

The Practice of Forgiveness
Catherine A. Deddo

In the prayer He taught His disciples to pray, Jesus includes the petition to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 6:12). The fact that Jesus includes this as one of the petitions in this prayer indicates that the practice of receiving God’s forgiveness and extending it to others is a foundational and regular part of our lives as Christians.

What is interesting, and challenging, about this particular petition is the phrase “as we forgive others.” This kind of addition is unique in the prayer. No other petition is connected with something we offer to others. Why is that? Is Jesus saying that God’s forgiveness of us is dependent on our being willing to forgive others? We might be tempted to believe this.

This article is too brief to go into great detail about why Jesus’ words are not conditional, but I will say a few things. From several other places in the New Testament, it is clear that God has forgiven us, reconciled and redeemed us in Jesus Christ. From His side, He has done all that is necessary to redeem us from our sinful nature, sanctify us so that we truly belong to Him. Calvin and other reformers emphasized that the New Testament teaches what they called “evangelical repentance.” Evangelical repentance declares “Christ has borne your sins on the cross, therefore repent!” (James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, p.54). We are redeemed and forgiven in Jesus Christ. We repent, turn to Jesus and away from our sin, in order to receive and live in this forgiveness and redemption.

So if God’s forgiveness of us is not conditioned by our forgiving others, what might Jesus mean here in this passage? I think the best way to understand Matthew 6:14-15 is that Jesus is speaking not about the Father’s refusal to forgive but about our not *having* or *receiving* His forgiveness. A warning about the danger of refusing to receive God’s forgiveness and so not having forgiveness is made clear in the section in Mark’s gospel where Jesus speaks of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus says in Mark 3:29 that the person who blasphemes the Holy Spirit “never *has* forgiveness.”

The Father does not wait to forgive us until we forgive others, but there is a definite connection between our receiving or having the Father’s forgiveness and our willingness to extend forgiveness to others. I think that Eugene Peterson’s translation of Matthew 6:14-15 gets at this point best: “In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can’t get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, *you cut yourself off from God’s part.*” (*The Message*, emphasis added) When we refuse to forgive someone who has wronged us or those we love, we do not *have* God’s forgiveness because we are not willing to actually *receive* His forgiveness of our sins. Refusing to forgive others means resisting receiving God’s forgiveness of us.

The connection between receiving God's forgiveness and extending it to others is not an arbitrary one. The connection is rooted in the nature of God's forgiveness itself. When we have trouble seeing how these two acts, receiving God's forgiveness and extending forgiveness to those who have wronged us, are intricately connected, I think it is because we don't have a clear idea of what God's forgiveness is and what it isn't.

Understanding God's Forgiveness

Like most people, if not everyone, I have experienced very painful events and relationships in my life. I have been in the position of hurting others as well as being hurt and have been seeking, over the years, to work through this process of receiving and extending forgiveness. I have often found in myself and in others a reluctance to spend much focused time on this practice of forgiveness. Why is that? It seems to me that we get stuck on the idea that forgiving others might mean that we are minimizing the sin and pain caused and simply letting the person who wronged us "off the hook." We may think that this is what forgiveness is, even for God. When God forgives us, do we think this means that He decides to consider our sin "no big deal"? While this notion of forgiveness may seem somewhat comforting when it comes to our own sins, we might struggle with it when it comes to forgiving those who have hurt or betrayed us. We want what they did to us to matter to God and not be simply dismissed as insignificant.

But God's forgiveness is the same whether it involves my own sin against others or the sin of others against me. And His forgiveness never involves taking sin, ours or any other person's, lightly. God's forgiveness does not mean that he decides to overlook sin, dismiss it, count it as a small insignificant thing—as not sinful!

To understand the nature of God's forgiveness, we need to understand more fully His grace, as we see, know, and receive it in Jesus Christ. God's grace is all that He does towards us and for us in Jesus to redeem us, heal, sanctify and transform us, to draw us up to share in His communion with the Father as His brothers and sisters. The New Testament never describes God's action in Christ as merely changing the way God regards our sins. Rather, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, bringing about righteousness, to make all things right. God recognizes the wrong, and at His own expense will overcome it, undo it, and make things right.

Righteousness in Scripture is not primarily conformity to a standard, but right relationship. God's redemptive work is to have *all* our relationships—those with Him, with each other, and with all of creation—set right in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 1:9-10, Paul says "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to rehead up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Righteousness means right relationships that reflect God's very own triune relationships.

In bringing about this righteousness, God's work in us is not just to bring about a change of status, but a transformation at the level of our beings, a transformation that is a part of the transformation of all of creation to the new heaven and new earth. Salvation means wholeness, and we will be made whole—free and safe, no longer bound by

ridicule, death, illness, etc. We will not just be called or regarded as holy and blameless, *we will be because we will share fully in Christ's sanctified and glorified humanity*. Our relationships with one another will be included in our full and perfect participation in His perfectly loving relationships with the Father and with all human persons.

In making all things new and right, God will destroy evil—it has no future. There is nothing in the new heaven and new earth that will not have been made right in Jesus Christ. God's forgiveness of our sins must be seen in the light of this, His ultimate purpose and accomplishment for us and for all of creation.

Forgiveness is grounded in the atonement God makes for us. God can forgive sin because He separating us from it, judging and condemning it and redeeming and transforming us. In his book *Atonement*, Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance said, "Forgiveness here is a stupendous act which only God can do, blotting out what is past and recreating what has been wasted by sin. . . . Forgiveness is not just a word of pardon but a word translated into our existence by crucifixion and resurrection, by judgment and recreation" (p. 222). God doesn't simply overlook our sin, he will actually, in the end, condemn the sin and redeem, recreate, renew and restore us, making everything right, undoing the wrong. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, God never forgives the sin, but forgives the sinner.

We receive and extend forgiveness out of faith or trust in God's gracious judging and renewing action in Christ. That is, we are counting on Christ's atoning and reconciling work in His crucifixion and resurrection in our place and on our behalf. Jesus in His vicarious humanity has redeemed humanity from the inside out, repenting, praying, and submitting to God's judgment against all evil in His crucifixion and trusting in the Father raising Him, and us in Him, to new and right life by the Spirit—all in our place and on our behalf. Jesus, our Great High Priest, is the one who on the basis of His atoning and reconciling work has forgiven others and who has received God's forgiveness for us in our fallen humanity.

So, we don't practice forgiveness apart from our union with Christ. This means that we do not receive and extend forgiveness alone, all on our own. We never forgive others in our own names! That would amount to very little. Rather, we always and only forgive others in the name of Jesus Christ—on the basis of who he is and what he has done as our Great High Priest. Our forgiveness is only a participation in all that Jesus has already done and is doing for us and in us by the Holy Spirit to condemn sin and reconcile and transform us. What a joy to know all the ways that Jesus enables us to receive and share His redeeming and healing work in our lives and in our relationships!

Now that we have thought about what God's forgiveness is and how He provides for us to receive and extend His grace to others, I want to look at how we can participate in this important aspect of our abiding in Christ.

Receiving Forgiveness

Receiving forgiveness from God is to receive His work of grace in our lives. This means that we aren't, as Torrance said, receiving just a word of pardon, *but a work of redemption!* We receive both His word of forgiveness and, at the same time, His word of judgment on our sin that this forgiveness implies. We agree with God that this sinful word, thought, feeling, or action does not arise from the truth of who God is and who I am in Him, does not arise from trust in Him and His good purposes, and it doesn't lead to life, or help me rest in Jesus and enjoy the peace and joy that He is giving me. In confession we hand it over to Him to be done away with, looking forward to the time when we'll never see it again.

When we receive His forgiveness, we see our sin, our failings, *in the light of Jesus and His presence and work.* We give up our words of self-justification or self-condemnation and let Him tell us the truth about our sin and our new life in Him. It is to acknowledge the truth that we are, and will continue to be, *recipients of God's grace.* We turn to hear Him tell us, "I know all about this—hand it over to me because this is not you, but the sin I am saving and healing you from. I am not thwarted by it. It cannot keep me from finishing my work in your life. I am confident that I can complete my work in you and that this sin is not the last word for you."

Extending Forgiveness

Extending forgiveness is also an act of trusting in and receiving God's grace into our lives. By extending forgiveness to someone who has hurt us or someone we love, we are recognizing that God is still at work, reheading up everything in Christ, including this relationship and situation. He is not done with us, with others or with our relationships. This is why we forgive others in Jesus' name, not in our own. We forgive, trusting *He* will make everything right in the end. In forgiveness we pass on to others only what we have already received!

Unforgiveness betrays an unwillingness to truly understand and receive God's forgiveness as something that is completely based in His grace and in no way *on our deserving it or on another's deserving or even receiving it.* Unforgiveness reveals a distrust in the atoning, reconciling work of Christ on behalf of others. Refusing to forgive others means refusing to pass on to others what Christ has extended to us. And in refusing to pass it on we are resisting receiving Christ's forgiveness of us.

It is in that sense that as we refuse to forgive others we do not have or receive God's forgiveness. And conversely as we forgive others in Christ's name we more fully receive ourselves his forgiveness of us.

We can extend forgiveness because we see in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus that the triune God takes sin more seriously than we do. In forgiveness, God never says that sin is okay, no big deal. Again, God never forgives the sin, but the sinner. His wrath is poured out on sin because He is against what is against us. He knows and grieves over the damage sin does, far more than we do. He has dealt decisively with sin, evil, and death on the cross and His grace is and will be the last word, not our sin or the sins that have been committed against us.

Forgiving another, then, is not pretending that what they did wasn't that bad, or wasn't wrong. If that were the case, there would be no need of forgiveness. To forgive is to acknowledge being sinned against and recognizing the real consequences of that sin. Rather than holding it against them, or wishing for them evil, we hand that person and that sin over to God to deal with Himself in Christ. We trust that the triune God is still at work in that person and in this situation and that He remains faithful to His good purposes both for us and for them. No one, in the end, will be getting away with anything.

Living in Grace

Practicing the reception and extension of forgiveness is part of how we continue to abide in Christ, live in His grace each day. Handing over our own sins and those who sin against us to the gracious triune God, again and again, helps us live in the real hope that God's grace is the deepest reality of our lives and of this world, and Christ is indeed the last word. Jesus doesn't allow anything that He cannot and will not redeem. Our practice of forgiveness in His name enables us to live in this truth.

For myself, I find receiving and extending forgiveness to be, at times, like a wrestling match. It isn't easy and it isn't automatic. It reminds me of the work of weeding in a garden. It calls for a continual effort to make room for the fruitful plants to grow. But Jesus our High Priest has stood in our place and on our behalf and is working to enable us more and more to forgive and receive forgiveness from the heart. We hand over our resentment, pain, self-justifications and self-deprecations. We hand over our unforgiveness and trust Him to work His healing, redeeming work in our hearts ever more deeply. We can do this because we see in Jesus—in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension—just how seriously God takes our sin and that He can and will redeem. We celebrate Easter, Christ's crucifixion that leads to resurrection, as a witness to the truth that God is actually reheading up all of creation in Christ.