

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study Nine

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

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FORGIVENESS AN END IN ITSELF?

In recent years there has been considerable secular interest in forgiveness: from philosophy, as a social phenomenon, and from psychology, as having health benefits for the one who forgives.

It has been argued philosophically that giving and forgiving are at their truest when there is no reciprocation. When someone responds to an act of giving or forgiving, then the giver or forgiver receives something back, and so the act could have a measure of self-interest. What could be more noble or altruistic than to give and forgive in the face of indifference or rejection, expecting nothing in return? But then the giver or forgiver has the satisfaction of knowing that they are noble and altruistic, which could also be a bit self-interested! Clearly, forgiveness needs to reach beyond this level of concern.¹

The health benefits of forgiving another have also been researched and documented:

Studies show that people who forgive are happier and healthier than those who hold resentments. The first study to look at how forgiveness improves physical health discovered that when people think about forgiving an offender it leads to improved functioning in their cardiovascular and nervous systems. Another study at the University of Wisconsin found the more forgiving people were, the less they suffered from a wide range of illnesses. The less forgiving people reported a greater number of health problems.²

A typical statement is: 'Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life'.³ We should not be surprised at this: made in the image of a forgiving God, we would expect to

¹ I am grateful for his insights in these areas to the Rev'd Dr Philip Tolliday of St Barnabas' College in the Adelaide College of Divinity, whose course 'God, the Gift and Forgiveness' I attended in 2010 as a personally helpful background to this whole series. This philosophical argument is associated with Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

² <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgiveness>> (accessed 29th November 2010).

³ 'Katherine Piderman, Ph.D., staff chaplain at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., discusses forgiveness and how it can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being', <www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131> (accessed 29th November 2010).

function best when we are forgiving as God forgives. It also needs to be said, however, that forgiving another is not always the easiest thing to do, and can make anguished demands upon a person who has been offended against.

Neither of these approaches to forgiveness necessarily expects or requires reconciliation.⁴ The focus is mainly on the self rather than on the other. Such self-concern may raise the question as to whether it is really forgiveness that is being considered here, or whether there is still some selfish sin present that itself will need to be forgiven!

What we find in Christian thought and practice is that, whatever benefits it may have, forgiveness is never an end in itself. It is always with a view to reconciled relationship—now, and in the age to come. ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8, 16), and love has to do with relationships. God forgives, but He is not ‘forgiveness’ as such. With us, as with God, forgiveness is always a subset of love:

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8).

Questions for Discussion:

- *How does forgiveness commend itself as a social good, or as a health benefit?*
- *How does this relate to the Christian experience and understanding of forgiveness? What does it leave out?*
- *How are forgiveness and reconciliation related to one another? What kind of ‘forgiveness’ is it that does not result in a restored relationship? Can we have one without the other?*

RECONCILED TO GOD

God’s forgiveness of us has always been with a view to bringing us back, and on, into relationship with Himself:

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18).

The cleansing of forgiveness is to fit us for entry into God’s holy presence:

‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to *enter the sanctuary* by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, *let us approach* with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:17–22).

⁴ For example: ‘If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness may lead to reconciliation. This isn’t always the case, however. Reconciliation may be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation may not be appropriate, especially if you were attacked or assaulted. But even in those cases, forgiveness is still possible—even if reconciliation isn’t.’

<www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131/NSECTIONGROUP=2> (accessed 28th November 2010).

We are ‘justified’—‘righteous-ified’—to be able to enter fittingly into ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’, and where ‘nothing unclean will enter’ (Rom. 3:24; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:27). The final outcome will be:

Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God (Rev. 21:3, TNIV).

This is not just a presence together but even more a relationship:

I will be their God and they will be my children (Rev. 21:7).

With this in view, God is effecting this reconciliation with person after person through the gospel:

the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them . . . if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you⁵ on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:14–15, 17–21).

Here reconciliation is of the one order with forgiveness, justification, and the saving love of God, and is their desired outcome. This has ever been God’s intention, and He put it into effect while we were still opposed to God and powerless to do anything about it:

while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:6, 8–11).

Here reconciliation is a present reality—we are now in relationship with God—and this is the assurance that we will be saved on the day of judgement. This has been effected through the transforming forgiveness that has come to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus: we have been ‘justified by his blood’ and we will be ‘saved by his life’. All this is God proving His love for us—not by logical argument, but by God putting His love for us to the proof in totally demanding, saving action.

Questions for Discussion:

- *How are forgiveness and reconciliation related with each other in God’s saving action towards us?*
- *What makes forgiveness necessary for reconciliation with God?*

⁵ There is no word for ‘you’ in the Greek original. Paul is not addressing this appeal to the Corinthians, who have already been reconciled to God by the gospel through faith. Paul is telling them in general terms about his gospel ministry: ‘Be reconciled to God!’ is his gospel message to those who still need reconciliation.

RECONCILED WITH EACH OTHER

Jesus rated reconciliation with each other as more important than any religious observance:

when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5:23–24).

Jesus said this as he spoke of how much we must love and respect one another without rancour:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matt. 5:21–22).

Jesus also went on to insist that any break in relationship should be attended to quickly:

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:25–26).

With this the apostle was in agreement:

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (Eph. 4:26–27).

Jesus may have been referring to this priority of reconciliation with each other over any religious practice when he said to some Pharisees:

Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners (Matt. 9:13).

He said this in the context of his own readiness to be in a companion relationship with tax collectors and sinners (see Matt. 9:10–11). John the apostle was making the same point when he wrote that any relationship with God must necessarily involve relationship with others:

Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:20–21).

Here John was simply being true to what Jesus had said how the second commandment (‘love your neighbor’) is ‘like’ the first (‘love the Lord your God’; Matt. 22:34–40)—they are both of a piece. This means we seek to associate with rather than dissociate ourselves from others, including those who are in a different, more vulnerable or less reputable position than we are:

the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Cor. 12:22–26).

There are many injunctions in the New Testament to live in this love of God with each other; for example:

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all (Rom. 12:16–17).

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Eph. 4:31–32).

It is in the context of this care for one another, in a body where we inextricably belong to one another, that what we saw in the last study about ‘church discipline’ belongs. It is doubtful that it should even be called that—Jesus and the apostles never give it that tag. Matthew 18:15–17, about what to do when a fellow believer sins, in the context of that chapter, is about going ‘in search of the one that went astray’ in order that not ‘one of these little ones should be lost’ (Matt. 18:12–13). John Howard Yoder comments:

Reconciliation and restoration is the only worthy motive. Any textbook discussion of ‘church discipline’ aligns several other reasons for its application by the church:

- the purity of the church as a valuable goal in its own right;
- protecting the reputation of the church before the outside world;
- testifying to the righteous demands of God;
- dramatizing the demands of church membership, especially to new or young members, assumed more likely to be tempted;
- safeguarding against relativization and the loss of common Christian moral standards.

Real as they are as by-products and logical as they may well be in motivating the church, it is striking that these concerns are not part of the New Testament picture. These reasonings all put the church in a posture of maintaining her righteousness, whereas the New Testament speaks of shared forgiveness.⁶

How easily do we slip into a stance of maintaining our own righteousness rather than living together in shared forgiveness! Yet what a wonderful body to belong to when shared forgiveness is what we acknowledge for us all and practice with each other. Yoder does recognise, with respect to 1 Corinthians 5:6ff. (‘a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough’), ‘that there is a kind of moral solidarity linking all the members of the body, so that if individuals persist in disobedience within the fellowship, their guilt is no longer the moral responsibility of those individuals alone but becomes a kind of collective blame shared by the whole body’, and so action must be taken to deal with this sin. But this is within the reality of us all belonging to one another in the body, where ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it’ (1 Cor. 12:26). So even ‘disciplinary’ action is a form of association rather than dissociation. Our common belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ, by God’s grace through the forgiveness of sins, is the overriding consideration (see again 2 Cor. 2:5–11).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the relative importance of religious practices and reconciliation with each other? How does this match our practice in the churches?*
- *How does ‘church discipline’ relate with belonging to one another in the body of Jesus?*

⁶ John Howard Yoder, ‘Binding and Loosing’, *Concern: A Pamphlet Series for Questions of Christian Renewal*, No. 14, 1967, reproduced in John White & Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1985, p. 220.

PAUL AND MARK: A CASE STUDY

Luke recounts a disagreement between Barnabas and Paul over the participation of Mark in their return visit to places in Asia Minor:

Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches (Acts 15:37–41).

Mark had accompanied them on their first visit, when they had begun by proclaiming the word of God only in the synagogues of the Jews (see Acts 13:5). In the course of their journey, Paul also spoke the gospel to a non-Jewish proconsul (Acts 13:6–12). It was after this that John left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). We are not told why, but it may have been that the young Jerusalem-based Mark found this approach too difficult at this stage.⁷ Paul and Barnabas after that spoke the word of God extensively to Gentiles as well as Jews (see Acts 13:46–47). Whether Barnabas' advocacy of Mark was determined by the fact that Mark was his cousin (see Col. 4:10), and whether Paul's objection to Mark accompanying them this time was principled or personal (or both) we are not told, and Luke, true to the gospel of forgiveness, uses words that apportion no blame. What it does tell us is that Christian leaders of the calibre of Barnabas and Paul are capable of coming to sharp disagreement that means they end up going their separate ways, even after they had been through so much together in the Lord. Right or wrong, in this the Lord's purpose is still served: there are now two mission teams instead of just one, and more ground is covered for the gospel. God works His purposes even through our shortcomings and weaknesses.

There is also reconciliation in the gospel later on: Paul later speaks companionably of Barnabas in 1 Corinthians 9:6, and possibly also in 2 Corinthians 8:18–19; and John Mark is commended by Paul in Colossians 4:10, sent for in 2 Timothy 4:11, and with him in Philemon 24.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What have we known of sharp disagreement in the church? How has it been handled? How has it worked out?*
- *What can we learn from this incident and its outworking, and from Luke's reporting of it?*

DELAYED RECONCILIATION

There may be times when reconciliation, contrary to the Lord's injunction in Matthew 5:25–26 (and Paul's in Eph. 4:26–27), is not immediate. Whatever the reason—whether stubborn recalcitrance, or cowardly avoidance, emotional depletion, danger of further harm, or sheer force of circumstances—it could be that the estrangement has become prolonged and exacting. How are we to conduct ourselves in that situation? Paul says:

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:18).

⁷ See Richard N. Longnecker, *Acts*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1995, p. 217.

This recognises that reconciliation requires both parties to be willing to come together. For our part, we need to recognise first of all that nothing is beyond the reconciling mercy of God. In the cross of Christ there is forgiveness for whatever may have caused the original separation, and for whatever may be getting in the way of coming back together. We need to hold to that hope by faith. In this we need to renounce any apportioning of blame, and any tendency to justify oneself. Love ‘keeps no record of wrongs’, and love ‘does not insist on its own way’ (1 Cor. 13:5, NIV and NRSV).

Once we are thus grounded in the grace of God with regard to this situation, what does ‘so far as it depends on you’ mean in practice? Is an apology appropriate, and would it be received? Should some form of restitution be offered? Sometimes there may be disagreement as to the nature of the original offence, which may not be able to be resolved even if communications are reopened. Should we try to get it all sorted out? In doing so we may well come up against limitations on our part that we cannot overcome. These will forestall any false assertion we may be tempted to make that *we* can fix what has gone wrong. From God’s perspective, what has gone wrong required the cross of His own Son to fix it—and we think we can sort it out ourselves?—! An argument cannot be just patched up. If an argument has happened, then it has happened. To try to patch it up may be simply to revert to the argument and give it more airplay. Better for both of us to stand before the cross, where both of us were put to death for our sins, and before the empty tomb, where both of us were raised for our justification (see Rom. 4:25; compare 6:3–5). We may be humbled to find there that sin, rather than being worked through by us, is actually taken away. The monster has been slain by a hand not our own. The darkness has disappeared in the light of day. The flood has evaporated under the blazing glory of the sun of righteousness (as in Mal. 4:2).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What has been our experience of seemingly intractable situations being resolved by God’s grace?*
- *What have we learned from situations where this is yet to happen?*

FINAL RECONCILIATION

We observed in the previous study that much of our forgiveness of one another may well be incomplete in this life, and may be at best provisional. But that it is provisional with a view to ‘the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed’ (1 Pet. 1:13), and ‘the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life’ that we ‘look forward to’ (Jude 21).

God’s plan is through Christ ‘to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col. 1:20), and to unite and ‘gather up all things’ in Christ (Eph. 1:11). Miroslav Volf again gives us an attractive picture of what this could be like:

... if the Last Judgment, understood as social event, is to succeed as a transition to the world of love, each person will joyfully *appropriate* the results of the judgment. The Last Judgment will reach its goal when all the wronged standing at the threshold of the world to come receive their rightful vindication, and when wrongdoers eschew attempts at misplaced self-justification, acknowledge their wrongdoing, and are freed from the hold of evil on their lives. In standing before Christ, the wronged and wrongdoers will see themselves and each other as does Christ, the just Judge who is full of mercy. Indeed, they will see each other and themselves *with the eyes of Christ*, for union with Christ begun in this life will be completed at the threshold of the world to come.⁸

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2006, p. 180.

Final forgiveness, however, will need to be completed by the embrace of final reconciliation:

... the judgment of grace is one essential aspect of the Final Reconciliation understood as a transition from the world as it is to the world of perfect love. The other element I will call the *final mutual embrace*. The judgment of grace—effective forgiveness—affirmed by offender and offended alike, takes us out of the world of offenses. But it does not yet bring us into the world of perfect mutual love. For forgiveness may well leave the forgiven one humiliated on account of having been forgiven and therefore also repelled from the forgiver; and it may leave the forgiver proud on account of having forgiven and therefore disdainful of the forgiven one. If nothing more than forgiveness happened, each party could still go her own way, the one denigrated and repulsed and the other proud and contemptuous.

So even after the question of ‘right and wrong’ has been settled by the judgment of grace, it is still necessary to move through the door of mutual embrace to enter the world of perfect love. And through that door the inhabitants of the world to come will move enabled by the indwelling Christ, who spread out his arms on the cross to embrace all wrongdoers. When former enemies have embraced, and embraced as belonging to the same community of love in the fellowship of the Triune God, then and *only* then will they have stepped into a world in which each enjoys all and therefore all take part in the dance of love.⁹

To quote another poet: that is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Question for Discussion:

- *How does the prospect of final reconciliation encourage our hope and actions in the present?*

⁹ Mirolslav Volf, pp. 180f.