

The Actions of Forgiveness

This was the conversation between a well-known pastor and a talk-show host:

Host: The best definition of forgiveness I ever heard is giving up the hope that the past could be any different. I love that definition, because it doesn't mean that you then have to accept the person back into your life. Forgiveness does not mean I now want to have you over for dinner. It doesn't mean I want to associate with you. It just means I will no longer be tied to the past.

Pastor: That's what people don't realize. Forgiveness is not about exonerating them. Forgiveness is about empowering you. It's more about you than it is about them. Cut the cord that ties you to the past or you're going to lose your future.

Once again, there is enough cheese in that mousetrap to draw you, but it's still a trap. Because biblical forgiveness is not all about you, it is not about empowering yourself, it does not mean getting over stuff so that I can enjoy a higher quality of life. Forgiveness is a quality of God, which He instructs us to have so as to reflect Him to one another and minimise the ongoing consequences of sin.

On our journey through this little book of Philemon, we have uncovered a treasure trove about forgiveness. We have seen the crucial need for forgiveness in the life of a Christian. Put simply, if you don't forgive, you are not acting like a Christian, and are placing your own salvation in doubt. If you don't forgive, you lose your joy; you may lose much effectiveness in your ministry.

As we then examined what Paul was saying to Philemon, we discovered the meaning and basis of forgiveness. It is not a feeling. It is not feeling better about someone. It is a repayment of the damage done, a consequent receiving of the person debt-free, and the beginning of restoring the relationship to a God-pleasing state. We saw that there is both unconditional, vertical forgiveness and conditional, horizontal forgiveness. We looked at the steps to take when you are the offended party – how to treat the person who has wronged you.

However, up to now, we have been looking at this matter through the eyes of Philemon. Philemon, as you will remember, was a wealthy Christian who housed the church at Colosse in his home, and who owned some slaves. Onesimus was not a Christian, and ran away. Once in Rome, he met up with Paul and was converted. Onesimus repents. This letter is what Paul sends back to Philemon, as a plea to forgive, receive and restore Onesimus.

But it is time to turn the tables and look at this matter through the eyes of Onesimus. In this incident, Onesimus was the offender. He was not one who had been offended and needed to grant forgiveness; he was the offender and needed to receive forgiveness.

Because at some point, and if you're honest – at many points in your life – you are going to be the offender. You are going to be the one who needs forgiveness. In fact, this is the starting point of the Christian life – when a sinner realises he or she has offended God, and needs forgiveness.

Most of what we are going to look at is going to be implicit, rather than explicit. The lessons about how to forgive are explicit, because the letter is addressed to Philemon. The lessons about asking forgiveness are implicit – they are implied, though they are not stated explicitly.

What I am going to take for granted here is that at some point you become convicted that you need forgiveness. Now that might be assuming too much for some people, because many people act like God should be thankful that they grace His green earth, and it has not even entered their minds that they need to ask Him for forgiveness. But assuming that at some point you become aware that you

have sinned against God, or wronged your fellow man, the Bible then describes the steps you are to take to seek forgiveness from others.

I. Requesting forgiveness involves returning to the one you have wronged.

Paul makes it very clear that someone accompanied this letter.

Philemon 1:12 *I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,*

Who delivered this letter into Paul's hands? Onesimus. Now once again, remember what the penalties were for a runaway slave? He could be tortured. He could be branded with an f on his face for fugitivus. He could even be killed. A runaway slave was a criminal, a fugitive from the law. Runaway slaves didn't come back by themselves. They were caught and brought back.

By returning to Philemon voluntarily, what was Onesimus doing? He was casting himself upon the mercy of Philemon. He was demonstrating his repentance by going to the one he had wronged, even though that one might punish him. He was placing himself in a situation where his guilt would be known, where he would have to claim ownership for his wrongdoing, and await the judgement of the one he offended.

But this is how true repentance and forgiveness happens. You might remember that the Lord illustrated forgiveness in the parable of the prodigal son.

Luke 15:11-24 *when He said: "A certain man had two sons. ¹² "And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. ¹³ "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. ¹⁴ "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." ' ²⁰ "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³ 'And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ 'for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.*

When the prodigal son eventually reached rock-bottom, what did he do? He made a decision to turn, to return to the one he had wronged – his father, claim ownership for his wrongdoing, and face the decision of his father.

When someone wants to get right with God, the start is that they have to be willing to at least go to Him where He is found – in His Word. You must be willing to claim ownership for what you have done and listen to His verdict. But for many people today, that is the very last thing they want to do. They will tell you quite plainly: “I don't want to go to church and be told what a sinner I am! I want some encouragement and upliftment for my daily living!”

In other words, I am not interested in even investigating the idea that I have offended God; I simply want religion to perform a therapeutic effect on my own ego.

That is not how forgiveness works. There must firstly be a returning to the one you have offended. Jesus made this very plain in His Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:23-24 *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your*

brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Notice a few things:

Firstly, you do not have to wait to be rebuked by the person you offended. What Jesus describes is something that happens in your conscience. You are aware that something has come between you and your brother. They have not offended you, but you are aware that they have something against you. Consider what this means – both parties, of they are humble and obedient – will approach each other.

Second, the offence can be real or imagined. It doesn't say – if you have definitely sinned against your brother. It simply says – if your brother has something against you. They may have something against you because of something you overlooked, and need to find out. It may be something that is a misunderstanding, which needs to be cleared up. On the other hand, you might be very aware of how you have offended the other person, or sinned against God in your actions towards them. The bottom line is, if there is something between your brother and you that is not something they have done to you, it must be something you have done to them – real or not.

Now consider something. Last week, we looked at how the offended party is supposed to take the initiative to seek to gain the repentance of the offender. Here, Jesus says if you are the offender, and you suspect you have offended, you must take the initiative and go to the one you have wronged. Do you realise what this means? It means that if you are both obedient, you will end up meeting each other on the way to reconcile with the other person. There is a high chance of reconciliation. It also means that if at least one party will humble themselves and be obedient – there is a chance for forgiveness. It also means that if there is no forgiveness – then both parties are being disobedient.

II. Requesting forgiveness involves confessing the sin and asking for forgiveness.

When Onesimus arrived at Philemon's door holding the letter in his hand, the chances are he said something. Though Paul was paying his debt, Onesimus, as a Christian who understood forgiveness, would have confessed to Philemon his wrongdoing. Philemon, I betrayed your trust, and abused your goodness. I stole your goods and deceived you all. I know I harmed you. God has had mercy on me and forgiven me. Will you please forgive me too?

When there has been a true offence, then there must be confession of that and a request for forgiveness. With all sin, we start with repentance and confession before God, and then we ask for it before man.

I confess that I am bothered by Gospel presentations which try to so simplify the Gospel that the matter of asking God for forgiveness seems to be lost. Sometimes the message seems to be – you can't go to heaven because you are a sinner, but Jesus died for you on the cross. So tell God that you want his free gift of eternal life, accept it, and you're going to heaven. As if all that's happening is 'you can't enter South Africa without a South African passport. You don't have a South African passport. But as a free gift, they are being handed out over there, so just accept one and you can enter.'"

No – the Gospel is about sins forgiven. That means we must come to the realisation that we have done something to offend God and when we come to Him, we come honestly seeking reconciliation. We come before Him, asking Him to accept Jesus on our behalf, so that we can be forgiven. That kind of attitude is repentant. God, I need forgiveness. I have sinned. I have lived as if I am the Creator. I did not worship you. I have not loved you. I have taken your gifts without thanks. I have lived my own life, even though you made me for yourself. I have trampled all over your earth, living under your longsuffering, pleasuring myself and thumbing my nose at the idea of submitting to you. I have mocked those who served you as fanatics, I have rationalised my own

semi-agnostic belief system, and I have congratulated myself for being so balanced. I have offended you again and again and again.

You see, whether it is God, or whether it is man, true repentance is stating your offence in terms the offended person would agree with. True repentance is to say about your sin what would cause the offended person to nod and say, that's true.

We often get used to stopping short of this. See, once again, listen to the words of that prodigal son:

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

What was he doing? He was confessing his sin in a way his father could agree with. Or consider David, in Psalm 51:

Psalm 51:3-4 *For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight -- That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*

Sometimes the words "I'm sorry" are a cop-out. "I'm sorry" might only mean you feel bad, it doesn't necessarily mean you are taking responsibility for your sin. It might just mean I feel bad that you feel bad. I feel bad that the situation is what it is now. But that doesn't mean – I have sinned against you, I stand in your debt, will you please forgive me.

Even worse than "I'm sorry" is "I'm sorry if you're offended." That's an underhanded way of putting the whole thing back in their lap. Well, if you're so petty as to get offended, then I feel bad for you.

State the offence in terms the other person would agree with. "I spoke in an unkind way and did not speak in an edifying way. Will you forgive me?" "I had a complaining, grumbling attitude earlier which is wrong before God? Will you please forgive me?" "I spoke disrespectfully to you, Dad. Will you please forgive me?"

Now one other thing here. The confession of a sin is to go only as wide as the offence. In other words, you do not have to confess the sin beyond the circle of those whom it has affected.

A person who gossiped to three other people, has four people he needs to ask for forgiveness. The person he slandered, and the three people he gossiped to. He does not need to confess it to anyone else.

The couple who quarrel need to confess their sin to one another. However, if they quarrel in front of their children, and the children are old enough to understand, they will need to confess the sin of failing to be examples to their children as well. But they do not need to stand before the church and confess it.

The man who repents of Internet pornography will confess it only to those it affects. If he is married, he has committed adultery of the heart, and he must confess it to her. But does he need to confess it to the church. Not at this point. Not unless he remains in unrepentant sin after following Matthew 18.

Confess only as wide as the offence is known. By the way, that also helps us to understand that we do not need to confess every hidden sin of the heart to other people. They can be repented of and confessed before the Lord, since no one else knows about them. You don't need to go to the pastor and say, "Recently, while you have been preaching, I have been fantasising about you collapsing and dying behind the pulpit, and I just want to ask for your forgiveness for those thoughts." No, if he didn't know and it didn't have any further ramifications, then confess it to the Lord and leave it

there.

Now, what if a person will not forgive you? What if they refuse to hear you at all? Well, then they are committing the sin of bitterness. That puts them out of fellowship with God and with you, but it cannot put you out of fellowship with God. Continue to treat them with kindness. Continue to love your enemy while they are estranged from you.

If the situation is in the church, a refusal to reconcile is to be dealt with according to the steps of Matthew 18.

III. Requesting forgiveness involves accepting corrective measures

We don't know what Philemon did exactly upon Onesimus' arrival. We know he forgave him. How do we know that? The fact that we have the letter speaks volumes but suppose Philemon had said, Onesimus, since your departure, I had to find someone to replace you. I now have a slave doing the tasks you were doing. I'm afraid you will have to start at the bottom again, cleaning the latrines, and keeping the midnight to early morning shifts.

If Onesimus had clenched his jaw, pursed his lips, and then exploded, "I travel thousands of miles on a dangerous journey, come and present myself before you, risking my own neck, when I could be out there as a free man, and you reward me with the dirtiest job in the house? Forget it. Tell Paul he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to work for someone like you." Would that be the heart of someone truly repentant? No, it would be the heart of someone still quite proud. A repentant man would accept corrective measures. That is, he would accept such things as coming from the hand of God to help him learn humility, diligence and contentment. He would say with the Psalmist:

Psalm 119:67 *Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.*

Psalm 119:71 *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.*

Even when we are repentant, sin brings consequences. Repentance takes away the penalty of the sin; it does not necessarily take away all the results of the sin. Repentance accepts the consequences. It also accepts that God will kindly put some things in place to make it harder to go back to that sin.

If Philemon had said, brother Onesimus, it grieves me to do this, but the standard for my household has always been that runaway slaves who are recovered must have their ankles in iron, tied to a chain for three months. Onesimus would have to say, "That's fine. Thank you, Lord for making my obedience easier, and making it harder for me to sin".

Sometimes, Jesus wants us to embrace a radical approach to dealing with sin that might hurt or cost us.

Matthew 5:29 *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.*

Think about David. After Nathan the prophet confronts him about his sin with Bathsheba, he immediately confesses it. God forgives him on the spot. But Nathan says to him, still, as a result, the sword will never depart from your house and the child of Bathsheba will die. David accepted God's corrective measures. He prayed that God would change His course of action, but when He didn't, He accepted it.

The same was true when he ordered a sinful census of the people. God said to him, I offer you

seven years of famine, three months of fleeing from your enemies or three days of plague. Once again, there were consequences, and David accepted them.

The prodigal son in Jesus' parable accepts the corrective measures in advance. He says, "I know I can't be considered one of your sons. Make me a hired servant."

Truly repentant people accept corrective measures. A man, repentant over his adultery, accepts that he can no longer serve as a pastor or a deacon and submits to extensive counselling with his pastor. A man repentant over his theft accepts the legal consequences of a court trial and the possible fines or sentences that will come of it. A woman repentant over her gossip accepts that she has estranged a lot of people, and it is going to take time to rebuild those friendships and re-establish trust. A man repentant over his embezzlement of church funds accepts that he will not have access to church finances for a probationary or even permanent period of time, and will submit to such things as presenting his accounts for scrutiny. The bottom line is, if you are repentant, then you are willing to face both the consequences of your sin, and whatever preventative measures are put in place to help you to not repeat the sin.

An unwillingness to accept corrective measures reveals an unwillingness to change. And an unwillingness to change is an unwillingness to repent.

Forgiveness is firstly returning to the one you have offended for the purpose of reconciliation. Secondly, it is confessing the sin in terms they would agree with, and asking for forgiveness. Third, it is accepting whatever corrective measures might be put in place to help you to not return to that sin.

I am going to suggest that the person who knows that they stand in the debt of another person, that they need to be forgiven, and who refuses to do anything, will experience a similar torment that the person who refuses to grant forgiveness experiences. The same alarmed conscience, the same spiritual dullness, the same grieved Spirit of God, the same guilt.

It's said that Leonardo Da Vinci was working on his masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. At one point he had a bitter quarrel with another man, the two hurling insults and accusations at one another. Da Vinci returned to his canvas and attempted to paint the face of Christ. He tried, but was bothered and agitated. He was so upset, he could not compose himself to do the detailed work. Finally, he put his brushes down, found the man he had quarrelled with and asked for his forgiveness. It was only after that that he could complete the work of painting the face of Christ.

What's obstructing your ability to know Christ and make Him known? If it is wrong done to another, then do not wait any longer for them to come to you. If it is the Lord, do not delay to go to Him like the prodigal son, and throw yourself on His mercy.