

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

A study paper
John McClean, 2003

God's forgiveness

The Bible shows us that we live in a moral universe, because it is created by the holy God. So our actions matter, they have consequences and effect relationships. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that relationship, and personal relationships are not incidental to reality, but are the heart of reality. The reality of sin means that we have a ruined relationship with God, and face his personal anger (e.g. Rom 1:18). This is basic to thinking about forgiveness, because it shows us that sin is not primarily a matter of 'law' (facing a just punishment and making restitution) but of ruined relationships, being enemies and facing anger. That does not mean that there is not a legal (or 'forensic') aspect, but that God's law is an expression of his character, and breaking his law is a personal offence to him. The New Testament uses important 'forensic' categories to describe salvation (i.e. 'justification'), as well as words from the sacrificial system ('cleansing'), the prison or slave market ('redemption', 'freedom'), the battle field (victory) and the hospital ('healing'). However if my claim that 'personal relations' are basic to reality is correct, words such as 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation', as well as 'adoption' and 'fellowship' are probably the most basic descriptions of salvation.

In the Old Testament we meet God as the God who forgives. Exodus 34:6-7 is one of the great revelations of God in his glory in the Old Testament. It stresses that Israel's covenant Lord is gracious and forgiving, although he also punishes sin. This verse is a point of reference for understanding God in the rest of the OT (Num 14:18, 2 Chr 30:9, Neh 9:17, Ps 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8; Joel 2:13). God's gracious forgiveness was offered to his people through the sacrificial system in which the worshippers offered the life of an animal in place of their own. (Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35). The sacrificial system is central to the Old Testament, and allowed a sinful people to live in the presence of a Holy God.

God's forgiveness was not restricted to the sacrificial system. God had saved Israel although they were sinners (Deut 9:4ff), and had provided the Passover lamb to protect them from the judgement of Egypt (Ex 12). God forgave them when Moses prayed for them (Ex 32-33, Num 14:13-25), though there were still aspects of judgement in these incidents (cf the incident of David's census in 2 Chr 21:1-17).

Psalms 51 and 103 are the moving appeal of David for God's forgiveness (vv1-12) and Psalms 103:8-14 are beautiful words of praise for God's merciful forgiveness.

Israel's exile is the result of her ongoing sin and lack of repentance (2 Kings 17:7ff, 2 Chr 36:1-16). The exile raised the question of Israel's guilt and forgiveness to new heights, to which the prophets responded. They spoke of God's forgiveness and restoration which lay on the other side of judgement (e.g. Isa 33) and held out great hopes (Mic 7:18ff, Isa 40:1-2). The fact that Israel's return from exile was partial and that they were not restored to the greatness of Solomon left the prophetic promises at best partially fulfilled.

Jesus is announced as the one who will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21) and the one who will bring a kingdom in which God's people will live in 'holiness and righteousness' (Luke 1:75). John will come before him to tell of 'salvation' and 'forgiveness' (Luke 1:77). This is first of all addressed to Israel, still living under the weight

of sin and judgement which was not fully dealt with in the exile. A far greater solution is needed. This Jesus brings.

Jesus offered forgiveness (Mark 2:5). Although this is only referred to occasionally in the gospels, the OT background and the development in the rest of the NT shows us that this is an important part of Jesus ministry. His announcement of the kingdom, which is anticipated in his miracles assumes that the problem of Israel's sin can be dealt with. This includes the creation of a new obedient people, but this obedient people will have to also be a forgiven people.

Jesus own readiness to forgive is shown dramatically in his prayer for the forgiveness of his executors (Luke 23:34). This prayer is a hint of the depth of forgiveness which is brought by Jesus death. Before he died he spoke of his death as bringing forgiveness (Luke 23:34). As we follow the gospel stories we see Jesus as the Messiah and the Servant of the Lord, who is the new Israel. However, rather than coming to glory and victory in Jerusalem, he receives the very judgement which should have fallen on disobedient Israel. The prophetic pictures of the final destruction of Israel are fulfilled in Jesus. The prophets told of salvation on the other side of wrath, and so after Jesus resurrection forgiveness could be announced in his name (2:38, 5:31, 10:43, 13:38; 26:18). Israel had never existed simply for her own sake, and so her forgiveness was not just for her, but for the whole world. The gospel declared forgiveness for all who trusted Jesus.

When the NT writers think about Jesus' death, they explain it as a fulfilment of the OT sacrificial system (e.g. Hebrews 10:11-12). Jesus death was 'atoning' as were the OT sacrifices (Lev 17:11, Romans 3:25, Heb 2:17, 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10). There has been an important debate about this word. Some people have argued that it should be translated 'expiation', which means meeting the just requirements of the law; while others have argued that it meant 'propitiation', which means turning away anger. The debate is about whether we think of God as truly angry at human sin. I think it has been conclusively shown that the word means 'propitiation'. This is important because it shows us that the personal aspect of salvation is very real, God is justly angry and his anger must be dealt with.

It is very important to remember that Jesus is God himself taking the just punishment and wrath. We mustn't think of an angry Father who is placated by a loving Son, but rather that the Triune God is holy and loving, justly angry at human sinners and at the same time passionately committed to loving them. In a way that is far beyond our understanding, God takes this just wrath into himself, rather than turning it on us. This is a wonderful and unfathomable mystery. People sometime talk about 'loving the sinner and hating the sin'. This reflects a certain truth of God's attitude to us, but is far too simplistic. We can not distance ourselves from our actions that easily, and God's anger is directed at sinners, not simply at sin. Rather than seeking to explain this, we wonder that "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8).

The infinite value of Jesus person and so of his sacrifice for us is the basis of God's forgiveness. It is sufficient for all and every sin and for every sinner who trusts in Jesus. The promise of 1 John 2:2 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." is based on Jesus atoning death and his ongoing intercession with the Father for us (1 Jn 2:1-2). When the NT speaks about a sin which can not be forgiven (Mk 3:29, Heb 10:26, 1 John 5:16), it is the very sin of rejecting Jesus who is the only source of forgiveness. There is, however, no sin which is so awful that Jesus death is insufficient for its forgiveness. Paul is the most striking example of someone who was active in opposing God's purposes, and despite his sincerity had a hand in the execution of God's people, and yet found forgiveness (1 Tim 1:15-16).

While the Bible stresses the fact that Jesus death is the basis for our forgiveness, it never suggests that this is an 'automatic' process. Some Christians so emphasise the 'objective' nature of salvation (Jesus death) that they leave no room for the 'subjective' (our faith in Christ). These people will say that everyone is already forgiven in Jesus, and that we simply need to discover it. However that is not the way the Bible speaks. Paul reports his ministry as declaring that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ". However his appeal is not, to "discover that" or "live that out", but "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:19-20). The dimension of 'personal relationships' is fundamental to salvation, and God's work of salvation must be realised in our reconciliation to him. (Our readiness to respond to God's appeal is itself a gift of God's grace, but that is another topic!)

God's forgiveness is offered to us freely, from his grace, not on the basis of our efforts (Rom 3:24-26, Eph 2:5-9). Our repentance does not earn forgiveness. However genuine faith in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour will always be accompanied by repentance (e.g. Acts 2:38, 1 Thess 1:9-10). Repentance is not merely sorrow over sin, nor a change of mind but means turning our lives around to live for God (e.g. Rom 6:10-12). Genuine repentance is only possible in the knowledge of God's grace. It is only when the message of the cross shows us the depth of our sin and God's readiness to forgive that we can be honest about ourselves and be ready to change. We are, indeed, new creations in Christ to serve God (Eph 2:11).

We know only too well that coming to Christ in repentance and faith does not mean that we have freedom over sin (Gal 5:17, 1 John 1:8). There was an ancient belief that sin after baptism could not be forgiven (so the first Christian Emperor Constantine was not baptised till he lay on his death bed). The Bible is far more realistic about sin and Christians, and invites us to continue to seek God's forgiveness in Christ and assures us that God will forgive (1 John 1:8, Heb 4:15-16). Most modern Christians are almost too familiar with this truth, and we become lax about sin. We need to recapture the NT's teaching that forgiveness and reconciliation are the motive for righteous living (e.g. Romans 6, Col 3:7-17). I John 1:6-2:11 captures the NT balance.

Human forgiveness

We can get tangled up with questions of when and if I have forgiven someone and what that means for an ongoing relationship. In God's work with us forgiveness and reconciliation always come together. However in human relationships it is helpful to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiven people must forgive. (Matt. 6:12, 14-15, 18:21-35, Col 3:13, Eph 4:32). The basis of the command to forgive is that we have experienced God's forgiveness in Christ. In this we have a real motive for forgiveness. Christian forgiveness will not be quid pro quo ("I'll do something for you if you do something for me"). Instead we will be read to let offences go past. 1 Corinthians 13 is the great exposition of Christian love, which is based on God's love in Christ (see how this is true by replacing "love is" with "Jesus was" in vv4-7). The love that is modelled on Christ's " is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." (1 Cor 13:5).

Forgiven people will also acknowledge that there is much for which we need forgiving. The gospel shows us our sin, and as we grow as Christians we see it more deeply. The gospel also teaches us of the deep joy of repentance, confession and restoration. When we know we have done something wrong, we should be quick to offer an apology, to try to fix things up and to restore relationship (Matt 5:23).

Some of the virtues which Jesus and the apostles taught were also admired by the rest of the ancient world (Jewish and pagan). 'Self-control' and 'contentment' were often praised. However the Christian virtues of 'forgiveness', 'meekness' and 'love of enemies' were not only unusual, but were even despised. We should not

be surprised at that, for unless you know the Lord Jesus, and have seen the costly love of the cross and have experienced redemption in that then forgiveness seems weak and pathetic. It is only Christians who can really say "Mercy triumphs over judgement!" (James 2:13).

Jesus prayer for his executors shows the extent of Christian forgiveness. We are not only to pass over the minor matters, but even in the most extreme cases we are to offer forgiveness. Indeed, I wonder if we should reserve the word 'forgiveness' for serious offences. We often trivialise forgiveness by offering it for the most minor issue. If you step on my toe, or if one of my children leaves my tools out in the rain, that hardly calls for 'forgiveness'. The wisdom of Proverbs 10:12 & 17:9 seems to apply here in particular.

Given this distinction 'forgiveness' is an attitude which gives up a desire for revenge (Rom 12:17, 19, Prov 20:22, Matt 5:38-42, 1 Peter 2:20-23, 3:9), and determines to love some one and seek their good (Luke 6:28, 1 Cor 4:4:12, 1 Peter 3:9). This is an action on the part of some one who has been wronged, and is independent of the action of the person who has done the wrong. The Bible focuses us on love as action and as an attitude which leads to seeking someone good, and I think forgiveness is the same. After I have forgiven someone I may not feel very forgiving, but I am choosing to give up vengeance and to seek their good. (Of course we can only live with a profound conflict between will and emotions for so long - and we must seek to address this, but it is not the essence of forgiveness).

Revenge is not wrong in itself, for God is the one who repays (Heb 10:30). However our desire for revenge is always mixed up with our own sinfulness, and even our ignorance means we can never really be just. The Bible tells us to 'leave room for God's wrath' (Rom 12:19).

The pattern of the cross is essential for Christian forgiveness. God took his just anger onto himself, and he paid the price of forgiveness. Analogously Christians will often bear, in many ways, a heavy price, in order to forgive someone. This may take great courage to recognise evil for what it is, and even to oppose it, without seeking revenge. It is certainly true that forgiveness is good for the forgiver, and that storing up hatred and anger is destructive. However, in our fallen and frustrated world, forgiveness may often be the uncomfortable and costly path.

"Reconciliation" is to re-establish a relationship. A restored relationship will always require effort from both parties. Our reconciliation with God is on the basis of his forgiveness, but involves our repentance. When one person has genuinely wronged another, then there will have to be some form of 'repentance' before reconciliation. Very often genuine reconciliation can only happen when a wrongdoer is confronted with their wrong. We might have an 'ideal' for repentance, but because we recognise that even when sinned against we are still sinners, then we are called to be ready to accept less than the ideal and seek reconciliation. If our approach to relationships is shaped by the gospel, then we will want to do everything we can to restore a relationship.

Bold Love suggests this formula "Hungering for restoration + revoking revenge + pursuing goodness = forgiveness that invite repentance and the opportunity for reconciliation. (p207)

We need to realise the way in which our forgiveness is not analogous to God's. We are sinners forgiving other sinners, not judges. Jesus warning about vision impaired people attempting eye surgery is very important (Matt 7:1-5 cf Gal 6:1).

Neither forgiveness nor even reconciliation means the end of all consequences of an action. In particular love for a person who has done wrong does not require us to be hurt by them in the same way again, but it will involve helping them to resist repeating that wrong. For instance, a son may have been stealing money from his parents to support a drug habit. Having found this and confronted him, they forgive him and when he expresses his regret and offers to repay the money they joyfully accept. However, they may well keep a careful eye on their money and insist that their son seek help with his drug habit. Neither of those actions are vengeful, in fact both are loving. Clearly there are times when it is very difficult to know how to apply this principle, especially if the person repeatedly returns to old wrongs.

We have to remember that we do live outside Eden, in a world scarred and marred by sin. We live in hope of a new creation, in which human relationships will be fully restored, as our relationship with God will be. Until then we will confront wrong in our selves and in others, we will be sinned against and sinners. It is only in hope that we offer or receive forgiveness and express or accept the repentance. We seek to live in harmony because we are part of God's new creation (Col 3:1-14). This reminds us that outside of Christ forgiveness and reconciliation will be at best weak, if not empty. As far as possible we should appeal to people to be reconciled with God, as part of human reconciliation.