

Nov 9: Forgiveness (part 2)

Here's our big questions for today: "Is my view of forgiveness biblically accurate? Is my practice of forgiveness biblically true?"

Last week we rushed through an examination of what the world believes and practices concerning forgiveness. We discussed how a secular worldview of forgiveness can be divided into two categories. The first is the forgiveness from the offended to the offender. The motivation for this forgiveness is personal health and wellbeing, for the benefit of your mental health because it reduces stress, anger, and depression rather than leaving you trapped in a cycle of dwelling on pain.

A second category, one particularly prevalent in the clinical world, is the idea of forgiving oneself. Self-forgiveness involves the goal of releasing self-directed anger, guilt, or shame after a wrongdoing or mistake, and replacing them with compassion and acceptance toward oneself with the goal of reducing negative self-image, anger, depression, and anxiety while increasing self-acceptance. We also discussed various theoretical views, including evolutionary, cognitive-behavioral, and socio-cultural theories concerning justice, revenge, conflict resolution, and forgiveness. There was a problem with the recording last week, but the notes are available through the church center app.

[Worldview map] Countless hundreds of thousands of hours have been spent examining human behavior by researchers across the globe for hundreds of years. The world has gotten very good at making observations. There's nothing wrong with Christians borrowing from these observations. Problems arise when these observations are then interpreted because every interpretation of behavior is an attempt to explain values, beliefs, and worldview. Interpretations of behavior ascribe cause. This happened because of this other thing. But if your worldview is misaligned with God's Word, answering the question why someone does something will be answered using a faulty interpretive lens, which means the solution will completely miss the mark because you have ascribed the wrong cause for the behavior you observed and therefore the wrong solution.

For instance, last week we discussed that secular thinking teaches that every society must and will determine how to respond when harm or injustice occurs, but these responses are actually within us at birth. We observe 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. That's a value every human is born with. The child may not be able to articulate the belief that informs the value or the worldview that shapes the belief, but it's all there at birth and will only continue to be conformed to the world over time or transformed to be like Christ. That's retributive justice, but in reality it's revenge because our motivations are misaligned from God's Word.

We carry within us an innate sense of "justice" because justice is a value determination given us through our knowledge of good and evil, but apart from God our knowledge of

good and evil is both faulty and incomplete. Our beliefs will be warped, flawed, and extremely limited about why we value justice and why we ought to respond the way we do when we are wronged **if** our beliefs have not been shaped by the reality of God's existence and His revelation of Himself to us in Scripture. This vengeful response we see in toddlers reflects our sin nature, and it carries over into adulthood, but we pretend it's justice, fairness, and equality when none of those are remotely possible apart from God and a right understanding of His glory and sovereignty.

This same is true of the modern-day view of restorative justice. This mindset seeks to repair harm rather than inflict punishment and involves victim-offender mediation, offender advocacy, and community support and involvement. This particular mindset has taken over our educational system, impacting criminal justice reform in many parts of the country as well.

With barely a scratch, we can easily expose the childish sin-nature thinking behind restorative justice as well. Restorative justice is an attempt to remove, or significantly mitigate, consequences. How often have you heard a child, when approached with a consequence, make the plea, "But I said I'm sorry!" as though this absolves them from responsibility. Restorative justice is no different. I said I'm sorry so I shouldn't have to experience any consequences, or least greatly reduced consequences. In theory, and theory only, that's **not** how restorative justice should operate, but in practice it is when your worldview doesn't start with God. Offenders repeatedly reoffend but consequences are not given because the worldview of forgiveness is flawed. Both retributive and restorative justice have been radically and permanently impacted by our sin nature, and apart from God's grace and Word, we are hopelessly and laughably incapable of exercising justice, practicing conflict resolution, and extending forgiveness beyond selfish, sinful motivations.

Today is week two of our examination of forgiveness, which means we are taking a look at what God's Word has to say on the subject. This, of course, will only be a taste because we could fill a month of Sundays on what Scripture reveals. Scripture reveals three categories of forgiveness, which are: 1) God's Forgiveness of Our Sins; 2) Our Request to God for Forgiveness; and 3) Forgiveness Between People. Within these categories we will look at the Attitude of Forgiveness and the Action of Forgiveness for each, then extract a definition next week for our application. It's important to say now that these categories form a scaffolding, they build off each other. Our worldview concerning forgiveness must begin with a right view of God's forgiveness. If we get this wrong, our requests to God for forgiveness and practicing forgiveness between people will also be wrong. In other words, our biblical worldview of forgiveness is contingent from category to category.

So let us first examine God's Forgiveness of Our Sin, first in attitude, or disposition, and then in action, or deed.

Attitude of Forgiveness:

God's forgiveness of our sins is a reflection of His character. In Exodus 34, the Lord descended in a cloud and stood with Moses on the top of Mount Sinai. Verse 6:

⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."

Micah 7:18-19 declares: ¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Psalm 103:8-12

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Isaiah 55:7 describes God's abundant compassion and willingness to pardon those who turn to Him. God's attitude towards our sin, when confessed, includes both an eagerness to forgive (that's really important) but also the divine desire to remove sin from us as nothing and no one else can.

I want us to sit under weight of this reality for a moment, because if we miss this, we miss it all. If you have not embraced this reality by faith, nothing else we discuss today or next will make any sense or be possible to apply. Your first application is embracing this reality concerning God's character. God's attitude towards sin is both an eagerness to pardon and a desire to remove it. There's no coercion. There's no bargaining. There's no waiting around for Him to decide whether or not He will actually forgive. It is quite literally His JOY to forgive.

God's attitude towards forgiving us of our sins results in His Action of Forgiveness.

Isaiah 43:25

"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

I want to clear up something from this verse real quick. When we think of the word blot, you might be inclined to think this means scribbling over, but that would contradict the notion that God remembers the sins no more because you can see where someone scribbles out an error on a document. God does not redact your sins. He removes them. Imagine you are a leather scroll and the story of your life is written upon you. God does not take a sharpie and cover your sins. He uses a solvent to lift the ink off you then wipes it away as though it

had never been. That what the word “blot” actually means in this verse. The blood of Jesus Christ is that solvent that lifts the sin from your story, and the Father in heaven then wipes away that stain as if it had never been there. The blood of Jesus both lifts the sin and then covers us with His righteousness.

Ephesians 1:7

In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...

If we are going to have any chance of understanding forgiveness, we need to biblical look at the difference between remembering and forgetting. To biblical forget means your past DOES NOT determine your present or your future. To biblical remember means your past RADICALLY determines your present and your future. God forgets your sin because it has no bearing on your present and future reality, IF you have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, IF that stain has been lifted off you by your confession and repentance, IF you are clothed in His righteousness. You are then compelled to remember what Jesus has already done on your behalf because the sin you commit today HAS ALREADY BEEN LIFTED OFF YOU AND WIPED CLEAN! Feel remorse, yes. Feel contrition. Yes, confess and repent of it, but recognize and embrace the reality that because of Jesus, God has already removed that stain so that you are free from the penalty of it. The removal of that stain includes the action of making you clean.

Matthew 26:27-28

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

1 John 1:7-2:2

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins...

The blood of Jesus has washed, is washing, and will wash us. We use this human linear language because we have no way of conceptualizing this work from God’s point of view because He is outside of time. God’s action of forgiveness includes both the lifting of the sin and wiping away clean the sin. Both and. In the judicial sense, this is accomplished once in order to permanently change your status from God’s enemy to God’s child. In the spiritual growth sense, God continues to wash you of your sins in order for you to be conformed into the image of His Son. In the ultimate sense, your final cleansing occurs

when you behold Him face to face and the presence of sin ceases to be part of your reality. God's attitude of steadfast love produces His action of pardoning and cleansing. His forgiveness is both relationally warm and judicially complete. A biblical definition of forgiveness would be incomplete without embracing this fundamental truth: forgiving includes the offended absorbing the consequences on behalf of the offender. Think about that for a moment. God forgives because Christ took upon Himself the punishment, the consequence we were owed. Jesus did this for the Father's glory and for our sake. The prophet Isaiah caught a glimpse of this transfer of consequences.

Isaiah 53:3-11

³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

A divine transfer, where Christ took our consequence upon Himself and gave us His righteousness. We cannot even begin to grasp a biblical view of God's forgiveness if we miss the fact that He, as part of His forgiveness, took our consequence upon Himself.

The question *isn't*, do you believe this? The question becomes, "Are you convinced of this?" Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief! Remove my doubt so that my faith can grow! Break me of my rebellious heart so that I may be free to embrace this reality! Cognitive faith versus functional faith. Do you agree out loud but in your heart still cling to a lingering doubt concerning God's attitude of forgiveness and His actions of forgiveness regarding your sin? If this doubt lingers without being regularly confronted by this biblical reality, it will be painfully evident in your beliefs, values, and behaviors. It will be painful evident in your struggle to give and receive forgiveness. It will be painfully evident by your lack of peace which transcends all understanding.

I so desperately want to stay on this category for the next ten years because if we miss this, nothing else matters, but we need to move on to our second category:

Our Request to God for Forgiveness

Once again, this begins with the right attitude, and Scripture is very clear about this. What's the right attitude for requesting forgiveness from God?

Psalms 51:1-4

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...

The right attitude of asking God for forgiveness begins with the right biblical worldview of category one. Mercy is only possible because of God's character, and the right heart attitude when asking His forgiveness must include being convinced of His greatness in order to rightly view the magnitude of our need. All sin is against God. All of it. It will sometimes include sinning against others, but all sin is always, always, always against God. We must have the right view of both the magnitude of our sin and our responsibility for our sin. This means a level of self-awareness that will be uncomfortable to say the least, but if we neglect to peer into the holiness of God in order to capture the seriousness of our sin, we will, as a fact, continue to struggle with that particular sin. Reflecting on God's glory, in order to rightly see and feel the impact of our sin, ought to then produce three things: humility (the awe and reverence of the fear of the Lord), contrition (meaning a righteous feeling bad motivating change), and dependence (because we cannot self-cleanse). These are the essential attitudes required for seeking God's forgiveness.

Luke 18:10-14

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

With the right attitude, we then take action by requesting God's forgiveness. What does this look like? Confession and repentance. In Acts 3 Peter is sharing the gospel in Solomon's portico, and he declares in verse 19:

Acts 3:19

Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out...

Confession and repentance demonstrates inward remorse, not just outwardly saying, "I'm sorry." That's the disconnect with restorative justice because confession and repentance extends well beyond what you say but reflects a condition of your heart that leads to action.

We confess our sin to God by agreeing with Him that we have sinned. This leaves no room for excuses or justifications. That's the theme of 1 John 1:9, agreeing, confessing our guilt to God for our lack of love towards Him and others.

Repentance means to turn and go the opposite way. It means the putting off of that sin and putting on instead the willful choice to submit to God's way. It means saying yes to the things the Holy Spirit would say yes to, and saying no to the things the Holy Spirit would say no to. This is what it means to walk by the Spirit rather than gratifying the desires of our sinful self.

Part of the application of this, which is a bit of a cheat since that's next week, is to adopt this mindset and action in your daily prayer life. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6, He includes the habit of confession and repentance.

Matthew 6:12

"...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Our requests to God for forgiveness requires the right attitude and must manifest in tangible actions – confession, repentance, and prayer. God forgives not because of the action itself, but because the action expresses the heart of humility, contrition, and dependence. In other words, the action of asking for forgiveness reflects a heart transformed by faith.

Our third and final biblical category of forgiveness is the Forgiveness Between People. Once again this begins with the right attitude before the right action, but this forgiveness will be impossible apart from the first two categories because forgiving one another begins with recognizing and embracing God's forgiveness and recognizing and embracing our forgiven state. The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 makes this abundantly clear.

Forgiveness between people begins with a vertical attitude between me and God because I am accountable to Him for what is in my heart and a lack of forgiveness in my heart towards another person is a reflection of my sinful heart and therefore requires a look at God's forgiveness and my need for it. If you have not been transformed by God's forgiveness and your need of it, and are growing in your transformation and need, then forgiveness towards another person simply won't happen. Here's a biblical reality we need to wrestle with: because God's forgiveness towards us is infinite, meaning God does not keep score, He doesn't run out of forgiveness, our attitude of forgiveness towards others must be limitless. Again, we see this in the conversation between Jesus and Peter leading up to the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Matthew 18:21-22

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

The numeric value is irrelevant because the point Jesus is making is that you shouldn't be keeping count. Your attitude of forgiveness towards others needs to mirror God's attitude of forgiveness towards you. That's a big deal. Let that sink in for a moment. The sin against you may be significant. I will never deny the impact and hurt, and neither will God. The only way that hurt can be redeemed and transformed, though, is a complete embrace of the forgiveness God has for you. Why? Because your sin against God is infinitely bigger. If you are struggling to be convinced of this, it will be evident in your struggle to forgive others. Our human nature is to compare ourselves to others and thereby dismiss the magnitude of our sin against God, and this blinds us to our need to embrace an attitude of limitless forgiveness towards those who sin against us. There's no way to sugarcoat this because at the end of the parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus declares:

Matthew 18:35

"And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

From your heart. That's attitude, and we are responsible unto God to embrace a limitless heart attitude of forgiveness to others. Again, this is impossible if in our complacency we neglect to remember and dwell in the forgiveness we have received.

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Colossians 3:12-13

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

1 Peter 3:8-9

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

Forgiveness between people must be from the heart. A genuine heart attitude of forgiveness will be evident in the action of forgiveness. Here's where things get tough. Yes, forgiving one another means being patient, kind, and merciful, but consider with me for a moment there isn't a single instance or reference in Scripture where forgiveness occurs without also the hope of reconciliation. God has never said, "I forgive you but don't want to have a relationship with you anymore." God's forgiveness always, always, always includes reconciliation. If you belong to God, then you are part of the family business of reconciliation and your attitude, and action, of forgiving one another needs to include reconciliation.

We see this in Genesis 50:17-21 with Joseph's word and provision for his brothers demonstrating forgiveness through tangible reconciliation and care. In Matthew 5:23-24, speaking of anger, a sure sign forgiveness has not occurred, Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:23-24

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Romans 12:18

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

That's reconciliation. This action is contingent on two things: first, your right heart attitude; and second, the other party's willingness and ability. For instance, perhaps the offender has died, so reconciliation isn't possible, but you are still responsible, in your heart, to maintain the right attitude of forgiveness towards this person because forgiveness between people goes well beyond restitution and reconciliation. In a very real sense it includes absorbing, taking upon yourself, the consequence the offender deserves when that reconciliation can't or doesn't occur. There may not be closure as you'd like. There may never been restitution.

The act of forgiving must mirror God's forgiveness. In the same way Christ took the penalty you deserved, you may have to take the consequences for someone else. Perhaps someone cheated you out of money and restitution and reconciliation hasn't occur. You are literally suffering that consequence. Perhaps someone radically hurt you in ways too painful to share. You are carrying the consequence of that person's sin against you. Folks, that's why the hope of heaven is so incredibly sweet because that pain will one day also be wiped away! Until then, if reconciliation does not occur, you may be asked to carry it. But you are not alone. Our Savior, as Isaiah 53 promises, carries our burdens, carries our grief. And He has provided you a family, siblings in God's family, to carry it with you.

Biblically speaking, forgiveness is both a disposition, an attitude, and a decision, an action. It's a heart-posture and a relational practice. The attitude reflects the inner nature of grace we have received from God and grace we have been called to extend. This grace is mercy, patience, and a refusal to harbor bitterness. The action demonstrates the fruit of grace: confession, reconciliation, and tangible expressions of love.

Next week we'll pull this all together into a definition we can use to apply this biblical knowledge into relational practice.

Questions?