

Lesson 1: God and Forgiveness

Texts: Romans 5:8, 20; 1 John 1:9; Luke 6:37; Luke 5:18-20; Matthew 18: 21-22.

Quotes

To err is human, to forgive divine. Alexander Pope.

What power has love but forgiveness? William Carlos Williams.

Without forgiveness life is governed by...an endless cycle of resentment and retaliation.

Roberto Assagioli.

Introductory questions

What does God want? What is his objective? Is it primarily forgiveness? How does this fit in the context of the great controversy over the nature and character of God?

Discussion ideas

Someone told me recently of her Catholic friend who'd told her "I wish I could die right after coming out of the confessional!" And sometimes we may feel like that too. "Lord, take me when I've remembered to ask for forgiveness of all my sins." Seen in those terms, God becomes a divine checker of sin who is busy making sure that every last sin has been forgiven on a cosmic score-card. Salvation becomes the process of making sure every sinful action has a balancing "forgiven" marked against it.

And this idea can even lead us to be casual about sin. I remember talking to one man who didn't seem to be bothered about his sins in any way. "After all," he told me, "God's in the forgiveness business!" This is why Paul has to write in such strong terms to the folk in Rome who were wondering whether they should "continue in sin so that grace may abound." God forbid! said Paul. Absolutely not!

Why not? Because while God can and does forgive, that's only part of His goal.

God's plan is not just to have a people who are legally not guilty, pardoned, forgiven. When Jesus' birth was announced, he was to be called Jesus not because we would forgive his people their sins but because he would SAVE his people FROM their sins! (see Matthew 1:21).

To be forgiven just is not enough for God. He wants us saved from our sins--from the results, the pain, the death of sin. That's why God is identified in Psalm 103:3 as the One who *forgives all your iniquities, heals all your diseases*. In the Hebrew parallelism of the poetry of the Psalms, the forgiving of sins is identified with healing--which is what Jesus did in his ministry too (see for example Luke 5:20-24).

EGW comments

“God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.’ Psalm 51:10.” Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, 114. (Emphasis in original).

(That is why forgiveness is called God’s *remedy* for sin. It is the *cure* of sin, not just some way of saying sin is legally taken care of.)

“God has freely forgiven our sins, not asking us to render any equivalent... The whole work of Christ had a tendency to counteract the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, who encouraged revenge and retaliation.” (In other words, they practiced a form of legal-based forgiveness/unforgiveness based on “contractual” concepts.)

Extra material

This is an extract from a statement written by an Israeli woman, whose young daughter was killed by a young Palestinian suicide bomber. Listen to what she says, especially about justifying killing in the name of God, in deeply moving and tragic words:

“My little girl was killed just because she was born Israeli, by a young man who felt hopeless to the point of murder and suicide just because he was born a Palestinian...”

“My daughter’s murderer was deceived because his act of murder and suicide did not change anything, did not end the Israeli cruel occupation, did not bring him to heaven. The people who promised him that his act would be meaningful carry on as if he had never existed. My little girl is deceived because she believed that her life was safe, that her parents and her country were protecting her from evil, and that no harm can come to little girls who are good and gentle and go through the streets of their own cities to a dance class. And they are both deceived because the world is going on living as if their blood has never been shed.

“Both of them are the victims of their so-called leaders. And those so-called leaders keep on playing their murderous games, using our children as their puppets and our grief as an incentive to go on with their vindictive tricks. For them, children are abstract entities, and grief is a political tool. *They know that all they have to do in order to draw more young and enthusiastic little soldiers into their units is to find a God that would ordain this killing. And each of them finds him in their own Bible, in their own mythologies. They commit crimes in the name of the Jewish God and in the name of the Muslim God, while in Ireland and in Eastern Europe people kill each other for different versions of their Christian God. And now the enlightened leaders of the West kill in the name of the God of freedom.*

“They all recruit man-made gods to their sides – the god of racism, the god of greed and megalomania. But children can also learn about the God who said, ‘I will have mercy upon her who has not obtained mercy, and I will say to them who were not my people, Thou art my people.’

“There is no vengeance for the death of a child, because after the death of a child there is no other death, for there is no more life. And where there is no more life there are no more words left to love or hate with, and the only sound that reverberates is the helpless cry of dying children and of bereaved mothers.

(This report was sent by the minister of the Church of St. Andrew in Jerusalem, and contained in a letter to the *Mennonite Weekly Review*, November 29, 2001. Italics mine.).

Lesson 2: Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible

Texts: Psalm 78:38; Exodus 32:1-14; Hosea 1:2; 3:1.

Quotes

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong. Mahatma Gandhi.
If we practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon the whole world will be blind and toothless. Mahatma Gandhi.

Forgive all who have offended you, not for them, but for yourself. Harriet Nelson.

Introductory questions

How does God “repent”? What does this really mean? How did God demonstrate forgiveness with his people in the Old Testament? What meaning is there for us today of the God who forgives?

Discussion ideas

If we view God as angry and hostile, then to be forgiven is the most important thing! However, we have to ask ourselves, in the light of the Great Controversy, whether our forgiveness is the primary aim—or is the greatest issue the nature and character of God? Many people contrast the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New. The violence and ugliness of the ancient world can often appear appalling. Is there truly room to reconcile such different pictures of God?

What examples can we think of that demonstrate God’s forgiving, healing attitude in the Old Testament? Note the healing aspect—for Israel often comes in repentance seeking forgiveness, because of the many problems that have developed—but it is perhaps questionable how much Israel really wanted to change. Is that a parable of some today?

Most importantly for this week’s lesson, what kind of image of God do we see operating? How does God deal with such a rebellious and wayward people? Forgiveness can be abused and expected—like Hophni and Phinehas who presumptuously carried the ark into battle, expecting that God would have to defend them or risk losing his reputation. God preferred to lose his reputation—both in Israel and among the surrounding nations—than to be blackmailed into support and forgiveness.

Heinrich Heine’s last words were “God will forgive me. It’s his job.” It is interesting to consider what he may have meant, and what this may indicate of his relationship to God.

The most intriguing aspect of God in this lesson is the concept of God “repenting”—particularly in Exodus 32. Remember God also repenting in Genesis:

“And GOD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. And it repented the

LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.” Genesis 6:5-7 KJV.

What is the repenting going on here? What does this tell us of God and our relationship to him? Most importantly, are we concerned at God “changing his mind”? Our perception of God is an essential factor in our relationship to him, and his nature and character are all important—particularly in the issues of the great controversy.

Finally: how does the “acted parable” of Hosea convey the truth about God?

EGW comments

“The conditions of obtaining mercy of God are simple and just and reasonable. The Lord does not require us to do some grievous thing in order that we may have the forgiveness of sin. We need not make long and wearisome pilgrimages, or perform painful penances, to commend our souls to the God of heaven or to expiate our transgression; but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall have mercy.” *The Faith I Live By*, p.127

“We are not forgiven *because* we forgive, but *as* we forgive. The ground of all forgiveness is found in the unmerited love of God, but by our attitude toward others we show whether we have made that love our own. Wherefore Christ says, ‘With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.’” *The Faith I Live By*, p.131. Emphasis in original.

Lesson 3: Forgiveness and Repentance

Texts: Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 9:13; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; Acts 5:31; 2 Timothy 2:25-26.

Quotes

Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean. Dag Hammarskjold.

The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent; the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult; the day he forgives himself, he becomes wise.

Alden Nowlan.

Once a woman has forgiven her man, she must not reheat his sins for breakfast. Marlene Dietrich.

Introductory questions

How does it work? Do you have to repent before you are forgiven? Is it a question of making ourselves right first before we come to God?

Discussion ideas

Restoration. Cure. Healing. Remaking God's image in us. That's what God wants to do, not to have us come to Him and say, "Please forgive me" and once we are forgiven go on in our own way. God is far more interested in taking away our desire to sin than in just taking away specific sins!

That's why when Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness he missed the point. The Jews said forgive five times. Peter in saying seven times thought he was being extra generous. But Jesus' "seventy times seven" expresses the kind of *attitude* that real forgiveness is all about. And that's why we must not limit God's forgiveness.

So what does that mean for the way we live, and how we treat one another? We need to remember that "We do not receive forgiveness *because* but *as* we forgive. The ground of all forgiveness is that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Ellen White, *Signs of the Times*, 14 April 1895. As a result we should "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Ephesians 4:32 NIV.

God's desire for all of us is to be right with one another and one with Him. In order to do that we have to come to the only one who can help us. And forgiveness in this case is not enough. When we are sick and go to the doctor, he doesn't say "I forgive you." He attempts to provide a cure. In just the same way, when we are spiritually sick, God doesn't say "I forgive you." Rather he enters in and begins the process of change and healing, making us well again.

Because even if we should refuse his help, and eventually die, just like a doctor who goes to the funeral of a patient who refused his help, God may still be saying “I forgive you”--but we will be dead. Forgiveness can never be enough, it must lead us to that oneness with God that is eternal life. For “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9 NIV).

For it is God who deals with our guilt, who forgives us all our wrongdoing, and heals us from the disease of sin. More than legal declarations of forgiveness, God restores the broken relationship and re-makes us in His image once more.

EGW comments

“Jesus knows the circumstances of every soul. You may say, I am sinful, very sinful. You may be; but the worse you are, the more you need Jesus. He turns no weeping, contrite one away.... He bids every trembling soul take courage. Freely will He pardon all who come to Him for forgiveness and *restoration*...” Ellen White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, 118. My emphasis.

“The moment we ask for forgiveness in contrition and sincerity, God forgives.” Ellen White, *Signs of the Times*, 4 September 1893.

“Christ draws the sinner by the exhibition of his love upon the cross, and this softens the heart, impresses the mind, and inspires contrition and repentance in the soul.” Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, 1 April, 1890.

“The Jewish precepts enjoined upon men the duty of forgiving five offenses, and Peter thought that in suggesting seven times he had reached the limit of human patience. But Jesus would have him understand that those who have the divine mind, and were imbued with the divine spirit, would exercise forgiveness without limit. The plan and ground of salvation, which is love, is the principle which must be carried out by [the] human family. Should Christ limit His mercy, compassion, and forgiveness by a certain number of sins, how few men would be saved! *The Upward Look*, 43.

Lesson 4: How Jesus Forgave

Texts: John 8:1-11; Mark 2:1-11; Luke 5:1-11; Luke 24:34; Matthew 18:21-35.

Quotes

Forgiveness is not an emotion, it's a decision. Randall Worley

How unhappy is he who cannot forgive himself. Publilius Syrus

The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.

Marianne Williamson

Introductory questions

How do the examples of Jesus' forgiving portray the character of God? When Jesus speaks words of forgiveness from the Cross, what does he really mean? What is the result of the Cross—in forgiveness and in other aspects?

Discussion ideas

What is going on in the story of the woman taken in adultery? (John 8:11). How could Jesus forgive her? Had she repented?

Peter had a legal idea of forgiveness. Certainly he was "better" than the Pharisees who had brought the woman to Jesus and accused her of adultery!

On another occasion Jesus told the parable on the ungrateful servant to explain what he meant, and concluded that we are to forgive one another "from your heart" (in other words, not keeping count and taking record, but having the right spirit).

Jesus is not just saying God's forgiveness is limitless and ours should be too--but that there's something more important than being forgiven. It's being SAVED and HEALED from sin—so that ultimately we won't need to be forgiven any more, because we won't want to go on sinning!

God's forgiveness means making us whole again: *Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean. Dag Hammarskjold.*

That's what we want! A true miracle! For the greatest miracle is not the physical healings or the provision of needs but the spiritual healing and change that only God can achieve. I know that in my own life. That's why just to want to be forgiven can never be enough. I want to be where I don't have to keep on asking for forgiveness because God has changed me and I no longer want to do what is wrong.

Neither must we think we have to pay for our forgiveness; like Martin Luther going up the steps in Rome on his knees, or beating ourselves with whips, or having to go to some special place to get what we want.

EGW comments

“It is peace that you need--Heaven’s forgiveness and peace and love in the soul. Money cannot buy it, intellect cannot procure it, wisdom cannot attain to it; you can never hope, by your own efforts, to secure it. But God offers it to you as a gift, `without money and without price.’ Isa. 55:1.” ...”As you read the promises, remember they are the expression of unutterable love and pity.... Yes, only believe that God is your helper. He wants to restore His moral image in man. As you draw near to Him with confession and repentance, He will draw near to you with mercy and forgiveness.” Ellen White, *The Faith I Live By*, 103.

“It is a mistake to think that you must come to repentance before you can come to Jesus. Come to Christ just as you are, and contemplate His love until your hard heart is broken. “A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” ... Let the sinner come just as he is, and contemplate the love that has been bestowed upon him, all unworthy as he is; and the first thing he knows, he will realize that Christ’s love has broken every barrier down, and that he exercises repentance which is not to be repented of. The sinner must go to Christ in order that he may be enabled to repent.” Ellen White, *Review and Herald*, 3 September, 1901.

“Many things that do not appear in a correct light will be made plain in the day of the Lord; but the question of forgiveness needs not to be interpreted. If a brother errs, forgive him if he asks you. If he is not humble enough to ask, forgive him in your heart, and express your forgiveness in words and actions.” *The Watchman*, January 1, 1907.

Jesus on forgiveness (not including parallel passages). All texts from NIV.

MT 6:12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

MT 6:14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

MT 9: 2 Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”

MT 9:6 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . .”

MT 18:21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

MT 18:35 This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

MK 11: 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. “

LK 6:37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

LK 17: 3 So watch yourselves. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

LK 23: 34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

JN 20: 23 If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

LK 7:44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

LK 7:48 Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

LK 7:49 The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

LK 7:50 Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

MT 26:28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

LK 24:45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

MT 12:31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

MK 4:10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that,

“ ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’ “

LK 12: 10 And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

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