Equipping Hour: Nov 2

Nov 2: Forgiveness (part 1)

Just a quick reminder that you can find Equipping Hour notes, and now recordings as well, on the church center app.

We are working our way towards understanding and embracing a biblical worldview, and this journey began back in January and continues through this semester. Our goal is to ask ourselves, "Is my view of _____ biblically accurate? How has my view been impacted by secular, worldly thinking?" Because it has. For all of us. It's most definitely not if. It's how. The renewing of our minds is a life-long process where we are taking every thought captive and holding it up against the truths of Christ and God's Word.

Since returning from the summer break, we have asked ourselves these questions concerning anger and fear. Is my view of anger and fear biblical? Have I embraced a biblical reality concerning these issues that informs my beliefs, shapes my values, and is ultimately displayed in my responses, in my behavior? Our format has and will continue to be spending three weeks to explore each of these topics.

In the first week, we take a look at what secular, worldly thinking has to say about the topic. This has included secular theories, explanations, and solutions for dealing with life's problems, like we've done with anger and fear. In week two, we examine God's Word for what God's wisdom has to say about the topic, essentially seeing His explanation for why we struggle with anger and fear and the subjects we cover next. In the third and final week on a given subject, we offer biblical application for how we are to then live in this knowledge and shape our worldview to more accurately reflect what Scripture has revealed. Knowledge without action is useless information. Our goal is to offer ***the*** biblical solution for life's problems. Not ***a*** biblical solution, as though it's one amongst a sea of other viable options, but rather ***the*** solution for living in godliness and freedom as no worldly system can offer.

Today, then, is week one of our next subject, forgiveness, meaning today we will look at how our secular culture and society believes, values, and lives this concept. Of all our topics, this one will be the most influenced by secular anthropology and sociology, so bear with me today because some of what we will cover will be rather academic but necessary for understanding why our society does what it does and how this has inevitably impacted your view of not just forgiveness, but also conflict resolution.

A secular worldview of forgiveness can be divided into two categories. The first is the forgiveness from the offended to the offender. This forgiveness includes the idea of letting go, of an emotional and mental process of pardoning an offender by releasing feelings of animosity and bitterness. This does not mean excusing the offense, forgetting the offense, or that there is necessarily a pathway towards reconciliation. The ultimate motivation for forgiveness is personal health and wellbeing, for the benefit of your mental health because it reduces stress, anger, and depression.

A second category, one particularly prevalent in the secular clinical world, is the idea of forgiving oneself. Self-forgiveness involves releasing self-directed anger, guilt, or shame after a wrongdoing or mistake, and replacing them with compassion and acceptance toward oneself. Many therapies (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy, self-compassion therapy) teach self-forgiveness as part of reducing anxiety, depression, and self-criticism, and increase self-esteem and self-acceptance. For the humanistic and sociologist, self-forgiveness is tied to personal dignity, empathy, and growth rather than divine absolution. The ultimate motivation is to acknowledge responsibility, learn from the experience, and move forward in healthier ways. Self-forgiveness is often seen as a process of self-acceptance and reconciliation with one's values and an act of personal freedom and authenticity, a way of realigning with who you want to be, and honors the inherent worth of every person, affirming that mistakes do not erase one's value or potential for moral growth. Self-forgiveness, then, is a self-directed process of healing and growth, grounded in psychology, ethics, and humanism, and has nothing to do with divine grace.

These two categories are how the world views forgiveness. How have you experienced this in your life? What's the motivation for both? Remember that motivation equals worldview.

In order for us to understand the first category, what the world has to say about forgiveness between offended and offender, we need to go back a little farther, a little deeper and broader, and begin with how secular worldly wisdom addresses wrongdoing. In other words, how does the world resolve conflict.

Every society must and will determine how to respond when harm or injustice occurs. We see the beginnings of this in toddlers when one snatches a toy from another. You done me wrong, so I'm going to retaliate by hitting you with this stuffy. We carry within us an innate sense of justice because justice is a value determination given us through our knowledge of good and evil. Our beliefs will be warped, flawed, and extremely limited about why we value justice when informed by a reality absent of God. Reactions to wrongdoing – such as revenge, punishment, or forgiveness – reflect cultural values. Consider that for a moment. Your behavior reflects your values. Your values are what you have determined to be right or wrong, good, better, and best, bad, worse, and worst. Examining how these values are shaped helps explain how individuals, and cultures, manage moral balance, social control, and emotional regulation because, because from a secular sociological worldview, the first category of forgiveness is a social contract, part of a larger conflict management survivability matrix necessary for humans to live together but applied differently considering the context.

So, just as a refresher, let's take a look at our worldview map to help us think critically as we continue.

The outermost layer of worldview is behavior. This is what is done. The behavior of a culture, society, and even individual reveals the values that inform the behavior. The values

you adopt, right and wrong, good, better, best… come from beliefs you hold to be true. Your beliefs will shape your values and be revealed in your behavior, but the beliefs you hold to be true come from a deeper source, and this innermost center is your worldview, the reality you have embraced by faith.

For the secular worldview, reality is materialism. Not to be mistaken for consumerism, the mindset that you must acquire things and money. This worldview rejects the notion that there is a spiritual reality beyond the physical, material reality, which means all problems must have a solution based in the physical world. For the Christian, this reality is that God exists and has revealed Himself to humanity in order that we may have a relationship with Him. This revealing of God to humanity includes general revelation, what can be observed about God through nature, and special revelation, the Word of God breathed-out by God as men were carried along by the Spirit, preserved to this day.

[Map] From embracing the reality that God exists and has revealed Himself through nature and His Word, from this reality, the Christian then adopts beliefs based on this reality, which then informs his or her values, and is ultimately displayed in behaviors. Our struggles against sin and being sinned against, as viewed by our behavior, necessitates looking for the breakdown between our worldview and beliefs, what I call, and you've heard me call, the difference between our cognitive faith and functional faith. I say and even think these things are true about my faith, but when the rubber hits the road, my responses to the challenges of life reveal a disconnect, an inconsistency, that requires I examine my worldview to see if I have, in fact, embraced a reality consistent, or inconsistent, with God's revelation.

So, back to a secular view of forgiveness, which will include a broader examination of conflict resolution, an examination about revenge, justice, and forgiveness. From an evolutionary worldview, revenge evolved as a deterrent mechanism, signaling that harm will not go unpunished. In a very real sense, a secular view of justice has, at its base, this foundational stance: harm will not go unpunished. Consider for a moment how close this is to a biblical reality, but when your worldview is absent of God, who gets to define harm decide the punishment?

Forgiveness, then, is also an evolved response to revenge as a social repair strategy, preserving cooperation between small groups of people so that you do not have perpetual feuds like the Hatfields and the McCoys. Both revenge as a deterrent mechanism, meaning if you do this, expect retaliation, so don't step out of line, and forgiveness as a social repair strategy, are evolutionary adaptations promoting social stability and long-term survival.

From a cognitive-behavioral psychology (CBT) worldview, forgiveness is understood not as a moral or religious duty, but as a psychological process that promotes emotional well-being and cognitive freedom. Cognitive-behavioral psychologists view forgiveness primarily as a means of reducing psychological distress, breaking cycles of rumination, and restoring a sense of personal control and peace after being wronged. The focus is less on

reconciliation with the offender and, once again, more on the cognitive and emotional benefits for the person choosing to forgive.

Within CBT, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are understood to interact continuously. When someone experiences deep hurt or betrayal, negative automatic thoughts—such as "I'll never get over this" or "They don't deserve forgiveness"— fuel ongoing anger, resentment, and anxiety. These emotional reactions, in turn, reinforce maladaptive thought patterns. Cognitive-behavioral approaches help individuals identify and reframe such thoughts, replacing them with more balanced perspectives such as, "Holding on to this anger hurts me more than it hurts them," or "I can release this without excusing their behavior." The goal is to empower the person to move from a reactive mindset to one rooted in self-regulation and clear thinking.

Forgiveness interventions in CBT are often structured and skills-based. Therapists might use guided imagery, journaling, or cognitive restructuring exercises to help clients process the event and reframe the meaning of the offense. For example, one CBT-informed model emphasizes "decisional forgiveness" (a conscious choice to let go of revenge and resentment) and "emotional forgiveness" (a gradual emotional shift toward empathy or neutrality). The process does not require forgetting or condoning wrongdoing; rather, it seeks to dismantle the cognitive distortions and emotional burdens that keep individuals trapped in pain.

Ultimately, in the secular cognitive-behavioral view, forgiveness is a form of psychological self-liberation. The goal is to help the individual reclaim agency, decrease physiological stress, and restore mental health. By reframing the meaning of the offence and focusing on self-directed change rather than moral reconciliation, CBT situates forgiveness as a strategy for emotional resilience and cognitive balance completely outside the scope of morality. In others, a perceived offence is just as valid as a real offence.

Now let's shift gears and look at forgiveness, and broadly conflict resolution, from a sociocultural perspective. Understand that forgiveness requires looking at the cultural context for what it means to be wronged before trying to under how to respond. Some social scientists break down cultures into three groups: honor cultures, face cultures, and dignity cultures.

Honor Cultures emphasizes family, reputation, and retributive justice. These cultures are typically found in Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and some Western subcultures (like parts of Appalachia if you read your Sunday Central email). Any offence to self or family tarnishes reputation and demands public retribution in order to restore that public standing, public honor. You have probably heard of honor-killings. These occur publicly, within a family, when one member of the family does something so dishonorable as to damage the reputation of the entire family, resulting in the family, usually the male head, executing the offending family member. We see this mostly against women who do something scandalous, but also for converting to Christianity. For the sake of the family's

honor, that person has to receive public punishment. But this is certainly true for offenders outside the family as well. We see this honor-based conflict resolution in several accounts in the Old Testament, including Lamech's boast in Genesis 4:23-24, the revenge taken after Dinah's violation by Shechem in Genesis 34, and even David when we sought to take revenge on Nabal in 1 Samuel 25. We see this today in gang culture, where the honor of the "family" demands swift, often public, displays of justice.

Face Cultures value harmony, reputation, and conflict avoidance on a societal level, a collective level, not just personal. You will find this culture almost exclusively in East and Southeast Asian countries. Forgiveness, and even silence, is often used to restore "face" without public confrontation, because public confrontation actually embarrasses both parties, not just the offender. So in a very real sense, the offended will go out of his way to help the offender "save face." For instance, if a mother-in-law makes a sharp criticism of her daughter-in-law but she got the facts wrong, the daughter-in-law wouldn't necessarily correct the elder woman because that would shame her, she would lose face for being wrong, so she may keep silent or even absorb or reframe the comment to keep from embarrassing her. This makes sharing the gospel really difficult within these cultures because the gospel points out our sin. The gospel offends. In Japan, for instance, in a gospel presentation where personal sin is explained as a violation against God, in the interpretation of the hearer, you just caused great offence by calling him or a her a criminal. Culturally, only criminals are bad people, and even then you wouldn't make the offence public because, as I already said, valuing your "face" maintains my own for the sake of harmony and the avoidance of scandal and limelight.

Dignity Cultures are those heavily influenced by Greek Hellenism where individual rights and legal processes are valued above personal vengeance. Justice and conflict resolution becomes institutional rather than interpersonal. We find this predominately in Western and industrialized societies where a robust utilitarian legal system determines retribution, restoration, and provides deterrence to behaviors outside the social norms. This is our context. Justice serves the greater social good, reducing harm, preventing crime, and promoting social welfare. At least in theory if not in practice. But within this culture we have conflicting perspectives, such as the tension between retributive justice and restorative justice. Retributive justice says the punishment must proportionally fit the crime, meaning the wrongdoer deserves to suffer in proportion to the harm caused. This worldview is rather prominent in the world. The more recent pull against this mindset is restorative justice, which seeks to repair harm rather than inflict punishment. This involves victim-offender mediation, dialogue, and community restoration. This particular mindset has taken over our educational system by storm, impacting how many States and municipalities reform their criminal justice systems.

In reality, within the subculture of your particular family, you may experience none or all three of these broader cultural views blended into something unique to your context. These, however, are generalities that sociologists use to help make sense of behavior and values within a broader cultural context.

So, to wrap up the first category, according to worldly wisdom, human responses to wrongdoing are shaped by biology, culture, and moral reasoning. While these views may be somewhat foundational to a particular cultural context, let's step into reality for a moment and take a look at our actual, not theoretical, secular worldview [map]. While restorative frameworks are increasingly used in schools, workplaces, and criminal justice systems to more or less catastrophic results, what do we actually crave as revealed in behavior? Revenge.

Just in the past ten years, movies with a theme centered on revenge outnumbered movies with a theme of forgiveness and reconciliation by a factor of about four times as many. And that does not include television. For every 250 movies about forgiveness there are a 1,000 glorifying the victim taking revenge. Our hearts pound as we inwardly shout for the horrible, murderous villain who senselessly killed the protagonist's family to get his comeuppance. Justice! We declare in our hearts, but really it's revenge. That's our actual secular worldview because that's what we actually value.

As a society, that's what we spend money to watch. That's what we spend our time watching. We can kid ourselves into thinking we are a highly evolved, rational society built on justice, rights, and restoration, but when push comes to shove, when we are bumped, this is what comes out by default. This is our worldview. We see this in social media, with cancel culture, with our almost rabid fascination with seeing how this person will get back at this person because of what she said on Instagram about how small her engagement ring is. Revenge and retaliation are the immediate "righteous" response to wrongdoing. Just like the toddlers fighting over a toy.

Now we need to shift gears and discuss the second category, forgiving oneself. With barely any effort, we can expose the root of this secular worldview of forgiveness as secular theories of self-esteem because the goal is self-release, self-empowerment, and self-acceptance. The term self-esteem can be traced back as far as the 1600s; its use reached a peak around the 1800s and then for seventy-five years it was not widely mentioned. As the study of psychology became more popular in the 1960s and 1970s, theories began to take form, such as the ratio of achievement and expectation, positive and negative self-regard, inferiority complex, attachment theory, the Human Potential Movement, Human Dignity Theory, and Self-actualization Theory.

The concept of self-esteem has evolved as scholars and researchers have sought to define and understand it. Essentially, self-esteem is understood as a mental evaluation of oneself, functioning either as a motivator or a consequence of behavior, ultimately shaping positive or negative perceptions, attitudes, emotional states, and feelings. Within secular thought, this concept raises fundamental questions. Some argue that self-esteem dictates behavior, while others contend that behavior determines self-esteem. This leads to a classic philosophical dilemma: which comes first, the chicken or the egg? How can self-esteem simultaneously be a motivator and a result? And, crucially, where is the objective standard by which it's measured? There isn't one. Self-esteem cannot logically be both the

cause and the effect of behavior. However, these secular theories neglect any biblical perspective on human well-being. They propose that a person's well-being hinges on their internal self-esteem, rather than their relationship with God and the handling of sin. In this worldview, sin is not the root issue, Christ is not the solution, and self-esteem becomes either the cure or the disease.

We mentioned some of this when we covered anger and fear. The self-esteem movement is an attempt to generate self-empowerment in the individual. The secular world recognizes that you perceive a problem because it's a problem for you, whether or not you are to blame because we love to blame society, biology, and the devil, but sin and guilt have to be dealt with because they are humanity's greatest problem. Since this worldview is absent God and therefore moral authority or judge, the power to be absolved from sin and guilt has to come from within you: self-empowerment. This certainly flavors both categories because forgiving others and forgiving yourself are ultimately about your mental health and wellbeing. But self-forgiveness is far more insidious because it makes you your own judge. It makes you your own moral standard. It makes you your own authority. It makes you your own god. Think about that for a moment. Somehow forgiving yourself is the solution to guilt, remorse, and regret. Hey, self, I screwed up, but it's okay, I forgive me. Folks, this ideology has radically infiltrated the church. I Googled "Christian podcasts and articles about how to forgive myself" and got over half a million responses in 0.33 seconds.

Are you prepared to sift through all that mouse poop?

The world desperately wants you to believe this lie. Next week we will examine God's Word for what He says about forgiveness. Any question?