

Is Christian Forgiveness Conditional?

David John Sandifer

The duty of Christian forgiveness has traditionally been understood to extend to all offenses. Recently, however, an interpretation has arisen to challenge this, arguing that Christians are only called to forgive those who demonstrate genuine repentance. This article argues that this view is based on a fallacious analogy between God's forgiveness and ours, and that it runs counter to both the direct teaching of Scripture and the thrust of Christian discipleship.

Introduction

'If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you ... [how] can you not forgive other people?'

Rhita Rhoads, one of the members of the Pennsylvania Amish community who publicly forgave the man who shot five girls in a schoolhouse in 2006¹

'...our forgiveness of others is... modeled upon God's forgiveness of sinners, whom he forgives conditioned upon their repentance. God does not forgive apart from repentance; neither should we... In the event of a tragedy that involves the loss of human life brought about by wanton human sin, it is therefore wrong for Christians to call upon immediate forgiveness in the absence of repentance. Such a call both cheapens and misunderstands the biblical doctrine of forgiveness.'

Christian blogger Justin Taylor²

Most Christians probably understand the Bible to teach that we are called to forgive others unconditionally. In fact, many would probably feel that this is one of the distinctive doctrines of the Christian faith, and one of the most powerful evidences for its outworking in lives. Recently however, some evangelicals have challenged this interpretation, arguing that the call to forgive is conditional upon the repentance of the wrongdoer. Christian counsellor Jay Adams was an early promoter of this idea, and the recently published *Unpacking Forgiveness*, by Chris Brauns,³ has given it perhaps its most extended defence. It has also attracted positive comment in some sectors of the Christian blogosphere, in particular on the influential blogs of Justin Taylor and Tim Challies. Similarly, some Christian ethicists are challenging the notion of unconditional forgiveness, as seen in a recent article by Anthony Bash in *Studies in Christian Ethics*.⁴ What is one to make of this?

The 'conditional forgiveness' view

The argument in favour of conditional forgiveness typically runs something like this: Christian forgiveness is a reflection of God's forgiveness; God's forgiveness of sinners is dependent upon those sinners coming to repentance; in addition, certain passages seem to suggest that Christians are sometimes not to forgive (especially Luke 17:3, which instructs us to forgive *if* our brother repents, and John 20:23, which speaks of unforgiven sins); it follows that while Christians should love everyone, including those who have harmed them, and thus not wish them evil, they are to follow God's example when it comes to forgiveness, and only extend it to repentant sinners. In addition, the point is often made, by Brauns, for example, that a distinction must be made between the *offer* of forgiveness, which should be unconditional, and the *granting* of it, which should not.⁵ Ken Sande, in *The Peacemaker*, makes a similar distinction between having an 'attitude' of forgiveness and 'granting' forgiveness.⁶

Part of the motivation for this approach is to underscore the centrality of relationships in forgiveness, stressing that the goal of forgiveness must be reconciliation. This is in contrast to what is sometimes termed 'therapeutic forgiveness', which, it is claimed, is overly focused on the internal state of the one forgiving, even to the point of making 'inner peace', rather than reconciliation, the primary goal. This is the charge Brauns makes against Lewis Smede's influential treatment in *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*.⁷ Arguably, this is partly a matter of semantics: by making forgiveness and reconciliation 'inextricably linked',⁸ 'full forgiveness' becomes dependent upon reconciliation, and therefore conditional on the repentance of the offending party. By contrast, the traditional view is to describe reconciliation as something separate, the hoped for but not always realized result of forgiveness rather than a condition for it having taken place. Certainly, the writers in question emphasize the importance of not harbouring grudges or bitterness, and, as mentioned previously, of being willing to forgive. Nevertheless, the point is stressed that to forgive another who has not sought forgiveness is not what Christians are called to, and should be viewed as either wrong or nonsensical.⁹ The energy which is being brought to bear on telling Christians that what they thought they were commanded to do they are actually commanded *not* to do is such that it is hard to believe that the difference is merely terminological.

What is forgiveness?

To respond to this line of thinking, it helps to begin by asking what we should understand by forgiveness. In ordinary speech, the idea of 'forgiving someone else' is probably associated primarily with the idea of 'not holding it against them' or 'letting it go'—in fact, we sometimes say, when encouraging someone to forgive someone else, 'let it go'. As it turns out, this is very close to the etymology of the two Greek words for forgiveness, *apoloio* and *aphiemi*: their literal meanings cluster around the ideas of 'releasing', 'letting go', or 'sending out'. Indeed, the petition in the Lord's Prayer that God 'forgive our debts, as we forgive our debtors', turns on this aspect of release, much as bankers still speak of 'debt forgiveness' today. So to say that we are not to forgive others who are unrepentant must mean that in *some way* we are not to release them, not to 'let go' of the wrong they've

done against us.¹⁰ Can this be right?

God's forgiveness – and ours

The heart of the argument rests on the analogy with God's forgiveness. In a point that he calls 'the key principle', and that he recalls again and again throughout his book, Brauns states that 'God expects believers to forgive others *in the way* that he forgives them'.¹¹ This is based on several Biblical passages where the word 'as' is used to establish a correspondence between God's forgiveness and ours, including the Lord's Prayer. Thus in Colossians Paul writes '*as* the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive' (Col. 3:13).¹² The argument, then, is that this means 'in the same manner', *ergo* we look to the principles for God's forgiveness of humans, and we have the very principles according to which we should forgive each other. This is the line which is repeatedly followed by Brauns and others, and it leads, in particular, to the seemingly inevitable conclusion that since God does not forgive everyone, but only those who come to sincere repentance, we should not either.

This interpretation, however, is deeply problematic. In the first place, in the verses where we are told to forgive 'as' God does, the ordinary reading is not the one which is being suggested. Instead, to forgive 'as' God forgives us is most naturally understood as meaning not 'in the same exact way' but '*since*' or '*on account of the fact that*' God has forgiven us.¹³ In the Lord's prayer, where the correspondence is reversed, this meaning is seen even more clearly, as witnessed by the manner in which the Lord's prayer has been understood by generations of Christians who have prayed it over the centuries: forgive us, not 'in the same manner as we have forgiven' but '*since* we also have forgiven', that is to say, 'we would not dare ask you for forgiveness if we were not also forgiving those who sinned against us'. And Jesus makes clear that this is what He means by His words immediately following the prayer: 'if you forgive others... your heavenly Father will also forgive you' (Matt. 6:13). It is not that the word 'as' in these verses *could* not also suggest 'in the same manner', it is just that it is not what it means in the first instance, and is not necessarily implied by the expression. A whole theology of direct equivalence is too heavy a burden to place on that one slender word.

Secondly, a moment's reflection reveals the inherent limitations of the analogy between God's forgiveness and ours: our sins against others are against like, against fellow creatures. When viewed as against God, as those of creatures against their Creator, these same sins take on an altogether different, infinitely weightier, quality. Likewise, each of us who is sinned against is also a sinner, who has sinned (and will sin) countless times against others, whereas God is eternally perfect, never sinning, only ever sinned against. Again, God is the righteous judge over all mankind and the whole universe, and each will have to give an account to Him for his sins. We, on the other hand, are told we have no right to stand in judgment over others for personal wrongs (Luke 6:37). Finally, the flip-side of God's forgiveness is His wrath, which falls righteously on those who are not forgiven—would anyone dare suggest that we should also mimic God in this? It is not difficult to continue to multiply examples of the *disanalogy* between God's forgiveness and ours. In particular, as Brauns himself observes, the precondition for God's forgiveness is that we 'repent and *believe*'—what would that look like in our case? Should we ask others to 'put their faith in us', even as we do in Christ? No, the parallel between our forgiveness and God's must in the nature of things be a limited one, because of the difference in kind between our relationships with each other and God's relationship with us. We do not—cannot—attempt to duplicate every aspect of God's forgiveness, as these aspects are bound up with His unique relationship with His creatures; rather, simply and straightforwardly, we imitate Him who forgave us by also forgiving others.

In fact, the distinctively Christian emphasis on personal forgiveness partly rests precisely on the differentiation between us and God. We forgive, in part, because we are not God, are not the final judges, and can relinquish our need to adjudicate because we have confidence in the One who can and will do it perfectly—the One who is, unlike us, both perfectly just and perfectly merciful. It is a posture of humility, of relinquishing, of trusting in the One who says 'vengeance is mine' (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). When we surrender our right to hold others to account we do not surrender the principle of cosmic justice, only our right to enforce it. And this is so precisely because we believe in the God who is infinitely above us. We have put our confidence

unconditionally in this God who has forgiven us and has told us to forgive others.

Letting Scripture speak

If we abandon, as we must, the misguided attempt to deduce the terms of our forgiveness of others in a one-to-one fashion from God's redemptive activity, then we can allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves on the subject. Here we find that, on the question of the conditionality of forgiveness, the whole weight of the New Testament witness falls on the other side. In the first place, there is not a single instance where we are told it is permissible to not forgive personal offences, never mind an instance when we are told it would be wrong to forgive others. The texts which are sometimes given as examples of 'not forgiving' (Matt. 18 and John 20:23) are in fact clearly instructions on church discipline, not interpersonal relations. There is one injunction, it is true, which seems to imply that forgiveness is conditional on repentance, the one in Luke 17:3, where Jesus speaks of forgiving the one who sins against us 'if he repents'. However, given that the primary intent of that passage is so clearly in the direction of encouraging forgiveness, it seems perverse to use it to justify its opposite—especially as the offender is described as repenting seven times in one day, and I suspect that few of us would really consider such a repeat offender's avowals as meeting the criteria of genuine repentance!

Secondly, there are so many Scriptures urging us to forgive sins, without any qualifications or exceptions mentioned or implied, that it is hard to see how these could be 'conditional' exhortations if one is not pre-committed to such an interpretation (in addition to the Lord's Prayer, see also Matt. 18:21, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37, Eph. 4:32, and Col. 3:13). In fact, the whole momentum, the entire direction and flow of the New Testament, runs in exactly the opposite way. We are to give freely as we have received, we are to turn the other cheek when we are slapped, we are to consider our needs as less important than those of others, we are to strive to be the servants of all, we are to bless and pray for those who persecute us, we are to love our enemies. All of these commands are unilateral and unconditional; all of them reflect an outward flow of generosity in imitation of our Lord Jesus Christ's sacrificial self-giving. Even if one were swayed by a chain of reasoning into believing that forgiveness should be conditional, should not the very words 'I will not

forgive until' stick in the Christian's throat?

Conclusion

Those advocating 'conditional forgiveness' are no doubt well-intentioned. In part, they are attempting to counter some genuinely pernicious teachings which have infiltrated the church: an overly psychological emphasis when addressing unforgiveness; an overemphasis on the personal benefits of forgiveness rather than on the goal of reconciliation with the offender; and a denigration of church discipline in favour of a 'cheap grace' with no accountability or consequences for sins. Nevertheless, it is a serious thing to interpret so central a teaching as the command to forgive one another, and it is an especially serious thing to teach that the command to forgive one another is in some cases a command *not* to forgive one another. Jesus, after all, seems to in some way make our salvation conditional on our getting this one right.

Through the centuries the radical, un-asked for, freely bestowed forgiveness of saints and martyrs has been the shining glory of the church, an unmistakable sign of her supernatural character, the evidence of lives overflowing with love, for the love of their Saviour. What a shame it would be if, on account of a misguided understanding, this distinctive witness were weakened in any degree.

'If you have Jesus in your heart and he has forgiven you, how can you not forgive other people?' How indeed?

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1. Charles Gibson, 'Amish say they "forgive" school shooter', ABC News, Oct. 3, 2006 <<http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=2523941&page=1>>
 2. Justin Taylor, 'Is forgiveness always right and required?', Justin Taylor: Between Two Worlds, Jan. 10. 2007 <<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2007/01/10/is-forgiveness-always-right-and/>>
 3. Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Crossway, 2008).
 4. Anthony Bash, 'Forgiveness: A Re-appraisal', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 24.2 (2011), 133-146. Bash states that 'to argue that Christianity applauds, endorses and promotes forgiveness for the unrepentant is... theologically misguided—and often pastorally naïve, simplistic and dangerous', 137.
 5. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 55, 57.
 6. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker, 1991).
 7. Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (Harper & Row, 1984).
 8. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 58.
 9. 'There are times when it is wrong to forgive' (Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 17).
 10. If there is not *any* sense in which this is true, one must draw the conclusion that 'conditional forgiveness' advocates have so re-defined forgiveness as a technical theological term that it has lost any meaningful connection to its ordinary usage.
 11. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 44. Emphasis added.
 12. The other passage which Brauns bases his argument on is Eph. 4:32 ('forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you') (Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 44).
 13. The Greek here is not decisive: both words used (*kathos* in the Colossians and Ephesians texts and *hos* in the Lord's Prayer) have a broad semantic range, much as with 'as' in English: the likely meaning must be inferred from the logic of the sentence.

For further reading:

- David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive*, Westminster John Knox, 1996.
- Anthony Bash, 'Forgiveness: A Re-appraisal', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 24.2 (2011), 133-146.
- Corrie Ten Boom, *Amazing Love: True Stories of the Power of Forgiveness*, Christian Literature Crusade, 2007.
- Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds*, Crossway, 2008.
- Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Baker, 1991.
- Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, Harper & Row, 1984.
- Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Zondervan, 2006.
- Brian Zahnd, *Unconditional? The call of Jesus to radical forgiveness*, Charisma House, 2011.

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