



## Forgiveness: A Rather Unsettling Issue

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### **Matthew 6 – The Lord's Prayer**

<sup>12</sup> *'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...*

<sup>14</sup> *"For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

<sup>15</sup> *"But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*

As the movie, "The Last Dance," draws to a close, a camera scans inside a death row holding cell. A woman talks quietly with her attorney. She's repented deeply, but the crime has been done and the penalty is about to follow. The two of them strain to hear the steps of the guard who will walk her to her death, all the while listening to the malicious chant of the crowd outside the prison walls. Her lawyer wrestles out his question: "Why can't the people forgive someone who has changed?" Her answer shakes us: "Because if they forgive, they have to change too."

If they forgive, they have to change too. And so for us – if we forgive, *we* have to change too. That thought has probably never entered our minds. Forgiveness turns out to be a rather unsettling issue.

### **Exposed by an "As"**

Jesus shines a light on our imperfect forgiveness by way of a request tucked innocuously into the Lord's Prayer: *Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.* It sounds like a wonderful thing, asking God to forgive us. Our hearts warm as we intone the words. But don't settle into the warmth too quickly, or you'll miss God's point. Look at the words carefully: *as we have forgiven ... as we.* Suddenly the spotlight is on us, and we begin to squirm.

We may have said Jesus' prayer hundreds of times, but I'll bet most of us skimmed over the "as." Are you willing to tell God to forgive you exactly as you've forgiven others? Think about it.

Of course, at times we've done quite well at forgiveness. But what about our lapses? Do we want God to mimic them as well? *God, I want you to be rude to me just like I was rude to that fumbling clerk at the store. Also, would you lash out at me just like I lashed out at my kids this morning? And please, show me the cold shoulder I just turned to that lady who's been gossiping about me.* We'd never ask God those questions – we want God to be *kind* to us when we're rude or angry or cold. We want Him to *forgive* us – and that raises another unsettling issue.

### **Agitated by Two "Ifs"**

Jesus said some startling things in His sermon on the mountain (Matthew 5-7), but those in Matthew 6:14-15 must have been particularly unsettling: *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.* Translators of Matthew 7:28 say the crowd was “amazed” at Jesus’ words – “panicked” better conveys Matthew’s meaning. Panic certainly would be my reaction. Right away I’d plead: *Jesus, teach me to forgive! Change me so I want to forgive!* (And, of course, when we ask, Jesus does those very things.)

Jesus' message makes us take forgiveness most seriously and exposes our hearts. We think of times we've held back forgiveness from others. We ask God to show us hidden grudges and teach us to let go of them, to search us and to show us where change is needed. We pray for Him to change our hearts so we're *willing* to forgive. And those are exactly the results Jesus wants to trigger.

### **Learning to Forgive**

Sobered by "ifs" and exposed by an "as," God has us in exactly the right place. We, if we're listening to Him, know we have some serious changing to do before we will forgive like He forgives. We know we must learn to imitate Him, but what do we imitate? How exactly does God do forgiveness? (You'll have to wait to read about how God forgives .... I'm saving the topic for another post.)

### **Some Things to Consider**

Frankly, forgiveness seems much more about the other person changing than about any change in ourselves. But if *we* have to change, then suddenly the issue becomes deeply personal. Take a look at your heart. Call to mind someone you avoid. Are you willing to love them before they say they're sorry? Are you willing to give up the satisfaction of retaliation (or at least "making things fair")? Would you suffer for their benefit? Do you need to change too?

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