

“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (Romans 11:5)

Vol. 38 No. 3

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A Deeper Look at Forgiveness

The key connection between forgiving one another and being forgiven by God

by Galen Peterson

Forgiveness is a subject that we often talk about. But as C.S. Lewis has lamented: “Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.” So it is important to have a solid biblical foundation of what we believe so that it matches what we practice.

If we do an overall summary of the Bible, we can learn how often the word “forgiveness,” and its verbal variants “forgive, forgave, forgiven and forgiving,” are used. And we can separate how many of those times the word is used in the context of God forgiving people or regarding people forgiving other people.

Thus we can see that there is no command is given by God for people to forgive one another in the Old Testament. All such terms are only used in the sense of God forgiving people. There are two things that we can rightly conclude about this evidence. First, there is a difference in the circumstances in the Old and New Testaments. And second, something significant happened that would bring about the first biblical discussion on interpersonal forgiveness.

The *Tanakh* (Old Testament) is a clear resource for evaluating the nature of humanity after Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. And one of the characteristics that we see is

that the natural inclination of humans is to oppose forgiving others. Instead, selfishly we want things to be in our favor or at least fair. And when circumstances are marked by unfairness, we are prone to “get even” another way.

That is the way of vengeance. You hurt me—physically, verbally, emotionally—and I will hurt you back. Our basic nature is to make others pay for what they do to us if it is perceived as being harmful. That is the common thread of human history—from wars between nations and feuds between tribes and church denominations, to broken relationships with neighbors and divorces between people who once loved each other.

It is unfortunate but true, that people tend to look out for themselves and make others pay for violating their inflated sense of self-worth. And it affects the way that we practice forgiveness. For in our fallen state we forgive in a self-serving way—there will be something in it for me if I exercise it, like material compensation or

Frequency of use in Scripture of words related to forgiveness

	Pentateuch (Torah)		New Testament		Total
	Prophets	Writings			
God forgiving people	25	17	21	47	110
People forgiving other people	0	0	0	23	23

holding power over someone. And this kind of forgiveness will also be incomplete. We will break it at the slightest excuse.

But God, in His wisdom, provided a system of civil justice in the Torah that brought control and restraint to our human nature. It was based on equity—whatever you did would be done to you in the same manner or a payment was required that was equivalent to the value of the violated object:

“You shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” (Exod 21:23-24).

The familiar phrase, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” tends to be viewed as a description of retaliation. In fact that is the meaning behind the name given to the verse—*lex talionis*—the “law of retaliation.” But that perspective misses a key point. God was not endorsing retaliation but was confirming the principle of equity.

People are the ones who desire retaliation, and our history shows that it never works out in an equitable way. As Tevye, the main character in *Fiddler on the Roof* observed: “If everyone lived by ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ the world would be blind and toothless.”

In reality, life is even worse than that. More often than not, people go after both eyes, not just one, and the whole head, not just a tooth. No one ever just gets even. And retaliation always leads to more retaliation.

But that was not God’s intent in the Torah. Often we miss the truth of His message by failing to consider it in context. In this passage, not only was God talking about a principle of equity in

formal justice, He does so with an interesting twist:

“And if a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.”

Exod 21:26-27

The picture here is simple. The slave has an eye or a tooth. So legally, since the master owns the slave, he specifically owns the slave’s eye or tooth. If the master causes the slave to lose that eye or tooth, then by God’s standard of equity, he must lose ownership of the slave. They both lose the eye or the tooth—it is equitable.

In other words, in situations like this, justice is not served by retaliation against the perpetrator. Justice is the result of the victim being released from obligation or indebtedness. The price has been paid.

This concept of paying a price in order to restore balance in society is the foundation of forgiveness. Four words are used in the *Tanakh* to convey the concept of forgiveness:

סָלַח (*salach*) – “forgive or pardon.” It depicts a release being granted from the consequences that are due because of a misdeed.

נָשָׂא (*nasah*) – “lift or bear.” It has the sense of “a debt being lifted up and taken away.”

כָּפַר (*kaphar*) – “cover or atone.” This is the root for the word atonement in which sins are covered.

מָחָה (*machah*) – “erase or blot.” This word conveys the removal of the consequences of sin.

Remember, as we saw earlier,

all of these terms regarding forgiveness are limited to the acts of God in the Tanakh. At no time do they apply to people doing the act of forgiving. The reason for that limitation is that pure forgiveness is truly a divine attribute. It is rooted in the very nature of God. We see this in Moses’ proclamation about Him:

“The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin. . .” (Exod 34:6-7)

God’s forgiveness is “a perfect pardon.” It takes a perfect God to forgive us completely and enduringly. And in His perfect plan, He provided a way for justice to be carried out for sin. He would spare the people He loves so dearly from the consequences of sin, and He would pay the required price of equity—an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” on our behalf. God Himself would become our judgment.

So that is exactly what He did. He dwelled here on earth as Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) and became our representative. He lived perfectly and without guilt, yet He died for the sins of those who are guilty. He died in our place—a life for a life. And thus by believing in Him we receive the Lord’s forgiveness and are spared the punishment of eternal separation from God.

That is the greatest thing of all when it comes to forgiveness. But there is an added benefit. We are also given the capability of forgiving other people in way that we never could do before. With the coming of Yeshua, we encounter the first instruction anywhere in Scripture for people

to practice interpersonal forgiveness. That is found in the portion known as The Lord's Prayer, in which Yeshua says: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mat 6:12). And then immediately after the prayer He adds:

"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Mat 6:14,15).

Notice that He links our forgiveness of other people to the way that God forgives us. He brings out the same connection later on in Matthew 18 where He tells a parable about a king forgiving the debt of a slave that was a total of 10,000 talents. A talent was the largest measure of weight in the Ancient Near East. It varied over time and region, but in Judea during the days of Yeshua, it was the equivalent of 130 lbs of silver. Today, that amount of silver would be worth about \$30,000. In those days it was the equivalent of 39 years of wages for a laborer.

So a debt of 10,000 talents would be 1,300,000 lbs of silver, which would be worth \$300,000,000 today, and in Yeshua's day it would take 390,000 years to work off. Thus it represents a debt that is humanly impossible to pay off.

Yet that is what the king was forgiving. The parable goes on to say that after being forgiven this incredible debt, the slave then went to collect on a debt owed to him by another fellow slave. The amount was 100 denarii. A denarius was the wage a laborer would receive for one day of work. So the silver of 100 denarii would be worth \$208 today, and it

represented 100 days of work. That was the amount that the slave whose vast debt had just been forgiven refused to forgive for his fellow slave. Instead he had him thrown in prison.

390,000 years vs. 100 days. When the king heard about this hypocritical act, he exercised his ultimate authority by having the unforgiving slave punished in torment. Yeshua gave the meaning of the parable by saying: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Mat 18:35).

We all have a debt due to sin that is so great that we could never pay it off by ourselves. But when we believe in Yeshua, that debt was paid in full by Him. So when we consider how amazing that is, it should motivate us to forgive the debts owed to us by others that are trivial in comparison.

Having a willingness to forgive others is an indicator that we understand the true nature of forgiveness. When we forgive others, it shows that we have grasped the awesome significance of God's forgiveness of our own sins. The Apostle Paul would later express the same linkage. He wrote:

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Messiah also has forgiven you."

Eph 4:32

Clearly a mandate for interpersonal forgiveness that was not possible during the days covered by the Old Testament has become possible because of the atoning work of Yeshua, coupled with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit after the day of Pentecost (Heb., *Shavuot*) in Acts 2.

When we become believers in Yeshua as Messiah and are

indwelt by the Spirit, our inner nature is changed and we are given the ability to live in a truly godly manner. That includes the ability to forgive. No longer are we limited to our human nature that leads us to retaliate in some manner. Now we are blessed by the working of the Spirit of God within us, allowing us to draw from the nature of God and His ability to forgive genuinely. We may not automatically forgive others, but we do possess the greatest resource of all that can enable us to forgive.

For that reason, we are given a rather challenging instruction by Yeshua:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you" (Mat 5:38-42).

Contextually speaking, Yeshua was not discarding the principle of civil justice and abolishing formal consequences for crimes. He was, however, condemning the way that people were perverting and misapplying that principle in order to justify their propensity for retaliation in interpersonal relationships. Instead, He is calling us to turn in the opposite direction of our human nature and to act in the same way that He does:

- Forgiving instead of retaliating.
- Giving instead of taking.
- Loving instead of condemning.

Yeshua was not negating that a price has to be paid in order to restore justice. He is calling us to pay the price ourselves, just as He did, because forgiveness means being willing to live with the consequences of someone else's sin.

ἀφίημι (*aphiemi*) is the primary Greek word translated as "forgive." It is frequently used in a business sense of forgiving debt. In such cases, punishment is cancelled and abated, and the former debtor is able to regain his ability to function in the community. But without such forgiveness of the debt, his credibility (or what we might call today his credit rating) would be damaged. The one doing the forgiving absorbs the debt within his overall wealth. That is what true forgiveness is all about.

When our eye of pride or our tooth of self-interest gets wounded, Yeshua is calling us to absorb the blow, just as He did for us. Easily said, but not easily done. Nevertheless, Yeshua has called us to live by a higher law of mercy and compassion because we are a reflection of the mercy and compassion that God has given us. So when we demonstrate forgiveness to others, we are a testimony of the ultimate forgiveness that God has given us.

And the Spirit of God helps us with that calling by:

- Reminding us of what we ought to do.
- Convicting our hearts when we fail to do so.
- Uplifting us when we follow through.

The importance of forgiveness cannot be underestimated. It is the very cornerstone of salvation. And our ability to forgive one another is a barometer of our understanding of the salvation that God has given to us.

If you are not experiencing forgiveness in your own life, two possibilities exist. One is that you may not have received the forgiveness of God yourself. It's just like living in the days of the Old Testament before Yeshua came. You simply do not have the ability to forgive as God forgives us. That means if you expect to practice godly forgiveness of others, you first have to be forgiven of your own sin, and that can only happen through belief in Yeshua.

The second possibility is that you are a believer, but you are not following the example of Yeshua and acting in the power of the Holy Spirit. The point is that all of us can suppress the Spirit and act

in the flesh just like non-believers, retaliating in ways that aren't horrific but seem acceptable like gossiping or withholding forgiveness for someone in order to punish them. Clearly with so many ways of retaliation in our arsenal, we need some help when it comes to practicing forgiveness.

When we find ourselves in a situation where someone has said or done something hurtful to us, and we are having a difficult time forgiving them, we have to remember that Yeshua has forgiven us. And that will give us the motivation and the empowerment to forgive others.

As God has made it clear in the Holy Scriptures:

The key to forgiving others is remembering that Yeshua has forgiven us.



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