

I NEED TO FORGIVE MY IMPENITENT NEIGHBOR

BY

DANIEL J. JOHNSTON

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to address the topic of forgiveness. This paper will demonstrate how misconceptions concerning the nature of forgiveness can arise in the secular world today, and even in churches, where many believe that one should only forgive another person as a reaction to their penitence following wrong-doing.

This thesis will examine the biblical bases for forgiveness as one finds them in a number of sections of Scripture. This examination will include not only exegetical issues found in isolated passages, but also the examples found in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant and in Jesus' own words from the cross concerning his enemies. This paper will consider the necessity of my attitude of personal forgiveness even toward the impenitent neighbor. This thesis will also take into account different situations where wisdom must guide the words and statements spoken by the wronged Christian to the impenitent individual and how these concerns may be expressed.

This understanding of forgiveness is one which is found in Scripture. One finds this evident in the biblical doctrine of objective justification, in which God declares the world forgiven totally on the merits of Christ and his redemptive work. The response of the individual does not change the completeness of that forgiveness. In the same manner Christians also forgive others who have wronged them.

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Introduction

Your head may have hit the ceiling upon reading that title. “Did I read that correctly? There must be some mistake.” After all, forgiveness and impenitence are two entities which never belong in the same sentence, unless stated negatively. Perhaps you are vigorously flipping through the pages of your Bibles in preparation to launch an attack against me on the basis of Matthew 18.¹

I wouldn't blame you. The title in and of itself is inadequate to explain the purpose and goal of this paper—which is, I suppose, why I will continue with this thesis for a number of pages. My goal is not to upend Matthew 18. Quite the contrary.

In the various circles and sects of Christianity, including our own in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, we find varying opinions on this topic of forgiveness. Some suggest that we ought always to forgive a neighbor or erring brother who has sinned against us. After all, this is the nature of forgiveness. One pastor explained it this way: “Since forgiveness is releasing the right to get even or be upset, releasing the punishment for sin (which we don't have any right to exert anyway), my life ought to be one of forgiveness.”² Another experienced campus pastor explained that “forgiveness is not dependent on what the wrong-doer says or does to 'deserve' our forgiveness, any more than our penitence deserves God's forgiveness.”³ In this we understand that personal forgiveness is not up to the Christian's discretion, as though meting out reward based upon behavior. The Christian offers this forgiveness regardless.

On the other hand, others tie this concept of personal forgiveness of an impenitent neighbor directly to the ministry of the keys. Thus, if one does not repent of his wrong-doing toward me, then I withhold that forgiveness indefinitely until he or she takes that first step. One pastor explains: “I have the responsibility to go to the person who has sinned against me in an effort to reach reconciliation. If he repents, I forgive him. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he doesn't repent, I cannot forgive him. How do I know he repents? I go by what he says, an expression of repentance or offering an apology. . . . There are not two forgivenesses, but one. . . . [There] is no 'personal forgiveness,' but a way to continue on a path of peace inside oneself, a way of being free from malice. In summary, I have the duty and responsibility to give forgiveness when the person who sins against

¹ Matthew 18:15-20 recounts Jesus' words to his disciples concerning the ministry of the keys and the forgiveness, or absolution, which we announce to those who are repentant of their sins committed. This deals with subjective justification, that is, the sinner's trust in that forgiveness won by Christ.

² For full context of this quotation, please see Appendix B, Pastor B for the answers received via the questionnaire.

³ For full context of this quotation, please see Appendix B, Pastor A for the answers received via the questionnaire.

me repents. I must forgive. I cannot forgive when the person who sins against me does not repent. I must not nurture grudges or harbor hard feelings.”⁴ This understanding limits the forgiveness of the Christian and subjects pardon to certain conditions. Yet it is important to note here that the end of the quotation reflects what the first pastor questioned stated, that it “releases the right to get even or be upset.”

Are these two schools of thought diametrically opposed toward each other? The temptation might be to think that these thoughts are as incompatible as fire and water. Yet as we dig deeper and give a fair ear to such understandings, I believe that we will find these two seemingly opposed thoughts both complement—one completes the other—and supplement—one reinforces and extends the other.

As I alluded to previously, the chapter of the Bible which tends to receive the greatest stress, especially when dealing with an impenitent individual, is Matthew 18:15-20. This states:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

My goal is not to throw this section of Scripture into the rubbish heap, nor to consider it old and outdated as many modern churches do. But we need to realize that Matthew 18 is about the ministry of the keys and the priesthood of all believers. The ministry of the keys tells me *not* to forgive the impenitent brother. But this is a different aspect or facet of forgiveness which Jesus addresses in these words, namely, the absolution and forgiveness given by God to the penitent and believing heart. As believers, we all have the command to show our brother his fault, and, if he remains impenitent, to bind the sin to the sinner with a pronouncement of judgment upon his actions. This is important to remember and always take very seriously as Christians living in a world which seeks to overlook sin and even to condone errors of lifestyle.

Yet our offering personal forgiveness, that is, releasing that perceived “right to get even or be

⁴ For full context of this quotation, please see Appendix B, Pastor C for the answers received via the questionnaire.

upset,” is different than the ministry of the keys. We are a people who have been bought with precious blood through a sacrifice by which “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”⁵ As those people whom God has dearly loved and chosen to be his own children, we now have an opportunity to reflect Christ’s love to the world in our daily lives and actions. As we live out of love for him who died for us, we forgive our impenitent neighbors. This forgiveness is not about their relationship with God, but about my own sanctified living. This forgiveness is a subjective matter, in that this is about myself and my relationship not only with them, but with my God who no longer holds my own sins against me. I need to forgive my impenitent neighbor.

In this paper I will strive to emphasize the importance of this two-fold display of love for others: offering personal forgiveness to the one who sins against me, while also employing the ministry of the keys as a member of that priesthood of all believers.

Biblical Basis for Forgiveness

As in every area of practical theology, we must draw from the Scriptures that which we learn. If the Wisconsin Synod as a church body were to go on the basis of reason or feelings alone, then we would have a basis for a much different theology. This matter of forgiving the impenitent neighbor is no different. We find this in Scripture both in the direct speech of the Lord Jesus and in a number of practical examples.

First one ought to look in the prescriptive passages of Scripture. In fact, one needs not look beyond the very words of Jesus himself to find plenty of proof passages. In very clear, precise words our Savior speaks of our forgiving attitude for others and how this is very directly parallel to our relationship with God.

Luke 11:4

ἰ ἄ ἡμῖ ἄ ἅμ ἡμῶ , ἰ ἄ ὁ ἰ ἄ μ ἰ ὁ ἡμῖ .⁶

We find this most clearly in the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, as recorded in Luke 11:4. Here his disciples had been witnessing Jesus engaged in prayer. Afterward, one of those disciples sought guidance from Jesus. He asked how he and his fellow brothers ought to pray. After all, John the

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:19. All verses from Scripture are taken from the New International Version copyright 1984.

⁶ For a thorough examination of the Greek in this passage, please see the Exegetical Study of Luke 11:4 in Appendix A.

Baptist had taught his disciples. How much more shouldn't the fulfillment of John's prophecy also teach his followers to pray!

In verse 4 we read the words in English, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”⁷ The Greek vocable ἡμῶν, which we translate here as the accusative, plural, direct object of the sentence, is one that is fully denoted with its common meaning in English, “sin.” This isn't merely talking about the bad and immoral activities which we do. It also speaks to the state of continued evil which we actually *are*. Our ἡμῶν is not just in conduct, but in the flesh of fallen mankind on this side of heaven. Because of our nature and our deeds, which are totally corrupt, Jesus tells us to pray for the forgiveness of sins. The Christian knows that Jesus died on the cross to accomplish this very task. In fact, through Christ's death on the cross, we know that the entire world has received the forensic declaration of “not guilty.”

There is no need to get hyper-technical with ἡμῶν in the following line. In English we transpose those two words into the more savory-sounding “for also.” (ἡμῶν means “and” or “also” in English. With another conjunction ἡμῶν, “for,” we take the adverbial meaning “also” for ἡμῶν.) Next we find ἡμῶν, an intensive pronoun coupled with and emphasizing the subject of ἡμῶν, the root of which means “to dismiss” or “to send away.” This verb possesses a plural first person subject. Thus far, the sentence reads, “For also we ourselves forgive.” Now we arrive at that which is (for our purposes) the crux of the phrase in the word ἡμῶν, which means “all,” “every,” or “entire.” This little adjective, as it modifies the following participle, carries with it tremendous weight, because it is the *only* adjective or adverb modifying that participle. We forgive *everyone* ὅσων, formally, “who is indebted.” This vocable is frequently used in the New Testament to denote personal sin against another. Finally ἡμῶν acknowledges that those referenced here are indebted “to us.”

Who, then, ought we forgive through the understanding of this passage? When somebody commits wrong against us, does our attitude or even word of forgiveness for that person hinge upon a requirement? On the contrary! Our Savior here does not indicate that we are to withhold personal forgiveness from anybody. He does not tell us to wait for some sort of indication of repentance before acknowledging and personally forgiving a brother, sister, or neighbor. Rather Jesus tells us to willingly forgive, following the pattern of his own willing forgiveness for us! Just as he died to forgive our sins and does so freely, so also we ought to have that same forgiving attitude in thought, word, and action

⁷ Personal translation after exegetical study. The wooden quality of personal translations is meant to reflect very closely the original denotation in the Greek language.

for our neighbors.

Matthew 6:14-15

Ἐὰν ἂν ἡμεῖς ἴδωμεν ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἔχουμε ὀφειλὰς ἡμῶν, ὁ ἅγιος πατήρ ἡμῶν ἡμᾶς ἀφήσει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ὀφειλὰς ἡμῶν. Ἐὰν ὅμως ἡμεῖς μὴ ἀφήσωμεν τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ὀφειλὰς ἡμῶν, οὐδέ ὁ ἅγιος πατήρ ἡμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ὀφειλὰς ἡμῶν.⁸

Another such example in Scripture comes from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. He has, in fact, just finished giving the Lord's Prayer to his disciples and multitudes who had followed him there. Jesus here actually takes time following the conclusion of that prayer to add further commentary on that phrase “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” found in verse 12. His commentary explains or expounds upon the issue this way: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”⁹

Here we see the issue presented in a considerably more serious light, subjectively speaking. We witness not only our relationship with others, but our relationship with God at stake. He says that my forgiving attitude actually highlights and clarifies my relationship with him! Jesus states the truth conditionally: “For *if* you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” We understand that our heavenly Father has forgiven not only us, but the whole world in Christ's cross. The *ἐὰν* in this instance is not etiological but syllogistic.¹⁰

The condition expressed here is not the one which our human natures might prefer. Jesus does not say, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you *and then repent*.” Like the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:4, as well as in Matthew 6:12 only a few verses prior, the issue at hand for a Christian is not whether the person wronging him or her has repented. The only concern for the believing heart is whether or not he or she is forgiving the wrongdoer regardless of the actions committed by the trespasser.

⁸ See Exegetical Study of Matthew 6:14-15 in Appendix A.

⁹ Personal translation.

¹⁰ An etiological understanding of the word translated “if” in this passage would denote a causal idea. Thus my forgiveness would then become the cause of God forgiving me. A syllogistic understanding of “if” describes an independent relationship between two things. Example: “If you get up in the morning, the sun will be shining brightly.” Your getting up would not cause the sun to be shining. Your getting up in the morning would allow you to enjoy the shining of that sun. Thus my forgiveness for another is syllogistic, because God has forensically declared the world forgiven in Christ. Yet if I am unforgiving, I truly live in unbelief and reject the forgiveness offered me.

No deep exegetical commentary is required here to shed light on the truth expressed. God is very serious about our forgiving attitude. In fact, to refuse forgiveness for a person is evidence of living in unbelief. The “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant” illustrates this wonderfully, but I will save that discussion in talking about the biblical examples portrayed for us.

Mark 11:25

ὁ ὅταν μὴ ἀφῆτε τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ὑμῶν ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἔσμεν ἰσχυροὶ ἵνα ἴδωμεν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ὑμῶν.¹¹

This verse may contain some of the strongest support for forgiving my impenitent neighbor. Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the power of prayer. He then interjects with what almost seems like a side-comment concerning the issue. “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”¹²

The word *στήκετε* (from *στημι*) in that first clause is present tense. This indicates clearly that the action is still continuing. This happens ὅταν, whenever the subject is standing and praying to the Lord. The following course of action does not occur at some point afterward. It occurs at the very same time that the individual is praying.

The individual praying here has been wronged. He has not conveyed forgiveness to that person. Now he must resolve this issue not between himself and the offender at this time, but between himself and God. That final phrase “so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” hearkens back to the previously considered passage. The relationship in consideration at this time is not the horizontal relationship between two people (although this is certainly an issue also to be dealt with). The relationship in consideration is between the one forgiving and God himself.

In neither Mark 11:25, nor in Luke 11:4 and Matthew 6:14-15 is this forgiveness for others ever spoken of as hinging upon a condition. In all of these cases, Jesus is speaking to people on a very personal level, as they dwell together in love not for self, but always for others. To hinge forgiveness at a personal level on a condition is simply not the language which the Bible uses. On the contrary, these New Testament passages indicate that we ought to offer this forgiveness unconditionally.

This unconditional forgiveness is not just spoken of theoretically or as a matter of philosophy in the Bible. We also have the privilege of viewing numerous examples in the Scriptures where such

¹¹ See Exegetical Study of Mark 11:25, Appendix A.
¹² Personal translation.

personal forgiveness was offered despite the impenitent offenses of others.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

This parable of Jesus immediately follows his discourse on forgiving the *penitent* brother. Still, we can glean some important principles from this parable which, again, do not hinge upon the condition of repentance. In this parable we see that the attitude of forgiveness does not hinge upon reparations on the part of the egregious party.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”¹³

This parable begins with the question from Peter. Although we cannot read Peter's heart, and this may have just been an innocent question, the content of the parable seems to indicate that Peter is searching for an excuse not to forgive. (If that is not the case, why would Peter ask this question in the

¹³ Matthew 18:21-35.

first place?)

Jesus begins the parable with a man who owes a tremendous amount of money to the king, an amount which he will never have the ability to repay. Sound familiar? This man is each and every one of us. We all owe God a debt which we can never repay. Our sin leaves us in a state where we are unable to attain perfection for ourselves. We can only rely upon the mercy of our heavenly Father.

Now the words of the servant may appear at first glance to be an indication of repentance. At closer examination, this possibility holds little water. The language used in connection with repentance in the New Testament never speaks of repentance in such a way as to suggest that we are paying our portion. While there is certainly an appeal to the mercy of the king in this situation, those words “I will pay back everything” seem incongruous to repentance.

Regardless, the issue of this parable is not the matter of the servant's repentance. Nor is the issue the matter of the latter servant promising his repayment. The point of this parable is the king's gracious forgiveness of a debt which the servant could have never hoped to repay! Mercifully, the king cancels that debt and sends the debtor on his way, free of all charges.

When this servant then meets another who owes him money, his actions are opposite of what he should have done. The unmerciful servant should have forgiven the debt without any confrontation whatsoever! One for whom so much mercy had just been given ought to have said, “Although this man owes me that money, I will forgive that debt just as my own debt has been canceled.” Sadly, his attitude is not forgiving, but demanding.

When the king finds out about what has taken place, he rebukes the unmerciful servant and throws him back into prison. Again, the idea of repaying the debt here should not be paralleled with repentance. The tertium of this parable is that of forgiveness. We find this in Jesus' words as he wraps up the parable: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”¹⁴ There is no condition or prerequisite for this forgiveness. We forgive others simply because we have been forgiven by God, and not on the basis of whether or not they have repented of their sins against us.

“Father, forgive them . . .”

Most have heard those words each year during Holy Week. Most have probably meditated on

¹⁴ Matthew 18:35.

such words more than once on Good Friday. These are important words—and possibly some of the most relevant to this topic of forgiveness. Yet the ramifications of such words are often overlooked. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”¹⁵ What exactly do these words speak to us?

One of the biggest issues that we must take note of is the fact that these words were not spoken by a sinful human being. The actions even of men like David, who is spoken of as being after God's own heart, were tainted and stained with sinfulness. But the one who spoke those words, “Father, forgive them,” had never committed any wrong in the eyes of God. He had never slipped in thought, word, or deed even once during his entire life. Because the example that he set for us was *perfect*, there can be no doubt that his plea to God now was absolutely right. Jesus Christ himself provides us with that example of forgiveness.

The context of this situation shows just how undeserving the recipients of that forgiving sentence were. We read the words in context in Luke 23:32-37:

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with [Jesus] to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

This wasn't even the beginning of Jesus' torment at the hands of the Roman soldiers and Jewish officials. In the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas, his Jewish captors had mocked him, spat in his face, and assaulted him with their fists.¹⁶ The Roman soldiers had made great sport out of humiliating him. They had placed a purple robe around his wounded shoulders, pressed a crown of thorns into his head, and hailed him as the king of the Jews.¹⁷ Even the Jewish citizens who passed by Jesus during his crucifixion offered their insults, saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in

¹⁵ Luke 23:34a.

¹⁶ Matthew 26:67-68: “Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸and said, “Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?”

¹⁷ Mark 15:16-20: “The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸And they began to call out to him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” ¹⁹Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.”

three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!”¹⁸ If anybody ever had reason to withhold forgiveness from another, the perfect Son of God had every right to refuse those who had beaten him, mocked him, and nailed him to a cross.

Yet Jesus did not. Those men and women had never expressed a desire for his mercy. Although we pray that some eventually did, they had not expressed their remorse over their actions and repentance for their sin. In their ignorance, they did not realize whom they nailed to the cross—yet this did not remove their guilt. This did not matter to our Savior. He expressed his own forgiveness for the very ones who were wronging him.

After all, Jesus hung on that cross for the very purpose of forgiveness. Now my intention is not to fudge the line of subjective and universal justification. But Jesus died on that very cross in order to forgive not only the sins of the repentant, but the sins of *everybody*. If his death carried such a purpose, how could Jesus not also offer them his personal forgiveness in the hours leading up to his death? Jesus offered his enemies—including you and me—with no conditions attached on our end!¹⁹

The Necessity of My Forgiving Attitude

When we are dealing with this sensitive and very personal issue of forgiving those who have wronged us, the task is never easy. Our sinful flesh constantly pulls us in one direction. That old man desires that we be vindictive and judgmental. To forgive as we have been forgiven is one of the most difficult tasks which our God assigns to those who have faith.²⁰

But the dilemma posed between our sinful flesh and our created spirit in Christ ought never turn us away from living and appropriating the proper attitude. Forgiveness is not a matter of adiaphora²¹ for us to exercise when and where we choose is best. Christians have a number of reasons why this attitude of forgiveness is not only recommended, but is necessary.

In My Relationship with My Savior

There's a story of a church member who would often swing by the office to let the pastor know what was on her mind. Often this involved family members or random individuals she had met during

¹⁸ Mark 15:29-30.

¹⁹ The appropriation of that forgiveness will be dealt with later in this paper.

²⁰ This is probably one of the reasons why that theme arises again and again throughout the Scriptures, especially in the words of Jesus and in the subsequent epistles of Paul.

²¹ That is, those things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture.

the course of the day. She wasn't afraid to let people know how she felt. One time a friend had taken offense at something she had said. Now that friend was treating this congregation member less than cordially. But this member reacted in a way that was less than forgiving. Instead she, too, became vindictive and spiteful. When she had told the pastor everything that was happening, he did not try to validate her recent expressions of anger. He instead told her to show love to the friend who had treated her so badly. "But why should I show love to her if she isn't showing any to me?" the woman replied. "Because," answered the pastor, "you aren't in control of her actions—but you *are* in control of yours." Alan Siggelkow writes the following: "The most serious consequence of our refusal to forgive is how our grudging hate destroys our relationship to God. . . . So many people like to believe that they are trapped in an unforgiving attitude because it is necessary for the offender to apologize or to repent prior to their forgiving them."²²

Alan Siggelkow highlights a very important point concerning the relationship which truly matters for for each individual. Here we primarily focus on the vertical relationship between us and our God. This relationship is that which is most personal when dealing with this issue of forgiveness. This also addresses how the Bible primarily speaks to us as individuals in the realm of sanctification concerning forgiveness for others.

Jesus has given me the command, as previously demonstrated in a number of passages and occasions, to forgive unconditionally. He does not hinge my forgiveness upon the actions of another. My sanctified life in this area is far outside of the influence of others' actions. One might be torturing me for my beliefs, wronging me in every way imaginable. Yet this ought to have no bearing on the attitude of forgiveness. My sanctified life through the Holy Spirit continues to show forgiveness to the torturer, love to the wrongdoer.

A vindictive attitude exists prominently in our world not only today, but really since the world fell into sin. "Bitterness is frighteningly easy to justify. *Since I've been wronged, I have a right to feel this way.*"²³ Every individual believes that he or she has the innate right to treat another based reciprocally on the way the other has treated him or her—"tit for tat" and "quid pro quo." While the world lives with these axioms, the Christian does not. I myself am piling sin on top of sin when I refuse to forgive. Harboring grudges and resentment, allowing those feelings to solidify by my words and

²² Siggelkow, Alan H. *Hopeful Solutions for WELS pastors: repentance, forgiveness, and hope in pastoral counseling*. Essay File 1431, 1997. Page 38.

²³ Groeschel, Craig. *The Christian Atheist*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010. Page 116. Emphasis his.

actions, is nothing short of my own sin in any situation.

Christians remember that their Savior has fully and freely forgiven them all their sins. Just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,"²⁴ we continually remind ourselves of that which he has promised us, and we also hold ourselves to that same forgiveness. It's free. It's the way which we distinguish ourselves from the rest of the self-serving world by reflecting Christ's actions in our own. Christians must never separate themselves from this.

In My Relationship with My Neighbor

A distinction must be made here. My relationship with my neighbor and my neighbor's relationship with God are two separate matters.²⁵ My relationship with my neighbor is exactly that—a relationship between a Christian and another who may or may not be one.

Along the lines of forgiveness, we must always remember the second greatest commandment that Christ gave to his disciples in Luke 10:27: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That word "neighbor" is different than "brother." The latter indicates one who is of one faith with me, while the former (as Jesus highlights in the subsequent Parable of the Good Samaritan) is so broad that it includes everyone! Also at the Last Supper in John 13:34-35, as Jesus is giving final instruction to his disciples before his death, he says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." When we forgive those who have wronged us, we show this Christian love that Christ commands of his people.

My forgiving attitude is necessary to keep bridges open to our neighbors. Rather than closing doors and removing our own credibility in their eyes to preach gospel love to them, by continuing to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit, such as peace, love, and patience, we potentially open up worlds of opportunity. To do the opposite can quickly destroy such opportunities.

When I was younger I worked at a local car-wash in my hometown for the summer. The Florida afternoons were blistering with heat and muggy with humidity. That in itself made the job nearly unbearable. What made things even worse was two of my co-workers. When they found out that I was studying to be a minister, they scoffed. They never tried to hide that they felt religion was only for

²⁴ This taken from the traditional setting of The Lord's Prayer.

²⁵ Although this does not mean that there won't be any overlap between the two. My relationship with my neighbor will open opportunities for impact on my neighbor's relationship with God.

idiots like me. They teased me about showing up later in life driving a brand new Cadillac. (They assumed that my ambition was to become rich like Joel Osteen and other televangelists.)

I really had but two options. The first option was the one that my sinful flesh wanted to take. Sometimes, sadly, glimpses of this seeped into my words and actions during the months of my tenure there. This first option told me to lash back, to become argumentative with them, and to treat them just as spitefully as they sometimes treated me. The world would have told me to do just that—hurt them as they were hurting me. Yet in doing so, to whom would I have been showing love? Only myself. My vindication would have served only to burn bridges. My mission as a Christian to make disciples would have died with that bridge, at least for those two individuals.

The second option was to take exactly what this paper addresses and apply it. Doctrine and Scripture are quite useless without proper application. This option prompted me to keep my sinful feelings in check. Instead, I allowed (though imperfectly) the light of Christ and my faith to shine through during those weeks. I calmly explained what I believed, why I believed it, and that my goal in becoming a pastor was never one of money. I treated them respectfully and their views politely. As a result, one of them never paid me and my Christian religion any mind. The other, however, began to listen to my witness. He eventually stopped making fun of me and instead asked questions. By the time that I left the job, no perceivable changes had occurred in his heart. But my job wasn't to make the seed grow. My job was to plant the seed. By keeping the bridges open between myself and my neighbor, that opportunity presented itself numerous times during that summer.

A Christian's relationship between his or her neighbor must never be undermined or under-emphasized. We must continue to maintain those bridges which exist. We show that love of Jesus' new command to his disciples, despite the sinful nature which tries convincing us to do the opposite. When those bridges remain open, so do our opportunities to present Christ's love through our words and actions.

Not in My Neighbor's Relationship with God

My forgiveness for an impenitent neighbor is not to be equated with vindicating their status in their relationship with God. That is to say that when I say, "I forgive you," I am not speaking this also on behalf of God in heaven. To do so would be improper—an abuse even—and would only offer somebody further excuse to perpetuate his or her ongoing error. While my forgiveness for impenitent individuals has necessity as an expression of God's will for *my* sanctified life, it does not speak to the

relationship with God in *their* lives. In such a circumstance, announcing forgiveness from heaven would not be an expression of God's desire.

The ministry of the keys is one of the fundamental privileges and responsibilities which God has given his Church on earth to carry out. The Church does this with seriousness and often with great personal pains. This ministry of the keys is that which God first gave to Peter. In the Matthew 16:19 we read: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Only two chapters later in Matthew, the Savior expounds on this idea of binding and loosing heaven. This time he speaks to all of his disciples. He says in Matthew 18:15-18:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.¹⁶ But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Likewise Jesus gave this command to his disciples: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."²⁶ This ministry of the keys has been given to all believers. We are to use this ministry in accordance with God's desire, forgiving the sins of the repentant and continuing to bind the impenitent in their sins. It is this forgiveness which we as a universal priesthood withhold from the impenitent, because this is that forgiveness which involves their eternal, spiritual welfare.

For this reason, Christians must take critical care in choosing how best to express their personal forgiveness. Think of one of those situations like a neighbor blasting loud music in his garage. For the umpteenth time, he has awakened my six-month-old daughter, and, for the umpteenth time, I ask him politely to reduce the volume of his speakers. He refuses to yield and laughs me off. He also knows that I'm a Christian. This is where one has reached a critical point. The Bible urges us to act in love for the souls of all people. Is this a moment when it is beneficial for me to smile and say, "That's alright—you're forgiven"?

Sometimes a Christian may find himself in the appropriate situation to speak those words of personal forgiveness to a person. As mentioned previously, this can help to keep bridges open and show

²⁶ John 20:23.

a genuine care for the offending party. Other times we must remember their spiritual welfare and status before God. We recognize that it may be very damaging for their spiritual health to express this forgiveness vocally. While this holds no influence over whether or not I truly forgive them in my heart, I may find myself in a situation where vocal forgiveness causes them to continue living as though they are in a state of harmony with God.

How These Concerns May Be Expressed

Under the previous heading I began to wrestle with this issue. Whenever we are dealing with an impenitent sinner who has wronged us, many concerns arise. We may wonder the best way to share the message of sin and forgiveness with this person. We may wrestle to understand the most beneficial avenue for expressing our personal forgiveness while also expressing their rejection of God's forgiveness by their impenitence. This just names a few.

An overarching principle in expressing our concerns to these erring neighbors is as follows: whatever actions we take, we do so in service to others. The attitude is never argumentative. Our proving a point or winning an argument is not an end in itself. Rather in servant-like humility and Christ-motivated love, we lead people to the truth through the gentle and patient instruction that is always centered in that which has the power to change hearts—God's Word.

To Share Law and Gospel

In the Old Testament, the priests were clearly established and set apart for their specific task among the people. They ministered on behalf of God's children, the Israelites. They offered the prayers and made the sacrifices. The people were prohibited from doing the latter on their own. In the New Testament Church, however, this has all changed.

The members of God's invisible Church all across the globe and of all times share a common title in “the universal priesthood of all believers.” Yet this status that we possess by God's grace through faith is not simply a title. This universal priesthood also tells us that we have a job to do. Through the proper dosages of Law and Gospel, we are to fulfill Christ's command to his followers in Matthew 28:18-20, where Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Christ is the one who has fulfilled the Law and brings the wonderful news of the Gospel through his sacrifice on the cross. Now he delegates this task of proclamation to his disciples. We who also have received that command are to

function as priests to the world.

The first goal is to show people their sin. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”²⁷ Countless millions—even billions—of people walk around day by day with blinders over their eyes. They do not always understand that their relationship with God has been destroyed through their own fault. Guilt still overwhelms their souls, whether they understand and feel that guilt or not. When Christians forgive just as Christ has commanded them, this only amounts to *part* of their task among the unbelieving and impenitent neighbors in this world. In expressing personal forgiveness to the impenitent, a Christian must also speak in such a way as to help them see that they have done wrong.

This is no easy task. Despite the guilt which many feel over past actions and current lifestyles, people do not particularly enjoy being told that they've done wrong. They dislike even more hearing that what they are continually doing is sinful.

We must approach such people with great tact. Leave the judgmental attitudes at home. It's very easy for us to become Pharisees who look down their noses at everybody else as lesser people.²⁸ The goal is not to inflate one's own ego or puff up with self-righteousness, but to communicate as sinners to sinners. We understand that on our own, we are just like them—sinners worthy only of God's wrath and condemnation. Only through Christ have we become his children, now righteous in God's sight. As we remember this truth of God's grace, our words and attitudes do not take a condemning tone, but a quality of genuine love and concern.

In the tactful approach, we also choose words boldly but carefully. The people with whom we are sharing the truths of God's Word need to hear just how devastating their sins are. Their obstinate lack of repentance concerning their iniquities separates them from that relationship which we know. Yet we should never sound condescending in what we speak. Just as a pastor does in his sermon, we avoid “preaching at” them. Using only the second person can reflect this damaging tone of speech. For example: “Mr. Smith, I know that you have told lies about me to the neighbor across the street. What you have done is inexcusable. God hates what you are doing.” While this may be the truth, it would probably put Mr. Smith on the defensive. He won't want to hear much of what you have to say. Speaking in the first-person plural may help to keep you both on the same level. Including yourself among sinners reduces the threatening nature which some might otherwise perceive. “Mr. Smith, we

²⁷ Romans 3:23.

²⁸ For an example of this, read “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector” in Luke 18:9-14.

are far from perfect people. The gossip that we all spread in our lives from day to day is damaging. I know that I've certainly defamed plenty of people in my life. . . ." Now Mr. Smith understands that you aren't coming at him with an attack on his character, but with a general statement about him, yourself, and all people. God-willing, you will from here be able to continue sharing the news of sin in a non-hostile environment and in a constructive manner.

Of course, we do not end the conversation at showing somebody his or her sin. We show them their sin so that they will see their need for a Savior! Without hesitation, we then reveal our Redeemer Jesus. With or without an admission of guilt and wrong-doing on the part of the impenitent, we must finish the story.

One might contend that the words of gospel should be withheld in the case of continuing obstinacy. After all, how can we preach about the Savior from sin if they still won't accept that they need this? This is where we make a distinction between telling them the good news of a Savior and offering them absolution. If one were arguing concerning the absolution itself, he would have a legitimate case. But to leave a person only with the knowledge of sin *sans* the knowledge of his Savior would amount to offering a message of despair. As the impenitent neighbor mulls over what he has heard, we want him considering the whole picture—not just the negative portion.

Stick to the Scriptures and its clear exposition. While getting into logical arguments has its time and place²⁹, a “God’s Great Exchange” style of exposition is most appropriate in an initial confrontation. What an impenitent and unbelieving neighbor needs is not an intellectual dispute. What he needs is to hear the Law and the Gospel clearly through God's own words.

The Holy Spirit, not my actions, is the one who will bring about a change in their hearts. Often Christians, especially pastors, can slip into the mindset—albeit unintentionally—that they receive a pass-or-fail grade when sharing this news of sin and forgiveness. To bring somebody to faith is not the job of the “priest” of the New Testament Church. We have no control over what occurs in an individual's heart once the seed has been planted. This is not ours to determine. All we can do is plant and water. Even the great missionary Paul recognized how completely deficient he and his ministry were in the realm of creating faith. He simply understood his role in the spread of the Gospel message,

²⁹ This form of logical argumentation based on human reasoning is known as “apologetics.” David Valleskey writes concerning this practice: “[Apologetics] can assist in clearing away misconceptions that may have resulted in a person being unwilling to listen seriously to what the Scriptures say. . . . It won't make a Christian of a person, but it may well result in his willingness to keep listening.” Valleskey, David J. *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*. Milwaukee, Wisc.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995. Pages 111 and 113.

and allowed the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.³⁰

The analogy of the seed provides a masterful illustration of Scripture. Truly we have no power over a seed! We can influence it in certain ways by watering and fertilizing it. But are we the ones who cause a seed to grow? Do we empower the biological functions of that tiny kernel, so that a shoot arises and continues to absorb nutrients and finally becomes a great tree a million times larger than the original seed? Just as God is the only one who causes a tree to rise from the earth by his providence and design, so God is the only one who can perform the greater miracle of faith in the hearts of stubborn and hostile rebels such as we.

The impenitent heart must hear of its standing before God. A discussion of objective and subjective justification deserves mention here. We probably would seldom use those terms in communication with an impenitent individual with presumably little knowledge of the Bible and of doctrine. The meaning behind those words, however, is just as pivotal in the spiritual lives of the lost as it has been and continues to be in the lives of Christians.

As we share the gospel message with the sinner, we first stress the objective nature of Christ's justification. By his death on the cross, he has declared mankind “not guilty.” The work of redemption is complete. Human beings have no added tasks, no required payments to make. We contribute nothing to this justification and salvation won for us by Christ. When we sin, there is no doubt that these are also transgressions for which Jesus Christ has atoned by his own blood. He did not leave the work of reconciling God and man only half-completed on the cross. His sacrifice has finally and fully bridged that breach. To use the language familiar with the rest of this paper, God *has forgiven* the sins of the whole world, regardless of individual responses to that fact. Becker highlights this objective nature which exists without even faith as its cause. “God does not forgive us *because* we believe, or *because* we pray, any more than He forgives us *because* we are sorry. He forgives us only because Jesus died for us and took away the sins of the world. He forgives us for Christ’s sake and not for faith’s sake.”³¹

Christians do not share this concept only abstractly with people still lost in sin and error. It is of

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:5-7.

³¹ Becker, Siegbert W. *Forgiveness and Faith*. Essay File Number 1266. Page 422.

high importance that we take these concepts and apply them concretely to the hearts and lives of those with whom we are sharing them. “Mr. Smith, we sin every day by cutting people down with our words and by regarding them in our hearts of less esteem than ourselves. By this—and by our other numerous faults—we rack up an incredible debt to God. It's actually a debt that we could never pay! But by his death on the cross, Jesus has made that payment for each and every sin ever committed by mankind. Nothing else needs to be done! It's complete!” (Obviously this is just a snippet of what one would actually say.) Using illustrations which include that idea of debt, which is a very biblical concept of it, helps the errorist to see how Jesus has made payment for it. Our standing with God through Jesus' sacrifice is no longer one of separation. Rather the entire world has been forgiven. God has drawn men back to himself.

Subjective justification applies to the individual what objective justification provides to all. Through faith, that “receiving organ” which clings to God's promise of forgiveness and salvation, the individual can also say, “God has declared *me* not guilty! Through faith I am personally justified and absolved of all sin.” This faith is, of course, not any merit for salvation on our part, but the tool created in us by the Holy Spirit to appropriate the salvation won by Christ.

Christians make a distinction at this point when dealing with the impenitent sinner. An individual who does not accept the message of salvation won by Christ, but rather rejects that gift, is not in a right relationship with God. To tell them that they are subjectively living in a state of forgiveness, or even to allow this to remain a perceived possibility, is not showing love to the impenitent sinner. This instead communicates that everything is alright when it is, in fact, not. One must tell this person gently but clearly that his or her soul is in peril of a very real danger.

What about when we are dealing with people who do know and confess Jesus as Savior? How do we communicate this to a member of the visible church on earth? When a fellow member of a congregation, or a fellow pastor, remains obstinate and unrepentant in sinning against us, Christians use the formula given by our Savior in Matthew 18:15-17 to admonish and discipline the erring brother or sister. Recall those words:

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Impenitence is tantamount to unbelief. Verse 17 indicates this clearly. It does not mean that you treat such a persistent errorist without love. It tells us to treat them as an unbeliever. They are rejecting God's forgiveness in their lack of sorrow and genuine repentance over sin.

Perhaps here it is necessary to define repentance. "The integral concept of repent and repentance is change. It is a turning away from something and a turning back to something that was there before."³² God's Word shows repentance as a two-part process. The first step is to admit that a problem exists. We have sorrow over guilt and wrong-doing. David's words as recorded in The Psalms display this well, when he says:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.
⁵Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.³³

David understood clearly that he had committed grievous and damnable sin in the eyes of the Lord when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed in battle. His heart cried out with his guilt, and he denounced himself in the acknowledgment of his transgressions. Yet repentance does not end here. Even the heart of Judas Iscariot was gripped with sorrow over his betrayal of Jesus. He rightly feared God's wrath over sin. But his repentance went no further than this.³⁴

The second part of repentance is trusting in God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake. A repentant heart recognizes that in the cross of Christ, our sins are fully forgiven. David continued in his testimony of repentance:

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
⁸me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
⁹Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.³⁵

³² Siggelkow, 4.

³³ Psalm 51:3-5.

³⁴ For more concerning this account of Judas, read Matthew 27:1-10. Most importantly in here are the words in verses 4-5: "I have sinned," [Judas] said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." ... So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."

³⁵ Psalm 51:7-9.

David trusted not in his own strength to save him, but in the salvation which would come through the Messiah. He understood that God was the one who cleanses and washes us from our sins, the one who blots out our iniquity. Paul also speaks of this faith in Christ's redemption:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, *through faith in his blood.*³⁶

True repentance recognizes through faith that Jesus' death on the cross is sufficient—indeed, it is all that one needs—to absolve us from all sin. On the night of Jesus' arrest and trial, Judas was not the only one to betray his Savior. The Apostle Peter also betrayed Jesus by denying any relationship whatsoever to the man the Jewish leaders had taken in custody. The difference, however, lies in Peter's trust in the forgiveness of that sin. His heart, like ours, recognized his sin, but he also recognized his absolution from that sin.³⁷

This genuine, two-part repentance is essential in the life of a Christian. Those living in impenitence are steeping themselves in unbelief. Left unchecked, that sin will result in spiritual death and eternity in hell.

We call the impenitent to repentance. This is not an unloving action. On the contrary, we show a high degree of care for the spiritual lives of the impenitent when we call them on their sin. For those who confess Christ as their Savior among us in our churches, we deal with them on the basis of Matthew 18. This never has the purpose of shaming them, but gently guiding them back to this proper repentance before God.

To Distinguish Horizontal and Vertical Relationships

The lives of people consist of many different relationships. A person has a relationship with his or her boss. That relationship, however, is quite different than one's relationship with his or her spouse. The relationship with the spouse is a different relationship than that with children, friends, and siblings. You would never want to confuse those relationships. Can you imagine speaking to your boss in the same manner that you use with husband or wife? Would you ever dare to speak to husband or wife as to a child? It's safe to say that consequences would almost certainly be disastrous in the confusion of most

³⁶ Romans 3:21-25, emphasis added.

³⁷ For more concerning the denial and reinstatement of Peter, read John 18:15-18,25-27 and John 21:15-19.

relationships. Sometimes a relationship itself might be forfeited if one confuses the wrong relationships or does so to a high degree.

Different rules and guidelines govern different relationships. I may be able to speak down to my children with condescension. If I talk likewise to my boss, the rules which govern that relationship will quickly produce an effect—and probably not one which I want to witness. When we are expressing forgiveness to the impenitent, we must remember that different relationships exist in this realm of absolution. Forgiveness in one relationship does not necessarily constitute forgiveness in another.

When I forgive my impenitent neighbor, what I am offering them is a right relationship with me. We sometimes refer to this as the “horizontal relationship,” that is, the relationship between myself and those on the same plane next to me. This is the forgiveness that one pastor described as releasing our right to get even with somebody or to become upset with them. We acknowledge in this that we have no right to exert punishment upon another through our words or actions—even by the thoughts and attitudes we entertain toward such an individual.

This horizontal forgiveness is that which we also viewed through those scriptural examples. The Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer speaks to this horizontal forgiveness on our part.³⁸ We also saw this principle in Mark 11:25, which says, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” Jesus desires that we make certain our horizontal relationships are right and secure.

While we are able to offer the horizontal relationship characterized by forgiveness to our impenitent neighbors, a right relationship with God is what I cannot announce to them. This is now dealing with the flip-side of the coin, that “vertical relationship” between mankind on earth and the God who reigns above. While God has done everything to bring them into his family, such people have alienated themselves through impenitence and unbelief.

The world does not enjoy this proper practice. The majority of the secular world *as well as* the religious world wants to ignore the fact impenitence over sin is not just a minor problem, but a problem that ultimately separates the sinner from God. In the case of many specific sins which society deems acceptable, when Christians do carry out this task of alerting the erring brother or sister of the dangers at hand, the world often views this as unloving and bigoted. Pressure mounts from many sides—not for

³⁸ It also includes the vertical forgiveness from God to us, but for the purposes here concerning our offering forgiveness, we focus on the horizontal aspect.

the sinner to recant and amend, but the one pointing out the error to do so. The innocent becomes the guilty, and the guilty becomes the innocent.

This role reversal can cause some trepidation to the one commanded by God to show another his or her fault. Our sinful desire to remain well-liked at all costs adds to this fear of confrontation. Yet Christians cannot allow this discomfort and fear to confound their efforts to offer words of warning to the impenitent neighbor. Nobody likes somebody knocking on their door at five o'clock on a Saturday morning, but if your neighbor's garage is engulfed in flames, is this an unloving action? Nobody enjoys hearing an order barked in his or her direction, but if a blind man is about to step off of a steep cliff, are we bigots to shout "Stop!" at him? If your neighbor continues to sleep, if that blind man continues to step forward, they will receive the consequences of those actions.

This never means that Christians ought to let them go without warning. We cannot announce to them that vertical forgiveness when, according to their own words and actions, it does not exist.³⁹ While such an action may seem most loving and commendable to the world, it is, in fact, the least loving and most despicable lack of concern which one can show for them.

To Serve Peers and Others

A Lutheran pastor remembers to express these truths clearly when dealing with other pastors, as well as congregation members.⁴⁰ In the life of a pastor, the majority of spiritual interaction typically happens within the church, both in the individual congregation and among other called workers in the Wisconsin Synod. Even within our church body we are far from possessing a utopia. Quite the contrary—our ranks are rife with sinners. If a pastor does not find himself at the receiving end of wrong-doing fairly often, he can consider himself fortunate. The time will come that we find ourselves mistreated by brothers in the ministry. Cases even exist where pastors refuse to acknowledge or repent of the evil that they have committed against another.

But before a pastor deals with another minister or congregant in a call to repentance, he must first search his own heart and attitudes. I wonder how many conflicts one could avoid by simply sitting back and asking the questions, "Have I actually been wronged in this situation? Am I taking words and actions in the kindest possible way—or am I making assumptions and jumping to conclusions? Are we

³⁹ This speaks to the subjective justification of the individual. He or she remains in sin as long as they live in impenitence which rejects the justification and declaration of "not guilty" procured by Christ.

⁴⁰ This paper looks specifically at the life of a pastor in this role, because certain situations often arise for pastors which typically do not for the average lay-person.

dealing with a matter of adiaphora, a difference of opinion about which I, perhaps, am becoming legalistic?” God has certainly set the force of his written law behind many matters, but more often than not, issues of ministry and application of doctrine fall into the middle-ground.

Take the current, ongoing conversation concerning the Synod's evaluation of translations as an example. Here we are dealing with translations of God's Word. No translation is perfect. We find errors and poor word-choice in all of those under consideration to replace the 1984 edition of the *New International Version*. Many pastors heavily favor adopting the updated NIV 2011. Others believe that the English Standard Version or the Holman Christian Standard Bible is the one we should use as our own. If my brother, for his own reasons, chooses one which I believe truly to be sub-par to my own option, has he wronged me by betraying the faith? Or has he, in his Christian freedom, opted for that which seems wisest to his conscience?

God forbid that I make rules out of such matters, then have the audacity to declare “foul-play” when another disagrees with me. Our job is not to conduct our own witch-hunts or to make evil out of that which is not. Before we confront a brother pastor or one of our church members, we would do well to examine our own hearts concerning the matter at hand.

Times do occur, though, when we find ourselves wronged by those whom we call “brothers” in the faith and in the ministry. They may show no outward signs of repentance. In fact, they may even cling more firmly to ego and turn their noses up at us. Attacks through phone-calls or blogs may increase, and we may find ourselves the recipients of firestorms of defamation and false testimony at their hands. Perhaps the manner in which they commit wrong against us is subtle, more often than not—a cold shoulder and disassociation.

In order to address these brothers in Christ properly, we remember that the situation has changed. In this situation we are not dealing with a lay-person or even unbelieving neighbor. This person who has wronged us and is living in that wrong is himself a shepherd of God's flock. As we express our concerns, we must do so in a way that is sensitive not only for him, but for the sheep whom he oversees.

Except in the case of gross sin and community shame, admonition should remain private as long as possible. We do not want that brother pastor's congregants losing faith in him and his abilities as their spiritual leader. If the fellow pastor fails to repent of his actions, then we continue to follow Jesus' advice in Matthew 18, handling things properly and discreetly. If he comes to recognize his errors and

repent, then we have won that brother over. If not, we continue patiently in our ongoing pursuit of brotherly admonition.

Yet all the while forgiveness remains our shining beacon and personal tool for reaching out in love to that brother. Do not take offense in such a way that you also respond with the cold shoulder or with gossipy rumors. Instead we keep the lines of communication open. Through this forgiveness the bridge remains standing. If we do not forgive, or if we harbor resentment which manifests itself visibly against him, those bridges shut down quickly and those lines through which we might have reached out are severed.

This personal forgiveness is also important as we deal with sinners in our own congregations. It's no secret to any pastor that a congregation usually contains at least one antagonist. When things do not go the way that they like in the church, pastors become the enemy in their eyes. When a pastor whom I know once switched from the traditional Lord's Prayer to the contemporary version in *Christian Worship*, a lady openly called him a "minister of Satan." Even in my short experience, I've heard of one pastor compared to Hitler, another whose member threatened his life through a letter, and still a third whose prospect tried to run over his wife and child in a parking lot.

The human nature which continues to cling to ministers of the gospel desires to belittle such people. Perhaps it lightens the blows to make light of the character flaws found in those trying to make ministry difficult. One might raise himself up into a position of perceived spiritual maturity far beyond that of the member whom he serves. When problems persist, the temptation grows to exert our position of authority in the church over them. Whatever way a pastor might find to remain at odds with the member, he takes it. But this can only result in further alienation of those people whom we are to shepherd. Any respect they might have for us will only diminish.

But in forgiving them and in showing them that forgiveness, we actually shame them properly! Proverbs 25:21-22 speaks to this:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
²²In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the LORD will reward you.

The purpose of this shame is not to embitter them or bring public disgrace upon them. The goal is to move them so as to view their sin for what it is and to repent of that.

Even if they do not repent, what are we to do? Each case will have its own course of action. I

cannot prescribe any cut-and-dried practical application or step-by-step plan. We continue to manage our actions with love, humility, and service to all. In doing so, opportunities for reaching out with love and with the Scriptures retain a strong presence.

Practical Examples

Let us now view a couple of examples from everyday life which reflect this unconditional and gospel-motivated love toward the world. Many times people don't treat us in a way that corresponds with love, either from a biblical understanding or even in the attitude of social civility. Constantly the world and the persons around us attack who we are, both in spite and in selfishness.

Take again the example of the neighbor who constantly blasts his or her music from the garage at a deafening volume. From the start, you might have that inkling of a notion that such people generally do not cast a caring glance at those who must live near them. Sometimes this may be in ignorance. At other times this may, in fact, become a blatant statement of selfishness. Many people not only possess, but also exhibit this attitude of non-conformity in sensitivity to others. This is not something new in the modern era, but something which has always existed in every era.

Or perhaps this becomes apparent via a far more aggressive approach. In an office situation, or even in other areas of the business world, a mentality prevails which says, "I must get ahead in this world and in this occupation, no matter how many people I have to cheat or step upon along the way." A rival in this situation might steal ideas or bad-mouth another to fellow workers and to management. A boss may claim well-done work as his or her own to superiors, when the true labor came from the hard-working hand of another in a subordinate position.

The wrong has already been done. A guilty conscience may not bother them. It may not exist altogether. Even when the wronged party confronts him or her concerning the matter, they may receive no admission of guilt. If such an admission comes, one hopes that it comes accompanied by apology.

But what if it doesn't? What does the Christian do when that neighbor laughs and turns up his music even louder? How do we deal with the coworker who shrugs off our complaint and admonishment to repentance? What attitude does the Christian then adopt? Is this just cause for us to stew over the wrong of the individual against us? Do we harbor ill feelings and grudges, simply because we feel we have the right to do so? Might we even take the words of Matthew 18 which

instruct us to “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” as an excuse to turn a cold shoulder in our own sense of indignant justice?

A gentleman once felt certain (although without proof) that his wife had cheated on him with his own brother. While he begrudgingly forgave his wife, he couldn't bring himself to do as much for his brother. For years he never spoke to his. Although they lived near each other, he completely ignored his brother. He acted as though the one whom he felt had wronged him didn't exist. No attitude of forgiveness dominated or even slightly expressed itself in his words or actions.

This does not reflect even remotely the positive examples which we saw previously. “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” does not appear in this harsh and unforgiving spirit. “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” remained distant. The examples set by Jesus when his enemies were nailing him to the cross did nothing to affect the hardness of this refusal to forgive. This is plainly wrong. It has no place in the life and works of a Christian man or woman.

The attitude of the Christian is not to harbor a grudge or ill feelings against that neighbor who blasts his music. The approach of those bought by Christ's blood does not return the evil of the thieving coworker by refusing to work with or help them in the ongoing duties of office life. Rather, in following the instructions for sanctified living spoken by Jesus and displayed in his own actions, the Christian must continue in his or her heart to forgive the egregious party. Whether or not this is easy makes no difference. The command is clear. We must forgive, just as our God in heaven has forgiven us our sins.

Conclusion

When using the word “forgive,” an issue of semantics comes into play. When looking back to the pastors interviewed in the introduction, we see different aspects, ideas, and concepts of what it means to forgive. Pastor A spoke of forgiveness in these terms: “Forgiveness is not dependent on what the wrong-doer says or does to ‘deserve’ our forgiveness, any more than our penitence deserves God’s forgiveness.” Here he is emphasizing the nature of the Christian to forgive in the sense that the world has been declared forgiven in Christ. He goes on to say: “However, that forgiveness does the wrong-doer no good without repentance (before God) and an apology (in the relationship with the person wronged).” Thus there exist two forgivenesses. The one exists in the relationship between the Christian

and the wrong-doer. The other exists in the relationship between the impenitent sinner and God, namely, that although forgiven through Christ, that sinner has rejected God's grace.⁴¹

Pastor B explained it by saying, “Since forgiveness is releasing the right to get even or be upset, releasing the punishment for sin (which we don't have any right to exert anyway), my life ought to be one of forgiveness.” And later: “That person’s reaction may affect the consequences of the sin - but not the fact that I have no right to hold something against him for it. That's up to God. So no, my personally forgiving someone doesn't depend on their repentance - it springs from the fact that I have no right to hold a grudge in the first place.” Pastor B emphasizes forgiveness in terms of our attitudes toward the impenitent sinner. We do not have the right to treat a person in our lives any differently or with any negative side-effects if they remain impenitent. We love and treat them with respect regardless.

Pastor C focuses on the nature of forgiveness as we employ the ministry of the keys. “I have the duty and responsibility to give forgiveness when the person who sins against me repents. I must forgive. I cannot forgive when the person who sins against me does not repent. I must not nurture grudges or harbor hard feelings.” Certainly our entire lives as Christians involve the privilege of this ministry! Pastor C *does* acknowledge that we must not harbor resentment or bad feelings about or against the impenitent sinner. The difference, however, is that he does not use the word “forgive” in this sense.

Are these both legitimate uses of the word “forgive”? Dictionary.com provides first this definition: “to grant pardon for or remission of (an offense, debt, etc.); absolve.”⁴² As ministers of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, we are told in the Bible to bind the sin to the impenitent sinner. To announce absolution before God in this case is to ignore the divine command in Matthew 18 to use that binding key. Forgiveness has been won for them by the blood of Christ. Yet in the unbelief of impenitence, they reject that forgiveness, for they have no faith.

Another definition of forgiveness, however, says this: “to cease to feel resentment against.”⁴³ When dealing with this definition, we can agree that the entire life of the Christian is one of forgiveness! We cancel whatever debts an impenitent sinner may owe us, because we have already been

⁴¹ This again deals with the differences in objective and subjective justification. We can tell somebody that he is forgiven, and this is objectively true. In doing so without further explanation, however, we may give the false impression that all is fine when, in fact, subjective justification through faith is not his.

⁴² Definition found at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/forgive?s=t>.

⁴³ Ibid.

forgiven much by our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us not be like the Unmerciful Servant in Jesus' parable, to whom much had been forgiven, but who could not find the love in his heart to forgive another who owed him. As we live in the wonderful gospel given us, let us forgive others freely.

Far more important than any definitions of the word “forgiveness” from English dictionaries are the Biblical definitions and uses. Luke 7 gives us a chance to look at the reality of forgiveness, most specifically found in two words: μ and $\acute{\alpha} \mu$.

The first of those words Jesus uses in 7:42. He is telling a parable here of a money-lender who was owed a little money by one man and a large sum by another. He says, “Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled ($\acute{\epsilon}$) the debts of both.” This verb μ indicates a free, generous, and undeserved canceling of a debt. Paul also uses this term in 2 Corinthians 12:13, when he urges the congregation, “Forgive () me this wrong!”

Jesus then applies the parable to the “sinner” at his feet using the second of the two words, $\acute{\alpha} \mu$. “Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven ($\acute{\alpha} \mu$).’”⁴⁴ He now adds to the idea of “canceling a debt” that of “dismissing” and “sending away” those sins.⁴⁵ This is the same vocable which we saw in the previous studies of Luke 11:4, Matthew 6:14-15, and Mark 11:25. This canceling of their sins and sending them away is what our Savior has commanded us. Let us not be like the Unmerciful Servant in Jesus' parable, to whom much had been forgiven, but who could not find the love in his heart to forgive another who owed him. As we live in the wonderful gospel given us, let us forgive others freely and generously.

This is important for keeping those bridges open. Forgiveness is not about our pride. Forgiveness is not about my feelings. Forgiveness is not about feeling that what is owed me must be paid. Forgiveness is about caring for souls.

As we care about those souls, we must continue to strive in whatever manner possible to keep relationships alive and doors open. David Valleskey writes concerning friendship evangelism: “Friendship gives one a window on another person’s life, which can uncover opportune moments for talking about spiritual matters.”⁴⁶ While the other party may not view us as a friend at the time, we certainly always view them as a friend and neighbor—in this case, a neighbor who has rejected the gospel. By doing our part to keep the relationship alive, more opportunities may arise for sharing that

⁴⁴ Luke 7:48.

⁴⁵ For the full context, please see “Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman” in Luke 7:36-50.

⁴⁶ Valleskey, 114.

message of Law and Gospel again and again.

In caring for those souls, we may need to choose our words carefully. The impenitent sinner may be at a stage when using the words “I forgive you” will keep that relationship alive without causing them to infer a right relationship with God. At another time, those words may be incredibly damaging to them, particularly if spoken to a former congregation member under church discipline. God has given us common sense. We must use that common sense to choose words carefully and tactfully in the different situations which may arise.

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”⁴⁷ Paul speaks these words to the Colossians. He spoke them to a group of Christians. Look at that second sentence again. “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” When the Lord forgave the sins of the world by his death on the cross, he *forgave them*. That forgiveness was not dependent upon the hearts and wills of those who heard the message. That forgiveness was fact. We call it “objective justification.” In that same spirit, we also forgive. Craig Groeschel writes: “God has forgiven us freely and completely, without any strings attached. And that's how we're supposed to forgive.”⁴⁸ We forgive regardless of the attitudes of those who have sinned against us. As Christians, this is what we do. We forgive.

⁴⁷ Colossians 3:13.

⁴⁸ Groeschel, 120.

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APPENDIX A
Exegetical Studies

Exegetical Study of Luke 11:4a

ἰ ἄ ῥ ἡμῖ ἄ ἅμ ἡμῶ ,
ἰ ἄ ῥ ἰ ἄ μ ἰ ῶ ἡμῖ .

Translation: And forgive for us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive all the ones who are indebted to us.

ἰ – The connective “and” connects this to the previous petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“Give us this day our daily bread”). The previous petition focuses on our physical needs. The Fifth Petition then transitions to our spiritual needs.

ἄ – Aorist, Active, Imperative, 2nd sg from ἄ μ ; This base meaning of this root is “dismiss” or “send away.” This was also used in everyday commerce for the canceling of a debt. Thus the connotation logically translates into the verb “to forgive” in English, as God cancels a great debt by sending it away “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12).

ἡμῖ – 1st person pronoun, Dative pl; This carries with it the idea of advantage. God forgives, and the recipient is “us.”

ἄ ἅμ – Accusative fem pl; This is the direct object of the sentence. This includes both “sins” of action as well as the state of sinfulness of our Old Adam.

ἡμῶ – 1st person pronoun, Genitive pl; We are the ones who possess and commit these sins. We are those who were liable with guilt before the forgiveness won by Christ.

ἰ – Here the connective has the sense of “also.”

ἄ – conjunctive, shows continuation of the thought progression, “for.”

ῥ ἰ – Personal Pronoun, Nominative m pl; Intensive subject

ἄ μ – Present, Active, Indicative, 1st pl, also from ἄ μ ; “to forgive”; The important aspect of this verb is its present tense. This forgiveness does not occur once or twice at the discretion of the person dispensing it. This forgiveness is continual and ongoing in the life of a Christian. When Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive his brother even *seven times*, Jesus replied, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22).

ἰ – Dative m sg; This is done *for* “all.” There are no limitations or restrictions set to whom we forgive.

ῶ – Present, Active, Participle, Dative m sg, from root verb ῶ ; This means “to be in debt.” One owes a payment or an obligation to another. This translates into English as “sin” or “trespass” most of the time, although that really loses the full flavor of the word.

ἡμῖ – 1st person pronoun, Dative pl; This takes the idea of disadvantage. Yet even in this disadvantage of others indebted to us due to their trespasses, we cancel that debt and send it away, just as God has done for us. “Our plea for the Father’s forgiveness includes an expression of our readiness to pass on forgiveness to everyone who sins against us” (*The People’s Bible: Luke*, 130).

Comments:

- ⤴ The Greek vocable ἁμαρτία, which we translate here as the accusative, plural, direct object of the sentence, is one that is fully denoted with its common meaning in English, “sin.” This isn’t merely talking about the bad and immoral activities which we do. It also speaks to the state of continued evil which we actually *are*.
- ⤴ As it modifies the following participle, ὀφειλόμενος carries with it tremendous weight, because it is the *only* adjective or adverb modifying that participle. We forgive *everyone* ὀφειλόμενος, formally, “who is indebted.” This vocable is frequently used in the New Testament to denote personal sin against another.
- ⤴ Jesus here does not indicate that we are to withhold personal forgiveness from anybody. He does not tell us to wait for some sort of indication of repentance before acknowledging and personally forgiving a brother, sister, or neighbor. Rather Jesus tells us to willingly forgive, following the pattern of his own willing forgiveness for us! Just as he died to forgive our sins and does so freely, so also we ought to have that same forgiving attitude in thought, word, and action for our neighbors.

Exegetical Study of Matthew 6:14-15

Ἐὰν ἂν ἄνθρωποι ἴδωσιν ἅτις αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ὑμῶν, ἂν ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς· ἢ ἂν ἄνθρωποι μὴ ἴδωσιν ἅτις αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ὑμῶν, ἂν ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς.

Translation: For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.

Ἐὰν – Typically this is used in a conditional, etiological sense of cause and effect. The Bible tells us, however, that our forgiveness is based on nothing that we do. Therefore this is used in a syllogistic sense. The objective forgiveness of sins has happened through Christ. This “if” invites us to share in what is happening. (Example: “If you get up early enough, the sun will be shining brightly.”)

ἂν – “For” marks a logical step in the thought process.

ἄνθρωποι – Aorist, Active, Subjunctive, 2nd pl; “forgive” (please see exegetical study of Luke 11:4 for more on this vocable); The subjunctive mood is used in connection with the Ἐὰν at the beginning of the sentence.

ἴδωσιν – Dative m pl; Dative of Advantage; “men”

ἅτις αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ὑμῶν – Accusative n pl; This is the direct object. These sins are what we are “sending away” or “forgiving.” The root ὤμω means “dead body” or “corpse.” With the prepositional prefix, the word receives the flavor of a dangerous “blunder” or “misstep” which causes death. Commonly, we would probably use the term “transgression” here.

ὁ οὐρανὸς – 3rd Personal Pronoun, Genitive m pl; “their”

ἐπιλάβῃ – Future, Active, Indicative, 3rd sg; “forgive”

ἢ – Here the connective has the idea of “also”

ἢ ἂν ἄνθρωποι μὴ ἴδωσιν ἅτις αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ὑμῶν – One can see the parallelism throughout this verse. The separate clauses reflect very similar grammatical points. Here the ὑμῶν, “for us,” receives the Dative of Advantage label.

ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς – “The Father” is the subject of this phrase. How important it is that our Father does forgive our sins! The fact that he has forgiven our sins is that which makes us his children. This is what even gives us the right to pray as such!

ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς – Second person pronoun, Genitive pl; There really is an idea of familial possession here when we are able to call him “our” Father.

ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς – Attributive Adjective, Nom m sg; “heavenly”

ἐὰν – “if”

ἂν – Contrastive conjunction, showing the reverse to be true as well; “but”

μὴ – Negative used with the subjunctive mood; “not”

ἄνθρωποι – Aorist, Active, Subjunctive, 2nd pl; “forgive”

ἴδωσιν – Dative m pl; “for men”

ἢ – Conjunctive “neither”

ὁ οὐρανὸς ἐπιλάβῃ ὑμᾶς – Nominative m sg; “the Father”

ὁμῶ – 2nd person pronoun, Genitive pl; “your”

ἄ – Future, Active, Indicative, 3rd sg; “forgive”

ἅ μ – Accusative n pl; “transgressions”

ὁμῶ – Genitive pl; “your”

The purpose of 6:15 is not to say that our objective forgiveness depends upon whether or not we are willing to forgive others. The issue at stake when we do not grant forgiveness to another is subjective justification. Those who refuse to forgive others are, by their hard-heartedness in doing so, rejecting the forgiveness which the Father freely gives to them. In that sense they remain unforgiven.

Comments:

- ⤴ Here we see the issue presented in a considerably more serious light, subjectively speaking. We witness not only our relationship with others, but our relationship with God at stake. He says that my forgiving attitude actually highlights and clarifies my relationship with him!
- ⤴ The issue at hand for a Christian is not whether the person wronging him or her has repented. The only concern for the believing heart is whether or not he or she is forgiving the wrongdoer regardless of the actions committed by the trespasser.

Exegetical Study of Mark 11:25

ὅταν μὲν ἴσθαι ἔτι, ἵνα ὁ θεὸς ἴδῃ
ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἵνα ἴδωμεν ἅμα ὑμῶν.

Translation: And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you hold anything against anyone, so that also your Father, the one who is in the heavens, will forgive for you your transgressions.

ὅταν – Conjunctive “and”

ὅταν – This has an indefinite quality of time, denoting the frequency of “whenever.” Thus this applies to whenever the following action is repeated at any future time.

– Present, Active, Indicative, 2nd pl; “stand”; The present tense shows that this is an ongoing activity in prayer.

μὲν – Present, Middle/Passive, Participle, Nom m pl; “praying”

ἴσθαι – Present, Active, Imperative, 2nd pl; “forgive”; The present tense in the imperative shows a continual command. Whenever you are praying, you continue to forgive.

ἔτι – “if”

– Indefinite pronoun, Accusative n sg; “something”; There are no restrictions to the extent of the sin committed against the one praying.

ἔτι – Present, Active, Indicative, 2nd pl; “hold” or “have”; With the plural, Christ is addressing his disciples as a group. We certainly fall into this category as the modern readers.

– “against”

– Indefinite pronoun, Genitive m sg; “somebody”; This indefinite pronoun leaves the recipient of the forgiveness in a broad category. It removes any restrictions on what the person has done or how they have responded since the offense has occurred.

ἵνα – Conjunction showing result; “so that”

ὅτι – “also”

ὁ θεός – Nominative m sg; “the Father”

ὑμῶν – Personal pronoun, Genitive pl; “your”; Christ makes this personal for his listeners. He doesn’t just say “my Father” when referencing God in heaven. He reminds his disciples that God is also their Father, this by the adoption that they have as Christ’s brothers.

ὁ – Nominative m sg; This article is showing the adjectival usage of the following phrase in connection with its antecedent ὁ θεός .

ἐν – “in”

ἵνα ἴδῃ – Dative m pl; God’s throne of glory sits “in the heavens.” With this phrase Christ shows that the Father is the one who is in the position of authority to forgive or not to forgive their sins.

ἵνα ἴδῃ – Aorist, Active, Subjunctive, 3rd sg; “forgive”; The subjunctive is used in the ἵνα clause for intended result

ὑμῶν – 2nd person pronoun, Dative pl; “for you”

ἅ μ – Accusative n pl; “the transgressions” or “the trespasses”; Specifically, these are those ways in which we cross the line set by God's law.

ὑμῶν – 2nd person pronoun, Genitive pl; “your”

Comments:

- ✧ This verse may contain some of the strongest support for forgiving my impenitent neighbor. Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the power of prayer. He then interjects with what almost seems like a side-comment concerning the issue.
- ✧ The individual praying here has been wronged. He has not conveyed forgiveness to that person. Now he must resolve this issue not between himself and the offender at this time, but between himself and God. The relationship in consideration at this time is not the horizontal relationship between two people (although this is certainly an issue also to be dealt with).

APPENDIX B
Questionnaire Responses

Four questionnaires were distributed, and three were returned completed. I did not want an inundation of responses when only a few were necessary. I chose three pastors who I already knew to possess differing views concerning the questions raised in this thesis paper, as well as a fourth to serve as a random opinion. The purpose of this questionnaire was simply to highlight the contrasting opinions concerning forgiveness even within our body of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans.

Pastor A

What do you believe about a Christian’s personal responsibility to give forgiveness to someone who sins against him in some way? Does it make a difference whether or not the other person expresses repentance or offers an apology? Why do you believe this?

Matthew 18 teaches complete and repeated forgiveness because we have been completely and repeatedly forgiven of far more than what anyone may do to us. The Lord’s Prayer reiterates the principle. That forgiveness is not dependent on what the wrong-doer says or does to “deserve” our forgiveness, any more than our penitence deserves God’s forgiveness. The parallel is objective and subjective justification. God declares sinners not guilty for the sake of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. This is objective and universal, totally independent of anything the individual does or believes. Yet, that forgiveness does the individual no good without faith – which makes the forgiveness God declares one’s own. In the same manner, Christians forgive the person who has wronged them, freely and because of what Christ has done for them and made of them, apart from an apology or repentance. However, that forgiveness does the wrong-doer no good without repentance (before God) and an apology (in the relationship with the person wronged). The very nature of grace is at issue.

Do you see a difference or conflict between offering personal forgiveness to someone and refusing forgiveness to the same person as you carry out the ministry of the keys? If so, how do you resolve this conflict?

A pastor will personally forgive someone who has wronged him and yet withhold the sacrament from that person if the sinner is impenitent. Again, this is no different than Jesus dying for all human beings and God’s justifying decree proclaimed to all, though the impenitent remain condemned for their refusal to accept Jesus’ atonement.

Jesus at the cross prayed “Father, forgive them,” (his personal forgiveness and intercession) while knowing that at least many of those crucifying him would be eternally condemned.

Do you have other insights to share at this time?

Perhaps it’s my mind finding coincidences, but your topic and the recent and repeated controversy over justification in our circles seem related.

Pastor B

What do you believe about a Christian's personal responsibility to give forgiveness to someone who sins against him in some way? Does it make a difference whether or not the other person expresses repentance or offers an apology? Why do you believe this?

With everything Scripture says about not holding a grudge getting in the way of worship (i.e. Matt. 5:23-24), and the truth that revenge is God's job (Proverbs 25, Romans 12)- it makes no sense for anyone, especially a forgiven Christian to hold a grudge against someone who has wronged them.

Since forgiveness is releasing the right to get even or be upset - releasing the punishment for sin (which we don't have any right to exert anyway), my life ought to be one of forgiveness. That person's reaction may affect the consequences of the sin - but not the fact that I have no right to hold something against him for it. That's up to God. So no, my personally forgiving someone doesn't depend on their repentance - it springs from the fact that I have no right to hold a grudge in the first place.

Do you see a difference or conflict between offering personal forgiveness to someone and refusing forgiveness to the same person as you carry out the ministry of the keys? If so, how do you resolve this conflict?

Clear communication resolves this perceived conflict. While I release any perceived right I have at retribution for something done against me, I am not releasing God from that. I would try to live without the grudge and yet clearly communicate to that person the wall that sin creates between him and God, expressing that I hold no grudge, and am concerned that this sin is affecting his relationship with God. Encourage him to repent and seek God's forgiveness

Do you have other insights to share at this time?

Handling it like this allows me to let God be God and take my ego out of the driver's seat. It lets us uphold the Biblical description of love without letting our pride and sinful selfishness get in the way.

Pastor C

What do you believe about a Christian's personal responsibility to give forgiveness to someone who sins against him in some way? Does it make a difference whether or not the other person expresses repentance or offers an apology? Why do you believe this?

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.

I have the responsibility to go to the person who has sinned against me in an effort to reach reconciliation. If he repents, I forgive him. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he doesn't repent, I cannot forgive him. How do I know he repents? I go by what he says, an expression of repentance or offering an apology. It makes all the difference in the world.

This is not only the power Jesus has given to his public ministers, it is the power he has given to each and every believer. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven.

Do you see a difference or conflict between offering personal forgiveness to someone and refusing forgiveness to the same person as you carry out the ministry of the keys? If so, how do you resolve this conflict?

There are not two forgivenesses, but one. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. The only bump in the road will be if it is a public sin or a private sin. If it is a public sin, unabashed alcoholism, homosexuality, etc, excommunication will be the ultimate ending for the unrepentant sinner, announcing God's Judgment Day sentence on him in advance as the final, most clear warning. You will go to hell if you do not repent. For private sins, we do not resort to the public use of the keys. Let me give an example. Let's say there is an issue over the care of an aging mother. One sibling shoulders the burden, the rest do nothing, not even contributing to her care and prescription bills, which are considerable. The caretaker sibling tries to get them to be more involved—to no avail. Hard feelings arise and even harsher words, from the distant siblings, accusing the caregiving sibling of doing it just to get a bigger piece of the inheritance. No amount of phone calls, e-mails, letters can remove their ill-founded suspicions, for they are grounded in their own feelings of guilt. Rather than repent, they attack the innocent, like the men of Sodom and Gomorrah accusing Lot of coming to live among them to judge them (as they are asking for his two male houseguests to have sex with). Finally the caregiving sibling realizes there will never be a rapprochement. As much as in you lies, live at peace with all men. The sibling will stop contact with the other siblings, since fighting always ensues, pray that they, one day, see the error of their ways and express regret and repentance. But there can be no expression of forgiveness. Those who repent, forgive. The sibling is going to make every effort to leave it behind, so that he/she is not consumed by anger or grudges. Perhaps the Lord will use someone else or some other stimulus to get them thinking about it. This is no "personal forgiveness," but a way to continue on a path of peace inside oneself, a way of being free from malice.

Do you have other insights to share at this time?

In summary, I have the duty and responsibility to give forgiveness when the person who sins against me repents. I must forgive. I cannot forgive when the person who sins against me does not repent. I must not nurture grudges or harbor hard feelings.

Yes, Jesus has paid for the sins that person has committed against me, but that forgiveness is apprehended by repentant faith. And when a person repents, we also repent of our hidden sins, those that are hidden from us, though not necessarily hidden from those we've sinned against. It is the

implicit trust and confidence in a Christian who has tried to be reconciled to his brother (and failed—to the point that only hard feelings will now multiply) that somewhere along the way, the Holy Spirit will bring the person into a repentant faith.