

Forgiving the Unrepentant?

ABSTRACT:

It is widely understood that Jesus forgave those who were crucifying him. His example is held up as one reason to forgive the unrepentant. This article questions these views and suggests that to forgive the unrepentant cannot be supported on biblical or pastoral grounds.

Key words:

Forgiveness, repentance, Stephen, Jesus, gift.

It is a widely held view that the most virtuous form of Christian forgiveness is to forgive the underserving and the unrepentant. People think that to do so is to demonstrate noble character and a magnanimous spirit. They say that to forgive in this way is not to engage in an exchange, like a commercial transaction, where one person gives another something only in return for payment; rather, it is to give a gift of love and grace, freely offered to the undeserving.

If only for pragmatic reasons, it makes good sense to forgive the undeserving and unrepentant, because we cannot be sure about the integrity of another's repentance, especially if a gift, such as the gift of forgiveness, depends on it. Jeffrie Murphy suggests, perhaps over-emphatically, that "[a]ny repentance that is simply a

response to a demand or external incentive ... is very likely to be fake.”¹ Better by far, people therefore suggest, is to forgive freely, and to trust that the grace of forgiveness will lead a wrongdoer to repent, much like (in Victor Hugo’s 1862 novel, *Les Misérables*) Bishop Myriel’s forgiveness of Jean Valjean, evidenced by the Bishop’s gift of the silverware that Jean Valjean had already stolen from the Bishop.

Often cited as the theological basis of forgiving the unrepentant are Jesus’s words on the cross in Luke 23:34 (“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”) and Stephen’s words in Acts 7:60 (“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”).

However, careful thought about these two passages does not tell us that Jesus or Stephen forgave the unrepentant. In this first example, Jesus prayed that *God* would forgive those who were crucifying him. Although Jesus’s killers knew what they were doing – they were fully aware that they were putting to death a condemned man – they did not know or believe that he was an innocent man and the Son of God. Similarly, Stephen did not forgive his killers. Rather, he prayed that God would not hold against his killers the consequences of killing a man wrongly condemned as a blasphemer.²

Rather than forgiveness, Jesus and Stephen modelled an extraordinary measure of love, mercy, and prayerfulness for their enemies. Neither wanted or sought revenge; neither was bitter about their suffering; both sought the best for their enemies through love, forbearance, and prayer. They loved their enemies, and prayed for

¹ J. G. Murphy, *Punishment and the Moral Emotions. Essays in Law, Morality, and Religion*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 15.

² Jesus and Stephen stood firmly in the tradition of the Old Testament that links divine forgiveness and sacrifices for *unintended* sins (see Lev 5:17-19 and Num 15:27-31, for example). There were no sacrifices for sins *deliberately or purposely* carried out. This approach to forgiveness is evidenced in the New Testament as well: see Heb 6:4-6 and 10:26-27, and 2 Peter 2:20-22.

them; however, it is stretching the meaning of what they said and of the biblical traditions in which they stood to say that they forgave their enemies.

There is no explicit command to forgive the unrepentant in the Old Testament or the New Testament; the idea that we should has prevailed for so long because it is based on mistaken inferences from the examples of Jesus and Stephen. Rather, in the New Testament, those who are called to faith (and so to divine forgiveness) are called first to repent. Not surprisingly, therefore, repentance is at the heart of the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus. It would be odd if repentance were not at the heart of interpersonal forgiveness, since interpersonal forgiveness is an imitative representation of divine forgiveness.

There is a sound psychological reason for *not* being constrained to forgive an unrepentant wrongdoer. Since many victims feel violated, it would be an additional burden on them if they believed they ought to forgive the very people who had violated them and who were unrepentant. Of course, this is no reason for victims to be vengeful and bitter, and the New Testament warns against that; however, to “forswear resentment”³ and to set aside one’s vengefulness and bitterness are sometimes different from forgiving.

From a practical viewpoint, forgiving the unrepentant is fraught with difficulties, for at least four reasons. First, to forgive an unrepentant wrongdoer may leave the wrongdoer free from accountability for having done wrong. In such circumstances, wrongdoers may consider that they have “got away” with their misdeeds. Second, it

³ Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) regards the starting point of forgiveness as being to forswear resentment. See his sermons entitled “Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries”, the eighth and ninth of fifteen sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel in 1726 in *The Works of Joseph Butler*, Vol. 2, Fifteen Sermons, ed. By W. E. Gladstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897).

may also deny a wrongdoer both the incentive and the opportunity to put right the effects of the wrong and to learn from his or her mistakes. If we are not confronted with the fact we have done wrong, we are unlikely to become any the wiser that we have done wrong or appreciate the impact of our wrongdoing. Next, and I have seen this happen, a victim who is eager to forgive wrongdoers who do not know that they have done wrong or who do not care that they have done wrong may leave those who have wronged them bewildered by, or even amused at, an expression of forgiveness. Last, to forgive an unrepentant wrongdoer can offend our innate sense of justice. In contrast, a repentant wrongdoer is likely to be remorseful, and to want to put right the wrong as best he or she can. Such a wrongdoer knows wrong has been done, and will want to undo at least the relational difficulties resulting from the wrongdoing. Although the clock cannot be put back and the fact of the wrongdoing undone, sometimes much can be done to help restore and repair the damage. In such a case, the victim may think, "I have been wronged, but the wrongdoer has truly sought to put things right. I will now do what I can to complete the process of restoration which the wrongdoer through repentance began." In contrast, there is no such sense of restoration and wholeness, and so of justice, if a person forgives an unrepentant wrongdoer.

Of course, to offer forgiveness to the unrepentant may be a trigger to help bring a wrongdoer to a point of repentance. One can also intend to forgive someone before he or she repents, as in the case of the father of the Prodigal Son. However, until someone repents and seeks forgiveness, the intended forgiveness can only be inchoate.

I offer one final comment on Jesus' often quoted words in the Lord's Prayer in their traditional form ("Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us"). Jesus

expects those who have received God's forgiveness to be forgivers themselves, that is, forgivers of repentant people. If Jesus' disciples have received God's lavish forgiveness in response to their own repentance, there is no place for them to harden their hearts and refuse to forgive others who are repentant. To refuse to forgive such people is to repudiate the basis on which the disciples have received God's forgiveness and to resist the outworking of grace that that forgiveness brings. True, we only forgive the repentant; however, if we fail to forgive the repentant, Jesus warns that we risk forfeiting God's forgiveness.

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