

Text: Mt 18.21-22

This week for “Ask the Pastor” I’m going to address a question that came up in conversation with some good friends who live many miles away.

Have you ever heard the idea that since Christians ought to be Christ-like, they ought to forgive those who mistreat them even before the offender comes and asks forgiveness?

I am not sure where this idea started, but it has gained some currency among believers and has put a lot of sincere believers under a sense of guilt when they find themselves in a situation where someone has wronged them and continues to wrong them.

Sometimes the offender has an inkling of this concept and calls on the believer to forgive them even though they

1. Aren't repentant
2. Aren't asking for forgiveness

Basically, the offender is demanding that you just let him (or her) get their own way regardless.

That's really a maddening situation!

So our topic this afternoon is:

Forgiving those Who Don't Ask

Read Mt 18.21-22

The context of this famous passage is:

1. Jesus' teaching on church discipline Mt 18.15-20 – “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private...”

Then Peter asks this question

2. Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant Mt 18.23-35

In the “prequel” Jesus tells us to go to the offender. If he repents receive him. If he doesn't repent, don't give up on him, but escalate by widening the circle of accountability. If he finally refuses, then set him out of the church.

In the “sequel,” that is, the parable, first the unforgiving servant begs forgiveness to his Lord, and then refuses to grant forgiveness to another servant who begs in exactly the same way.

Proposition: The spirit of forgiveness is not the same as the granting of forgiveness.

I. Defining forgiveness

“The action of forgiving; pardon of a fault, remission of a debt, etc.”¹

“Pardon, involving restoration of broken relationships; ceasing to feel resentment for wrongs and offenses. ... Forgiveness is ... a human act extended toward one’s neighbor—a manifestation of one’s realization and appropriation of God’s forgiveness. Hence, forgiveness is a uniquely Christian doctrine.”²

A. The Greek words

1. The main word has the root idea of sending away, or leaving behind
- But many other meanings — after the temptation Satan “left” Jesus for a time (he didn’t “forgive” him!)
2. The secondary word has the idea of graciousness and showing favour (related to the word for grace)

B. New Testament example: the prodigal son

1. The prodigal son wasted everything the father gave him
2. He “came to himself” and determined to own up and ask forgiveness
3. The Father readily forgave him

II. The spirit of forgiveness

A. Many passages point to the kind of spiritual heart behind forgiveness

1. You must forgive “from the heart” (Mt 18.35)
2. It is a fundamental part of our relationship with God: see the Lord’s prayer (Mt 6.12)

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “forgiveness, n., sense 1”, July 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6549104244>>

² “Forgiveness” Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 496.

Mt 6.12 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

3. The one offended is to seek out the brother who committed the offense (Mt 18.15)
4. Put off wrath, put on forgiveness (Eph 4.31-32)

Ep 4.31-32 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as GOD in Christ also has forgiven you.

5. Peter sums it all up (1 Pt 3.8)

1 Pt 3.8 ¶ To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;

B. Other passages warn about unforgiveness

1. No mercy to him who shows no mercy (Jas 2.13)

Jas 2.13 For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

2. Shut your ear to pleas for mercy, you will not be answered (Pr 21.13)

Pr 21.13 He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be answered.

All these exhortations point us to a spirit of heart and readiness to act.

- But what if the offender never asks???

III. Our God, ready to forgive

- A. God made it possible for him to be ready to forgive sinners before any of them came to him asking for forgiveness

Rm 5.8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

1 Jn 4.10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins.

Jn 3.16 ¶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

We could add verse after verse on this line. Nothing stands between men and the availability of forgiveness.

B. But God doesn't forgive those who don't ask

Isa 59.1-2 ¶ Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear.² But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden *His* face from you so that He does not hear.

Conclusion:

Forgiveness doesn't mean that everything is as it once was.

A convicted sex offender, after having served his time, can be released to society (in our system). He can be forgiven, but he can never be trusted with the same trust he had before he offended.

A pastor who betrays his church, his family, and his Lord with some grievous public sin can never really regain the trust he has squandered.

What about God's forgiveness? If we ask are we fully restored?

God forgives our sins, will not hold them against us anymore, and washes us clean. But...

- We are not restored to Eden
- We are not immediately in heaven
- We must still approach God through a mediator (Christ)

Forgiveness isn't the same thing as restoring full trust. But all of us are called to a forgiving spirit and should be ready to forgive if an offender comes and asks for forgiveness.