

As God Forgives*

Matthew 6:12 and various passages

**This is the first part of a two-part sermon*

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(GA) This morning as we move on in the Lord's Prayer, we are examining the very core of the Christian faith – the topic of forgiveness.

A. Jesus teaches us to pray in *Matthew 6:12*, "...forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors."

1. Forgiveness – if there's an idea more essential to the Christian faith, I'm not sure there is...

B. I'm also not sure if there's a doctrine that's confused in the church today, by *well-meaning people...*

1. Ruth Graham – Billy Graham's daughter – describes this confusion over "forgiveness" well. In her book *In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart*, she writes about how she felt when many of her friends told her to forgive her husband after his an affair.

a. She writes, "What did forgiveness really mean? What did it look like? As I struggled over the years, at times I saw forgiveness standing like an open door beckoning me with the promise of release. At other times I saw it standing like a wall condemning me because I could not climb over. Then again, once news of my situation became known, forgiveness also seemed like a bludgeon used by some to punctuate their 'shoulds' and 'oughts.' I was discovering that if I did not exhibit the right attitudes or say the right words, then my testimony was negated in the eyes of others because I did not look like I had forgiven. I struggled to be real and honest while trying to do what to some people was clearly inadequate. What was forgiveness? I did not know. Everyone seemed to have a definition."

C. Friends, it seems so *biblical* to tell one another, or ourselves, that we must forgive.

1. We tell the parents of an abducted child, "I know it's hard... but you have to forgive the man who abducted your son."

2. We tell the woman who's repeatedly abused by her husband, "You just need to keep forgiving him, because that's what Jesus did for you."

3. Many Christian leaders told us to forgive President Clinton after his affair with an intern.

D. We toss around the word or idea of forgiveness all the time. But I want to challenge us a bit – Have we really thought through what we're saying?

1. What it means to forgive... who we forgive... when do we forgive...

a. I think we're often confused about what forgiveness involves. Scot McKnight is right when he writes, "the debate over [the meaning of forgiveness] is bedeviled by clumsy definitions, confusing categories, and contextual dislocations."¹

E. Forgiveness *is* at the core of our belief system... and when Jesus teaches us to pray, "...and forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors," He *is* placing a call on our lives to forgive!

1. So we'd need to be confident we understand what is being asked of us.

¹ Quote taken from *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns, Crossway Books. Scot McKnight's book is titled: *Slowing Down the Runaway Forgiveness Truck: Is There Such A Thing as Too Much Mercy?*

a. I want us to move out of the ambiguity and into clarity this morning on the topic of forgiveness.

(S) Now, when I say that – “we’re moving out of ambiguity and into clarity,” I don’t have this naïve expectation that this will be a **comfortable** experience.

A. This will not be comfortable.

1. Some of you are going to want to flip through your Bibles and try and find passages that challenge or support or inform what I’m saying.

a. You’re may get stuck on a sentence, or statement, that I make at some point this morning... and want to stay there and have your own little Bible study during the sermon.

2. Please don’t do this. Not during the sermon. I need your full attention this entire sermon.

3. Now, having said that, **DO** test me... **DO** search the Scriptures... **DO** challenge every claim I make this morning to see if it stands up against the Word of God.

a. But do this when you leave here this morning. I’ll put this entire manuscript on the Internet (www.heartlandefc.org) this week and you can download it and have this sermon, word-for-word, to test it against Scripture.

i. Go this week and be like the Bereans in *Acts 17*, who “examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”²

3. What’s more, you’ll find a quarter sheet of paper in your bulletin that you can write down any question you have... any objection... any comment... and turn it in after the sermon and I’ll read it this week.

a. This is going to be a two-part sermon because there are two parts to this message. Next week I’ll try to address the questions you turn in on the paper.

i. But for today, please just listen and try to think with me as I walk through the biblical doctrine of forgiveness. Ok?

B. Let’s look at forgiveness from Scripture. The first absolute truth in regards to “forgiveness” is that we are to forgive in a specific way... as **God has forgiven us**.

1. This is inherent in what Jesus teaches us to pray in *Matthew 6:12* – “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”

a. Jesus teaches us to view forgiveness of others in the same light as how God forgives us.

2. The Apostle Paul was also crystal clear on the idea that we forgive as God forgave us.

a. Paul writes in *Ephesians 4:32*, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, **as God in Christ forgave you.**”

b. Likewise, Paul writes in *Colossians 3:13*, “...if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; **as the Lord has forgiven you**, so you must also forgive.”

3. This is undisputable. As Christians, we’re to forgive precisely in the manner that God forgives. So this makes our question very simple – **How does God forgive?**

a. *Who* does God forgive... and *when* does He forgive them?

C. Think for a moment... is there ever a time that God’s forgiveness of a person or a group isn’t dependant upon repentance and confession?

1. The forgiveness of God is an unmerited, utterly amazing gift. There’s nothing like it! And nobody deserves it!

2. In fact, you and I and everyone who has ever lived deserve the wrath of God. Because God is good... because God is holy... He will punish sin. And we have so much sin.

² Acts 17:11, ESV

- a. Every person falls short of God’s standard of holiness – everyone deserves God’s wrath... because He is good!
 - i. Many people think that because God is good, surely he wont punish sins.
 - ii. No, it’s because God is good... and holy... that He will punish sins.
- b. Every person must come to terms with this reality. You deserve hell. This is terrible news... made true by the fact that your Creator is holy, and good, and perfect... and you’re not... and I’m not.
- 3. As horrible as this news is, you must accept this bad news in order for the good news to be just that... good news.
 - a. You see the good news is that God loves His children so much – even in their rebellion – that He offers forgiveness.
- 4. What an incredible offer. But to make us this offer, it cost Him dearly. The offer is **freely offered** to us, but it was not **cheaply attained**.
 - a. God, in Jesus, had to die in your place, as a substitute, for the punishment you and I and everyone rightfully deserves.
 - i. His death makes forgiveness possible.
- 5. Isn’t this good news, that sinners deserving the wrath of God can be forgiven?!!!
- D. Who gets this forgiveness from God? Who benefits from Christ’s death and resurrection?
 - 1. Everyone... No matter what they think of Jesus?
 - 2. No, only those who repent and believe. The clearest theme in all of Scripture – OT & NT – is that not all people are forgiven. Only those who repent, turn to God, and believe.
 - a. In *II Chronicles 7:14* God says, “...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”
 - b. When Jesus came – God said again in Christ – “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (*Luke 13, verses 3 & 5*)
 - c. Paul, in *Acts 20:21*, states, “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”
 - d. Again, in *Acts 2:38*, when Peter is asked what must be done to be saved, replies, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”
 - 3. This is the Lordship Salvation debate – some of you may have never heard of this. But some will suggest that repentance isn’t necessary for forgiveness of sins... just a mental ascent, or agreement, to the gospel.
 - a. That is the most misguided, unbiblical idea. Scripture does not equivocate on this point – God forgives the repent sinner.
- E. So, if we are to forgive as God in Christ forgives... what does this mean?
 - 1. It means that we forgive every chance we get, no matter how horrible the offense. But it also means that our forgiveness is conditional. God’s forgiveness is conditioned on repentance.
 - a. And we are to freely offer forgiveness, when the one who offends or hurts or wrongs us **repents**.
 - 2. Now, this is where some of you may struggle with what I’m saying. Even in light of what we just examined... because this idea that a Christian forgives everyone is so assumed – so promoted – today.
 - a. But think about it – where does that idea come from? Because the Bible says:
 - i. We’re forgiven by God when we turn to him and repent of our sins.
 - ii. The Bible also tells us that as Christians, we’re forgiven when we confess our sins – *I John 1:9* says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

iii. And the Bible tells us that when it comes to forgiving others, we do it when they repent. *Luke 17:3-4* records Jesus saying just this: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him and if he sins against you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

3. The beautiful, unmerited gift of forgiveness is preceded by repentance.

F. Can you think of a time that it isn’t? I ask that question rhetorically, because some of you are wondering about a specific moment in Scripture – the moment Jesus hung on the cross.

1. You know the moment. Jesus was just nailed to the cross and lifted up to begin his suffocation process. The Roman soldiers, with blood splatter on their faces, begin to argue about who gets Jesus’ robe.

a. They could care less about Jesus... they have no desire to repent in their hearts... but yet, what does Jesus say? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23:34*)

i. I’m guessing that some of you are thinking, “Pastor... isn’t that a moment where forgiveness is given aside from repentance?”

2. Think of that idea. Think of the theological ramifications of us suggesting that Jesus was pronouncing forgiveness, or giving forgiveness to those men aside from repentance.

a. Not only did these men not repent... they didn’t acknowledge that Jesus was God... they didn’t put their faith in Jesus that His death paid for their sins...

i. If we suggest that forgiveness of sins was given to these murderers ***aside from repentance and acknowledgement that Jesus was God...*** what have we done the gospel?

ii. We’ve thrown out EVERYTHING Jesus said about Himself and what is required to be forgiven and reach paradise, as opposed to die under the wrath of God.

3. No, this moment cannot be an example of forgiveness given to people aside from repentance.

a. It ***IS*** a powerful moment that makes a huge, significant theological statement. But not the statement that forgiveness is given to people aside from repentance and confession.

i. That’s universalism... and that is not the gospel Jesus preached.

G. This moment when Jesus hung on a cross and looked down upon His murderers and said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” this moment demonstrates the second part of the message – the part we’ll pick up next week.

1. It demonstrates what it looks like to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

2. But forgiveness is something different – it’s a specific transaction that takes place between two people – one who has been wronged, and one who is repenting of the wrong.

a. One who receives the awesome opportunity to display the same grace and forgiveness God displayed toward them in the act of forgiving the wrong...

b. And one who gets to experience the type of forgiveness that Jesus offers... but through the forgiveness of another person...

2. Forgiveness is a beautiful transaction that involves the active participation of two people... or two groups.

a. Forgiveness is an exchange between two people:

i. One who deserves wrath, and comes to repent.

ii. And one who rightfully could show wrath, but chooses to forgive.

b. But forgiveness takes two... the repentant and the forgiver.

H. Now, please, please, please come back next week. There’s another side to this idea – and it’s the idea that God commands us to love and pray for those who persecute, or hurt, or wrong us.

1. The idea that we forgive only those who repent doesn't let us off the hook from incredibly good and difficult command to love our enemies with the love that Christ models for us when He loves His enemies.

a. What I'm doing this morning is separating out the idea of forgiveness from the idea of loving those who hurt us as Christ loves. Please come back next week.

I. For this morning, I want to pull it together and make three statements about forgiveness that are true about God's forgiveness toward us, and I'd put to you, they inform how we're to forgive others.

1. **God's forgiveness is freely offered, but conditional** – it is given freely to those who repent and believe.

a. The idea that His forgiveness isn't conditioned on repentance and belief is called Universalism. I have relatives and friends who believe this... this is NOT THE GOSPEL!

2. **Forgiveness is a promise** – it's a promise from God that He will no longer hold a sin against the person whom He's forgiven.

a. I love *Psalm 103:12* – "...as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

i. Forgiveness is what opens the door for reconciliation to begin between God and a person.

ii. And between one person and another person...

3. **Forgiveness does not mean that there aren't consequences.**

a. When God promises to forgive, He's promising to not punish us for it at the judgment seat of Christ. He's promising to not treat us with wrath here on earth.

b. But God certainly allows us to experience consequences for our sins.

i. After King David confessed his affair with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, he was told by Nathan that God forgives him, but that God still requires the life of David & Bathsheba's son.

a) What a painful consequence.

c. Forgiveness, as God forgives, does not rule out consequences. In fact it affirms that consequences are a necessary tool to shape character and wisdom.

i. When Jamie and I discipline our children – two things happen:

a) We spank them. We tell them that as parents, God has asked us to show them that sin brings consequences. So we spank.

b) But every time we discipline, we ask them if they would like to ask for forgiveness. Then, when they ask, we say, "Yes... we forgive you... it's all done. Let's not speak of it again."

ii. Forgiveness and consequences go hand in hand with God... and need to with us, at times.

4. These are three statements about how God forgives... three truths that I send you with this week to grapple with, check me on, against Scripture.

(Application) But here's how I want to close today. I want to challenge every one of you in this room.

A. Do you realize the eternal implications of the truth that God forgives **only those who repent**?

1. My guess is that there are some in this room this morning who know about God... know about Jesus... you could tell me the gospel if I asked... but you've never humbled yourself before God, repented of your sins, and asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior.

a. Friends, the word "repentance" means to "turn away from something" – it involves agreeing with God that sin is sin, and then with sorrow, turning from that sin to Christ.

B. I cannot end today without challenging you on the question – have you repented of your sins and believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior?

1. Jesus tells us that there are going to be many people on the Day of Judgment who are utterly shocked because they fully expected to gain paradise... but they don't.
 - a. Jesus says, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (*Matthew 7:22-23*)
 2. What's the problem? What did these people miss? What didn't happen for these people that caused them to miss eternity in Paradise with Jesus?
- C. All I have for the answer to that question is the simple truth that a person who repents and believes is forgiven.
1. These people clearly knew about Jesus... clearly had some degree of belief in Him... but they must not have repented and trusted in Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of their sins.
 - a. The transaction of forgiveness, we just examined, didn't occur for them.
- D. I've got to ask you this morning – has it occurred for you?
1. Have you humbled yourself under the mighty hand of God, repenting of your sins and believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins?
 - a. That's it. That's all I care to challenge you with this morning. If you haven't repented and believed... I'd urge you to do that today, or this week. Your eternity depends on it.

For future study, I'd recommend these two books (in addition to the ESV Bible):

1. ***Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds*** by Chris Brauns.
2. ***Slowing Down The Runaway Forgiveness Truck: Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Mercy?*** by Scot McKnight