

Why Forgiveness Matters

Years ago, I worked in a primary school. One break-time in the staff room, the chat turned to something which had happened a number of years before. It seemed that the head had put in a very unpopular policy without consulting anyone. It was news to me – it was before my time. But one of the senior staff who had been there said these words about what had happened: ‘I will never forgive him for that – never.’ It was a remarkable moment for me, for suddenly I knew why so many things about the school were as they were. Relationships, atmospheres, dynamics in meetings and all sorts of things had been soured and spoilt. The consequences of that person’s decision not to forgive were everywhere in that school so many years later. Perhaps you know of similar situations.

Forgiveness is an issue for all of us. All of us live amongst sinners every day, so all of us are sinned against, not

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once but many, many times. We ourselves are sinners too, so we wrong others repeatedly as well. Sin damages relationships, and

when people wrong us, strong reactions and emotions rise up in our hearts.

Some of us may be carrying very deep wounds from particular events in the past. You may be living now in challenging situations, perhaps in marriages and families, where you have to forgive the same sin over and over again. It is so easy to hold grudges and to want to hurt back. How should we respond when people wrong us?

Jesus Christ spoke compellingly about forgiveness. After His death and resurrection, He told His followers that ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins [would] be preached in his name to all nations’ (Luke 24:47). That is glorious good news. Jesus died to pay for our sins and bring us free forgiveness. This forgiveness from God is now available to all who repent and trust Christ.

God forgives us through Christ. And we are called to become, in our turn, people who forgive. Over and over again in the New Testament, Christians are reminded that God has forgiven all their sins through Christ’s death. And time and again, too, Christians are commanded to forgive.

So, Paul writes to the Christians in Colossae, ‘forgive

whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you' (Col. 3:13, my italics).

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught His followers to pray, 'Forgive us our sins, *for we also forgive everyone who sins against us*' (Luke 11:4, my italics).

Forgiveness can seem very hard. Sometimes it can seem quite beyond us. We need God to help us and we need to prayerfully seek His help.

But however hard it may seem, we need to be clear that forgiving people is not an optional extra in the Christian life. It is like the litmus test of being a Christian. It is not that forgiving others is something we do to earn God's forgiveness. But forgiving those who wrong us is a sign of the genuineness of our new life in Christ.

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There are a number of stark warnings in Scripture that to refuse to forgive is to declare yourself outside of Christ and His forgiveness. Jesus said, 'if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Matt. 6:15).

So, we are on very serious ground here. We cannot just dismiss Jesus' command to forgive as being too difficult for us. Jesus is clear. If we refuse to forgive those who wrong us, we will not receive forgiveness from God ourselves. And to face God unforgiven is a truly terrible prospect. It means that we will have to pay for our sins ourselves and

will face a lost eternity. Yes, this is very serious ground.

But we have many questions about forgiveness.

What does forgiveness actually look like in practice? It's important I know so I can be clear if I have done it or not.

- Does forgiving someone mean I must drop all criminal charges against that person?
- I still feel angry about what happened. Does that mean I haven't forgiven that person?
- What if the other person is not sorry about what happened? What then?
- Does forgiveness mean that I must treat that other person exactly as if the sin never happened?
- And what about when I just don't want to forgive, or I feel I can't forgive? What then?

We have all sorts of questions.

In coming to understand forgiveness, it's helpful to think first about what happens when someone wrongs another person.

Questions to think about and discuss ...

- **What effects does sin have in personal relationships?**
- **How do people tend to react when they have been wronged?**