

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Forgiveness - God's Remedy for Human Failure

written by Bob DeWaay

“Of Him [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 10:43)

Last month I asserted that human actions have significance and that we are accountable to God for “*deeds in the body*” (2Corinthians 5:10b). We have all failed, leaving us with a guilt problem. This month we shall deal with God's answer to this problem, the forgiveness of sins through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pleasing the Father

Only the Incarnate Christ, who was fully human and fully God, could legitimately say, “. . . *I always do the things that are pleasing to Him* [the Father] (John 8:29b). If it is valid to claim unconditional acceptance from God without respect to behavior as many now maintain, then why do people still struggle with guilt and what are they to do with their obvious failures?

The popular approach affirms that we need not try to follow Jesus' example of doing the things that please the Father because the ideal of pleasing one's father is unworkable. Many believe that people should not be asked to measure up to anyone's expectations, neither those of God nor of an earthly father. Therefore, doing things (as Jesus did) in hopes of pleasing one's father is deemed a sign of an emotional malady or “conditional” love, as discussed in last month's issue.

Self-actualized people (those who are complete and happy in themselves with no external approval needed) supposedly have risen above the Biblical analogy of a son seeking to please his father. We are to be whole, complete and fulfilled people without reference to our behavior or other people's (or God's) expectations

and hopes about our actions and attitudes toward them. “Accept me as I am, or take a hike” many brazenly declare. I saw a bumper sticker that read, “away with guilt” (only in crude metaphor). A summary of what is now considered a reasonable philosophy of life might be, “I am through with guilt and with people who disapprove of my actions. I shall do as I please and feel good about it.”

When pagan society takes a position such as characterized by this statement, we may not be shocked. However, when Christians promote the beliefs that lead to this attitude, we encounter serious problems in the church. If by human fiat we autonomously declare guilt to be gone we also reject the Biblical teaching on forgiveness. If there is no guilt, no personal responsibility and no person (including God) to whom our actions and attitudes ought to matter, then why seek forgiveness? To ask forgiveness is to acknowledge the reality and significance of one's own failures. The Lord's prayer contains this response, “*Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us*” (Luke 11:4). We need forgiveness, because our indebtedness is real. We do owe something to God and our fellow man (bumper stickers notwithstanding).

Is pleasing God a valid goal in one's life? Consider these Biblical passages:

So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Colossians 1:10)

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. (1Thess. 4:1)

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

The exemplary people of faith in Hebrew 11 were people who trusted and obeyed God. The passages in Colossians and 1Thessalonians were addressed to Christians, people who had placed their faith in God through confessing Christ as their Lord. The New Testament shows that pleasing God is a proper motive of life. Jesus did it and we who are in Christ should “walk” so as to please the Father.

What if We Fail?

To acknowledge pleasing God as a purpose in life is to admit past failure and risk future failure. The answer to failure and resulting guilt has been revealed since the times of the Old Testament. David knew well the agony of public failure and the torment of personal guilt. He could have taken the course of Adam and Eve who blamed respectively Eve (and God who gave her to Adam) and the serpent. Had David also shifted the blame, he probably would not have been called “a man after God's own heart.” Psalm 51 records David's response to his failure.

(For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.) *Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy loving-kindness; According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, And done what is evil in Thy sight, So that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, And blameless when Thou dost judge. (Psalm 51:1-4).*

David avoided blame shifting. He acknowledged that he had sinned against God and that God was just when He held him accountable for his actions. Cleansing and forgiveness are the works of God that David knew he desperately needed. Where would David have been had he said that he did it because his parents raised him in a home that lacked unconditional love? Perhaps he could have said, “Bathsheba should have been more discreet.” That would make him like Saul who told the prophet, “*the people spared*

the best of the sheep . . .” (1Samuel 15:15) when questioned why he took the spoil when commanded not to; but of himself Saul lied, “*I have carried out the command of the Lord*” (1Samuel 15:13).

David's throne became that of Messiah (see Jeremiah 33:15-17) and Saul's was removed through Samuel's prophecy, “*the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel*” (1Samuel 15:26). The difference was not that one was blameless and the other blameworthy, but that David truly repented and wholeheartedly sought forgiveness and cleansing while Saul grudgingly admitted, “*I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel*” (1Samuel 15:30).

Failures either humble us and drive us to the throne of Grace to find mercy and help or they motivate us pridefully to save face. The first response leads to victory in our walk with the Lord, the second to a humanistic, self oriented declaration of spiritual autonomy. It involves feeling badly for a while, failing to repent, and **seeking justification from the world rather than forgiveness from God**. This leads to bumper stickers that read “away with guilt, perverted and proud,” or other things to that effect - you have seen them.

Paul describes these options:

I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death. (2Corinthians 7:9,10)

R. V. G. Tasker offers insightful comment on this section of Scripture:

For a man repents when he turns to God, sees his conduct as God sees it, submits to God's judgment and asks God to forgive him. Sorrow for wrong-doing, which leaves God out of account, is merely remorse, that melancholy compound of self-pity and self-disgust. So far from healing and uplifting, remorse depresses and embitters.¹

Saul suffered from this last state of af-

fairs. Wanting honor before the people, he failed to repent and eventually became depressed and tormented.

Paul had seriously challenged sin in the Corinthian church (see 1Corinthians) and now rejoiced that their response was godly sorrow that led to repentance. Repentance and forgiveness will be found only by those who acknowledge God's sovereign right to judge, the truthfulness of His decrees, and their own failure to do the will of God (which encompasses actions **and** attitudes). It has been said that, “God forgives our sins, not our excuses.” Only forgiveness from God can give us a reason to rejoice since His forgiveness can eliminate the emotional residue of sin.

The practice of defining away our guilt is wreaking horrible consequences in American society and sadly, in the church. William Kirk Kilpatrick comments on this problem, “Even when people do not, in fact, feel good about themselves, they have the belief they ought to feel good. Even when they feel guilt, they are convinced it is only neurotic guilt: not a matter for expiation but for explanation.”² What happens when guilt is deemed merely a mental abnormality, not the result of a judicial relationship between a transgressor and the Lawgiver and Judge? Kilpatrick explains, “The new psychological idea seems to be that we should have harmony at any price. If our actions aren't in line with our beliefs, then we ought to change the beliefs (beliefs being considerably easier to change than behavior).³ This means that the changeless God cannot be acknowledged as the absolute revealer of truth and righteousness.

Emotional “Honesty”

In order to change beliefs to remove guilt we must find another source for what we hold to be true. This turns out to be ourselves. In a self-perpetuating cycle, human actions that produce guilt cause the guilty ones to shun their previous beliefs about God in order to lessen the guilt. The new beliefs must accommodate whatever action caused the guilt. This is the equivalent to the sinful action being the source of moral direction. “It means that if your self-concept won't let you

feel good about having casual sex, and yet you still want causal sex, then you ought to adjust your self-concept accordingly.”⁴

This philosophy asserts, “what is right.” Being is its own justification and all moral imperatives are relativized. Again, Kirk Kilpatrick helps us understand how this is being done: “Curiously enough, a lot of our moral jiggery pokery *is* justified in the name of honesty. The psychological creed says that we ought to be proud of ourselves and our life-styles, that we should not hide what we are.”⁵ When asked why certain actions (previously considered sinful) are followed, the answer returns, “I have to be emotionally honest, I have to be true to myself.”

This attitude frustrates many parents who seek to provide godly, moral guidance for their teenagers. The kids have learned the psychological credo well and have found a perfect shield of armor to repel the teachings and guidance of their parents. Now, when engaging in behavior forbidden by the Bible, they see no need for forgiveness. There need be no sorrow, tears, or crying out to God for help now that whatever a person does is simply what he is and what he is cannot be wrong.

It is now “honest” to be what you are and be proud of it, even if some stodgy parents refuse to get up to speed with modern ways of thinking. Television shows train parents in the correct responses, portraying those who accept openly, without shame or correction, their child's “gayness” (for example) as the wise “Father Knows Best” parents of the new era. Those who refuse to tolerate Biblically forbidden behavior are made out to be abusive hypocrites who need

psychological help. Evil is twisted into a “virtue” under the ruse of “emotional honesty” and toleration. If we are honest about what we are, proud of what we do and unwilling to disapprove of the actions and attitudes of others no matter how offensive they are, we have arrived at modern society's highest sense of goodness and value.

It is no wonder that today forgiveness is rarely mentioned as a vital aspect of human relationships. Forgiveness implies that wrong was done. If we neither admit to wrong nor acknowledge its existence in anyone else, there is no point to giving and receiving forgiveness. Somehow we must try reconcile to differences without forgiveness. This does not work well in practice as shown by the record number of divorces, fatherless children, and irreconcilable, rebellious young people.

“No fault” relationship breakups are a blatant denial of reality. The Bible lays out the necessity of receiving forgiveness from God and extending it to fellow humans as the only way to healing. Part of the present blessing of reconciliation with God is that there can be substantial healing in human relationships in this life. God places us into the body of Christ where we can find relationships with “brothers and sisters in Christ” that, if nurtured in the gracious attitude of forgiveness and mutual encouragement, can become life long blessings to us.

The Danger of Unforgiveness

Jesus taught, “*For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions*” (Matthew 6:14,15). This seems harsh to some who feel this passage should be tempered. There is no need to do so, it is straightforward and reasonable. If we are willing to ask and receive forgiveness from God, then it is right to be willing to extend forgiveness to men. To refuse to do so is to be guilty of double-mindedness. It is to say that God is forgiving and merciful to me; but others must suffer the consequences of their own shortcomings without reprieve. We either are or are not willing to participate in receiving **and** giving forgiveness. It cannot be limited to receiving only. Let us examine

some pertinent Biblical teaching to dispel any confusion on this matter.

Jesus told a parable to illustrate the nature of forgiveness that is recorded in **Matthew 18:21-35**. A king had a slave who owed so much money (ten thousand talents - a massive sum of money) that he would never be able to repay it, so the king “. . . *commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had. . .*” (Matthew 18:25). Upon hearing the pleas of the hopeless man, the king “*forgave him the debt*” (verse 27). In the parable this man, enjoying his new found freedom, came upon a fellow slave who owed only a few dollars in comparison. His response was, “*he seized him and began to choke him saying, ‘payback what you owe’*” (verse 28). He turned a deaf ear to the man who ironically used the exact plea for mercy that had worked on the king, and threw him in prison. When the king found out about this injustice, “*moved with anger, [he] handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed*” (verse 34).

Jesus interpreted the parable for us, “*So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart*” (Matthew 18:35). The problem many find with this is the implication that it can be done. They say, “I can forgive but I cannot forget,” or “I try to forgive but I cannot.” To answer the first response we need to clarify the meaning of “forget” as used in this statement. If it means “the inability to recall the incident to memory,” then this was not what Jesus asked us to do. God does not eradicate memories nor does He give us the ability to do so. The fact that we can remember incidents is implied in the notion of forgiveness. We are only consciously concerned over what we can presently recall. We forgive incidents that we can remember and they do not instantly exit our conscious minds the moment of forgiveness; they may never.

However, if to “forget” does not mean a literal inability of conscious recall, but a willingness to quit holding a “debt” in

account, then to say one cannot “forget” is the equivalent of saying “I cannot forgive.” This statement needs careful examination because many people think that they are in this condition. Many Christians say they “cannot forgive” and therefore lack assurance of salvation because of Christ's statement in this passage. This seems a hopeless dilemma: “God has commanded me to forgive, I cannot forgive, therefore I am not forgiven by God and there is nothing I can do about it.”

I have talked to many people over the years who are depressed and feeling hopeless because of this seeming dilemma. We should look to the context, the parable itself, to understand what Jesus is asking us to do. He likened forgiveness to a financial transaction (one version of the Lord's prayer seeks and gives forgiveness for “trespasses” another “debts”). This analogy is helpful because monetary transactions are more easily defined and grasped than wrongs inflicted by another's actions or words.

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If someone owes you money and you hold a valid note proving the debt, you can seek legal action against the person if they refuse to pay. If however you were to forgive the debt by signing the note, “paid in full,” you would lose all legal recourse against this person. No matter what you felt like or how badly you needed the money at a later date, you would not even consider trying to collect. In this case, you would “forget” the previous debt in the sense of not taking it into consideration when making financial plans. “When I get paid back, then I will buy such and so,” would not be in your mind.

Forgiveness is the legal cancellation of a debt so that repayment is never again expected or sought. When God forgives our sins, he accepts the blood of Jesus Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, as payment for our debt of sin. That great load

of debt that we could never repay is wiped away, legally, from God's accounts. We are reconciled to God and function as people who live by faith in a relationship with a forgiving, loving, Heavenly Father. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* (1John 1:9)

When we forgive someone, we are making a commitment not to seek repayment. We are committing to the fact that any future relationships will not be lived in the cloudiness and confusion of past "debts." Those who live thinking that they will become healed when others "pay them back," or somehow make up for all the wrongs that are perceived to have been done are consigning themselves to the "tormentor" like the unforgiving slave. Many past wrongs could not be repaid even if those who caused them were completely willing. We could not repay our debts to God.

The past is beyond our immediate grasp and does not allow us to go back to undo things that were hurtful to others. If we expect others to do this for us, we shall never find satisfaction. Some people will never admit to a wrong, much less try to make it right. Forgiveness means no longer asking for repayment, writing the debt out of the "account book of life" and going on based on something other than hopes for repayment of past wrongs.

To refuse to forgive others after having received forgiveness from God is to say that we have greater hope in gaining satisfaction from those who we feel owe us than we have in God who promises to take care of us in all circumstances. It is like saying to God, "I would be better off having my sin (the 10 million dollars I owe in debt) **and** the right to collect from my debtors (the fifty dollars someone owes me) than to be relieved of the debt of sin. God has given us a choice - let Him take our sin and we give up the right to blame others and seek restitution from them for the wrongs they have done or - we can keep our sin and look to others to fix things. This is would be a rejection of God and His offer of forgiveness.

Understood this way, forgiving others is not a can or cannot issue, it is a will or will not issue. That is how Jesus presented it. Anyone who can ask God to forgive them also can forgive others. It is an act of taking one's faith, hope and expectations off fickle mankind and placing them on God. Our emotions need not hinder this process. We may feel strongly about

the hurts others have done to us. If we genuinely repent and (like David in **Psalm 51**) place our sin and guilt into God's merciful hands, the relief of the load of guilt thus removed cannot possibly be compared to whatever shallow, temporary "satisfaction" we get from holding other people's debts to us against them. It is impossible that anyone could end up worse off emotionally by receiving forgiveness from God **and** extending forgiveness to others than they would by living in their own sin and being bitter toward others, demanding payment to relieve their victimhood.

Why Forgiveness is Necessary

The teaching of **Matthew 6:15**, *"But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions,"* is clear enough; but it seems too severe to some Christians. The best policy is to believe it and let Jesus' teaching have the intended effect of motivating us to forgive. Clearly forgiveness is essential to our relationship with the Lord. Why is this presented to us in such a serious manner? As with many of God's moral commandments, God is seeking to preserve crucial relationships. A cursory look at the Ten Commandments shows that they deal with one's relationship with God, family, and neighbors. When Jesus taught that all of the commandments can be summarized by the commandments to love God and others found in **Leviticus 19:18** and **Deuteronomy 6:5** (see **Matthew 22:36-40**), He showed that relationship with God and others was at the heart of law.

Since the commandments are always for our own "good" and "survival" (**Deuteronomy 6:24**), loving God and others is essential to things being the way God intends them to be for us. Nothing is more important than loving God with our whole being. If we do not make that our purpose in life, we are living lives that are far less than that for which God created us. So David, the man after God's own heart, longed for forgiveness and cleansing because the most vital of all relationships (his relationship with God) was threatened. *"Do not cast me away from Thy presence, And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, And sustain me with a willing spirit"* (**Psalm 51:11,12**).

Holding unforgiveness is so serious because it jeopardizes both aspects of the

law of love, making reconciliation with family and friends difficult or impossible while rejecting God's forgiveness. Ruining one's relationship with God, family and friends inflicts havoc on life and imperils one's survival.

Hebrews 12:15 warns of the "root of bitterness" that can torment a person and defile many: *"See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled."* Coming short of grace is missing that which enables us to walk with God and fulfill our purpose (loving God with our whole being and others as ourselves - for eternity), thus leaving one like Esau, rejected, bitter, and plotting revenge (see **Hebrews 12:16-17** and **Genesis 27:41**). The only comfort left is the hope of "getting even." The alternative is forgiveness.

Let us return a final time to **Psalm 51**. *"For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise"* (**verses 16 & 17**). David knew could not give something that would pay for his sin. God does not delight in seeing us futilely try to pay back bad deeds with good deeds. He asks only that we have a broken and contrite heart that will lead us back to Himself to find forgiveness. This forgiveness is found in Jesus the Messiah.

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End Notes

1. R. V. G. Tasker, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) Tyndale Commentaries Vol. 8, 105.
2. William Kirk Kilpatrick, Psychological Seduction, (Nashville: Nelson, 1983) 74.
3. *ibid.* 75.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*