

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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Forgiveness and Immediacy

On the heels of our look at the 'forgiveness request' within the Lord's Prayer, there are numerous issues related to forgiveness that deserve our attention. Forgiveness does have its complexities! The next three Meditations of the Heart will be devoted to giving more consideration of forgiveness. This week, we will consider the correlation between forgiveness and immediacy: If God expects me to forgive a person, then what does God think of me when I *think* I've forgiven someone, but later notice lingering resentment in my heart toward that same person? Does God expect me, regardless of the offense, to forgive immediately and completely? Is it even possible for me to do that?

Next week, we'll look at the two concepts of 'forgiveness and forgetting' versus 'forgetting and remembering'. In other words, does Biblical forgiveness mean I am supposed to forgive and forget and, if so, how do I possibly do that? The week after that, we will address the correlation between forgiveness and trust: Does forgiving a person mean that I have to trust that person as though they had never sinned against me?

So then, back to the matter of forgiveness and immediacy... This is somewhat of an elaboration on what I said at the end of our time this past Sunday morning. I noted that Dietrich Bonhoeffer began speaking to his congregation on forgiveness one Sunday morning by asking his hearers to think of someone [anyone] whom they had not forgiven a wrong, whether in open anger or in silent bitterness and withdrawal. Bonhoeffer then said, in effect, "If you can't think of anyone [to forgive], then you are either absent-minded or grossly indifferent towards others." Now, when compared to the Lord Jesus' words in explaining the Lord's Prayer [**14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses...**] one might well suggest that Bonhoeffer was implying that the members of his flock could not have true assurance of forgiveness from God (because, somewhere, somehow, even if they hadn't realized it, they were refusing to forgive someone.)

That's not what Bonhoeffer was implying. Bonhoeffer was implying the same thing as Paul, who wrote to the Ephesian church (Ephesians 4:31-5:2), **31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

Paul would not be writing those words (nor Bonhoeffer his) if forgiveness were something we had to do immediately, once and forever. The first century believers struggled with the same tendencies toward resentment, bitterness and unforgiveness as we all do. Indeed, I would suggest that the Lord would not have given the instruction that he did in His prayer ["**forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors**"] unless He knew that this would be something that His disciples (then and now) would be struggling with. Thus, when we pray this prayer contemplatively, thoughtfully and improvisationally, we not only have to search our hearts for what we might need to confess to the Lord, but we also have to search our hearts for ways that we might be withholding forgiveness from another.

Personally speaking, years ago, there once was a person who had wounded me deeply. I considered all of my anger at him to be quite righteous and justified. It's amazing how, even though I know I am not God, the very act of portraying my anger as 'righteous' and 'justifiable' seems to give me a divine exemption on having to forgive. But it's a fake exemption.

One evening, I really sensed the Spirit of God touching my very soul, quietly helping me see that my real problem was not the person who was the object of my so-called righteous anger. Rather, of utmost priority to God was my need to forgive that other person. It was a wrestling match... and God won. I realized, against my earlier predisposition, that my supposedly 'righteous' anger was actually an excuse to keep me from having to trust God. In other words, while something that person had done affected me in a significant way, my so-called 'godly indignation' was actually a means of focusing upon my wounded-ness rather than upon the God who could use such wounded-ness in my life for His good and very wise purposes. Indeed, hearkening back to the image from the Garden of Eden, our anger can be yet one more piece of fruit that the devil offers us so that we might seek to be like God instead of trusting and depending upon God. In my case, on that particular night, God was addressing the subject of my anger and basically telling me "Get over it. Trust Me, instead."

All of this turned out to be important because, exactly one week later, I would run into the aforementioned person – the 'object' of my anger – and, by that time, God in His providence had prepared me to show mercy, even as He had shown me mercy.

When it comes to what God calls of us regarding forgiveness, the fact is that God knows our hearts and He is patient with us, especially when someone has trespassed against us in a hurtful way. As we walk with Christ, seeking to do His will (on earth as it is in heaven), as we seek Him for forgiveness (and routinely search our hearts for where we may have withheld mercy from others ourselves), and as we seek God that He lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (including bitterness and resentment), we will inevitably discover dusty corners in the closets of our heart where we have been hiding our unwillingness to forgive. The Spirit of God, who lives in the very heart of the Christian, is the one to shine His light on those dark corners of our heart and call us to repentance and mercy, given that we ourselves have been shown mercy.

God is patient with us, gently nurturing us to forgive, but if we are to walk with Him, then we will not be able to hold onto the anger, resentment and bitterness that He calls of us to let go - not if His mercy is to be the theme of our lives. If we ignore God's prodding by holding onto our resentment and anger, then we become like the many disciples who deserted Jesus. We are ultimately choosing to no longer walk with Him. We can't have it both ways.

On the other hand, if His mercy is the theme of our lives, then knowing and tasting the grace of God will ultimately move us to share it with others – even when it is costly to us. Grace indeed begets grace, but the 'gestation period' sometimes takes awhile when we're the one's giving birth to such forgiveness.