

## **Do I Really Have to Believe *That*? Theology Gone Awry**

### **Do I Really Have to Believe in Forgiveness?**

Matthew 18:15-22

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We're three weeks in to our series on Christian theology gone awry, theological claims that make more than a few of us wonder, Do I Really Have to Believe That? The first week we considered creationism and biblical literalism. Last week we explored predestination. This week we turn to forgiveness, which might feel relieving to you. After all, forgiveness is one of our biggest selling points as Christians. We proclaim it every week in worship — we confess our sins, we are forgiven, and then we share the peace that come to us as a result of it all. When you frame it that way, who wouldn't be in favor of forgiveness?

On the other hand, few things in life, or in faith, are as simple as they first seem. What about instances of genuine harm? What about the things we really do want to let go of, but just can't? What about a person who makes no effort to change? What about the importance of reasonable boundaries? Does any of that matter? Or are we really just supposed to forgive, all the time?

It's complicated.

Especially because when I think about forgiveness, I tend to think about the big stories we hear about on the news.

There was the Amish community that forgave the man who came to their school and unleashed terrible violence, taking the lives of five girls and injuring five others. He wounded that community forever, but the Amish simply refused to hate what hurt them. At the

graveyard for one of the young victims, a grandfather said, "Do not think evil of the man who did this." A small group visited the family of the killer, who ended his own life at the end of his rampage. "Don't leave," they said. "Stay here. Stay in your home here." Sister Joan Chittister wrote at the time, "It was not the violence that shocked us. This sort of violence no longer has the capacity to shock us. It was the forgiveness that followed it that we were not prepared for. It was the Christianity we all profess but which they practiced that left us stunned."

And of course, here in South Carolina especially, surely you think about the Mother Emmanuel church in Charleston. Back in 2015, a self-professed white supremacist walked into a historically black church and took nine black lives right in the middle of Bible study. Forty-eight hours after having lost their mothers, sisters, their wives, sons, husbands, and brothers, the newly grief-stricken showed up in court for the bond hearing. And it wasn't planned or premeditated, and it wasn't all of them, but a number of them looked the killer in the eyes and said, "I forgive you."

These stories are amazing to me. They're humbling, and beautiful.

And at the same time, I have to wonder. I don't doubt those folks were genuine in their forgiveness. But can it really be expected of all of us? Should it be expected of all of us? Where does profound grief or righteous anger fit in? If we forgive too quickly, do we miss the chance

to ask questions about systemic issues that need to be addressed? Why did the first man only target girls? What pervasive hatred helped shape the second man? What role do we play in misogyny and racism? If we forgive, do these hard questions get passed over? And if they do, how do we ever change enough to ensure these sorts of things will someday stop happening? What does forgiveness really look like in these moments in the midst of these questions?

It's complicated.

I've told you about my preaching group before. We meet once a year, and write papers on biblical texts and read them aloud to one another and discuss every one of them at length. It's wonderfully nerdy, and it has helped me become not just a better preacher, but a better Christian, too. A few years ago, my friend Drew<sup>1</sup> wrote a brilliant paper on forgiveness that traces how and when it shows up throughout the entire Bible. You will hear a number of his observations today.

In the Old Testament, forgiveness is God's domain. People mess up. God rebukes us and warns us. People mess up again, sometimes even worse. God gets angry, understandably and righteously angry. But then that anger is followed by a promise of restoration and mercy. God is the one who is able to forgive, and God can be trusted. Like we sang earlier, "there's a wideness in God's mercy." In the Old Testament, forgiveness is God's business.

Jesus' teaching on the matter complicates all that.

There's the story about a paralyzed man who is brought to Jesus on a stretcher. Before Jesus heals him, he declares that the man is forgiven. Everyone is astonished and amazed and some are even a bit offended —

more so by the forgiveness of sins than by the recently paralyzed man just getting up and walking away. This shock is because forgiveness has always been something God does, and all of a sudden, here's Jesus, who by virtue of being both human and divine seems to be saying that forgiveness is not just God's responsibility, it's ours, too.

Then there's the time Jesus says before we pray, we're supposed to forgive anything we have against anyone. Anything. Anything against anyone. Before uttering a word of prayer. I imagine it's true that we connect better with God when our hearts are not distracted. But should we really not pray if we haven't forgiven everything? Isn't one of the reasons we pray to admit the things we struggle with? What if the reason I need to pray is because there's someone I really can't forgive?!

Of course there's the line in the Lord's prayer, the prayer Jesus teaches us to pray. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Whatever the translation, we ask God to forgive us the way we have forgiven others. The measure we receive is the measure we give. If we want unconditional forgiveness, we have to extend unconditional forgiveness.

The standard Jesus is setting here seems awfully high. Maybe even dangerously high.

It's worth noting that professionals of all sorts, from biblical scholars to practicing pastors to psychologists and social workers often talk about forgiveness as something we do as much for ourselves than for the other person or persons. We need to forgive because we need to move on. It's less about offering any sort of absolution and more about letting go of our own anger and hurt, our own resentment

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Lt. Drew Stockstill, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church (Harrisburg, PA) and chaplain in the Navy Reserve, in his 2018 paper for the By the Vine preaching group. I am indebted to him for much of this sermon, as well as others in the group for their shared reflections, especially Rev. Sarah Wiles, pastor of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church (Blacksburg, VA).

and pain. It's a step toward healing.

That's true — a lot of the time. But as all of those same professionals would note, it's not true *all* of the time. Insisting that forgiveness is part of healing can add a massive burden to someone already living with the heaviness and harm of trauma. It puts one more barrier in front of someone working their way through a difficult past. And there is nothing faithful about that.

Jesus himself makes this clear in today's scripture reading. Yes, there's the story about forgiveness being our business. And yes, there's the story about forgiving anyone and anything. And yes, there's the whole "forgive us as we forgive." But there's also the conversation Jesus has with Peter, when forgiveness is linked with honest confrontation, and the need for a change in behavior, and setting healthy boundaries. When someone wrongs you, you talk with them. If that doesn't help, you bring in someone else for support and you go back to them. If that doesn't help, you bring in the community. If there's still no change, you go your separate ways.

This system that Jesus lays out to Peter, it's not perfect. In human hands, it has sometimes led to harm — sometimes, unfortunately, this teaching has been used to shun or excommunicate people. But if interpreted rightly, there's important wisdom here. Naming harm that has been done, holding one another accountable, and maintaining boundaries is equally as holy and essential as anything else Jesus has to say about forgiveness.

Because there's a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Sometimes reconciliation is appropriate and possible, but sometimes it's not. Forgiveness does not mean you have to be friends with the cousin who ridiculed you and it does not mean you have to sit down to dinner every night with an ex-spouse who abused you. And it certainly does not mean staying in a dangerous situation.

There's a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness might lead to reconciliation, but reconciliation is not required for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the internal work we go through over time. Jesus says, right in the reading from Matthew, that it's something we do again and again and again. It's ongoing. It's not necessarily unconditional. It's not black and white. It's a process we go through, seven times, or seventy-seven times, or even more, if that's what it takes.

Forgiveness is something we strive toward. Because to be forgiven an offense is to be set free. And to forgive an offense is to be set free. What we bind, we're bound to. What we set loose, we're freed from. It might take time — seven times, seventy seven times, 700 hundred times. Because forgiveness isn't simple or straightforward. That's why Jesus' teaching about it isn't simple or straightforward, either.

My favorite Bible story about forgiveness is actually one we haven't gotten to yet. It's from the Gospel of John. After Jesus dies, he disciples are huddled in a locked room, terrified, wondering if they going to be next. When push came to shove, they'd left Jesus. They ran. They were behind locked doors, held captive by their own fear, and probably by guilt and regret, as well.

Then Jesus appears. And his very first word is, "Peace. Peace be with you." Nothing of anger or accusation. Just, "Peace." And then he breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit.

The first word, the first act, of the Risen Lord to his terrified followers is one of forgiveness. He is the victim. He has every right to come back with a vengeance. But that is not the way of the Resurrected One.

And then, after he's forgiven them, he gives them the power to forgive others. John puts it this way: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." No ultimatums or

requirements about who they forgive and who they don't. Just an observation that forgiveness is possible. He gives them gift of that possibility.

That's the important part, I think. We're forgiven, by the victim, and that forgiveness is what empowers our forgiveness. Forgiveness, in any and all of its forms, is, ultimately, a gift. It's not something we can force or achieve. It's not an item to check off a to-do list. It is pure grace.

That's why when Paul talks about forgiveness, he uses a Greek word with a dual meaning. It can mean forgiveness, but that can also mean gift. Because that's really what forgiveness is.

Forgiveness doesn't erase harm. It doesn't nullify the need for accountability or boundaries. It does not require reconciliation. But by God's grace, because we're forgiven, we can forgive others more than we might ever think possible.

It can happen in a flash, in a moment, the way it did for the Amish community or the folks in Charleston. It can be an immediate, miraculous gift. And it can also be a slow miracle, one that unfolds over time, with tremendous effort, a process that takes seven times, or seventy-seven times. But whenever it comes, however it comes, it's a gift.

So if you have unhealed hurt in your life, hear that. Forgiveness is complicated. It is. To pretend otherwise would dishonor not only our own experience, but also the One who walks through our every experience with us. I think that's why Jesus has so much to say about it. It's too complex for sound bites and pull quotes. But in the midst of the complication and complexity, the bottom line is this: forgiveness is a gift we're given. That we are forgiven is sheer grace. And whatever forgiveness we're ultimately able to offer is sheer grace, too.

If I understand it, that's the forgiveness that's worth believing in.

Because there is one more story to tell still. The story of how when Jesus was on the cross, dying, he spoke. The Gospels tell us he spoke seven times. And he didn't say, "You'll pay for this." He didn't say, "I hate you." He didn't say, "You are beyond hope." He didn't curse. He didn't rage. He hung there, and he said, "Father, forgive them."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The end of this sermon is shaped by Fred Craddock's *Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult?*