

Feb 26th 2012 "Forgiveness: The Divine Pattern" Ephesians 4:20-5:2

Over the last two weeks in these studies about forgiveness I have been moving towards the matter of our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. And such always raises the question of how different should this whole forgiveness thing be for the Christian to that of a non Christian?

The Apostle Peter was obviously struggling with that issue when, in Matthew 18:21 he asked Jesus a question about the number of times that he, as a follower of Jesus, should forgive a brother who sins against him.

He was aware that the current Jewish teaching concluded that three offences might be pardoned but after that a person could justly avenge the wrongdoing. So when he suggested up to seven times he was asking whether the difference between their forgiveness when wronged, and his forgiveness as a disciple of Jesus, was simply a matter of the follower of Jesus being prepared to forgive just a little bit more.

What Jesus said in reply was, "Don't give me any of this up to 7 stuff! I say 70 times 7"—which simply was Jesus telling Peter that you can't put a limit on the forgiveness that he expects his followers to practice. And the reason for that is because such forgiveness follows an entirely different pattern to that which the world presents. The pattern for the forgiveness Jesus expects of us is God's pattern.

Paul mentions this in Ephesians chapter 4. He is talking about Christians living lives worthy of their calling as followers of Jesus and in v20 he begins to speak about some practical implications of this. In v24 he stresses that Christians are "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness".

Then he follows this by a whole list of negative behaviours we must now avoid such as lying, being controlled by our anger, stealing and so on. When he gets to v32 he introduces some positive things we should be doing and forgiveness is one of them.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

The Divine pattern for forgiving is the one set by God Himself when He set out to forgive us. Forgive as I have forgiven you.

I have many wonderful memories of my father, especially those going back to when I was a young boy and he was my hero. And one of my most precious is of the time when he taught me how to mend a broken fuse.....He did it first step by step. Gave me his pattern. Then he got me to do it.

I have never forgotten that, and for years after I would approach that particular problem in the way he had shown me—because he loved me enough to show me, and because I knew his way worked.

God has shown us by His own example how we should practice forgiveness. He has revealed what the forgiveness He expects of us looks like by first showing that depth of forgiveness to us while we were still sinners. So what does God's forgiveness to sinners like you and me look like?

Well in his book, 'Unpacking Forgiveness', Chris Brauns presents what he sees as the characteristics of this Divine pattern of forgiveness and I feel that his list goes a long way towards answering that question. What I see him as saying is that:

1. God's forgiveness is by Grace and is offered to everyone but it is not free.
2. God's forgiveness is conditional.
3. God's forgiveness is a Commitment.
4. God's forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.

Now I can sense some of you looking at this list and feeling a little uneasy about it, but let me explain it in its biblical context to you and I'm sure it will make more sense.

Take his first point: God's forgiveness is by Grace and is offered to everyone but it is not free.

We all have some understanding I'm sure about Grace. It's all that God gives us that is so precious and wonderful and is so absolutely free. All that He gives or offers on the basis of His love and mercy alone and not on the basis of whether we deserve it or not. God's forgiveness to us in Christ is definitely an act of Grace. As sinners we were His enemies and did not deserve or seek after His forgiveness, yet God the Son laid down His life so that this forgiveness could be offered to everyone.

I was talking to someone after the service last Sunday who asked whether God saw a difference between someone who had sinned greatly like Hitler, and someone who had done mainly good things like Mother Tereasa. And the wonderful thing is that God offers the same complete forgiveness to all and that is the outcome of His Grace.

But although such forgiveness is offered freely to all it is not free in the sense that it cost God nothing. The cost to God was so high that it is beyond our comprehension. He took upon Himself our sins and bore the judgment due us. The most horrific sins we could ever think of God the Son carried to such a degree that the Bible says in 2Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God

Second: God's forgiveness is conditional.

By Grace His forgiveness is gloriously offered to all but that does not mean that everyone automatically benefits from it. The well known verse, John 3:16 says : ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".***

Whoever **believes**, where belief is much more than an acceptance that God exists and that this Jesus, who lived over2,000 years ago, was God in human flesh come to save us. You can accept that without having Faith, which is what belief means, and it will profit you nothing. Faith is that decision of the will that says God is my God and therefore I will trust in Him and not myself for my life now and into eternity.

God offers forgiveness freely but Faith is needed on our part to receive it. And not only Faith is required. Paul said in Acts 20:21

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Repentance as well. Repentance which means literally a turning around. An acceptance of the truth of our sinful position before God and a willingness to claim God's forgiveness for our sin and then to live our life in a new God pleasing fashion.

Someone once said that:

- Regret is being sorry—mentally...like King Saul
- Remorse is being sorry—mentally and emotionally.....like Judas
- Repentance is being sorry—mentally, emotionally, and doing something about it

When God offers forgiveness He wraps it up like a present. Faith and Repentance are like taking the packaging off.

Third: God's Forgiveness is a Commitment. A Commitment He makes to pardon our sins. He makes a promise that He will no longer hold the sin against the person being forgiven.

Romans 5:1-2 are two of the most glorious statements in Scripture. They read like a legal proclamation of freedom from punishment for the sinner.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

That word Justified means—‘just as though we had never sinned’. God has made the commitment to completely pardon the sinner who accepts His forgiveness and He will stick by it.

“Merlin Carothers, author of the book Prison to Praise, had firsthand experience of what it is like to be declared righteous. During World War Two, he joined the army. Anxious to get into some action, Carothers went AWOL but was caught and sentenced to five years in prison. Instead of sending him to prison, the judge told him that he could serve his time by staying in the army for five years. The judge told him that if he left the army before the five years ended he would have to spend the rest of his time in prison. Carothers was released from the army before the five years were over, so he returned to the prosecutor’s to find out where he would be spending the remainder of his sentence. To his surprise and delight, Carothers was told that he had received a full pardon from President Truman. The prosecutor explained: “That means your record is completely clear. Just as if you had never gotten involved with the law.”

Fourth: God's forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.

It does of course eliminate the eternal consequences of our sin. As the previous point makes, we appear before God Just as though we had never sinned. But it does not mean that all the mess our sins have caused here on earth are automatically cleared up for us.

When Zacchaeus, that tax collector in the bible who climbed the tree in order to see Jesus, became a follower he knew that he was a sinner and repented of his sin. But he also knew that his sins which included cheating many out of their money, had consequences that he had to deal with. So he stood before the crowd and made a promise to pay back to those he had cheated four times the amount.

At times God makes it easier for us to clear up the mess our sin has caused—at times He doesn't. But he always uses it to train us in right living, to show that we are trustworthy, and to prove to others what a difference He has made in our lives.

So that is God's pattern of forgiveness and next week we will look at how we can emulate it in our dealings with others. But before we leave it today there is a very important question that must be asked. Have you truly accepted God forgiveness for yourself?

Have you by Faith accepted God into your life as the only One who can keep you safe on this earth, and give you a place in His family in heaven. Can you truly say that you have acknowledged your sin in His sight, repented of your wrongdoing against Him and accepted His forgiveness.

If you haven't then right now you have the opportunity to do so.

