

FORGIVENESS

An act of God's grace to forget forever and not hold people of faith accountable for sins they confess; to a lesser degree the gracious human act of not holding wrong acts against a person. Forgiveness has both divine and human dimensions. In the divine relationship, it is, first of all, the gracious act of God by which believers are put into a right relationship to God and transferred from spiritual death to spiritual life through the sacrifice of Jesus. It is also, in this divine dimension, the on-going gift of God without which our lives as Christians would be "out of joint" and full of guilt. In terms of a human dimension, forgiveness is that act and attitude toward those who have wronged us which restores relationships and fellowship.

Everyone Needs Forgiveness

The basic facts of the Bible are God's creative power and holiness, human rebellion, and the efforts of our merciful God to bring us back to an intended relationship of Sonship and fellowship. The need of forgiveness is first seen in the third chapter of Genesis, as Adam and Eve wilfully disobeyed God, choosing rather to satisfy their own self-will.

The result was

- a) Guilt (Gen. 3:8, 10),
- b) Separation from God, loss of fellowship (Gen. 3:8, 23-24),
- c) And a life of hardship, anxiety, and death (Gen. 3:16-24)

David expressed this terrible condition of the un-forgiven sinner graphically in Psalm 51. He spoke of being unclean (v. 2, 7, 10), of being sinful by his very nature (v. 5), of his grief and sorrow at being separated from God (v. 8, 11, 12), and of his guilt (v. 14). Sinners cannot live rightly without God, and yet as a sinner a person is cut off from the holy God. Only through the mercy of God can one find peace and forgiveness.

Forgiveness in the Old Testament

The primary means of obtaining forgiveness in the Old Testament is through the sacrificial system of the covenant relationship, which God established when He brought His people out of Egypt. The sacrificial system expressed the dynamics of the sinful human condition. The bringing of the sacrifice showed the sense of need; the laying of the hands on the living sacrifice symbolised identification of the person with the sacrifice, as did the releasing of the life of the animal through the sacrificial slaughter. Emphasis on an unblemished sacrifice stressed the holiness of God contrasted with human sinfulness. The forgiveness of God, channelled through the sacrificial offering, was an act of mercy freely bestowed by God, not purchased by the one bringing the offering.

An emphasis upon God's demand for a repentant heart as the basis for forgiveness, while not totally absent earlier (see Ps. 51), gained its full expression in the prophets (Isa. 1:10-18; Jer. 7:21-26; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-27). This element does not negate but rather deepens the understanding of the sacrifice. The Old Testament sacrificial system could never give once-for-all forgiveness. It had to be repeated over and over (Heb. 10:1-4).

Forgiveness in the New Testament

Jesus is the perfect and final Sacrifice through which God's forgiveness is mediated to every person (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 10:11-12). The connection of Jesus with forgiveness is seen in His own self-understanding. According to the Old Testament, only God could forgive sins; yet Jesus

declared that He could do so, and He did (Mark 2:1-12; John 8:2-11). He saw His own death as the fulfilment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. At the Last Supper He spoke of His death as "my blood of the New Testament [covenant]" (Mark 14:24). Jesus Himself is the unblemished Sacrifice (Isa. 53:3-7), offered once for all (Heb. 9:28) not by a human being, but by God Himself in Christ Jesus for the sins of mankind (Heb. 9:14; Rom. 3:25; Acts 13:38). Forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ is available for everyone who truly repents (Luke 23:39-43; John 8:2-11). This is the message of the early church. The promised new age has arrived; old things have passed away (Acts 2:36-39; 3:13-19, 26; 5:31).

The Sin which is Unforgivable

It is true that Jesus spoke of an unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:22-32; Mark 3:22-30; Luke 12:10). It is not a question of God's ability or desire to forgive, but rather a matter of human willingness to meet the conditions for forgiveness. The background of the saying was the controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders of His time. The Pharisees refused to see the merciful hand of God in the work of Jesus, and rather attributed His miracles to the power of Satan. For such who deliberately closed their minds to the work and invitation of God in Christ to draw near, repent, and receive forgiveness, there is no hope. But the fault lies with them, rather than with God.

Human Forgiveness in the New Testament

As a part of His teaching about human need for forgiveness and the means of receiving it, Jesus spoke of the human dimension of forgiveness. A firm condition for the receiving of God's forgiveness is the willingness to forgive others. In the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4) and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:12-35) Jesus clearly indicated such is the case: "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15).

The forgiven life is the forgiving life.

Human forgiveness reflects our experience and understanding of divine forgiveness. Love, not wooden rules, governs forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22). Jesus powerfully demonstrated this teaching on the cross, as He asked for forgiveness for His executioners (Luke 23:34). Paul reminded the church at Ephesus of both the grounds of their forgiveness and the basis on which they must forgive one another (Eph. 4:32).