



"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

—C.S. Lewis

21-Sep-12

Sins in the Balance (Part One)

Under the Old Covenant, the [Day of Atonement](#) was the only day during the year when the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies. On that day, he sprinkled the blood of a [sin offering](#) on and in front of the Mercy Seat and thus made atonement for the whole nation's sins. When [Jesus Christ](#) gave Himself as the perfect Sacrifice, His priceless blood fulfilled this ritual, and as a result, *true* forgiveness became available. Forgiveness only happened in type before because the blood of bulls and goats could not actually take away sin.

[God](#) did these things freely, meaning He was under no compulsion to do so. Nothing was forcing His hand. Yet, even though we cannot earn forgiveness, our forgiveness still hangs upon a condition. Forgiveness is a gift, but there is a limiting factor, a stipulation, that is a part of it. Among other places, it can be found in Christ's model prayer:

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. . . . For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. ([Matthew 6:12](#), 14-15)

These verses are easy to read, yet they can be one of the most difficult parts of a Christian's walk! If we want God to forgive those things that we have done to incur the death penalty, we have to forgive the sins of others.

By way of definition, the word "forgive" comes from the words "from" and "give." It began as "from-give," but over time, it turned into "for-give." From this we can see that the basic meaning is "to give away from," in the sense of sending an [offense](#) out of our presence. Thus, it means to overlook an offense, to treat an offender as not guilty, or to consider a debt to be paid.

Forgiveness is not a feeling that washes over us, but rather a conscious choice. It does not mean that the offense will never come to mind again, nor does it mean that all the pain suddenly goes away. It also does not mean that we are required to remain in a circumstance of abuse. But forgiveness means that we no longer hold that sin against the sinner. As [I Corinthians 13:5](#) says, [love](#) "keeps no record of wrongs" (*New International Version*).

The forgiving we do is not at all equal to the forgiving that the Father does. To begin with, any sin against us is first and foremost committed against a transcendent God. We can understand this in the example of [King David](#). He committed a whole slew of sins that affected many people, yet when he prayed to God, he said, "Against You, *You only*, have I sinned" ([Psalm 51:4](#); emphasis ours throughout). It is *God's* law that is broken when someone sins against us, so the primary offense is against the divine Lawgiver. The sin is against a vastly superior Being, and thus He has the sole claim on the life of the sinner.

The sin of one mere mortal against another is essentially inconsequential compared to the fact that the sin is against the perfect Creator. The sin may have utterly destroyed lives, as David's did, but that matters far less than the fact that the essence and nature of the Most High God was disregarded, despised, and defied when the sin was committed. For this reason, the forgiving that takes place between two created beings is on an almost infinitely lower level than the forgiving that takes place when the Creator forgives the sin of a person He created, especially when He has every right simply to end the existence of the sinner.

A second point about human forgiveness is that, while God's forgiveness can pardon the death penalty, ours cannot. Again, God has first claim, and only He has the authority to uphold or remit the death penalty. His forgiveness is overwhelming in its effects, while ours is of a considerably smaller scope. Nevertheless, if we want Him to overlook our sins and to treat us as guiltless when we wander off the path, He requires that we do the same thing for others.

The well-known [Parable of the Unforgiving Servant](#) is a vivid example of the debt someone owes to us when they sin against us compared to the debt we owe to God ([Matthew 18:23-35](#)). Notice the conclusion:

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers *until he should pay all that was due to him*. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

This parable deals a deathblow to the concept of "[eternal security](#)," and it does so in a unique way. The king represents God, and verse 27 says that he forgave the debt—one so huge it was unpayable. That debt represents our sins. Yet, his forgiveness is not absolute! Because of the servant's impatience and hardness of heart toward others, the king actually lays *the entire original debt back* on the servant and requires him to pay it in full. Translating this to our own lives, our own immense debt *has been* forgiven—yet our treatment of others could cause that debt to be fully reinstated. We would then have to pay that debt with our lives. As one pastor and poet wrote, "He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass."

The Bible highlights certain classifications of sin, and they are described in terrifying terms. Within the Book of the Law are warnings against presumptuous sin, for which no atonement could be made ([Numbers 15:30](#); [Deuteronomy 17:12-13](#)). Another example is Christ's warning against blaspheming the Holy Spirit, which is something that will not be forgiven (

[Matthew 12:31-32](#)). In Hebrews, we are warned against willful sin, after which Jesus Christ's sacrifice no longer applies ([Hebrews 10:26-27](#)). These are the major areas of danger that we must all avoid.

But when it comes to not receiving forgiveness from God, Scripture shows that this can happen simply because we do not forgive a brother. Are there debts against us that we are holding onto rather than giving over to God to collect? When it comes to judgment, if we want the balance to tip in our favor and to receive mercy rather than justice, we must do the same thing for our brother. The scale on which we do these things is minuscule compared to what God does for us, but He wants—requires!—us to practice this. If we will be living with Him for eternity, we must learn to emulate Him now. The God we are striving to emulate is a God of mercy and forgiveness—thankfully.

Next time we will consider whether we still need to forgive, even if someone does not ask forgiveness.

- David C. Grabbe

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[The Need for Forgiveness](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Because it is more blessed to give than to receive, the things we ardently desire for ourselves we should be willing to give to others, including forbearance and forgiveness. Following the Apostle Paul's example to the Corinthians, we ought to forgive and comfort one who has genuinely repented. Godly character includes the capacity to forgive and exercise forbearance. Within the body of Christ, we consist of interdependent cells, dependent upon each other. By failing to forgive our brother, we jeopardize the health or well being of the entire body. Extending forgiveness to a repentant brother is a godly characteristic, strengthening the entire body, leading to unity. Jesus Christ's example should be our standard.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Forgiveness](#)

by John O. Reid

Following our too frequent mess-ups in life, forgiveness is so refreshing! John Reid examines forgiveness, highlighting how necessary it is for us to forgive others.

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