

Forgiveness (Matt 6.12, 14-15)

I. REVIEW

- A. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is inviting his disciples into a greater experience of the blessed life (whole, complete, fulfilled, satisfied). This is centered around the eight beatitudes (Matt 5.3-12), which are the most succinct portrait of the values of the kingdom of heaven. The presence and growth of these virtues are the mark of our discipleship (Matt 5.13-16) and the measure of true and lasting greatness (Matt 5.17-20).
- B. At the heart of the Sermon is the call for Jesus' disciples to *be perfect* as the Father in heaven is perfect. This is a call for wholehearted obedience to God in every area of our lives — thought, word, and deed.

⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5.48)
- C. In chapter 6, Jesus outlines several practices (means of grace) that are to be *actively pursued* as we seek to cultivate the beatitudes in our lives.
- D. Jesus is not concerned to do away with means of grace — rather he is concerned to reorient *how* we pursue them (before the eyes of God alone) and *why* we pursue them (for true, lasting reward).
- E. One of the dynamic realities of understanding these means outlined in Matthew 6 is to see that they are all invitations to pursue voluntary expressions of *weakness*. In each of these pursuits we give up something that we generally understand as strength (money, time, control, personal rights, food, etc.) in order to more regularly align ourselves with our true dependence.

II. THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS

- A. Jesus' statement on forgiveness demonstrates the *essential* nature of this practice within the lives of his disciples. This is a striking statement on the importance of extending forgiveness to those who are indebted to us (v. 12) and who have transgressed against us (v. 14).
- B. However, the practice of forgiveness does not often shape the lives of those who follow Jesus in the manner that is demonstrated by his commandment here.
- C. We all intrinsically understand that the idea of forgiveness poses a significant problem. We all understand the severity of sin and its effects; and are fearful that to forgive means that we will make light of sin, lose the ability for personal vindication, or that we will continue to suffer under the weight of its effects.
- D. There are two misguided models for forgiveness that are often offered. Each of these models possesses an *aspect* of the truth, but not the whole truth. To adopt either of these models will leave us falling short of Jesus' call to live as a people of forgiveness.
 - 1. **The Unconditional Model:** This sentiment embodies a type of “forgive and forget” method to forgiveness. This model highlights the importance of forgiveness without recognizing the severity of sin and the devastating effects it has on people.
 - 2. **The Payment Model:** This model is prevalent in our world today. This model is built around “naming” truth as it is, vindication, and punishment. The only model for forgiveness in this model is that the offender adequately suffers *prior* to the offer of forgiveness. This model emphasizes the severity of sin and its devastating effects but is often unclear as to what constitutes sufficient “payment” for such sin.
- E. To walk in true obedience to Jesus' commandment related to forgiveness, we then need a better model for understanding forgiveness in order that we might more regularly practice it.

III. THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

- A. Any discussion on the nature of forgiveness in the kingdom of heaven requires that we begin with understanding the *need* for forgiveness. In other words, to rightly understand *what* forgiveness is (and how to practice it), we must first understand *why it is necessary*.
- B. Within the Scriptures, the concept of forgiveness is not first situated horizontally (between individuals) but vertically (between God and man). In other words, any conversation about forgiveness has to start with God and relationship with him *before* we talk about what it means to forgive one another.
- C. God exists in eternal, perfect, and holy communion within himself. He is eternally One God who lives in three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit). The life of the Trinity is one of infinite holiness, glory, satisfaction, joy, and peace. As the creator, God alone holds the right to define what is “good” within his creation.
- D. The Bible teaches that mankind is created in God’s image (Gen 1.26-27) in order that we might live in communion with him and express his glory throughout all the earth. This created purpose lies at the heart of any discussion of mankind, sin, and our need for true forgiveness.
- E. Our relationship with the Triune God (receiving from his infinite glory, goodness, and truth) was to define every other relationship in creation — our relationships with ourselves, with others, and even with the created order.
- F. This relationship was to be expressed ultimately through love and humble trust (demonstrated through obedience) that would result in eternal life. To disobey God’s commands is to express hatred for him and distrust of his character. This is ultimately what the Bible defines as sin.
- G. Throughout the Scripture, the reality of sin is described in many ways (pictures, images, analogies, etc.). However, as it relates to our passage and the need for forgiveness, there are two particular ways that emphasize the need to be forgiven.
 - 1. Sin as *debt*: The Scriptures invite us to see sin as akin to incurring a debt. When the Bible speaks of it in these terms it is not speaking solely of monetary debt (although that could be a part of it), but as spiritual debt. The nature of sin *violates* the one sinned against as though it takes something from them. This requires *repayment* — and the sinner is now indebted to the one sinned against. This is why the Scriptures can speak of the *wages* of sin (i.e., the ultimate payment) being death (Rom 6.23).
 - 2. Sin as *transgression*: The Scriptures also invite us to see sin as breaking or violating the goodness of God’s order and creation. The idea of transgression is not simply that a debt is incurred, but that something has now become broken and must *be healed or restored*. Not only is there an absence of something that should have been (obedience, which not necessitates repayment), but there is a presence of something that should not have been (hurt, a stain, a fracture, etc.).
- H. The Bible is both clear and unapologetic that every person is guilty of such debt and transgression before the holy and righteous God. There is no one who has lived up to the purpose for which we were created (cf. Rom 3.23) both by *nature* (we live in the domain of sin; cf. Rom 5.12-21; 2 Cor 4.4; Col 1.13) and by *choice* (cf. Rom 1.18-23; Eph 2.1-3).
- I. Yet, many of us today struggle to connect to the severe nature of our sinfulness before God. This is because we have exchanged an understanding of our purpose from one defined by God to one defined by ourselves. In a society that believes it fundamentally exists for self-fulfilling purposes (therapeutic), sin no longer is violation of God’s holy nature or design, but violation of someone else’s pursuit of self-actualization or experience of some form of subjective, inner wholeness.

IV. THE COST OF FORGIVENESS

- A. The Bible calls us to look full face at the reality of sin, the severity of sin, and the effects of sin in our lives and in the world. Because we can neither pay back the debt incurred by our sin nor work to bring restoration from the violations that have been enacted in the world from our sin, the Bible declares that each of us deserves an eternal punishment of separation from God in accordance with his justice.
- B. Yet, God in his great mercy and kindness has made a way to offer forgiveness that simultaneously provides a way to offer forgiveness to his enemies *without* making light of sin or its effects in the world.
- C. Through the death of Jesus, God provides a way of forgiveness and salvation to all who will receive it by faith. At the cross, Jesus:
 - 1. ***Cancels the debt*** owed because of sin (Col 2.14)
 - 2. ***Pays the ransom/redemption*** price for our debt (Matt 20.28; Eph 1.7)
 - 3. ***Offers forgiveness*** in Christ's blood (Matt 26.28; Eph 1.7; Heb 9.22)
 - 4. ***Bears God's wrath*** as a substitution (Rom 3.25; 1 John 2.2)
 - 5. Is ***qualified to accomplish God's restoration*** of all things (Rev 5.1-10)
- D. The Scripture is clear to show that the forgiveness of God does not come at the expense of the justice of God. At the cross of Jesus, God sufficiently punishes (pays for, empties out his wrath) Jesus for sin *in order* that he might express his gracious mercy in forgiveness toward those who look to him.

²⁵whom [Jesus] God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3.25-26)

²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5.21)

- E. We see clearly here that God does not turn a blind eye to the effects of sin, the severity of sin, or the need for justice. He lays this upon his own Son and provides the way in himself. The Bible does not invite us to either the "forgive and forget" model or the "exact repayment" model of forgiveness. It presents a model of forgiveness that is *profoundly costly* — so costly that it cost the life of God's own son (Rom 8.32).

V. FORGIVE AS YOU ARE FORGIVEN

- A. This lays the necessary framework for understanding Jesus' teaching here in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' command is to offer forgiveness to others.
- B. However, this statement presents another problem for us: Does this commandment teach that God's forgiveness of us is *conditional* upon our forgiveness of others.
- C. Understanding this statement requires that we interpret this commandment with the rest of Scripture. Later in Matthew 18.21-35, Jesus tells a parable that is clearly an exposition (and expansion) of the commandment here in the Sermon on the Mount.
- D. In that parable, Jesus demonstrates that one of the clearest ways that we express the reality of our own forgiven-ness (of a debt we could never repay) is that we practice forgiveness toward others *from the heart*. It is important to understand that our forgiving others does not *earn* God's forgiveness — rather, it is one of the most effective demonstrations of our experience of forgiveness.

VI. PRACTICING FORGIVENESS

- A. **Definition:** *forgiveness is relinquishing the right to exact repayment for a debt incurred by sin and releasing the person from bearing the responsibility to heal, or bring restoration, to the place transgressed.*
- B. To practice such forgiveness requires many things as we seek to cooperate with God's grace in following Jesus. These ideas can help us to conceptualize what it means to step toward practicing forgiveness — but they do not make the practice *easy*. This is a costly and difficult aspect of discipleship.
- C. Forgiveness first requires that we **experience the magnitude of being forgiven**. Many of us struggle to offer true forgiveness from the heart because we do not regularly experience the magnitude of our forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Many of us believe that we are better than we actually are and struggle to not minimize our own sinfulness and need for forgiveness. We must continually be *reminded* of the magnitude of our debt (we could never repay) and the abundance of God's mercy toward us in Christ. This takes the work of the Spirit.
- D. We must see forgiveness as an **issue of obedience**. This means that to pursue walking in a regular practice of forgiveness toward others demonstrates our faith in Christ (faith always *looks like something*). When we seek to forgive, we humbly seek to believe that we are forgiven first, that God will be sufficient for us, and that he will ultimately bring forth justice. As we forgive we show that we cannot exact repayment for the debt (it must be paid for in God's justice — either in judgment or in Christ) and that only God can ultimately heal and repair the damage done because of sin (he is making all things new!).
- E. We must **understand the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration**. Many times we collapse all three of these concepts into one (these are all accomplished for us in the Gospel) — but often look like different stages in relationships that have been wounded or broken because of sin. All of these should be “on the table” for a Christian — but we may not fully experience them in this life.
1. **Forgiveness:** see definition above. To forgive does not require the other to repent. This is an important aspect of Jesus' commandment here — he does not lay a condition for our forgiveness on anything the other person does.
 2. **Reconciliation:** This is when a relationship is set at peace — i.e., there is no longer “something between” the two parties. This requires both parties to desire to be at peace. This always requires forgiveness and *usually* requires repentance.
 3. **Restoration:** A relationship being restored to trust and intimacy — i.e., there is an openness and enjoyment of continuing to walk together. There are relationships that can be reconciled that do not experience restoration this side of eternity. This requires a greater measure of “agreement” in order to continue walking together in intimacy.
- F. **Forgiveness does not mean we make light of sin.** The Scriptures outline processes to name sin and offenses — both within the body (cf. Matt 18.15-20) and within society (cf. Rom 13.1-7). We can pursue walking in a spirit of forgiveness *while* we are walking out a process within these avenues. We also know that if these processes fail (or fall short in weakness), we can entrust our souls to God's ultimate justice that will be made known in all eternity (cf. Rom 12.19-21; 1 Pet 2.23)
- G. Forgiveness is **related to Jesus' earlier teaching of resisting the temptations of retaliation and hating our enemies**. Jesus outlines concrete ways to pursue entrusting ourselves to him in the face of being wronged, opposed, or sinned against. These concrete actions are *essential* in operating in and practicing forgiveness. We are called to relate to those who are our enemies by **doing good** to them (practically meeting needs with our resources, time, and energy), **blessing** them (using our words to speak *to* and *about* them with a spirit of grace), and **pray** for them (ask God to move in their lives).