

The 64th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Monday, July 12, 2010

Bible Study Essay 2: One People Forgiven through Christ to Forgive

This “Bible Study Essay” is the second of five essays that Ted Kober prepared for the 64th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. It was originally presented on Monday, July 12, 2010. The theme of the convention was “One People—Forgiven.”

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Note that each Bible study essay provides discussion questions in the middle of the document. In the original convention, only 5 minutes was provided for this discussion because of time constraints. However, when used in other settings, we recommended that much more time be allowed for discussion of these questions.

Presented by Ted Kober

Friends in Christ, one people forgiven through Christ
to forgive,

“Forgive our sins as we forgive,”
You taught us, Lord, to pray;
But You alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls
And bid resentment cease;
Then, bound to all in bonds of love,
Our lives will spread Your peace.¹

I Can't Forgive!

I know a man named Gene.² He was born in the early 1950s to an unwed mother. When she became pregnant, both his parents decided to have nothing to do with each other. They made their families promise not to tell any of their future children about this incident.

Gene's mother never married. There was more shame for being an unwed mother at that time than there is today. Life was difficult raising a child and being the sole breadwinner. Gene and his mother were poor. Later, she ended up also caring for her disabled mother.

At first, Gene didn't realize that he was different from other kids. Then one day some of the children in the neighborhood told him that they couldn't play with him anymore. He asked why. Gene today reflects, “Do you remember the first word you looked up in the dictionary? The first word I looked up was ‘bastard,’ because that's why the other kids' moms said that they couldn't

be with me anymore.”

Gene noticed other differences as well. Other kids seemed to get new toys and bikes, but Gene's mom was too poor to afford new things. He didn't have a father to play ball with him or just spend time with him. As he grew older, he became angry at a father he never knew. His mother wouldn't talk about it, and bitterness filled his heart.

He had constant reminders that his father abandoned him and his mother. When he was ready for his first job, he needed to apply for a social security number. He and some friends went to the office with their birth certificates and application forms. Under father's name, Gene's birth certificate had an x and a line behind it. When the clerk reviewed his application, she asked who his father was. Gene said he didn't know, and he pointed out the blank line on his birth certificate. The clerk shoved his application back to him and said loud enough for his friends to hear, “Take this home and get it filled out properly. Someone knows who your father is.” Gene was shamed in front of friends, once again reminding him of his situation.

Bitterness consumed Gene. His schoolwork suffered. He stopped attending church once he was confirmed. After all, how could he love a God who would allow his mother and him to suffer as they did? Relating to his heavenly Father was as foreign to him as his earthly father. He barely graduated from high school and then went to work at K-Mart.

Our text for this morning is from Ephesians 4:29-5:2:

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths,

but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.³

We are One People Forgiven, to forgive others as we have been forgiven in Christ.

The Scriptures warn us often against withholding forgiveness. We pray as Jesus taught: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The parable of the unmerciful servant reinforces the danger of withholding forgiveness from a fellow sinner when we have been forgiven so much more (see Matthew 18:21-35).

Unforgiveness is the poison we drink hoping the other person will die. It separates us from God. Yet at times it seems impossible for us to forgive. After all, those who have sinned against us have hurt us so deeply, betrayed us in unspeakable ways, or brought suffering on innocent ones that we love.

The disciples struggled to understand this divine act that defies human understanding: “How many times must I forgive?” We know well Jesus’ answer: “Seventy times seven,” meaning as many times as someone sins against us. Because the Bible provides a clear answer, we avoid this question.

Yet Christians today ask a question that appears different, but in reality is closely related.

When Must I Forgive?

To answer this question, let’s begin by asking a different question. Since we are to forgive as God forgives us, when did or does God forgive you?

Small Group Reflection Questions

1.) When did or does God forgive you? Look up the following verses as you answer the question:

1 John 1:9

Acts 2:38

Matthew 26:26-28

Romans 5:8

John 19:30

Genesis 3:15

Ephesians 1:4

2.) If Christ died for the sins of the whole world, and if God forgave us while we were still sinners, before we were born, before we repented and confessed our sin, then why does not everyone go to heaven? See John 3:16-18.

3.) If we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us, then when should we forgive those who sin against us?

If we truly forgive as God has forgiven us, then we need not wait until we see some act of repentance before we forgive. “Why, that’s impossible!” you might think. “That would take a miracle of God!”

Yes, that’s precisely the point. Forgiveness is a miracle of God. While psychologists may promote forgiveness as a human behavior that can be learned and exercised,⁴ to forgive as God does is not human but divine. Too often we treat forgiveness like a personal possession that we can choose to do with as we please. On our own, we have no authority to forgive or withhold forgiveness as defined by Scripture. Only those who have received God’s gift of forgiveness can forgive as God through Christ has forgiven them. And when we do have opportunity to forgive, we have responsibility to exercise that privilege as the original donor directs.

Repentance and Forgiveness

Okay, we understand that we need to forgive as Christ forgives. But what is the relationship between repentance and forgiveness? Doesn’t the Bible say that someone needs to repent in order to be forgiven? Shouldn’t we withhold forgiveness until someone is repentant enough?

Note that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us and won forgiveness for us on the cross. Before the foundation of the world, God worked out our plan for salvation. On the cross Jesus declares, "It is finished!" God's forgiveness is for everyone.

Not everyone benefits from God's grace because not everyone believes in the Son that God gave the world. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18).

The granting of forgiveness is not dependent upon repentance, but the receiving of the benefits of forgiveness is dependent upon repentance and faith. "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Christ's forgiveness was won on the cross. That reality is not dependent upon man's response. But if a person does not believe that he needs God's forgiveness or that Christ died for him, he does not benefit from the gift.

Now we have a fuller picture of what to do when restoring others as Paul directs in Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

We don't go to confront someone so that they can repent enough to deserve God's forgiveness or ours. That would make forgiveness conditional upon man's work. Instead, we confront someone about his sin in order to prepare him to receive the gift that has already been given.

The church is given the responsibility to retain the sins of one who demonstrates manifest unrepentance (see Matthew 18; John 20:19-23). Such declaration only comes after many attempts to restore (futile admonition). The purpose is not to punish or get rid of the person, but rather to help the individual understand that unless he repents and believes in the Gospel, he is in danger of hell. He is treated like an unbeliever because he acts like he does not need Christ's forgiveness. He becomes the object of our evangelism. But upon any movement of repentance, the sinner is restored and assured of forgiveness.

Overcoming Unforgiveness

We may be able to muster enough fortitude to forgive in a human way. However, biblical truth indicates that we

cannot on our own inner strength or personal determination forgive as God through Christ has forgiven us. But God promises to give us what we need.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire (2 Peter 1:3-4).

Can we accomplish divine assignments? Yes, because God promises us his divine power so that we may become partakers of the divine nature.

Following these verses, St. Peter continues:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins (v. 5-9).

How can we keep from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? By remembering our own forgiveness from God. Peter says that those who lack the qualities that bear fruit are those who are nearsighted and blind and have forgotten that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

Note that the Bible connects our forgiveness of others to our forgiveness from Christ. "Forgive as God through Christ has forgiven you." Focusing on our forgiveness in Christ, we are empowered to forgive as Christ forgives us.

One day a friend from church ran into Gene at the store where he worked. "Gene, we haven't seen you for a while at church."

"I know, but I'm busy. I work on a lot of Sundays," he answered.

“Are you working this Sunday?”

“No, but I’d feel funny going back to church after being gone for so long.”

“How about if I pick you up?” the friend asked.

“I guess that would be okay.”

So, Gene returned to worship because of a friend’s gentle restoration. After some time, his pastor approached him. “Gene, how would you like to teach children in our Sunday School?”

“Who, me? I haven’t done that before.”

“We’ll teach you. We have lesson plans and our teachers meet together to prepare. All we need is for you to be available.”

Gene tentatively answered, “Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

Soon Gene found himself in front of small children, telling them the stories about Jesus. But Gene soon became uncomfortable with his teaching. He knew he was a hypocrite. How could he teach about Jesus who healed and forgave people, when all the time Gene hated a father he never met? Moreover, Gene resented God for what he had suffered in life and he had trouble loving a heavenly father when he had no loving earthly father. So he decided to quit teaching.

But before he was done, he had one more lesson to teach: the passion of Christ. And as he prepared the lesson, he read Jesus’ words from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Gene cried out to God, “I can’t forgive him. I don’t want to forgive him. I hate him! God, help me!”

God answered Gene’s prayer, the plea of a beggar. Gene had nothing to offer God, but God had everything to offer him. Gene realized that day that Jesus’ prayer was for him, and that God could even forgive his bitterness and unforgiveness. Remembering how much God had forgiven him, Gene forgave a father he never met. He experienced a peace that passed all understanding.

Several years later, Gene’s mother came to him and said, “I have something to tell you. I want you to know who your father is. He came to see me last night. He’s dying from cancer. Here’s his name and number.”

Imagine how Gene must have felt! After all these years, he was given the opportunity to meet the man who abandoned him and his mother. Had he really forgiven him? What would he say? Gene took a few days to col-

lect his thoughts and then picked up the phone.

But his father had left town for treatment, and he died before returning home. Gene never got to meet his father, but he learned that the man had married another woman and had three children.

My father died in 1989 of cancer. And that’s when I learned I have an older brother named Gene. My sister and younger brother and I were in shock. How could our father not provide for his eldest son and the mother that bore him? Our father had been so good to us kids and to thousands of his employees over the years. How could our father not tell us? But then we realized that all our extended family knew about the family secret: aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents. We felt betrayed by everyone we were related to.

After the shock wore off, Gene, my other brother and sister, and I went on a retreat with our families to get to know one another. We heard Gene’s story and marveled at his attitude toward us. “Gene, we weren’t rich, but we never experienced the kind of life you did. We three kids all had the opportunity to go to college, but you were unable. Why aren’t you jealous of us? Why don’t you hate us?”

“If I would have met you several years ago, I would have,” Gene said. “But Jesus healed my angry heart. Let me tell you about what I learned teaching Sunday School.” And he shared his story with us.

Gene was able to forgive as Christ had forgiven him. Not on his own determination, but because he remembered that God forgave him. Gene forgave without ever meeting his father. My father never received that gift from his oldest son, but I have received that gift from my older brother. I praise God that he gave me a brother who is a living witness to a forgiving God.

God is present when we struggle to forgive. He still promises to be with us, to forgive us for our own struggles with unforgiveness, and to empower us to forgive others.

When struggling to forgive, we can lay that burden at the foot of the cross and beg God for his forgiveness and help. He gives us the power and strength to do that which we cannot do on our own (see again 2 Peter 1:3-4).

How can we forgive? By fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. With Paul we can bold-

ly claim, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

A Gift Meant To Be Shared

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

God never intended that his gift of forgiveness be for us alone. He wants us to share it.

A couple desperately wanted to have children, but they were unable to conceive. They endured extensive medical exams and procedures. They prayed fervently to God, but it seemed that he was deaf to their pleas.

After years of waiting, they lost hope and applied for adoption. And that’s when the wife discovered that she was pregnant. They praised God for answering their prayers.

However, the pregnancy was difficult, and the wife quit her job to rest in bed for most of the term. She gave birth to a baby girl, whom they named Kristy. They cherished their daughter more than anything.

But Kristy⁵ was sick. The doctor told the parents that they would need to leave their baby at the hospital, but he assured them that she would be given medicine that would cure her.

Reluctantly, the parents left their daughter in the care of the hospital. The nurse who attended her grabbed the wrong medication out of the cabinet, administered it to the infant, and Kristy died. Immediately the nurse realized what she had done. She reported the incident to her floor supervisor, who contacted the hospital administrator, and he sought counsel from the hospital’s lawyer. The lawyer said, “Whatever you do, don’t let that girl’s parents talk to that nurse.”

Imagine the grief of these parents! After all those years of waiting, they were blessed to have a child. But then to have her so suddenly die all because of the mistake of some nurse must have been almost unbearable!

They went to the hospital, asking to see the nurse. But the administration resisted and would not allow them to see her. The parents left the hospital in tears. Before they reached their car, someone ran out to them and pressed a note in their hands, saying, “Don’t tell anyone I gave you this.” Then the stranger ran back to the

hospital. The note included the name and home address of the nurse.

That evening, the parents walked up to the nurse’s front door and knocked. As soon as the nurse answered, she recognized the couple and began to cry, saying, “I’m so sorry, they won’t let me talk to you.” And she started to shut the door.

The husband stuck his foot in the door. “Please wait. We know that you can’t talk to us. But won’t you listen to what we have to say to you?” How could she refuse his request? She killed their baby! So she paused.

The mother began: “For years, we waited for God to answer our prayers. Finally, after we had given up hope, I became pregnant and gave birth to our beautiful baby girl. We don’t know why Kristy had to be taken away so soon . . .” The mother broke down and cried.

The father continued: “We don’t know why our daughter had to die so young. But we understand that you gave her medicine that contributed to her death. My wife and I were holding each other last night grieving over our loss. And then we thought about you. We realize that you love babies and that’s why you work in the nursery. We know that you didn’t want to hurt Kristy, and so we thought you must be feeling pretty awful too. So we came just to tell you we forgive you, because God forgives us through Jesus Christ.”

The nurse wept uncontrollably at hearing this news. She knew she didn’t deserve this couple’s forgiveness. She knew that she couldn’t bring back their child with any amount of financial settlement. She knew that she could do nothing to earn favor with this family. To her the gift was free, but for the couple who gave it, it was very costly.

That’s what forgiveness is, my friends. It is a gift. You do not deserve God’s gift. You can’t buy his gift. You can do nothing to earn any part of it. To you the gift is free, but for the One who gives it, it is very costly. This gift cost our heavenly Father the blood of his one and only Son.

You will meet this nurse. You see, when this couple came to her door, she didn’t know Jesus. But when she received their gift, she also learned how much God loves her and she received God’s gift. She is your sister in Christ, and you will spend eternity with her.

Fellow beggars, as you consider all that you have done

to offend God and others, remember Jesus' promises to you: "You are forgiven" and "I am with you always." Christ is present in our conflicts to confront sinful behavior and offer his free gift of forgiveness.

Receive God's gift. But remember that the gift is not offered so that you may hoard it for yourself. It is not given for you to set on a shelf to admire or to put it away in a closet. The gift is meant to be shared.

Receive God's forgiveness. And then forgive, as the Lord has forgiven you.

We pray.

Heavenly Father, how can we ever thank you for giving us your Son for the forgiveness of our sins? We praise you for your infinite love. And yet, in spite of all you have done for us, we sometimes fail to forgive as you have forgiven us. How easily we allow anger to dwell within us! How quickly we nurse grudges into bitterness! Forgive us, Lord, for our shallow thankfulness. Help us remember that in our Baptism, through your Word, and in your Holy Supper you forgive our sins. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may have divine power to do what we cannot do on our own. With Paul, we are bold to proclaim, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Amen, Lord Jesus, make it so. Amen.

¹ Rosamond E. Herklots, 1905-87, alt. (Oxford University Press); "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive," © Oxford University Press. Used by permission: LSB Hymn License .NET, no. 100013024.

² Gene has given me permission to share this story.

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⁴ See Michael E. McCullough, Ph. D., Steven J. Sandage, M.S., Everett L. Worthington Jr., Ph. D., *To Forgive Is Human* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997).

⁵ Names and certain details have been changed to protect confidences.