

Forgiveness of Others, Forgiveness of Self – Where Do We Begin?

Micah 7:18-20

Psalm 32

Colossians 3:12-17

Matthew 18:21-35

1] Begin with the cross. There is nowhere else to begin. The cross looms everywhere in scripture. All theological understanding is rooted in it. All discipleship flows from it. It's what we trust for our salvation. It transforms our thinking, ridding us of the mindset that characterizes the world. The cross is the only place to begin.

To begin anywhere else means that we have begun with calculating: "Should I forgive? How much should I forgive? Under what circumstances should I forgive?" Now we are calculating.

Calculation in matters that concern us fosters self-interest. We go to the bank to purchase our RSP for 2008. The interest rates are 4% for one year, 4.25% for two, and 4.5% for three. We estimate how the interest rate is going to fluctuate in the next few years, and we calculate which combination of locked-in RSP rate and time period is best -- best for the bank? Of course not. Best for us. Calculation in matters that concern us fosters self-interest.

In the second place calculation is frequently a conscious cover-up for unconscious rationalization. At a conscious level I calculate whether I should forgive, how much I should forgive, whom I should forgive. But all of this is a smokescreen behind which there is, in my unconscious, a heart set on vindictiveness, a desire to even a score which has remained uneven (I think) for umpteen years, a wish to see someone who has pained me suffer himself. Unconscious rationalization, like any unconscious proceeding, is a process which spares us having to admit nastiness about ourselves that we don't want to admit, spares us having to acknowledge what we prefer to hide. Calculation is a conscious matter which cloaks an unconscious development, even as we are left thinking we are virtuous.

In the third place calculation traffics in the unrealistic. What I am prepared to forgive in others (feeling virtuous about it too) will in fact be slight, while what I expect others to forgive in me will in fact be enormous. This is unrealistic.

In the fourth place calculation both presupposes shallowness and promotes shallowness. It presupposes shallowness in that I plainly think that sin is something I can calculate or measure like sugar or flour or milk. Calculation promotes shallowness in that it confirms over and over the shallowness I began with.

We ought never to begin our understanding of forgiveness with calculation. We must begin with the cross; and more than begin with the cross, stay with the cross.

2] Nobody uses a twenty-member surgical team to clip a hangnail. No government sends out a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to sink a canoe. The air-raid warning isn't sounded because a child's paper glider has violated air-space.

When the twenty-member surgical team is deployed the patient's condition is critical. When the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier puts to sea the threat it's dealing with couldn't be greater. When the air-raid warning is sounded destruction is imminent. And when God gives up his own Son humankind's condition is critical, the threat facing us couldn't be greater, and our destruction is imminent.

As often as I read scripture I am sobered to read that God's forgiveness of you and me necessitated the death of God's own Son. I try to fathom what this means. In trying to fathom it from the Father's perspective I ponder the anguish of our foreparent in faith, Abraham. Abraham and Isaac. Abraham collecting the firewood, sharpening the knife, deflecting Isaac's anxiety, trudging with leaden foot and leaden heart up the side of Mount Moriah. He and Sarah had waited years for a child, had had none, had given up expecting any. Then when everyone "just knew" that the situation was hopeless Sarah conceived. Was any child longed for more intensely or cherished more fervently? Now they have to give up this child, give him up to death.

I have been spared losing a child. I do know, however, that when a child dies the parents of that child separate 70% of the time. Wouldn't the death of their child bring the parents closer together? The truth is, so devastating is the death of a child that calculation concerning it is useless; we can't begin to comprehend what it's like.

Abraham again. At the last minute the ram is provided. Abraham's relief is inexpressible: his son doesn't have to die. But when the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ walks his Son to Calvary there is no

relief: his Son has to die. Here the Father bears in his heart the full weight of a devastation that couldn't be greater.

Next I try to fathom what the cross means from the perspective of the Son. On the one hand I don't minimize the physical suffering he endured for our sakes. On the other hand, countless people have endured much greater physical pain. (It took Jesus only six hours to die, remember.) It's the dereliction that ices my bowels. What is it to be forsaken when the sum and substance of your life is unbroken intimacy with your Father? As a child I was lost only two or three times. It wasn't a pleasant experience; in fact it was terrifying. Nonetheless, even when I was lost (and terrified) I knew that my problem was simply that I couldn't find my parents; I never suspected for one minute that they had abandoned me. A man who is dear to me told me that when his wife left him and he knew himself bereft, forsaken by the one human being who meant more to him than all others, he turned on all the taps in the house so that he wouldn't have to hear her driving out of the garage, driving *out*. Before our Lord's Good Friday dereliction I can only fall silent in incomprehension.

3] As often as I begin with the cross I am stunned at the price God has paid -- Father and Son together -- for my forgiveness. In the same instant I am sobered at the depravity in me that necessitated so great a price. It's plain that my depravity is oceans deeper than I thought, my heart-condition vastly more serious than I guessed. It's incontrovertible that when I have trotted out all my bookish, theological definitions of sin I still haven't grasped -- will never grasp -- what sin means to God.

When I was a teenager I thought our Lord to be wrong when he prayed for his murderers, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." I thought him to be wrong inasmuch as it seemed to me (at age 17) that they *did* know what they were doing: they were eliminating someone they didn't like. They *had* to know what they were doing simply because they had plotted and schemed and conspired for months to do it. Furthermore, our Lord's plea, "Forgive them, Father, they don't know what they are doing", had to be self-contradictory -- I thought. After all, if they didn't know what they were doing then they didn't need to be forgiven; they could simply be overlooked. Now that I'm old I perceive that our Lord was right. His assassins didn't know what they were doing, ultimately; didn't know they were crucifying the Son of God. They didn't know that their sinnership had impelled them to do it, didn't know that while they thought they were acting freely they were in bondage to sin more surely than the heroin sniffer is in bondage to dope. In my older age I see that our Lord was right. They can't be excused; they can only be forgiven, since what they are doing comes out of their own disordered heart. To be sure, they don't fully grasp what they are doing, can't fully grasp it. But the reason they can't grasp it is that they are blind to their own depravity. Of course they are; the worst consequence of our spiritual condition is that we are blinded to our spiritual condition. But being blinded to it doesn't lessen our accountability for it, as the day of judgement will make plain. But why wait until then? Why not own the truth of the cross now; namely, that a cure this drastic presupposes an ailment no less drastic? A cure whose blessing is richer than we can comprehend presupposes a condition whose curse is deadlier than we can imagine.

4] Is everyone convinced that we should begin with the cross? Then everyone must agree that our understanding of forgiving ourselves and others unfolds from the cross; the light that the cross sheds will ever be the illumination by which we see everything else concerning forgiveness.

For instance, it's the consistent testimony of the apostles that our forgiving our enemies is the measure of our closeness to God. When this truth first sank home with me I sank to the floor. Surely I could enjoy intimacy with God while enjoying the fantasy of my worst enemy going from misery to misery, misfortune to misfortune. Then in that light which the cross sheds I saw that I couldn't. How could I claim intimacy with the One who forgives his assassins and at the same time relish ever-worsening misery for those who have not yet assassinated me? How can I say I crave being recreated in the image of the God for whom forgiving costs him everything while I make sure that my non-forgiving costs me nothing?

Two hundred and fifty years ago John Wesley wrote in his diary, “Resentment at an affront is sin, and I have been guilty of this a thousand times.” We want to say, “Resentment at an *imagined* affront would be sin, since it would be wrong to harbour resentment towards someone when that person had committed no real offence at all; but of course it would be entirely in order to harbour resentment at a real affront. After all, who wouldn’t?” To argue like this, however, is only to prove that we have not yet come within a country mile of the gospel. Resentment at an *imagined* affront wouldn’t be sin so much as it would be stupidity. Because resentment at a real affront, at a real offence, comes naturally to fallen people we think it isn’t sin. How can we ever be held accountable for something that fits us like a glove? But remember the point we lingered over a minute ago: not merely one consequence of our sinnership but the most serious consequence of it is our blindness to the fact and nature and scope of our sinnership. Then what are we to do with our resentment? Do we hold it to us ever so closely because its smouldering heat will fuel our self-pity and our self-justification? Or do we deplore it and drop it at the foot of the cross, knowing that only the purblind do anything else?

Our Lord’s parable of the unforgiving servant leaves us in no doubt or ambiguity or perplexity at all. In this parable the king forgives his servant a huge debt; the servant, newly forgiven a huge debt, turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow whatever this fellow owes him. The king is livid that the pardon the servant has received he doesn’t extend in turn. The king orders the servant shaken up until some sense is shaken into him. If the servant had refused to forgive his fellow a paltry sum, the servant would merely have looked silly. But the amount the servant is owed isn’t paltry; 100 denarii is six months’ pay. Then the servant is readily understood, isn’t he: the forgiveness required of him is huge. But the point of the parable is this: while the 100 denarii which the servant is owed is no trifling sum, it is nothing compared to the 10,000 talents (\$50 million) that the king has already forgiven the servant.

That injury, that offence, that wound which you and I are to forgive is not a trifle. Were it a trifle we wouldn’t be wounded. The wound is gaping; if it were anything else we wouldn’t be sweating over forgiving it. We shall be able to forgive it only as we place it alongside what God has already forgiven in us. Please note that we are never asked to *generate* forgiveness of others out of our own resources; we are simply asked not to impede God’s forgiveness from flowing through us and spilling over onto others. We don’t have to generate water in order for it to irrigate what is parched and render it fruitful; all we have to do is *not* put a crimp in the hose. Either we don’t impede the free flow of God’s forgiveness from him through us to others, or, like the servant in the parable, we shall have to be shaken up until some sense has been shaken into us. (We must never make the mistake of thinking our Lord to be a “gentle” Jesus “meek and mild”. Gentle and mild he is not.)

5] Before the sun sets tonight we must be sure we understand what forgiveness does *not* mean.

(i) It does *not* mean that the offence we are called to forgive is slight. As we’ve already seen, it’s grievous. Were it anything but grievous we’d be talking about overlooking it instead of forgiving it -- if we were even talking about it at all.

(ii) It does *not* mean that the offence is excused. To forgive is not to excuse. We excuse what is excusable. What is not excusable, will never be excusable, is also never excused. It can only be forgiven. The day you tell me you have forgiven me is the day I know that I am without excuse. To forgive is never a shorthand version of, “Oh, it doesn’t matter.” To forgive is to say it matters unspeakably.

(iii) Forgiveness does *not* mean that we are suckers asking the world to victimize us again. To forgive is not to invite another assault. To forgive is not to advertise ourselves as a doormat. To be sure, there *are* people who are doormats, people whose self-image is so poor and whose ego-strength so diminished that they seem to invite victimization. Forgiveness, however, isn’t the last resort of the wimp who can’t do anything else in any case. Forgiveness, rather, is a display of ego-strength that couldn’t be stronger. Jesus can forgive those who slay him just because he has already said, “*No one* takes my life from me; I may lay it down of my own accord, but *I* lay it down; no one *takes* it from me.”

(iv) Forgiveness does *not* mean that the person we forgive we regard as a diamond in the rough, good-at-heart. Forgiveness means that the person we forgive we regard as depraved in heart. After all, this is what God's forgiveness means about you and me.

(v) Forgiveness does *not* mean that the person we forgive we must also trust. Many people whom we forgive we shall never be able to trust. The only people we should trust are those who show themselves trustworthy. Forgiveness does mean, however, that the person we can't trust we shall nonetheless not hate, not abuse, not exploit; we shall not plot revenge against him or bear him ill-will of any sort.

Remember, all that matters is that we not impede the forgiveness which God has poured upon us and which he intends to course through us and overflow us onto others.

6] Any discussion of forgiveness includes forgiving ourselves. Very often the person we most urgently need to forgive is ourselves. And since all forgiveness is difficult to the point of anguish, then to forgive ourselves may be the most difficult of all.

Suppose we don't forgive ourselves; suppose we say, "I can forgive anyone at all except myself". Then what's going on in our own head and heart?

(i) Surely we have puffed up ourselves most arrogantly. There is terrible arrogance in saying to ourselves, "I'm the greatest sinner in the world; the champion. I can forgive others because they are only minor-league sinners compared to me. When it comes to depravity I'm the star of the major leagues."

Not only is there a perverse arrogance underlying such an attitude, there is no little blasphemy as well. "The blood-bought pardon of God, wrought at what cost to him we can't fathom -- it isn't effective enough for me. Where I'm concerned, God's mercy is deficient, defective, and finally worthless." This is blasphemy. Our forgiveness, which cost God we know not what, you and I shouldn't be labelling a garage-sale piece of junk.

(ii) If we say we can't forgive ourselves then we want to flagellate ourselves in order to atone for our sin. But don't we believe the gospel? The heart of the gospel is this: atonement has already been made for us. We neither dismiss it nor add to it. We simply trust it.

Perhaps this is where we should stop today; at the cross, where we began. For it is here that we see that God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. And here we see that we therefore must forgive others, and forgive ourselves as well.