveness. This is similar to the Roman Catholic concept of the sacrament of penance, where sins are absolved through the confessional.

This not only would be the work of confession but it is impossible since we are unaware of many sins. *“Now if a person sins and does any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, though he was unaware, still he is guilty and shall bear his punishment”* (Leviticus 5:17). 1 John 1:9 teaches that we must confess our sins in a general sense. This is the opposite of 1:8 and 1:10, which teach that if we do not confess our sin, the truth is not in us.

Forgiveness of sin is granted by God unconditionally, according to His grace, by the means of the faith that He has imparted to us as His gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). Apart from God’s initiative, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-3). Our very desire for forgiveness is an expression of God’s grace toward us and when we believe in Jesus Christ, we are delivered from the penalty forever.

3. Forgiveness is not counting people’s trespasses against them

The gospel, the word of reconciliation, has been entrusted to us that He uses to deliver people from their sin. *“Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation”* (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). The essence of forgiveness is that God does not count our trespasses against us.

This does not mean that God is unaware of our trespasses or that He does not account for our sin in His relationship with us. The critical point is that God is not counting our transgressions against us, but He is seeking to serve us. God is for us, He is not against us (Romans 8:31).

It is in this light that we see that He may serve us through maturing us by discipline. The Lord’s discipline is seen in the Lord’s supper in 1 Corinthians 11:31-32, *“But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.”*

Also, Hebrews 12:4-11 teaches in detail to role of discipline has in our lives as our loving Father serves His children, *“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding*

blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives.' It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

The Lord knows our sin and serves us according to our sin. If we are to forgive as Christ has forgiven us, then we will seek to serve others who sin against us.

4. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting

If God serves us in light of our sin, then He does not forget our sin. God is omniscient and knows all. If our sin was not part of His knowledge, then He would not be omniscient but limited.

The concept of God "forgetting" our sin is rooting in the New Covenant from Jeremiah 31:34, *"They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, 'for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.'"*

God's promise to no longer remember sin (cf. Hebrews 8:12, 10:17) leads people to believe that God forgets sin. This is a misunderstanding of the Hebrew meaning of remember. To remember (ZAKAR) in the Old Testament is to act in correspondence with knowledge. God "remembered His covenant" (Exodus 2:24; cf. Psalm 105:8, 106:45; Ezekiel 16:60, etc), which meant that God committed to act according to His promise. To remember our sins no more means to no longer act in judgment against our sin. God now is committed in His forgiveness to bless us, not judge us. He is able to lovingly serve us *because* He knows our sin and does not forget.

*"He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.*

*As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”* (Psalm 103:10-12)

As such, God’s loving forgiveness is our model for loving forgiveness. We do not act against people to judge them. As “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:17), so we do not act as the judge of others, but to serve them as ambassadors for Christ. In forgiving, we commit ourselves to serve sinful people.

This understanding helps us to know how to relate to others in light of their sin. We seek to serve them but, like the Lord, we do not necessarily act toward them as if we have no memory of their sin. For example, we serve people who have committed crimes against children by not placing them in children's ministry where they could either be falsely accused, treated suspiciously, or fall into similar sinfulness. Likewise, we love the group along with the individual by seeking to protect others from unnecessary risk.

Also, certain actions have necessary consequences, such as with crimes (Romans 13:1-4) or possibly divorce based upon the act of adultery (Matthew 19:9). Actions have results and to know what has happened will help us to serve others individually and help leaders serve a group as a whole. This is consistent with forgiveness.

This understanding helps us to apply 1 Corinthians 13:5, *“love does not take into account a wrong suffered.”* This does not mean that we no longer remember the wrong we suffered, nor does it mean that we act as if the wrong never happened. The emphasis is taking into account the wrong *suffered*, which means considering how the wrong has harmed up in some fashion. Our desire in love should be for the edification of another, not for the vindication of ourselves.

5. Forgiving as Christ has forgiven us

The way that we forgive is according to the example of Jesus Christ. *“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you”* (Ephesians 4:32). We forgive in the way that the Lord has forgiven us.

We have seen that the Lord’s forgiveness is unconditional. He initiates forgiveness toward us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8) and even before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5). He granted us forgiveness, even though we cannot identify all of the sins of which we are guilty. His forgiveness does not wait for our confession of a specific sin or even an adequate attitude about specific sin. This is

important to understand since the failure to do so leads us to holding sins that we find particularly offensive against people.

Some have taught that we ought to withhold forgiveness until the offender repents of their sin. The belief rests upon the view that God's forgiveness is triggered by repentance. That God's forgiveness is not granted to us until we repent so we must not forgive others unless they repent.

This perspective, known as "transactional forgiveness", misunderstands the nature of repentance. When we repent of sin in justification, we turn from our sin toward God on the basis of faith. The meaning of repentance is fundamentally a change of mind and upon belief, we change our mind about sin. This is salvation, that we are saved from our sinfulness. But this is not an understanding of, much less a change in behavior toward all our sin. It is only a turning from our present understanding of our sin.

Furthermore, the Lord alone knows the heart. He can make an evaluation of repentance, we cannot. He can evaluate the sin, while we can be confused. Also, the concept of transactional forgiveness leads people to require adequate repentance over specific sins before they grant forgiveness. This results in continued broken relationships.

The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35 highlights the issue of forgiveness. Peter asks, "*Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?*" and Jesus responds, "*I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.*" In other words, when we have every reason to believe that the person is never going to repent when His sin keeps happening "seventy times seven," we still forgive. The reason we do so is because of the magnitude of God's forgiveness toward us.

Forgiveness is a complete remission of the punishment of sin. The term for forgive is used in the New Testament in either this clear sense of justification from sin (Matthew 9:2; 9:5; 12:31-32; Mark 2:5-10; 4:12; 11:25; Luke 5:20-24; 7:47-49; 12:10; 23:24; John 20:23; Romans 4:7; 1 John 2:12) or in a sense that should be interpreted as justification (Matthew 6:12-14; Luke 11:14; James 5:15).

There is no clear usage of the term forgive in a relational sense where God withholds His relationship with us due to our sin once the enmity has been removed when we were justified by faith.

When we sin, we grieve the Spirit. We weaken our relationship with God through rebellion. When we are filled with the Spirit by yielding to His will, we draw near to Him and He draws near to us (James 4:8). As believers in Christ, the Lord's relationship with us is always secure as His child. He never moves away from us; rather, we move away from Him.

Conclusion

Just as forgiveness is fundamental to our relationship with God, it is also fundamental to our relationship with others. We cannot have a relationship with God without His granting forgiveness to us, and we cannot have a relationship with others without granting forgiveness to them for their sin.

Our flesh desires that others serve us. When we feel harmed, we want justice. Because like us, our fellow man is fallen, we will rarely be satisfied with the response of people to our perceived offense. We end up bitter against others which ends up harming us even more than the original offense.

Our desire is for others to overlook our missteps, but we are slow to overlook the missteps of others. We are often harder on others and easy on ourselves. We grant grace for ourselves but judgment for others. We should rather be easy on others and harder on ourselves.

When we are sinned against, we must forgive. *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse"* (Romans 12:14). In this way, we can apply Romans 12:18-19, *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."*

This forgiving attitude results from the Lord's forgiveness. Any sense of the magnitude and significance of our forgiveness by Jesus Christ will necessarily move us toward extending forgiveness to others. It is impossible to truly understand our salvation and advocate withholding forgiveness without being hypocritical. We must always desire the edification and service to others regardless of their sin. The only issue ought to be how to serve each person under each unique circumstance and with limited resources.