

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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Forgive and Forget?

We are currently in the middle of a three-week Meditation-of-the-Heart look at forgiveness, addressing details on the subject of forgiveness that I was not able to address in the short window that is a sermon on Sunday morning. Last week, we looked at the subject of 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?)

This 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? Then next week, 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?

It is helpful to remember that that very issue – forgiveness and trust – is related to the question of forgiveness and forgetting. Indeed, they are sometimes confused as being part-and-parcel the same. But, in fact, carrying out the imperative to forgive does not obligate the one granting forgiveness to trust the offender – and that is predicated on the fact that it is humanly impossible for one to completely forget the offense of another. One reason this can get easily confused in our minds is because of the old axiom "Forgive and forget". 'Forgive and forget' can get so ingrained in our understanding of forgiveness that many Christians can fall into assuming that "forgive-and-forget" is a command found somewhere in the Bible.

Actually, you can't find it in the Bible. It's not there. "But wait!", someone will say. "Doesn't God say in the Bible that He will remember our sins no more?" Yes, numerous places:

Psalm 103:12 ...as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

Jeremiah 31:33-34 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Isaiah 43:25 25 I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Micah 7:19 19 He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

However, whereas the Scriptures (and the Lord's Prayer) instructs us to forgive those who trespass against us, we will never find anyplace in Scripture that teaches us to forgive *and forget* the trespasses of those who trespass against us! The reason for this is very simple: we are not God! To be sure, we do bear God's image, and we are instructed to "be imitators of God, as beloved children"... "forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32-5:1). But, as human beings, our minds are not made to literally forget a trespass that has been done against us.

So that puts us in a situation where we have to have a proper grasp of what forgiveness looks like given our inability to forget. For simplicity's sake, I will reduce our response down to two criteria: choice and trust.

When we forgive someone, we are making a choice to not hold their sin against them again. The easiest way I can think of to explain this is to consider a husband and wife. When I perform a marriage ceremony, I often begin by telling the couple, *'You are about to make promises to one another that, frankly, you can't keep. No matter how hard you try, you are going to sometimes act in ways that do not love and cherish the other person, you are going to sin against one another and you are going to disappoint one another.'*

Those things being the case, no marriage can thrive (let alone hold together well) without the thread of genuine forgiveness running all the way through the relationship. So, if we humanly don't have the capability to completely forget the ways in which our spouse has sinned against us, how can we imitate God by "forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you"? We demonstrate that forgiveness by choosing to not remind our spouse of their sin.

Suppose your spouse sins against you by doing 'X' [insert whatever you want for 'X']. Your spouse comes to you and says, "I was wrong to have done that. Please forgive me for 'X'." You, in turn, forgive your spouse. But, of course, as Jesus told Peter, God calls us to forgive not "**seven times, but seventy times seven.**" So, you'd better be prepared to forgive your spouse again should (or, more likely, *when*) they do 'X' again. So, one day, your spouse does 'X' again. And you, in anger, say, "You're always doing that!" If you find yourself bringing up egregious actions for which you have already expressly forgiven your spouse, then the fact that you are bringing up what you already forgave is an indication of your resentment and resistance to forgive. Another way of looking at it is that, if you choose to bring up something from the past that you forgave, there may very well be a good reason to do so, but the fact that you want to bring up things from the past may also be an indication that you haven't really forgiven to quite the extent that you thought you did.

The fact is, in a marriage, you just can't put your partner's failings completely out of your mind. They are there before you every day. Meanwhile, your failings are there before your spouse every day, too. There are times when you need your spouse to challenge you and speak the truth in love (and they need you for the same reason). But if you do bring up something from the past for which you have had to grant forgiveness to your spouse, then you have to recognize that you are treading upon holy ground. You made a choice in the past not to hold your spouse's failings against them (and the Lord calls you to nothing less).

This is yet another example of why Proverbs 4:23 calls us to "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." It's a matter over which we each need, with the help of the Spirit of God, to prayerfully be alert to our own heart. This is where we have to conclude that the Lord knew what he was doing when he followed up the prayer regarding forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer with the request, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"!

The second criteria for dealing with forgiveness and our inability to forget involves the matter of trust. We'll look at that next week.