



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Forgiveness: What, Why, and How (1 John 1:9)

JUNE 25, 2013

Bob Lewis / 267-278-1992 / Bob.Lewis@capitolcom.org

INTRODUCTION

In his book “A Theology of Christian Counseling”, Jay E. Adams stated, “Man’s greatest need is for forgiveness.” On the next page, he followed up by quoting Jack Winslow, the head of a large mental institution in Great Britain, who said, **“I could dismiss half of my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness.”**¹

One of the glories of the gospel message is that forgiveness is granted to those who repent. This is made possible by the finished work of Jesus on Calvary’s cross.

But, what is forgiveness? Just how do we forgive one who has hurt us horribly? Are we actually called to “forgive and forget”? What if I don’t feel like forgiving? What if there is no repentance on the part of the offender?

THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE

The New Testament is quite clear and explicit in its command to a follower of Jesus to be a person of forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came to him and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

Mark 11:25 “Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.”

Luke 17:3-4 “Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent’, forgive him.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restores such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Ephesians 4:32. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Colossians 3:12-13 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on as heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

The passages just read need neither interpretation nor degree in theology. They are straightforward. A follower of Jesus is one who has been commanded to be forgiving.

THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

In both testaments, the principal word picture of forgiveness is that of having a load lifted. Mankind is burdened with the load of guilt because of sin. God “lightens by lifting”, or “takes away by lifting up.”² In the New Testament there is the idea of a cancelling of a debt owed or a dismissal. Another New Testament word used is “*charidzomai*”, meaning to show favor or grace.

Jay points out that “in the New Testament, the forgiveness is always undeserved by the one who receives it (he deserves to pay the penalty or debt). The gift of forgiveness costs the giver, not the receiver.”³

Again, the forgiveness is not free, but the cost borne by the one offering forgiveness. In the case of God’s forgiveness, it cost the death of His Son Jesus on Calvary. In terms of those bearing the name of a follower of Jesus, they too bear the cost of being a forgiver.

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS, STAFF, LOBBYISTS: TUES..AT 1215-1245 HOURS-LOCATION 2ND FLOOR SENATE CONF. ROOM

Delaware

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FORGIVENESS IS A PROMISE

Jay Adams points out that “forgiveness is a promise with three elements. It is a promise that 1) I won’t bring it up to the offender again, 2) I won’t bring it up to others and, 3) I won’t bring it up to myself.”⁴

Not hard to understand:

I will not bring this matter up to you again.

When next I see the individual I will not bring the offense up. It will not be something I throw into the offender’s face during any future discussions.

I will not bring the matter up with others.

The offense will not be as topic of conversation with others. It will not be a tid-bit for gossip nor used as a means to bring down the offender.

I will not bring it up to myself. This may well be the most difficult. This is an aspect of the promise that I will not allow myself to indulge in self-pity or brood over the offense. I will not permit myself to wallow in the slough of despond.

With these three aspects of forgiving, Adams defines forgiveness as “a lifting of the charge of guilt from another, a formal declaration of that fact and a promise (made and kept) never to remember the wrong against the offender in the future.”⁵

QUESTIONS

But, the Bible teaches we should forgive and forget, doesn’t it? Doesn’t God forgive and forget? NO. God says, “...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more...” Jeremiah 31:34. Practically, we need to forgive in order to forget.

But, what if I don’t feel like forgiving? Would not the making of such a promise be hypocritical? Hypocrisy would lie in saying one thing and doing another, regardless of how one feels. Many are the times when I feel like doing something I know I ought not to do, and do not do it. That is not being hypocritical, but simply being prudent.

OK. But, what if the offender does not repent, even boldly refuses to repent? Aye, there’s the rub, Matey.

Clearly, God does not forgive unless and until one repents. We saw that in Luke’s gospel.

Our word to the offender is Repent. The word of others who may be privy to the offense ought also to be Repent. But as we saw in Mark’s gospel, as we stand praying before God and have something in our heart against another, we are to forgive as we stand before God in prayer. We do not offer forgiveness to the offender til repentance is manifest and forgiveness requested.

How about: how many times, and simply on the Basis of the offender saying, “I repent”? Simplest answer: YES.

Justification? How many times have we sinned the same sin and asked God for forgiveness and expecting to be forgiven?

It is to be inconceivable for a follower of Jesus to be an unforgiving individual.

PURPOSE OF FORGIVENESS

Ephesians 5:1-2 Be ye followers of God as dear children and walk in love as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.

As a friend of mine once stated, “...there is no quality more contrary to the natural man than forgiveness; yet, nothing more “God-like” than when His children extend forgiveness to those who have sinned against them”.

¹ Jay E. Adams, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1979) 184-5

² Adams, 186-7

³ Adams, 189

⁴ Adams, 228

⁵ Adams, 229