

**Text:** Various

**Title:** The Marvel of Forgiveness

**Truth:** The Christian rejoices in the truth that God forgives sinful people.

**Date/Location:** Sunday May 7, 2023 at FBC

## Introduction

The purpose of this message is to glorify God by extolling the truth and glories of forgiveness. This will help us remember the Lord in an honoring way tonight. He died to secure, among many other things, eternal forgiveness for capital offenses against the Most High God.

## I. Meaning of Forgiveness

What does it mean to forgive? One simple definition quickly available online is to “stop feeling angry or resentful toward (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake.”

“Psychologists generally define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness.” It does not mean denying or condoning an offense, excusing it, or forgetting it.<sup>1</sup>

What about forgiving yourself? Today this idea revolves around self-love and self-respect despite wrongdoing, having to do with feelings of goodwill instead of ill-will toward oneself.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that these definitions are feelings-based.

What constitutes wrongdoing in the above definitions is unclear at least on the premises used by post-modern or neo-pagan man where many evils are excused or even promoted as moral goods. With a shifty standard of what constitutes a transgression, there may be people who do not feel the need for forgiveness, but the offended party may beg to differ.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/forgiveness/definition>

<sup>2</sup> Julie H. Hall and Frank D. Fincham, SELF-FORGIVENESS: THE STEPCHILD OF FORGIVENESS RESEARCH” in *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 5, 2005, pp. 621-637.

All Scripture is from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

Another definition of the word in English is to cancel a debt. It is more “objective” rather than subjective (feelings-based). In Greek, a word commonly used for forgiveness is ἀφίημι “to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon” (BDAG). This definition is in line with the Bible as over against the feelings-based definitions.

Take note about the type of obligation that we have toward God when we sin. It is not a financial obligation, nor can it be discharged by financial means as a substitute. It is not a legal obligation that can be paid with money or a short amount of incarceration. It is a moral or ethical obligation. The level of offense and the party offended (God and His offended holiness) require a life as a payment. For God, merely overlooking sin is not possible. The good news is that a substitute life is possible.

Any act, or non-act, or word, or attitude, or desire that displeases God brings guilt. Guilt (eventually) brings punishment. Said another way: sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death. Sin entered the world, and death through sin. Death of both the physical and spiritual varieties is the debt that must be paid for sin. Everyone recognizes that there are consequences for sin, at least for some things—criminal behavior that victimizes others or unethical behavior that may seem generic or even victimless. Usually, such considerations are focused on the human-to-human consequences, or on a mystical idea of fate or karma. But the living and true God is real, and your sin also has an impact in His realm, just like it does in your family or society realm.

## **II. The Marvel of Divine Forgiveness Toward Man**

A. The last three verses in Scripture that use the word “forgive” (out of over 100 uses) are of this sort: James 5:15, 1 John 1:9, and 1 John 2:12. Each addresses God as the One who forgives our iniquity. Forgiveness follows upon the Christian’s confession of sin because Jesus, the One in whom the Christian lives, Himself is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 1:9), the sacrifice that provides expiation (1 John 2:2), the appeasement required for God to forgive our sins.

Forgiveness is a verb that is “passive” to the recipient whose obligation is cancelled. God does the action of forgiveness (James 5:15, 1 John 1:9). It is an action that once done carries a permanent ongoing effect (1 John 2:12).

- B. Part of the marvel of it is that God forgives *all* our sins (Psalm 25:18, 85:2, 103:3). It is a huge blessing when God forgives (32:1). God forgives even egregious sin (32:5). God is compassionate and repeatedly forgives (78:38). He stands ready to forgive, not grudgingly (86:5). He is *characterized so much by forgiveness* that He is the God-Who-Forgives (99:8). Another part of the marvel of it is *how* God does that.
- C. God forgives and this means we ought to see God with deep reverence and fear (Psalm 103:4).
- D. God’s character is so holy that sin’s debt is inherent; thus, forgiveness is required to remove the debt. But His character is also so loving and compassionate that forgiveness is readily available. He is not like an unappeasable tyrant who demands repentance readily but does not extend forgiveness easily. He demands repentance and extends forgiveness both with ready ease. But both must happen together and cannot be separated. That is, God does not extend forgiveness without repentance.
- E. At this point you might ask if humans can “forgive” without repentance on the other side, why cannot God do the same? When people talk about this kind of feeling of forgiveness, they speak of a truncated type of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a three-part thing: the offended party is ready to release the moral obligation; the sinning party is ready to apologize, confess, repent; and the two parties “meet” and exchange communication so that each understands the other’s true feelings about the matter and transact the actual forgiveness.

Back to the question then: when people “forgive” an unrepentant criminal, they are letting go of ill feelings toward the person, which is step 1 only. Steps 2 and 3 have not occurred. You cannot criticize God for doing less than that because He has done that maximally. He stands ready to forgive because He himself took the ethical

obligation of sin upon Himself in Christ, dying in our place for our sin. He demonstrated He is *so ready* to forgive that He himself took the punishment due to the other party.

Let us turn the criticism back on the criticizer. If God can stand ready to forgive like that, better than any magnanimous human being, why do you refuse to align your heart right to apologize to God for your sin and turn away from it in gratitude to Jesus who died for your sin? Why cannot you do that?

- F. Good feelings *should* follow the debt cancellation because feelings should be informed and shaped by truth. If the truth is that sin debt is truly canceled—and it is, in Jesus—this is a cause for great rejoicing. If when we fail, we can go to God to ask forgiveness and Christ is there as our advocate, and God promises to forgive and cleanse us, how can we *not* feel strength and courage from that? We marvel because we have such a privilege. We are not subject to fate or other impersonal forces that determine our outcome. We have a real relationship with the sin-forgiving God.

### **III. The Marvel of Human Forgiveness Between People**

- A. Some remarkable people “let go” of bad feelings toward someone who has done them wrong. This is unusual, especially in egregious cases of a criminal act against a person or family. But this is not the real marvel in my view. The amazing thing is when a full transaction of forgiveness occurs between two people—the sinner apologizes, the wronged party is graciously ready to release the debt, and they communicate their stance with one another. The restorative result is so peaceful, enjoyable, gracious, and kind. Communion is restored. Sinful people continue to live in harmony together. That is beautiful. It should characterize our marriage and family life. It is very much different than the hatred that permeates our culture.
- B. The fourth-from-last verse in the canonical order of Bible books that refers to reconciliation is Colossians 3:13. Christ’s forgiveness of us is the basis and the standard of comparison for our forgiveness of others. We are to bear with one another and forgive one another *as* Jesus forgave us. It is not an option; it is a moral

obligation. In fact, failure to meet this moral obligation is an offensive act toward God—a sin—and would require us to confess our sin to God and thus rely upon His forgiveness for our lack of forgiveness. Recognizing that, we should immediately be moved to forgive our neighbor.

- C. That is, we are to “cancel the debt,” to release from moral obligation that someone has toward us.
- D. On what basis do we do this? There is no substitutionary sacrifice or other place where the sins done against us are “put,” is there? The basis in us is the same as it is in God—grace. The offense does not merit forgiveness; the person who did the offense does not inherently deserve forgiveness. So, the offended party’s response must be sourced in unmerited favor, which is the *definition* of what grace is. The relationship may indeed be worth sharing forgiveness, but what about after 7 times (Luke 17:4), or 77 times, or 70 x 7 times (Matthew 18:22)?

When we forgive, we behave like God. Or, like the forgiving master (Matthew 18:27). Or, like Jesus (Matt 9:2).

What happens to the sin done against us? If the sinner transacts with God and with us, then the sin against *me* is taken by Christ. Stop and think about the marvel of that. Person A sins against B, and Christ takes the sin of A upon Himself, and B can graciously forgive A and know that Jesus died for that sin and sinner just like for Himself. I forgive you because Christ forgave me, and I can forgive you because Christ forgave you, and Christ paid for the sin done against me, and so I’m not going to hold that against you any longer.

## Conclusion

Continuing with the human “version” of forgiveness, we receive grace, and we exhibit grace. Most humans have a basic understanding of grace because we are made in God’s image. God builds this character trait in redeemed people. God gives more grace, and this is what makes forgiveness work!

MAP

## Appendix: Another False Doctrine about Forgiveness

Here is a quote I found online: "Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us."<sup>3</sup>

Is this true?

Not at all. It creates a false dichotomy between relationship and rules. In reality, *both* God's "rules" (holiness) and relationship with us matter to God, but never holiness at the expense of relationship. He cannot be positively related to sin or unrepentant sinners. God maintains His holiness unsullied *and* stands ready to receive or request of forgiveness because He took care of our sins in a holy manner in Christ.

## Hymns

278 At Calvary

275 Jesus Paid it All

309 There is Fountain

339 My Sins are Blotted Out

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<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Richard Rohr at <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/quote-archive1/forgiveness-quotes>