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FORGIVENESS IN THE BIBLE AND IN POP PSYCHOLOGY

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Modern Western culture has drunk deeply of pop psychology's ideas regarding forgiveness. Because of this, modern relationships are not generally built on a firm foundation of genuine love, truth, and reconciliation. Even among Christians, relationships too often remain at a superficial level marked by denial and avoidance by those who have injured others and by unresolved pain in those who have been wronged. Neither party grows from the experience, as God would intend. These types of weak and potentially explosive relationships are avoidable if we are willing to commit to a wholly biblical view and practice of forgiveness.

BIBLICAL DATA ON GOD'S FORGIVENESS

God is the pattern for all righteous behavior. We are to be perfect just as God is perfect (Matt. 5:48). We are to imitate Jesus Christ so faithfully that we are to "follow His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21). Indeed, the process of sanctification is equated with being "conformed to His image" (Rom. 8:29–30¹). Even in the matter of extending forgiveness to others, the behavior of God Himself is to be our pattern. We are to forgive others "even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). We are specifically told to imitate the forgiveness of Christ (Col. 3:13).

Canceled Debt

God's forgiveness is characterized as canceling a right of repayment or as completely eliminating a debt (Matt. 18:27, 32; Luke 7:41–50). When God forgives a person, his (or her) sin is covered and is therefore no longer considered by God (Ps. 32:1, Ps. 85:2, Isa. 44:22). God puts so much psychological and spiritual space between us and our forgiven sins that it can be likened to the endless distance between east and west (Ps. 103:10–13). God's forgiveness is unlimited in scope, as well, covering all sins (Ps. 103:3; 1 John 1:9, but see the exception, Matt. 12:31–32), and is available to all people (2 Pet. 3:9).

Reconciliation

It goes without saying that the goal of God's forgiveness is not the psychological health of the forgiver, since God is perfectly healthy from the beginning. Rather, the goal of

God's forgiveness is the *reconciliation* of human beings to Himself and the restoration of a relationship marred by human sin (Acts 26:18; Eph. 1:7–11; Col. 1:13–22). Further, this reconciliation is not the result of a psychological trick by which God simply decides one day to ignore the mass of offenses committed by human beings (Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18). God's forgiveness, rather, is extended within the context of both mercy and justice. God fully and completely judges sin, and based on the demonstration of wrath and purging of guilt that took place in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (called *propitiation* in Rom. 3:24–26), both mercy and judgment are possible. In God's economy, sin must be judged even while God's mercy is given an avenue through which to operate.

Conditional Forgiveness

God's forgiveness, then, is not tolerance of sin or "letting bygones be bygones." God's forgiveness is based on the fact that sin has already been judged in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Matt. 26:28; Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:22; 1 John 2:12). Although Christ is the ground of all forgiveness of sin and such forgiveness is freely given, there are conditions that precede receiving this forgiveness, such as faith (Rom. 3:24–26).

This is an important principle: while God's *love* is unconditional, His *forgiveness of sin* is conditional. God's love is constant and universal in that He is good toward all people, regardless of their moral character (Matt. 5:44–45; Luke 6:35). He desires and has made it possible for all people to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9) and He is always "ready to forgive" (Ps. 86:5). But God's *forgiveness*, while certainly conceptually related to and motivated by His love, is not extended universally, as His love is.

In the Old Testament, Joshua makes clear that not just anyone can obtain God's forgiveness of sins. Because God is holy and jealous, those who forsake Him or serve idols are not the recipients of His forgiveness (Josh. 24:19–21). Repentance, or "returning from one's evil way," is further presented as a prerequisite for obtaining forgiveness (Jer. 36:3, cf. Ps. 51, esp. vv. 3, 16–17). New Testament teaching agrees. The woman who received forgiveness consequent to her anointing of the Lord's feet is stated to have exercised faith in Him, and thus her sins were forgiven (Luke 7:40–50). She was motivated by godly sorrow for her own sins (Luke 7:44–47), and Paul explicitly notes that such godly sorrow "works repentance" (2 Cor. 7:9–10). Repentance and forgiveness of sins are similarly linked in Peter's sermons (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22). So repentance is considered to be a prerequisite, or *condition*, of receiving forgiveness from God in both Testaments.

CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Since Christ is our example and we are to imitate the Father in our own moral character, we should emulate God in both our willingness to grant forgiveness and the conditions under which we grant it. Like God's forgiveness of human beings, our forgiveness of others is based on the redeeming work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 2:10). Like God's

forgiveness, we should be willing to forgive all people, for any sin, an unrestricted number of times (Matt. 18:21–22; Luke 17:4).

Freedom in Forgiveness

However, there is much disagreement culturally as to whether forgiveness is conditional or unconditional, and what its purposes are. “Spiritual counselor” Gary Zukav maintains, “When you don’t forgive it’s like wearing dark sunglasses that distort everything you see....Forgiving is...lightening up. It is being able to enjoy your life, laugh again, and see the beauty in others. When you cannot forgive yourself, you cannot forgive others. When you cannot forgive others, you cannot forgive yourself.”² According to Zukav, then, forgiveness is primarily a matter of personal psychological health and self-fulfillment. It is “lightening up” as a part of a quest for personal happiness.

At Oprah.com one reads that “in his book...clinical psychologist Everett Worthington Jr. offers a five-step process he calls REACH. First, **recall** the hurt. Then **empathize** and try to understand the act from the perpetrator’s point of view. Be **altruistic** by recalling a time in your life when you were forgiven. **Commit** to putting your forgiveness into words. You can do this either in a letter to the person you’re forgiving or in your journal. Finally, try to **hold** on to the forgiveness. Don’t dwell on your anger, hurt, and desire for vengeance.”³

So, according to Worthington’s pop psychology, forgiveness can be accomplished merely by the offended party’s expression of it—perhaps in his or her journal. Yet note that it is anticipated that an attempt to forgive in such a way might be difficult to “hold on to.” Forgiveness is an act of altruism, not provoked by any act or attitude in the wrongdoer and not conceptually related to healing relationships or judgment of wrongdoing.

Such erroneous notions of forgiveness are not limited to secular thinking, but are affirmed by professing Christians as well. Denise George, writing for ChristianityToday.com, says, “You’ve acknowledged the hurt and rightly blamed the offender. Now you’re ready to make the willful decision to ‘cancel the debt’ your offender owes you. Find a quiet place to be alone and ask the Lord’s help in forgiving the person who hurt you....After you’ve prayed and while you’re still alone, speak aloud your decision to forgive: ‘(Name of offender), I’ve chosen to forgive you for hurting me....’”⁴

Free Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be accomplished while you are alone, merely by speaking it into existence? While George rightly recognizes that forgiveness involves recognition of moral culpability (you have *blamed the offender*), she seems to consider forgiveness more of a process of dealing with one’s own hurt than one of fixing a relationship that has been marred by wrongdoing. Note her idea that forgiveness is unilateral: while *you* have *blamed* the offender, *he* is not required to *accept responsibility* in order for forgiveness to be extended.

The “forgiveness” of pop culture is a matter of personal psychological health that we perform by ourselves, for ourselves. “Forgiveness” is essentially getting over an injustice; it is the near equivalent of releasing a grudge, and it can be accomplished unilaterally. “Forgiveness...means that we change old patterns of beliefs and actions that are driven by our bitterness. As we let go of grudges, we’ll no longer define our lives by how we’ve been hurt....It may be particularly hard to forgive someone who doesn’t admit wrong or doesn’t speak of their sorrow. Keep in mind that the key benefits of forgiveness are for you.”⁵

Conditional, Confrontational, and Conciliatory

Nothing could be further from the biblical model than the popular ideas above. While the Christian must always have a conciliatory spirit, even in relation to those who may never ask for forgiveness, the actual act of forgiveness requires a wrongdoer’s confession or repentance. Biblical forgiveness is not extended arbitrarily or unilaterally, but is *conditioned* on the repentance of the wrongdoer. “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” (Luke 17:3–4).

Jesus says that if someone trespasses (αμαρτανω), the most generic New Testament word for “sin,” encompassing both intentional and unintentional offenses) against us, we are personally to “rebuke” him for his sin. We are to do so in an attempt to offer forgiveness to him, but we are to forgive him conditionally, *only* if he repents (v. 3). If he continues to offend, we are to continue to forgive conditionally, *if* he continues to repent (v. 4). There must be both a human *confessor* and a human *forgiver* in order for forgiveness to be complete. Human forgiveness, then, is *conditional*, just as is divine forgiveness (2 Pet. 3:9).

Biblical forgiveness is *confrontational*. Scripture does not indicate that it is possible, in the privacy and isolation of one’s own mind, to release one’s hurt mystically and achieve forgiveness. In Matthew 5:23–24, Jesus demands that if we come to worship (“bring thy gift to the altar”) and, prior to presenting our gift, realize that there is some unresolved matter (the Greek term is τics, literally “anything,” great or small) between ourselves and our brother, that we are to leave the act of worship and seek to be immediately reconciled to our brother. So reconciliation with our brother is placed on a higher religious (not merely ethical) plane than even the worship of the Almighty. If we are at fault, we must confront the person that we have wronged with our recognition and confession of wrongdoing. Note also that in Luke 17:3–4, we are commanded to extend forgiveness in a process that begins with an act of confrontation: our *rebuking* our brother. In Matthew 18:15–17, we are commanded to confront the wrongdoer, and if he will not be scripturally reconciled, to seek the help of others in confronting him, too. There is no biblical justification for simply not speaking about sin committed either by us or against us and “getting on with life.”

While it is true that biblical forgiveness is confrontational, it is important to note that the confrontation has as its entire goal the objective *reconciliation* of relationships

marred by sin. The Bible recognizes Christian *relationships*—not popular conceptions of *mental health*—as the primary criteria in determining the validity of one’s Christian walk (John 13:35). In Matthew 18, Jesus makes plain that reconciliation is so important that one church member’s failure to be reconciled is sufficient grounds for removing him from the local church and treating him as “a heathen man and a publican.”⁶

Reconciliation of marred relationships between believers is of such high ethical importance that it cannot merely be a matter left to the two parties to sort out. If an attempt at reconciliation does not succeed, church leadership or the church itself should become involved (Matt. 18:16–17).

Note that the simple process of church discipline is enough to contradict the common misconception that forgiveness is a subjective psychological exercise by which one merely releases hurt or “chang[es] old beliefs and patterns and actions that are driven by our bitterness.” If forgiveness were so easily accomplished, there would be no need for a command to confront the offending brother (Matt. 18:15), no need to involve the church (vv. 16-17), and certainly no need to remove the offender from the local fellowship (v. 17). The believer simply could subjectively “forgive” or “release his hurt” and walk away. But genuine forgiveness is not a subjective experience related to mental health. It is an objective transaction in which one party accepts responsibility for wrongdoing and another party willingly reconciles despite the harm suffered (vv. 15–17). It is the objective reality of healing relationships in such a way as to demonstrate the mercy and love of God to others by modeling His willingness to forgive us despite the infinite harm caused to His glory by man’s sin (Matt. 18:23–35). Therefore, if forgiveness is either sought or offered and the other party refuses to respond appropriately, such failure to accomplish the objectively measurable transaction of repentance followed by forgiveness and reconciliation demands that church discipline be enforced.

In summary, biblical forgiveness is an objective, conditional, bilateral transaction in which sinners are confronted so that sin can be judged by both the offender and the offended and, consequently, relationships can be reconciled.

The snake oil that is pop psychology’s “forgiveness” condones sin, coddles the sinner, and leaves relationships forever marred. As with God’s judgment of our own sin on the cross, human wrongs can only be fully dealt with when mercy and justice are *both* satisfied. Therefore, confrontation of the offender—and repentance by the offender prior to extension of forgiveness—is a necessary aspect of accurately imitating divine forgiveness.

Recognizing that genuine forgiveness is conditional leads to the achievement of full spiritual maturity in both the offender and the offended. The offender knows that his sin has not been ignored, but rather has been judged. He has the opportunity to participate in the judgment of his own wrong, which is a necessary part of avoiding God’s greater judgment of sin (1 Cor. 11:31–32). He is also motivated to turn away from destructive personal behavior patterns that he now understands are not only wrong, but also hurtful to others and shameful to him. That true forgiveness is

conditional also motivates both parties always to be willing to reconcile, leading to the rule of both love and peace within the church.

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the King James Version except where free-form translations of the Greek and Hebrew are offered.
- 2 Gary Zukav, *How to Forgive Yourself*, Oprah.com (http://www.oprah.com/spiritself/lybl/well/ss_lybl_well_forgive01_h.jhtml), accessed May 26, 2008. Considering the biblical data below, in which forgiveness is demonstrated to be about healing relationships, Christians can understandably be skeptical of the whole idea of “forgiving one’s self.”
- 3 Michael McCullough and Robert Emmons, *Choosing Happiness*, Oprah.com (http://www.oprah.com/spiritself/webmd/200710/spirit_happy_105.jhtml), accessed May 26, 2008.
- 4 Denise George, “What Forgiveness Isn’t,” in *Today’s Christian Woman*, ChristianityToday.com (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2006/julaug/14.38.html?start=3>), accessed May 26, 2008.
- 5 Katherine M. Piderman, Ph.D., “Forgiveness: How to Let Go of Grudges and Bitterness,” MayoClinic.com (www.mayoclinic.com/print/forgiveness/MH00131/METHOD=print), accessed on May 27, 2008.
- 6 Far from being permission to treat the person cast out of the church with hatred, the role of the church following the process of church discipline changes from edifying and mobilizing him to attempting to evangelize him (Gal. 1:16; Gal. 2:9) and to love and pray for him (Matt. 5:44; Jude 21–23).