

Forgiveness: What it Is and How it Works

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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Our topic today is forgiveness, what it is, what it isn't, and how it works.

We'll begin, of course, with the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12), and the follow-up immediately after it, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

There is a story in Matthew 18 that illustrates this principle. The Lord had been talking with the disciples about people who commit "offenses," and what to do with them, whom He called sinners and "lost sheep," whereupon Peter famously asked Him, "How *often* shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" And Jesus says, "not...up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." But then it gets... interesting. He tells them a parable about a servant who owed his king a HUGE amount of money, so much that the king threatened to sell him and his wife and children into slavery to pay the debt. You remember it: the servant begged for mercy and promised to pay everything if he would just be patient. And not only was the king patient, he forgave him and wrote off the whole debt! So far so good.

But this servant had a servant of his own who owed him a relatively *little* money. And he went to that man and told HIM to pay up or he would throw him into prison. So again, *he* begged for mercy but the first servant wouldn't listen and threw him into prison. And when the king heard about this he not only revoked his forgiveness of that servant, rather than just selling him into slavery he "**delivered him to the torturers**" until he paid up. Do you see any problems with this?

On one hand, there's a certain logic to it. But on the other hand the Lord told this whole story to illustrate His loving, compassionate statement that forgiveness should be given not just seven times but seventy times seven times, **and here He was teaching punishment after only the second offense!** Furthermore, the Lord promised that His heavenly Father would do the same to anybody who did not forgive his brother! Knowing how flawed we all are and how hard it is to forgive, this really seems cruel and unlike the qualities we associate with a loving God.

So how can we understand it?

Well, first of all, forgiveness does not mean overlooking or disregarding evil. If you look up the word in the original Hebrew, Greek or Latin, you will find that it means "to send away," or "to let go." In fact, in most translations of the Writings it is not called "forgiveness" but "remission," which means the sending away – of sins or debts or trespasses or offenses. So when you think about it you can see that the whole concept relates particularly to our lives IN THE PRESENT as we let go of bad habits and bad memories that keep us from receiving the goodness of the Lord's love.

Now remember, among other things in the third lesson we read, "A person's sins are *continually* being forgiven by the Lord, for He is absolute mercy. But the sins cling to the person, however much he thinks they are forgiven, and the only way to have them removed is to live in accordance with the commandments of a true faith" (NJHD 165).

Here we begin to get at the true meaning of forgiveness as a real, active, present state of determination of the person who is seeking to improve, change, reform, and do what is good. Sure, people who are trying to get away with something will want forgiveness in the sense that they won't want to take the consequences for the wrong they may continue to do. They won't want to take responsibility. But because forgiveness means remission, *or the removal or letting go of what is wrong*, it is a simple fact that people can't be forgiven until they themselves let go of that wrong, whether it's an attitude or behaviour. As long as we cling to the thoughts, feelings or activities that are out of line with the Lord's love, or even dwell on the memory of those bad things that we or others have done in the past, we will not be able to give or get forgiveness, no matter how much the Lord offers it to us. And He does offer it to us constantly, every moment!

That said, how is it that the Lord, like the king in the parable, might possibly "deliver us to the torturers" or "tormentors" – even after just one offense?

In the parable it says that the king was angry, but we know that the Lord is never angry. It just seems that way to the person who is self-centred and ... unforgiving. But He does have the power to do whatever He wants – which is why we pray that He will not "deliver us to the torturers" but rather "deliver us from evil." In fact it is never His will that we should suffer. The general doctrine is that everything of the Lord's WILL involves the goodness of His love, but to the extent that we reject or turn away from that goodness we place ourselves under the rule of the laws of Divine truth separate from good, which by their very nature criticize and condemn. And since the Lord will not compel us to remain in His love He must PERMIT or ALLOW us to go the other way. So He "delivers us to the torturers;" He *lets us go*, He *releases* us to the influence of those (men and spirits) who delight in nothing more than punishment – which they naturally carry out with the help of all the harsh truths they can bring to bear about Divine order, and about how weak and foolish we are.

Again, the Lord is constantly delivering us FROM this evil. The truth is, He only ever "delivers us" TO evil in the sense that He allows us to pursue it – unfortunately, along with its torments. But He can "deliver us" FROM it only if we let Him, and that requires certain actions on our part.

This is where the story of the Prodigal Son is so instructive (though, ironically, the word, forgiveness, itself never appears there). Everybody knows the story, and everybody recognizes that the literal father in it represents our heavenly Father – who of course is all-forgiving! But what many people don't see, or don't remember, is that the Father never went to rescue the son from his prodigal life; and he certainly did not favour or support the son when he was in that life. He left him in freedom. And it was, for all intents, as if the son was lost or had died, which is what the father actually said – not once but twice. Yet when the prodigal son came to his senses, and in utter humility repented of his sins and turned back to his father immediately the father "had compassion on him" and fell on his neck and kissed him, and prepared a great feast to welcome him back. Plainly his forgiveness was based on *the son's actions*, and on *the son's* change of heart. And so it is between us and the Lord.

Now with regard to the Lord's prayer specifically, you are no doubt aware that there are two versions of it in use in the Christian world. In ours we say the words "forgive us our debts," but many churches use the words "forgive us our trespasses." Why is that?

Well, as you may know, the Lord's Prayer occurs in two places in the Gospels. In Matthew's version, the Greek word definitely means debts, that is, things we owe as obligations, things we need to pay for. But it doesn't necessarily imply that we have done anything *wrong*. For example, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Lord for life itself, not to mention all the many blessings we receive from Him on a daily basis. We ask the Lord to "forgive us our debts" in that we acknowledge we can never really repay Him for all those incredible blessings – most of which we don't deserve!

In the same vein we need to remember that very often other people are not able to repay us for the benefits we offer them, and in the prayer we are reminded that we cannot receive forgiveness of our indebtedness unless we also are willing to forgive others of theirs. What we receive from the Lord is precisely in keeping with our attitude and the efforts we are making – good or bad.

In contrast, but more specifically to enhance and extend the lesson, we have the version of the prayer in Luke, which uses the Greek word for *sins* – along with the word for debts – so that what we have literally is "forgive us our sins, as we forgive our debtors." To sin, literally, is to miss the mark or to fail at something, and in Scripture generally it refers to the failure to live according to the Lord's Commandments. The point is, WE sin, that is, we completely miss the mark, and we depend on the Lord's mercy to relieve us of the burden of guilt for that. But what He asks of US in exchange is that we let go of the indebtedness others have to us, which is another way of saying we must let go of our craving for *reward* for the good that we have done for them. We do not always need to be repaid.

But there is still another term related to sins and debts in the verses immediately following the Lord's prayer (in Matthew), and that is roughly translated by the word, trespasses. This is a peculiar word in the original Greek that means to fall beside, or perhaps to fall aside. Metaphorically it means to do something wrong, or to transgress. And because it follows after the Lord's prayer we also use it as a separate petition afterwards, thereby adding our recognition that we also have to let go of the hurt that others have inflicted on us. But many churches incorporate it into the prayer, using it instead of the word, debts.

Anyway, as the Pharisees pointed out in several stories, no one can forgive sins but God. He is the ONLY one who really knows who we are and what we are about; He is the only one who knows us all inside and out. So we can't presume to forgive in the same way that He does. But what we can do is learn to "let go" of any selfishness or prejudice that we may harbour in our minds, either about ourselves or about others. In that way we can gain some relief – and freedom – from the stress, worry, embarrassment or guilt arising from our actions; and *to the extent we do this we can both forgive and be forgiven*. This is not to say that we can forget about the wrong. Having done it or having been a victim of it we may thereafter have to be especially vigilant, but we can watch for the problem itself and still let go of the guilt or blame.

Sadly, though, there **is** one sin that can't be forgiven. Matthew puts it this way: – "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, *but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.*" Further, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; *but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come*" (Matt. 12:31-32). This sin has been described as that of deceit, or profanation because it violates the spirit of the Lord's Word, but in simple terms what it amounts to is that when we can't abide by or even acknowledge the truth of what the Lord teaches, we can't possibly receive His forgiveness,

since our minds are closed to it. Still, it doesn't have to be this way, and the moment we change our attitude, forgiveness is again possible – as it was presumably even for Judas, not to mention the others who also betrayed the Lord at His crucifixion.

There are many more stories in the Gospels that speak of forgiveness, especially of the Lord's forgiveness as He healed people of their various illnesses or sins. But it is interesting that in every one of them the Lord either says or clearly implies that true forgiveness requires a new life. For example, in the story of the woman caught in adultery, though He did not condemn her He plainly said, ***“Go and sin no more.”***

To summarize, then, there are at least 3 things to keep in mind about forgiveness:

1. The very word means to let go or send away. With respect to our own need for forgiveness from the Lord, it is precisely when we let go of the destructive habits, resentments, selfishness and misunderstandings that plague us that we can be forgiven. And the forgiveness is ALL the Lord's doing as we turn to Him in faith and charity, for it is He who actually sends all these problems into “remission.”
2. With respect to our forgiveness of others, it is much the same, only in this case we are looking at what bothers us about others, and so what is required is that we let go of the self-centred ill feelings we have toward them so that they are free to be themselves, and not only what we want them to be.
3. When it comes to how often we should forgive, and what we can forgive, the thing to remember is that we can only get as much as we give. 70 x 7 basically does mean always, forever and, yes, EVERY time. But the teaching doesn't mean we should have no regard for what a person does with his life. The word, brother, in Scripture actually means someone who has a kind or charitable attitude (but who is still quite capable of messing up). Sometimes it is necessary to put some distance between ourselves and those who cause trouble for us. Even so, it is important that we live in the present, not in remorse or depression or resentment about the past, or in anxiety, dread or suspicion about the future. Furthermore, while we may and should condemn certain acts, we can never condemn another person. So if a “brother” repents of any evil and sincerely begins a new life (as judged by his actions), our forgiveness – like the Lord's – should be automatic. After all, as we noted earlier, we don't really know what's going on inside other people, but we do know that the Lord is leading everyone, always, toward heaven. So He gives every one of us the opportunity to be inwardly happy, spiritually free, and perfectly generous, if we will only give up and let go of the actions and attitudes that stand in the way.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 15:11-32
 Children's Talk: The Prodigal Son (turning his life around)

Matthew 18:21-35
 NJHD #159-161, 165-166