

For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee. (Psa 86:5)

Today I want to discuss forgiveness, and what it means to forgive one another as a practical matter. I warn that I may ask for the considering of things that cause discomfort of thought, that perhaps embarrass us in our consciences, and likely cause us to feel inadequate and foolish in some action taken.

If any of those things are felt today, rest assured I felt all of them as I examined my own failings and faults writing this; I feel them now. None of this today is spoken to any one of us in particular, rather it is spoken to all of us particularly.

I believe forgiveness, real forgiveness, is one of the greatest obstacles for individuals and the body to overcome in order to compact and prepare for the return of our King. Lack of forgiveness stands in the way of being truly charitable (as opposed to outward “display” charity), it leads to divisions, roots of bitterness, and ultimately can bring about schisms that destroy a body. Lack of forgiveness leads to the creation of “baggage” that turns into the next offense, which creates more baggage, which turns into the next offense, and puts us upon a never-ending carousel of offense.

I regularly see difficulties and challenges with forgiveness, including within myself, and feel like specific focus could help us. I am not addressing this from the perspective of a master imparting definitive or grand wisdom to students. Far from it. I struggle with this as much as anyone in this place, so please understand I am simply trying to share my thoughts and explorations on this matter and impress upon us a need to study our behaviors in the light of Scripture to each determine individually how to grow. I am not pretending to have “the” answers. I am exhorting us to look for growth in this area, to actively look to expand our abilities and our willingness to genuinely seek and impart forgiveness, because without forgiveness we have no hope.

Lest any should use my words to accuse me of over-reaching, I want to be very clear at the outset that I am talking about the forgiveness of one person by another for an offense. I am not claiming that we have any power to forgive sins or absolve any human of the guilt they bear for their sins. Offenses are a natural part of the creature we are and pretending otherwise is a delusion that creates more problems. Offenses are not synonymous with sins, and I am not declaring that a person committing some heinous sin is forgivable by us in a soul-affecting manner. I’m talking strictly about when we do something to someone that upsets them and it impacts our relationship.

I first want to address the idea of “forgive and forget”. I don’t want to split hairs, but as I have studied the idea of forgiveness and inquired of my crack research panel of young people (thank you for those conversations), I feel compelled to explore this point, because I do not believe “forgive and forget” is a scriptural concept.

The phrase “forgive and forget” is not found in the Bible, but rather originates in two pieces of famous literature – Miguel de Cervantes *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (“Let us forget and forgive injuries”) and Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (“Pray you now, forget and forgive”).

Nowhere in Scripture does it say to forget when we forgive. Now, this is where I may be in danger of hair-splitting, but please indulge me in this analysis, because I think it helps us frame up **how** to go about forgiving people.

My problem with operating under a “forgive and forget” mantra is that forgetting a thing, by necessity, implies that the thing can be remembered at a later time under the right triggers. It also creates a course of behavior, where if we simply allow the heat of the anger at the moment to dissipate or roll over us, we may not actually address what is needful to be addressed, which then allows us to avoid the work of actually forgiving the offense. That doesn’t work in the long term, and it’s not what we’re called to do.

I’m saying that we don’t really forget, and if we’re focused on how we’ve forgotten, we aren’t in the business of forgiving. I’m fairly confident that right now some are sitting here saying “of course I can forget offenses, I do it all the time”. My response to that is, “which ones?” If you have an answer, think about that. And that’s the difficulty I have with the mantra.

Now, some have posited to me that you can pray to forget, and that is absolutely true, you can. And I’m not going to tell you it’s a wrong or sinful thing to do that. I’m going to suggest however that it might be more efficacious to pray for the spirit of forgiveness we are commanded to, rather than praying to forget.

As I look at the idea of “forgetting” it falls significantly short for me as I consider my own sins and the dependence I have on God’s forgiveness. To be blunt, I don’t want the Lord to forget my sins, I beg they be forgiven. And this is the crux of my thinking.

We owe our God a great debt. Hopefully I don’t have to prove that to this group. It is a debt that we cannot pay on our own. “Forgetting” the debt implies that it can be remembered. I don’t want that to happen, ever, since I know I cannot pay it. Forgiving the debt necessitates that it has been paid or that payment is no longer required at the prerogative of the creditor. Those are very, very different things in actual application.

Think of it in terms of a monetary debt owed to a bank. Yes, they can shred the files related to the debt, maybe fire all the people that ever did business with you to incur the debt, erase all the electronic images of the paperwork in an effort to “forget”, but that **is not the same** as taking the promissory note and stamping it “PAID IN FULL”.

That state of “paid” is the long-term, legal forgiveness of the debt. It cannot ever be re-opened and called forth for payment again. If someone finds the evidence of a

“forgotten” debt – finds the shredded papers and tapes them back together, restores a backup of the erased data, etc. – that debt is back in full force, and you’re in worse trouble than before because you haven’t been making required payments all the time it was “forgotten”. Forgetting doesn’t really help us.

Now, one might argue, God has effectively forgotten our debts. He puts them behind Him, and makes them as far from us as the east is from the west, right? Well, yes, the scripture tells us those things:

“Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back.” (Isa 38:17)

And

“As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.” (Psa 103:12)

One might also argue that His blotting out the sins of His people is effectively the same as forgetting them, and then ask “doesn’t that same verse about blotting them out say He won’t remember them”, which is a very good question that I have spent some time considering. The verse in question is this:

“I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” (Isa 43:25)

This can also be connected with a verse from the next chapter

“I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.” (Isa 44:22)

This is where it might seem like I’m splitting some hairs, so please just consider what I’m saying. First, the idea of blotting is a little foreign to us in this day and age, because we have a backspace key. We don’t blot out words as was done when things were all written in ink, that is, cover a line up with more ink to make it unreadable.

That’s the idea expressed in this verse – there is a line in a ledger, and it records a debt. That debt is blotted out with more ink so it is unreadable, and in effect “forgotten”. But interestingly, that word translated “remember” in Isaiah 43:25 also has a more pointed definition that applies specifically to debts, what would be translated “recall”. The idea is calling in the marker. The debt is being called due.

This “remembering”, in my analysis, isn’t a memory, it’s a reference to the written record to bring the debt into payment. Instead of being called due, our debt is blotted out as paid in full via forgiveness and will not be recalled (remembered) for payment.

Furthermore, saying God “effectively forgives and forgets”, doesn’t really satisfy me. It’s too loose. God does everything with great specificity and purpose as the only true, righteous God, and the idea of Him “forgetting” our sins is not one of righteousness and justice.

Consider this – it would be unjust to simply “forget” some people’s sins, and our God is a just God!

“He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he.” (Deu 32:4)

His justice demands **payment** for transgression. Yes, He could have just declared that the Elect were going to heaven with no payment required, but that would have been absolutely and utterly unjust – and this is what the Accuser would have people believe, that He is an unjust God! But no, God requires payment for sin, and He received payment for the sins of His chosen when He poured His wrath onto the Son. He has thereby imputed the righteous payment of Christ to all His elect so their individual payment is no longer required!!

I maintain that He has not forgotten the sins of His elect children, but He has rather gone to great lengths to mark them as paid in full. I want that payment recorded, please, because when the “PAID IN FULL” stamp is put on that debt, though the debt itself was egregious and couldn’t be paid by me, it was still marked as paid by the creditor. More importantly, His justice is satisfied – the non-elect have no claim to make against His righteousness because He didn’t bend the rules for His chosen.

That is a much more satisfying position to me than He “forgave and forgot”.

It also frames up for us how we ought to think and behave toward our fellow man, especially those of the body. Full forgiveness of offenses, even if they could never be paid by those committing the offense, is the standard.

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.” (Luk 17:3-4)

There are a number of things to draw out of this passage

- We must take heed to ourselves, that is, control ourselves, be mindful of ourselves, work to operate in a mindset that allows for forgiveness, doesn't expect perfection in others (since we can't deliver it ourselves) and that is patient with the faults of others. Implied in the repentance seven times a day is the continued rebuking, but in a brotherly and helpful way.
- There is no end of forgiveness. **We** have faults, **we** have failures, **we** have weaknesses. If we cannot see when a person is struggling with theirs and work with them to change behavior and overcome their difficulties, there can be no expectation that others will do the same for us. Are we not exhorted that

"... all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Mat 7:12)

I don't want people walking around harboring ill will toward me or beating me up every time I fail, so why would I do it to them? The short answer is "my pride", but that, of course, is an utterly terrible excuse.

- Repeated offenses do not justify our diminishing how we view a person and letting that color our treatment of them. There is no "set number" of times that a person can offend us and seek our forgiveness. How awful for us would it be if there were a set number of sins we could commit before we lost forgiveness? That should be the starting point of our thinking – always – when we deal with someone who irritates us, has a presentation that we don't like, or we just haven't found how to be more compacted with – and all these things happen amongst the membership of this body. If anyone is sitting in the pew right now telling themselves "phht, I don't do any of those things, I am always looking at everyone with the best light because I'm the epitome of charity and brotherly love" – I am going to ask you to look deeper and consider the truth of what you're telling yourself. I mean no offense by this, but I don't know anyone here who has perfected this, including myself. There is a great deal of room to improve, and that improvement won't happen without taking "heed to ourselves".
- A requirement of forgiveness isn't your "get out of jail free card" for intentional and repeated or even just utterly reckless, selfish behavior that doesn't consider your brother. "This is how I am" is an unacceptable phrase to enter our heart, our mind, or pass our lips. Putting on the new man necessitates that we change so that we grow. Growth is an ongoing, lifelong thing, so accepting how you were a decade or a month or a week or a day ago, if it is genuinely causing offense and pain for a brother or sister, isn't the right approach. We have to work to grow. That doesn't mean we get to demand everyone morphs to be just like us. We are, after all, unique members of the body. We should all work to morph toward the standard.
- If we have had an offense brought to our attention, we don't get to wield forgiveness like a cleaver and demand it, operate in the expectation of it, or begrudge the lack of it when our actions do not demonstrate repentance for the

behavior. It is when we believe we deserve it we are least deserving of receiving it.

- Forgiveness does not require repentance for the forgiver to grant it. It is well within a person's right to forgive someone of a fault without ever bringing to their attention that they caused the offense. But we don't get to play fast and loose with it. Either forbear or bring the fault to the person's attention and work through it, finding a way forward to help change behavior and increase patience with their uniqueness, forgiving the fault, so that we don't just spend time angry with people.

It's important that this work be done because being angry with people isn't an acceptable approach to life. Things are going to happen. Offenses are going to come in the natural course of our lives, but walking around with anger in our heart toward another person is just wrong. I incorporate all of Jon's notes on anger here, and want to make a few additional points.

"Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath." (Eph 4:26)

Take note, it doesn't say "don't be angry". Being angry with a person because they offend us is a reaction built into our nature; part of the croc brain fight or flight element of our biology. There are times and places to be angry, but against one another in a prolonged way over days, weeks, months, years, or decades, is utterly unacceptable per Scripture. Barnes has a really good bit of language on this that I think is worth sharing (emphasis mine):

*"Anger' is a passion too common to need any description. It is an excitement or agitation of mind, of more or less violence, produced by the reception of a **real or supposed injury**, and attended commonly with **a desire or purpose of revenge**. The desire of revenge, however, is not essential to the existence of the passion, though it is probably always attended with a disposition to express displeasure, to chide, rebuke, or punish. To a great extent **the sudden excitement on the reception of an injury is involuntary**, and consequently innocent. Anger is excited when a horse kicks us; when a serpent hisses; when we dash our foot against a stone - and so when a man raises his hand to strike us. The "object or final cause" of implanting this passion in the mind of man is, to rouse him to an immediate defense of himself when suddenly attacked, and before his reason would, have time to suggest the proper means of defense. It prompts at once to self-protection; **and when that is done its proper office ceases**. If persevered in; it becomes sinful malignity, or revenge - always wrong. Anger may be excited against a "thing" as well as a "person;" as well against an act as a "man." We are suddenly excited by a wrong "thing," without any malignancy against the "man;" we may wish to rebuke or chide "that," without injuring "him." Anger is sinful in the following circumstances:*

- (1) *When it is excited without any sufficient cause - **when we are in no danger, and do not need it for a protection.** We should be safe without it.*
- (2) ***When it transcends the cause,** if any cause really exists. All that is beyond the necessity of immediate self-protection, is apart from its design, and is wrong.*
- (3) *When it is **against “the person”** rather than the “offence.” The object is not to injure another; it is to protect ourselves.*
- (4) *When it is **attended with the desire of “revenge”.** That is always wrong.*
- (5) *When it is **cherished and heightened by reflection.** And,*
- (6) ***When there is an unforgiving spirit;** a determination to exact the utmost satisfaction for the injury which has been done. If people were perfectly holy, that sudden “arousing of the mind” in danger, or on the reception of an injury; which would serve to prompt us to save ourselves from danger, would exist, and would be an important principle of our nature. As it is now, it is violent; excessive; uncontrollable; persevered in - and is almost always wrong. **If people were holy, this excitement of the mind would obey the first injunctions of “reasons,” and be wholly under its control;** as it is now, it seldom obeys reason at all - and is wholly wrong. Moreover, if all people were holy; if there were none “disposed” to do an injury, it would exist only in the form of a sudden arousing of the mind against immediate danger - which would all be right. Now, it is excited not only in view of “physical” dangers, but **in view of the “wrongs” done by others** - and hence it terminates on the “person” and not the “thing,” and **becomes often wholly evil.**”*

I want to make a point here about anger that I think a lot of the expositors miss when they use language like “passions” and “enflamed”. Angry doesn’t just mean we’re pacing around our living room giving it the Yosemite Sam treatment. Angry doesn’t just mean yelling at people or shouting a string of curse words.

Anger is a thing that starts inside and it can be kept there – remember it starts as a croc brain reflex – and “reason” can protect it and turn it into a smoldering ember that burns as an internal fire that is hidden from others. We can be angry and have a smile plastered to our face, using a soft voice to call people “hon” or putting words out about how much we appreciate a person or are thankful for them while not truly meaning one syllable of it because in our mind’s eye all we see is red when we look at the other person. The sin associated with anger isn’t just storming about and saying mean things. We can and do sin in our hearts continuously, including holding anger, wrath and malignity there. That is how malice grows and springs forth roots of bitterness – this holding of anger in our heart for prolonged periods of time with an absence of forgiveness.

The most important thing we must do is to overcome the nature of the old man so the thoughts which engender anger don’t even come into being. Absence of these thoughts and feelings through forbearance and patience prevents their germination into

anger which leads to strife. Impatience and anger are traits and behaviors of the old man which we must put off.

I also want to point out that a person's anger in a moment isn't our King's X to deflect offensive behavior. It is in our base nature to deflect away criticism that highlights bad behavior. It is easy to get into a bout of verbal pugilism over "you got angry and said that when I said that other thing, so the real problem is your anger". Ignoring the original problem to chastise a person's anger just keeps the cycle going because we never actually address the problem that made them angry in the first place.

I also want us to consider that prolonged anger toward someone for an offense is really a desire for revenge. Normally, we think about revenge as being prohibited against worldly enemies. But when we want to see a person punished or in pain over some slight we perceive, that is still revenge. Consider this verse in today's context:

"Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD." (Lev 19:18)

When we seek that revenge or bear a grudge, whether in our hearts and minds or in our actions, that's where anger has crossed the line. We might not think that we're seeking revenge, but if we go around saying things in our hearts or from our lips like

"Why doesn't someone make that person stop this"

"How do they just keep getting away with this"

"Don't people see how mean they treat me"

"Why doesn't anything ever happen to them when they act this way"

"How many people do they get to do this to before something changes"

Revenge is what we're looking for here. There are an infinite number of other permutations of "someone needs to bring me a pound of that other person's flesh". That's selfish revenge.

Selfishness is embedded in the old man, and must be overcome, and that's all this revenge is – raw, unmitigated selfishness; "they've made me miserable so let's make them miserable, too." We seek revenge because we are selfish.

But selfish is the opposite of how we should be

*"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind **let each esteem other better than themselves.**" (Php 2:3)*

There are two actors – ourselves and others – receiving esteem, or honor, in this scenario. This is an important point. This requires us to look simultaneously at how we look at ourselves **and** how we look at others. We can't just temporarily elevate the other person to our self-appointed high and lofty status – “I see you as my equal at this time”. We have to look at ourselves “*in lowliness of mind*” – “I see myself as inferior”. That goes against the grain and the central tenet of our pride – that we're number one!

If our selfishness drives a view of others that “I've got the answers, I've got the mastery of scripture, I've got the new man figured out and I've definitely got it figured out better than **that person**” we assuredly do not find ourselves in this place Paul exhorts to. The importance of how we really view ourselves cannot be understated in this context especially. Putting on a face of faux humility while internally holding others in disregard makes forgiveness difficult – both the giving and receiving of it.

Like we should be easy to entreat and ready to accept help overcoming our faults, we should work to be easy to forgive. We must defy our natural pride and put more effort into controlling ourselves than we put into “winning” the situation when conflict arises.

I see this all the time. People in conflict would rather stay wrapped in the conflict than “lose”. We frame almost everything in life, especially when it comes to a conflict as a win/lose situation. We have to get the last word in, we have to make the other person submit. We have to score the apology, the tears, the whatever. That way is foreign to forgiveness, and the opposite of letting “*each esteem other better than themselves*”.

To accomplish this is not impossible. It is difficult, especially in the heat of a moment when someone is “pushing our buttons”. It requires an understanding of the need to do so, and a drive to be truly charitable. Paul later provides the path to achieving this, which is to consider this critical example:

“But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.” (Php 2:7)

If Christ can take on the form of the servant and humiliate himself in such a manner, to pay the price and gain the Father's forgiveness, how can we say it is impossible to look upon ourselves as beneath every other person so that it is easy to forgive their offenses? What have you done in your life that could possibly compare to Christ and his humble actions? That's the plumb line we should measure against when we are in the throes of a conflict with another person; the plumb line is **not** how we compare to another individual, how we're better or more righteous, more spiritual, more anything. The comparison point is us to Christ! A comparison that leaves us inadequate in every analysis.

In that light, how can we see it as impossible to control our mental state, to release our anger and put our pride into subjection? We aren't sacrificing our lives, we're sacrificing our pride and our need to win every interaction and every situation, to feel superior to everyone else and make everyone know we are superior to them!

Forgiveness is about seeking the win-win and eschewing the win-lose. It is about controlling ourselves in the most difficult spots. If we are truly operating in charity towards others, the goal in front of our eyes will always be to elevate others and do everything in our power to help them, whatever the cost is to us.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”
(Joh 15:13)

Think about what it takes to lay down your life for a friend. The intent, the selflessness, the absolute dispersion and displacement of pride and self-interest. Controlling our tongue, our mind, our emotions and our hearts is the key to so much in our lives, but especially this. It is hard to do because it means pushing our ego to the bottom of the stack. Without focus, without intention, without seeing ourselves properly, without the charity that drives thinking of this nature it certainly seems impossible. In the heat of a moment it feels like a thing that cannot be done without some sort of divine intervention.

The bottom line is we have to change our thinking and our behavior. We have to, with great purpose and intent, seek to control our thoughts and our tongues. We must control our emotions so that pride-driven, sinful anger does not rule our actions and drive our behaviors. We are in control of how we react to situations. We must operate with that thinking from the moment we rise up to the moment sleep overtakes us every single day.

Forgiveness is the complete unburdening of responsibility for anything a person has done that we see as “wronging us”. It is a complete and utter cancellation of the debt we believe they owe for intrusion upon our space, interference in our happiness or disruption of our state of mind. Forgiving means not judging future interactions in the light of past ones. It requires deliberate action to accomplish. It is the ultimate expression of putting off the old man in that it requires us to completely put the needs of other people before our own and esteem their well-being over our own need for vengeance and payment for a slight. It requires us seeing ourselves as lowly enough that the worst offense another commits against us is irrelevant in our own eyes.

To forgive requires us to control our emotional state, to set aside that natural anger that arises when we perceive we are being wronged, and actively put thought to how we respond. It is what Baxter and several expositors refer to as letting “reason” rule over “passions”. I believe there are two trains of thought that we can apply to this

dilemma that **in the moment** may help us gain the victory over sinful anger and forgive our fellow pilgrims.

Controlling thought: “I want to be forgiven, so it is only just and right that I forgive others.”

Scripture plainly tells us that

*“Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: **forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:**”* (Luk 6:37)

Forgiveness received is directly impacted by forgiveness given. A person who will not forgive others will eventually find themselves in a position where their lack of true, demonstrable charity is a sin committed against the body, and will be dealt with appropriately according to the remedies we have provided us.

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” (Mat 18:15-17)

We should be very, very slow to make offenses or trespasses upon one another's peace a matter for the whole body, but there is remedy for it provided for a reason. Make note that the word “trespass” here in Matthew 18 is the same as in Luke 17

*“And if he **trespass** against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”* (Luk 17:4)

Same word, same idea; these are personal trespasses committed against each other, not some obvious and grave sin of the soul like fornication or adultery.

In the heat of a moment, remembering that our own trespasses need forgiving should give us enough pause that we can take a less heated view of whatever is making us feel wronged. That moment should provide us a release to these “passions” and insert the balance of our “reason”. The prerequisite for that reason gaining the victory is viewing ourselves as lesser than the person offending us; without that view, victory won't come.

Controlling thought: “All things are of God, and there is something for me in this event, so I must not murmur against God.”

This is a powerfully controlling idea for me. I am in so much need of education and growth that every interaction with people should be a welcome opportunity to do just that – learn and grow.

Perhaps another way to look at it is this

“Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?” (Jon 4:4)

Do we do well to be angry over the things God has ordained to occur in our lives? As hard as it is to hear, I don't think we do well at all. That doesn't give people license to act like jerks with a whole “this is God's will” mentality, or “I'm helping you learn with my behavior”. But as a superseding and controlling mindset, it is very, very powerful, drives patience and can help us keep perspective. Practicing this as our leading thought helps overcome a number of issues in our lives.

There is another critical piece to forgiveness that I cannot today undertake to properly address but I want to call to our attention, and that is not needing it, i.e., forbearance. Forbearing means to put up with, endure or suffer the faults and annoyances of others with grace and without response. How to go about doing that as a matter of course and habit is not a small topic, but it is a thing I will leave you with pondering as the first order of business in our interactions. If forgiving is hard, why not regulate our mindsets so we are never in a place where we need to forgive because we've raised the bar of what it takes to offend us to such a height that it can't be cleared?

“Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.” (Col 3:12-13)

If these things seem difficult to do, as they do to me at times, consider keeping this as a forefront thought:

*“For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: **no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.**” (Psa 84:11)*

We have no good in us, no good work that we can do, but if we seek to walk uprightly, God will not withhold from us the ability to behave in this good and excellent way.