

Gospel forgiveness

Introduction: In Galatians 4:12-20, Paul's forgiveness of the Galatians for their betrayal of him is so automatic that we can hardly notice it. It is only because his appeal to them (as strong as it is) is so affectionate and free from resentment that we realize the strength of Paul's forgiving spirit. Later he cautions the Galatians against a growing spirit of resentment and back-biting (Gal.5:15). The more they lose touch with the gospel, the more resentments and grudges grow.

Below is a guide to how the gospel helps us reconcile our relationships with a balance of truth and love. (At times you can see that this project has been used in seminars for married couples! But the principles are basic to all relationships.)

A. THE RESOURCES FOR FORGIVENESS

1. We need enough humility

Jesus ties our ability to *forgive* to our ability to *repent*. ("Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" Matt.6:12.) This doesn't mean that God forgives our sins because we forgive others. It means that in general we are as forgiven by God as we are forgiving to others because unforgiving people are unrepentant people. The more we hold grudges the less we see ourselves as having done wrong and needing forgiveness; the more we see ourselves as needing forgiveness, the more likely we are to forgive others. Why? Resentment requires a person to sit in the position of Judge (Rom.12:19-20). We can only hold grudges if we feel superior to the other person. Jesus very directly and bluntly tells us that, if we hold a grudge against another person, we are ignorant of how much we owe God. So the first thing we have to see is our own need for forgiveness. We need enough humility to forgive.

Transition: But this is not enough! Because though pride is one reason that we cannot forgive, emotional insecurity is another. So in addition:

2. We need enough "emotional wealth."

Why is it that we can forgive some wrongs easily but not others? It is because everyone draws a sense of self-worth (a sense that we are worthy of love and respect) from certain objects. No one can validate themselves. We all look to certain people or things to convince us that we are significant. The more certain we are of this, the more "emotionally wealthy" we are — confident, poised, at peace. What are the things that we look to? Steven Covey calls them "personal centers" and Victor Frankl calls them your "meaning centers." They may be career, possessions, appearance, romance, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, religion, marriage, children, friendships or a combination of several. However, this means that these things are things that we absolutely must have or we face emotional bankruptcy and death. And all our most powerful feelings are connected to them. We respond in deep guilt if we fail to attain them or in deep anger if someone blocks them from us, or in deep anxiety if they are threatened, or in major drivenness since we must have them, or in despair if we ever lose them completely.

For example: a husband and a wife discovered that a school teacher had been emotionally abusive to their daughter and had fairly ruined her academic year and sent her into counseling. They are both angry at the teacher but the husband has less trouble “getting past” the anger than the wife. Why? Is the husband a less angry person? No, in general he tends to be angrier temperamentally. Does he love his daughter less? No. The issue is that the wife has tied her own self-image and sense of self-worth to her daughter’s progress and happiness while the husband does this with his career. As a result, her anger is far deeper, since she is going “bankrupt.” She feels, “If my daughter doesn’t turn out well, what good am I?” So her anger toward the teacher is powerful.

Ironically, it is **both** a sense of superiority and a sense of inferiority that makes it hard for forgive. Paradoxically, the two can often go together. We often deal with our own inferiority and insecurity by taking a superior, judgmental position toward someone else.

3. The Character of Forgiveness

A definition: *What is forgiveness?* When someone has wronged you, it means they owe you; they have a debt with you. Forgiveness is to absorb the cost of the debt yourself. You pay the price yourself, and you refuse to exact the price out of the person in any way. Forgiveness means you free the person from penalty for a sin by paying the price yourself.

The ultimate example: We are told that our forgiveness must imitate God's forgiveness in Christ. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Eph.4:32).

How did God forgive? We are told that he does not remember them. That cannot mean that God literally forgets what has happened. It means he “sends away” the penalty for them. He does not bring the incidents to mind, and does not let them affect the way he deals with us.

How did God forgive “in Christ?” We are told that Jesus pays the price for the sins. “*It is finished*” means “It has been paid in full” (John 19:30). The Father gave up his Son, and the Son gave up his life. God absorbed the cost in himself.

B. PRACTICAL STEPS FOR FORGIVENESS

1. Distinguish between granting and feeling

Realize that forgiveness is granted (often for a long time) before it is felt. Forgiveness is granted first, and felt later (Luke 17:3-10). Forgiveness is not primarily a feeling, but a set of actions and disciplines. In summary, forgiveness is a promise not to exact the price of the sin from the person who wronged you. This promise means a repeated set of “payments” in which you relinquish revenge. It is hard and (for a while) constant. If this promise is kept actively, eventually the feeling of anger subsides. It is critical to realize at the outset, then, that forgiveness is not the forcing or denying of feelings, but a promise to make and keep despite our feelings.

2. Determine to never exact the price, but to pay the price ourselves

“[Forgiveness] is to deal with our emotions by sending them away — by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds...”

“Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her... but [only] in small sums over a year... [They were made] whenever I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity, whenever [I saw her] with another man, whenever I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments— but she never saw them. And her own payment was unseen by me... but I do know that she forgave me... [Forgiveness] is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender... Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals.”

— Dan Hamilton, Forgiveness

3. Take two inventories: ways to exact the price; ways to pay the price.

This quote shows us that there are numerous ways that we can “exact” and take payment from the offender, but each time we refrain, we are absorbing the cost ourselves and “making payments.” Below are the ways in which we tend to try to exact payments:

a) In our dealing with the offender:

- (1) We can make cutting remarks and drag out the past.
- (2) We can be far more demanding and controlling with the person than we are with others, all because “they owe us.”
- (3) We can punish with self-righteous “mercy” which makes them feel small.
- (4) We can avoid them, be cold to them in overt and/or subtle ways.
- (5) We can actively seek and scheme to hurt or harm them, taking from them something valuable to them.

b) In our dealing with others:

- (1) We can run them down to others, under the guise of “warning” people about them.
- (2) We can run them down to others, under the guise of seeking sympathy and sharing our hurt.

c) In our dealing with ourselves:

- (1) We can replay the tapes of what they did to us, to justify our anger and hostility.
- (2) We can “root” for their failure or fall or pain.

Forgiveness is a promise, to not “bring the matter up” to the person, others, or even ourselves. At each point when we are tempted to exact payment, we refuse, and though it hurts, that is a payment:

a) With the person

In our dealings with the person we are courteous and warm as possible. If the person is repentant, we seek to restore the relationship as much as possible. Why say “as much as possible?” If the person has done grievous wrong, it may mean the trust can only be restored in degrees. If the person is continuing in a hostile manner, you must not make it easy for them to sin against you. And there are other circumstances. (E.g. If the person is a former “love interest,” then to re-create the same relationship may be inappropriate.)

The speed and degree of this restoration entails the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Part of real repentance usually means asking: “What could I do that would make you trust me?” and being willing to accept the answer. Part of real forgiveness means being open to the possibility of lasting change in the offender and being truly unbiased and willing to offer more trust little by little.

b) With others

We must not criticize the offender to others. We should be careful, when seeking support for our “burdens” (Galatians 6:1-6) that we aren’t using them as an excuse to get others to justify us by agreeing how horrible the other person is! We must be reasonable. This is not to say you can never say anything that casts a bad light on someone else, but you must watch your motives. If the person stays in a hostile and unrepentant mode, it may be necessary to “warn” someone about him or her, but again, motives must be watched.

c) With yourself

What does it mean to “not bring it up yourself?” It means not to dwell on it in the heart, and not to re-play the “videotapes” of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh and real to you. It means, when you are ready to do so, you should pray for the person and yourself, remind yourself of the cross (see below) and turn your mind to other things.

4. “Will the good” of the other, not only for his/her sake but also for yours!

Notice that on the cross Jesus says, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”(Luke 23:34) He doesn’t actually say “I forgive you.” He does forgive, of course, but by turning to the Father and praying for them, he shows us an important method of forgiveness. He admits that they are sinning (otherwise they would not need forgiveness!) but he sees them as needy and weak (they don’t know). He seeks their enlightenment and forgiveness from God. He prays for them.

When we identify “evil” too closely with the “evildoer,” we get pulled into the same cycle of hurt pride and revenge and self-absorption and then more hurt pride and more revenge.

The secret of overcoming evil is for us to see evil as something above and distinct from the evildoer. When we do that, there are two results:

1) The spread of evil is checked toward us. It's hatred and pride do not infect us. Consider this: The only way to truly beat the ill-will of the other is to forgive him/her. If you don't, you are still being controlled by the other. Even if you are reacting against them, you are still being dominated and affected by them.

2) The spread of evil maybe checked in the evildoer. He or she may be softened and helped by our love. We don't know that for certain but it is almost the only way that can happen. This is, then, an act of the will. We determine to wish them good and will their growth and healing. We determine to pray for them.

Note: It needs to be said here that in general, it is not loving to let another person go about sinning and doing wrong. Forgiveness does not therefore mean you cannot criticize, oppose or contend against continued destructive behavior. Forgiveness that turns away from confrontation is not loving at all; it is self-serving.

The ordinary approach is to stay angry inside (exact payment) and say nothing on the outside. That lets evil spread in both your life and the life of the other. Instead, the right thing to do is completely forgive inside (make payment) and confront lovingly on the outside. That checks the spread of evil all around. Also, it is impossible to speak lovingly and winsomely to a person doing wrong unless you have gotten control of your anger through forgiveness steps. The model for this is Christ, of course, who spoke out enough to get crucified, but who forgave his crucifiers every step of the way. The result of his perfect conformity to this model was the triumph of grace both in his own life and in that of his crucifiers.

D. PRE-CONDITIONS FOR FORGIVENESS

1. Getting humility

The Bible is explicit in telling us to forgive as God in Christ forgave you (Eph.4:32). There is no better way to get the humility necessary for forgiveness than to accept what the gospel says about us. It tells us that we were made by God and owe him, therefore, everything. We owe it to him to put him first in our life. Even religious people ordinarily only relate to God when we need him in times of trouble. None of us love him as we owe, "with all our heart, soul, strength and mind." Jesus himself shows us vividly how to do this in Matthew 18:21-35. When Peter asks about forgiveness, Jesus tells the parable of a servant who is forgiven a debt of an infinite sum (10,000 talents— roughly equivalent to about \$300,000,000 dollars) but who then refuses to forgive a debt to him of a few dollars. Jesus calls the servant "wicked" and says, in effect, to him, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?" (18:33) This is a challenge to us. We must compare our debt to God with people's debts to us AND we are to compare his Christ's payment for our forgiveness to our payment for their forgiveness. We are to say, "Lord, you did not exact payment for my debts from me, but Jesus paid for them with his life. Now what right do I have to exact payments for their debts to me? And for me to forgive would not take a payment anything like Christ's payment!"

Paul in Romans 12 shows us another way to think of resentment and forgiveness. He says, "Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: 'Vengeance is mine... says the Lord'"v.19. What we are being reminded is that all resentment and vengeance is taking on God's role as judge. It is playing God.

- But only God is qualified to be judge (we are imperfect and deserve judgment ourselves).
- Only God knows enough to be judge (we don't know all about the offender, what he/she has faced and deserves).
- Jesus took the judgment of God.

So Paul is saying: "Think about this! Either these people you are angry at will repent some day and Jesus will take their judgment or they will not and God will deal with it. But in either process, you are not involved." "Pride won't allow forgiveness; forgiveness won't allow pride." If you cannot forgive, it is because you are sure that you are not as sinful as the person you are mad at.

2. Getting "emotional wealth"

Anger is the result of love. It is energy for defense of something you love when it is threatened. If you don't love something at all, you are not angry when it is threatened. If you love something a little, you get a little angry when it is threatened. If something you love is an "ultimate concern," if it is something that gives you meaning in life, then when it is threatened you will get uncontrollably angry.

When anything in life is an absolute requirement for your happiness and self—worth, it is essentially an "idol," something you are actually worshipping. When such a thing is threatened, your anger is absolute. Your anger is actually the way the idol keeps you in its service, in its chains. Therefore, if you find that, despite all the efforts to forgive (using 0.-4. above), your anger and bitterness cannot subside, you may need to look deeper and ask, "What am I defending? What is so important that I cannot live without?" It may be that, until some inordinate desire is identified and confronted, you will not be able to master your anger.

Here is a real example. A woman in her late 30's had never married. Her family and her part of the country believed that there was something radically wrong with any woman of that age who was still single. She wrestled greatly with shame and unworthiness. She also had tremendous unresolved anger against a man she had dated for many years but who had not married her. She went to a counselor. The therapist rightly told her that she had taken to heart her family's approach to personal value and worth. They taught that a woman had to have a husband and children if she was to have any value or worth. She was bitter against this man only because he had come between her and the thing she felt she needed to have to have value. The counselor then proposed that she throw off such an unenlightened view and throw herself into a career.

About this time she was going to a church where she was clearly hearing the gospel for the first time. She heard that the gospel is not that we live a worthy life and then give it to God and then he owes us but that in Jesus Christ he has already lived a worthy life.

He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. When we believe, he gives it to us. Then we are completely accepted and loved by the only One in the universe who counts. This gives us the ultimate emotional wealth, a sense of being loved so deep that we can afford to forgive anyone. She realized that the well-meaning counselor was asking her to throw off a politically incorrect system of works-righteousness for a politically correct one! She said, “Why should I leave the ranks of the many women who make family their worth and value to join the ranks of the many men who make career the same thing? Would I not be as devastated then by career setbacks as I have been by romantic ones? Yes. But instead, I will receive the righteousness of Christ and learn to rejoice in it. Then I can look at either men or a career and say, ‘What makes me beautiful to God is Jesus, not these things.’ Only then will I have power and freedom. And power to forgive” She found the “pre-conditions” for forgiveness.

Note: It will become clear that one of the most typical idols we can have is our spouse! We may need his or her approval and respect in idolatrous ways. We may look to the other person to be a “savior,” the source of our self-worth. However, no human being can bear that pressure. Your spouse is a finite human being with limitations. He or she cannot love you consistently. And if you try to get from your spouse what only the Lord can give, you will be locked in a vicious cycle. You will not be able to forgive your spouse for his/her failures unless you find a Spouse whose love and forgiveness is perfect.

E. Steps for Repentance

Why wait until now to talk about repentance? And why give it so little space? Repentance and forgiveness are really different ways of looking at the same thing. We could just as easily have spent the lion’s share of this essay on repentance, and then added this note on forgiveness. Both are the same in all of these ways:

- 1) The pre-conditions are identical. Both are blocked by pride and emotional bankruptcy. Both require humility and emotional wealth.
- 2) The character is identical. Both are just ways of saying, “I am willing to absorb the payment for what I have done.”
- 3) Even the steps are nearly the same. See below.

1. An honest admission of your part of the wrong.

Maybe in the disagreement you are only 10% wrong, or 30% or 80%. You just confess your part without any blame-shifting or excuses. Even if the other person believes you are guiltier than you think you are, admit the truth. Only offer to analyze and describe the part of the mess that you are responsible.

2. Make no excuses. Do not explain it away as blame-shifting.

Treat other trigger factors as occasions not causes. Your own selfishness or insensitivity etc., was the real cause, and what other people did to you only released those things out into the expressions that you did. If you don’t do this, your repentance can actually be a way to not repent at all.

3. Be willing to listen to a realistic account of what your wrong cost the other.

It is possible to use repentance to say “shut up” to another person. How? a) If your repentance is very dramatic and emotional, you are saying, “Look at how bad I feel! Don’t tell me anything more about how I made you feel” Or even, “Look at how bad I feel! Don’t you want to take back what you said?” b) If your repentance is very quick and analytical, it may make the other person feel that she or he cannot share what he/she was feeling. It can be a way to say, “I’m not interested in hearing how you feel at all.”

4. Provide fruits of repentance, rather than just an expression of sorrow.

- Offer to make changes that would restore or remunerate in some way for the damage done.
- Offer to make changes in behavior that would make it very unlikely for the incident at issue to happen again. If you can’t do this, your partner has the right to think you haven’t repented.

If competent repentance and competent forgiveness coincide, the experience is almost a joyful revival of your relationship each time. It is a bit like a conversion experience, with the reality and sweetness of your relationship appreciated in new ways. You see the marriage as a gift. You find new emotional wealth since the love of the other person actually points you to the forgiving Lord himself. But if your spouse is not repenting, you should still forgive since it is the only way to keep evil from spreading in the both of you. (See above.) And you can still forgive if you meet the pre-conditions. (See above.)

Discussion questions

1. What helped you most?

2. What questions were raised?

3. Where will you begin to start using what you’ve learned?