

MATTHEW 6: 14,15

FORGIVENESS IS FUNDAMENTAL

The greater context: The Sermon on the Mount

The immediate context: forgiveness as it relates to the Lord's prayer.

Matthew 6:12

**12 And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.**

While this line of the prayer may not seem to be the most important one, it is most likely the hardest one to apply.

Jesus has circled back to this point after having spoken on prayer. Therefore it is important - important enough that He revisits the subject. Just as giving and prayer are a given, so is forgiveness. Jesus had made a link here between the forgiveness we receive from God and the forgiveness we extend to others. There is a vertical axis to forgiveness and there is a horizontal axis to forgiveness.

Matthew 6:14,15

14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Matthew 6:15

15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

A cursory reading of this text in isolation tends to lead a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. We would say it like this. First, we forgive others, and then God forgives us. And that can be dangerous. Knowing human nature as I do, that would mean that Jesus would never get a chance to forgive us. Because as we go through our checklist of people to forgive, inevitably there are some that are missed or even pushed to the bottom of the list for a "later time" that may or may not ever come. This would have the effect of us earning our vertical forgiveness by our horizontal forgiveness.

The fact of the matter is that this is not the only scripture we have regarding the relationship between the vertical and horizontal axis of forgiveness. Therefore we have to take into account all that the Bible has to say on this subject so we are able to rightly divide the word of truth.

TWO EXAMPLES:

Acts 13:38

38 Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins;

Ephesians 1:7

7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace

We don't earn our forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of others. The forgiveness of sin comes from the free gift of Jesus Christ. By going to the cross, innocent of anything, any charge brought against Him, He bled and died in order to pay for my sin and yours. Though innocent, He was treated as if He were guilty, offering no defense or rebuttal. There was a debt owed, a debt I owed, a debt I couldn't pay and Jesus paid the ultimate price in order that I may go free.

Imagine if you were in debt up to your eyeballs. You have received the last notices from the bank regarding your house and your cars. The IRS is now about to seize your assets and garnish whatever is left. Then suddenly, someone swoops in and pays all that you owe. You no longer have a mortgage, car notes or anything else. You are free and clear. In the spiritual spectrum, that is what Jesus did.

So, the vertical and horizontal axes are linked but not the way we might think by just a cursory reading of verses 14 and 15.

My forgiveness of you does not CAUSE God to forgive me, but rather my forgiveness of you is a CONSEQUENCE of Jesus having forgiven me!

ILLUSTRATION: The lady that was abused by her father as a child, then married a missionary. Her dream.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Mt. 18: 23 - 35

21 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. 26 The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' 27 Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

28 "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' 29 So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' 30 And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. 31 So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. 32 Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 33 Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' 34 And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

35 "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

TWO POINTS:

1. Forgiveness is not an option for the follower of Jesus.
2. We forgive others in light of the fact that Jesus has forgiven us so much more.

Though others may have wronged us, it pales in comparison as to how we have offended a Holy God. In the parable, the king had forgiven millions of dollars whereas the other servant owed so little in comparison.

Jesus is not stingy with forgiveness. And we shouldn't be either.

Those that are stingy with forgiveness will often point to this passage.

Eph. 4:31,32

31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

They focus on the words, "...even as God in Christ forgave you."

Their reasoning goes like this: Jesus doesn't forgive me unless I go to Him and confess, therefore, unless the one who offended me comes to me and repents, I don't have to/ won't forgive them.

But there is a fundamental fallacy in this line of reasoning. God is not stingy with his forgiveness and we shouldn't be either.

Why shouldn't we be stingy with forgiveness?

We don't value the forgiveness we have received from God and we minimize our own sin. One definition of repentance is, "to see our sin as God sees it." Until we see our own sin, we will minimize God's forgiveness. We live in a culture that is blind to its sin.

Going back to the parable we see the amount the servant was forgiven vs. the debt he was owed by the other servant. When our eyes are opened to our sin and the forgiveness we have received, it changes our heart! We love Him more and then have the joy, which is needed to aggressively reach others.

This realization of our sin, which leads to the solution in Christ, is the source of revival. J. Edwin Orr, the greatest scholar of revival in the 20th century tells how this has been the key to true revival.

For those demanding that others come to them and repent prior to their forgiving them have put themselves in the place of God. God can demand repentance prior to forgiveness because He has never wronged anyone. He has nothing for which to repent. We cannot say that. Often times, the party we see as having offended us has been wronged by us also. The horizontal axis of offended parties is usually a two-way street. We offend God, but He has never offended anyone. If you have a problem with God, you are at fault.

God has never sinned and therefore has never had to be forgiven, but we are not in that place. Therefore we are not in a position of demanding repentance.

In a sense, we have a greater obligation to forgive others than God because we have sinned against others. Chew on that for a while.

Unforgiveness is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to die. Holding on to it will kill you.

Gollum and Bilbo

The difference between forgiveness and reconciliation

“But what about when I forgive him and he just hurts me again? Where is the protection in that?”

I understand the premise. There is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. We can release the anger over what they have done. That is a one-way street. But reconciliation is a two-way street. Forgiveness ensures that bitterness won't eat us up from the inside.

Forgiveness is not pretending that what the other party did is not wrong. That isn't the reality in which we have been called to live.

Example: Joseph speaking to his brothers, “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.”

Joseph didn't sugarcoat the situation. He brought it out and still forgave them choosing to rest in the sovereignty of God.

At the end of the day, if we realize our own sin and properly value the amount of forgiveness we have received, we will experience our own personal revival and we will then see how little the offence really is that has caused us so much trouble.

“But they don't deserve to be forgiven!” Neither do we.

That is what grace is all about.

