

The Heart of Forgiveness and the Nature of Forgiveness

We need to delineate between two related ideas when discussing forgiveness: 1) forgiveness itself, and 2) the ready heart to forgive.

A heart of forgiveness is the preparatory attitude and state of mind where hurt has been dealt with, anger has been released, and bitterness is unwelcome. The heart of forgiveness is what the offended person takes full responsibility for in the process of forgiveness. While no one can prepare the heart of an offender to arrive at repentance except God alone the offender is alone responsible for responding to the work of God to arrive at that repentance. Similarly a heart of forgiveness can only be cultivated by God alone but the offended person is responsible to respond to God's cultivating work and allow a soft and welcoming heart to emerge. In short, you are responsible for having a heart of forgiveness.

Forgiveness itself is what is granted to an offender as he comes in repentance to the offended person. He receives, upon repentance, a remittance of his debt to the person who has been offended. That individual, out of a heart of forgiveness then acts in forgiveness by receiving the repentant individual. To attempt to forgive someone who is unrepentant is like shaking hands with someone who does not stick out their hand to be shaken. You can have a heart to shake hands but the shaking of hands itself demands two parties. So it is with forgiveness. Forgiveness unites two people in preparation for mutual reconciliation. As such, it is preceded by a heart free of bitterness and malice toward the offender and is at the ready to give forgiveness to that repentant offender, fully and freely.

The Gospel logic of God's kingdom goes like this:

From the standpoint of the offender:

Offense-----Repentance-----Forgiveness-----Reconciliation

From the standpoint of the offended:

Offended-----Heart of Forgiveness-----Forgiveness-----Reconciliation

But life and forgiveness are messy experiences. Consider the following questions:

1. What does this mean for the person who has been abused whose abuser is now dead or unable to connect with the one they abused?
2. How do we follow Jesus exhortation to forgive if our offender is not repentant?

We are only responsible for ourselves. We cannot be held accountable for another's inability or unwillingness to repent. God is concerned with our hearts, and he knows whether they are postured in bitterness or ready to forgive. The exhortations to forgive have as their understood presupposition that someone has repented. If we doubt this simply ask yourself if an *unrepentant* sinner is forgiven by God through the Gospel of Jesus? The answer of course is no. Repentance is a precondition for forgiveness which enables reconciliation. So the abuser who dies without repenting to the abused has forfeited the opportunity to be forgiven by the offended, but this does not mean that the offended ever has the right to hold on to bitterness. They should always be in possession of a heart of forgiveness.

God's kingdom operates the same horizontally (human to human) as it does vertically (human to God). He forgives those who have acknowledged their offense (sin) against his glory. In the same manner, we forgive those who have acknowledged their offense (sin) against us. God's heart is ready to forgive those who repent. He does not stew in some type of relational bitterness. He is at the ready to grant forgiveness. His heart is soft and welcoming, like the father of the prodigal in Luke 15:11-32. But forgiveness itself is a transaction of relational remittance of debt that can only be granted if repentance comes first. In reflection of God's character we are to have his heart for people who have sinned against us. We need to be ready to forgive and ready to welcome them again and move toward reconciliation.

In conclusion consider the following points:

1. A heart of forgiveness is preparatory to granting forgiveness.
2. A heart of forgiveness cannot include anger, resentment, and bitterness. There is never an excuse to hold on to those crippling things.
3. Forgiveness is granted in response to repentance.
4. Forgiveness is not about releasing yourself it is about releasing the debt of another. If you develop a heart of forgiveness you will already be released from the chains of anger, resentment, and bitterness.
5. All of the Bible's exhortations to forgive show us the importance of having our hearts ready to do just that when presented with the opportunity to do so.
6. If the opportunity to forgive never materializes in a relationship because the offender is hardened in their heart it never lets the offended person off the hook. They are still expected to have a heart of forgiveness even if the transaction never takes place.