

Gospel Forgiveness

Maybe you've heard it said that they who use God's vocabulary ought to use His dictionary. I believe this. But quoting or agreeing with this principle doesn't mean we practice it. If you gave it some thought, I'm guessing you could come up with several examples of how "we" use Biblical terms in unbiblical ways.

I think, for instance, that this is sometimes the case with forgiveness. *Gospel forgiveness* involves several things, not the least of which is *reinstating a sinner in the relationship against which he sinned*. Reinstatement/reconciliation isn't hard when another's sin only bruises us, and we can dismiss the injury with a wave of the hand. But when another's sin breaks us, shattering our trust and leaving our heart in pieces, one of the hardest things we'll ever attempt is to restore relationship with that person. But such is gospel forgiveness. And against this, the giants called bitterness, rage, anger, and malice; the fact that true forgiveness is undeserved and always costs the giver rather than the receiver*; etc., conspire. Chesterton's observation that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried," well applies to forgiveness.

Yet gospel forgiveness is within our reach. And to this end I offer three thoughts, without commentary, letting the Spirit speak for Himself. (The italics, for emphasis, are mine.) Forgiveness:

Has been done. "*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses*" (Col. 2.13). "*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered*" (Rom. 4.7).

Must be done. "*You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses*" (Matt. 18.32–35).

Can be done. "[T]hat you may know . . . what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power²⁰ which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead" (Eph. 1.18–20).

If we fail to bestow true forgiveness, it is due to our lack of faith, not to a lack of God's power. So instead of trying to construct untenable arguments to justify a forgiveness that isn't forgiveness at all, can we not encourage each other—and expect each other—to forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us?

"Two images," wrote Jim McGuigan, "regularly grip my attention. One is God coming down the steps of heaven with a baby in his arms to give to the world. The other is that baby, now a young man, running back up the steps of heaven with a sinner by the hand. Bringing him home. *This encapsulates the gospel.*"

For Christ to bring the sinner home, He had to forgive.

Let us remember that for Christ to bring us home, we have to forgive.

*Sin always nails someone to a tree. Sometimes that someone is us.



Thinking Through the Gospel of John, 4

Some time ago, some German friends sent me a copy of the short story *Address Unknown* by the American writer Kathrine Taylor. The story, which appeared in 1938, was based on a troublesome situation that involved some of Taylor's friends. Since its publication, *Address Unknown* has gone through numerous printings and translations and to this day remains one of the most chilling and effective indictments of Nazism to appear in print.

The story consists of a series of letters between two friends and business partners who own an art gallery in San Francisco: Martin, a German who moves his family back to Germany in 1932, and Max, a Jew who remains in San Francisco to manage the business. In his early letters, Martin effusively describes to Max the wonderful changes that have occurred in Germany under the National Socialists. Martin's letters, which initially are full of warmth and affection, gradually grow more disaffected and hostile. When Max hears from others how Jews in Germany were being beaten, jailed, and their businesses boycotted, he asks Martin about this. Martin brushes off such reports as insignificant and overblown. Before long, though, Martin asks Max to stop writing out of fear that if a letter was intercepted, and it was learned that he, Martin, was corresponding with a Jew, it might go badly for him and his family.

Max, however, continues to write because his sister, Giselle, an actress living in Germany, has gone missing, and he is frantic to learn her whereabouts. He begs Martin, who knew Giselle well, and at one time had been romantically involved with her, to see if he could locate her and provide her shelter.

