



Forgiveness: What Forgiveness Is

We don't discover what forgiveness is from looking at the people around us. Neither we nor our relatives, friends (or enemies, for that matter) do it as well as it should be done. Some people, of course, forgive better than others, but perfect forgiveness? We can only learn that from God. He shows us exactly what forgiveness is supposed to be ... and we're intended to imitate Him.

What do you visualize when I pair the words "God" and "forgiveness"? Probably you picture Jesus' journey from the Garden of Gethsemane to the cross where Jesus lived out forgiveness. But the Lord first showed us what forgiveness is thousands of years before Jesus hung on that cross.

Forgiveness Exemplified in a Garden

The first example of God's forgiveness occurs in Eden. Adam and Eve have rebelled against God, distrusted His goodness, isolated themselves, and treated His words with indifference. How will He respond?

How would we expect Him to respond? Not with forgiveness. Hatred, perhaps, or blazing anger. Possibly cold distancing. (Can't you visualize Him writing Adam and Eve off with scorn?) Surely God will make them pay. Without a doubt their relationship with Him is irreparably broken. We sit on the edge of our seats waiting for vengeance to crash down on their heads. That's not what happens.

God does the unexpected – He forgives them. How? By loving them enough to call them out of hiding. By promising a redeemer who (at great cost) would suffer the penalty those two deserved. By being good to them and removing them from that newly dangerous garden. God was unflinching yet tender. Not hateful, distant, or retaliatory, but loving, vulnerable, and careful to do them good. The portrait of an angry God throwing Adam and Eve out of the garden is far from the truth. Forgiveness is quite different than most of us picture.

Forgiveness Taught on a Mountain

Pray like this, Jesus teaches in His Sermon on the Mount, and then, in a very short prayer, points to forgiving six times. Six times – the repetition emphasizes the centrality of forgiveness. And each time He says it Jesus uses a word for forgiveness that means "to send away."

But what does Jesus want each of us to send away? Exactly what His Father sent away in Eden. We're to send away hatred and substitute love, to send away self-protectiveness and embrace vulnerability, to send away vengeance and instead provided good to those who hurt us. We're to imitate God.

Forgiveness Accomplished on Skull Hill

Golgotha, where Jesus died, got its name from the skulls that littered the ground. God the Son, hanging on the cross, saw both living eyes and empty eye-sockets staring back at Him. This is the context in which Jesus examples forgiveness. Surrounded by horror and pierced by pain, He still asks His Father to forgive those responsible. No hatred, no self-protectiveness, no hunger for retaliation. Just forgiveness. Costly forgiveness.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 tells us that we have been *bought with a price*. The cross was that price. It cost the Lord dearly to buy us the freedom to draw near and be His intimates. Why did He do it? Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the cross *for the joy set before Him*. Joy? That seems impossible. Does intimacy with us bring the Father, Son, and Spirit such joy? Are we worth that much to Him? Apparently so.

God didn't hate, protect Himself or retaliate. He forgave. He loved; He was vulnerable; He provided good to those who hurt Him. That's what forgiveness is. It's the example we're to follow.

Three Questions

Call to mind someone who's offended you. Now ask yourself if you're willing – with that person, in that relationship – to imitate God.

- Are you willing to send away hate? (Substitute disgust, scorn, indifference, or whatever other word captures for you your difficulty loving them.)
- Are you willing to send away self-protectiveness? (Again, if it's helpful, substitute a word that better exposes what you want to avoid. Being known? Being exposed Feeling hurt? Being taken advantage of?)
- Are you willing to send away vengeance? (Instead of vengeance you might substitute words like getting even or retaliation or giving them “what they deserve.”)

What's Next?

What does it look like for us to send away hate, self-protectiveness, and vengeance? In the next three posts we'll think through these difficult choices one at a time.

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