



Why Forgive?

Years ago, as a pastor, I visited prisoners in jails and prisons. In those days prison officials would often remind people like me, whom they considered naive “do-gooders,” that we were visiting convicts, and that convicts will say anything and pretend to be something they are not in order to expedite their release from prison. Pastors like me were warned not to be fooled by someone who pretends to “come to Jesus”—who fakes a conversion hoping to deceive a pastor or social worker into supporting and vouching for the convict to receive early parole.

Statistical evidence was given to pastors who visited prisoners demonstrating that many convicts who professed to repent and be converted reverted to the life they had once lived once they were released into society. Prison officials were concerned that people like me might become just another soft touch for hardened criminals.

But **it’s not only convicts who repeat their actions once they are forgiven**—that happens with all humans, does it not? Here’s an amazing truth about the gospel—God promises to always and forever forgive you, me and everyone who sincerely seeks his forgiveness.

The flip side is that God’s forgiveness is freely given but must also be received. God will not force anyone to accept his forgiveness. But when anyone desires to “come to Jesus” God has forgiven them without being worried that he will get “conned.”

When forgiveness is requested, God does not launch deep investigations into the level of sincerity of those asking and

requesting his forgiveness. He doesn’t need to—he knows full well that once his forgiveness is given we will offend again—if not in the specific way that we did before, in some other way.

God is not surprised with repeat offenders. He made us—he knows how we operate. We are all repeat offenders. It really doesn’t matter, in terms of whether God will forgive you and me or not, how many times we have offended in a particular dysfunction, sin, addiction or bad behavior before—his forgiveness is always waiting for those who sincerely desire it.

This forever and ever forgiveness is illogical and even stupid to the human mind. It makes perfect sense to us as human beings that people who make mistakes need to get what’s coming to them so that they can learn their lesson.

It makes perfect sense to human beings that if society does not have some way of penalizing people—if we do not discipline and discourage bad behavior—then what kind of society will we have?

It makes perfect sense to you and me that unless we have threats and deterrents and penalties paid when laws are broken we will have a bloodthirsty and lawless anarchy—we will have a jungle where only the fast, strong and most cunning survive—while all others are abused, beaten and destroyed.

That’s an apt description of humans governing humans, but as I follow Jesus, my job description doesn’t include being a judge or a disciplinarian. I’m not a military expert as to how nations must keep aggressor nations in check by ensuring their military is stronger

than that of their adversaries.

I am talking as a Christ-follower, as one who has been forgiven by God and one who then is enabled to pass on that same forgiveness to others. I do not have answers for the violence, hatred and racism in our world. But I believe that *the Jesus Way*—the life of our risen Lord—is the way of life that is superior to all other paths, and that turning the other cheek—forgiving and even praying for one’s enemies is the foundation of the peace of God.

I am not offering myself as a perfect example—or indeed, any kind of example of forgiveness on any level. I am offering Jesus—I am offering the gospel of Jesus Christ—I am proclaiming the forgiveness of God which flows to us and through us by his grace, mercy and love.

I do know this: forgiveness is unnatural. Revenge is natural. Having a grudge is natural. Payback is natural. Getting even is natural. Retribution is like swimming downstream. Retaliation is easy—it’s the normal response to those who harm and hurt us. Responding to hatred, aggression and violence with even greater doses of hatred, aggression and violence is going with the flow of human history.

Forgiveness is swimming upstream, and there is no greater example of “swimming upstream” than the cross of Christ. Forgiveness is one of the ultimate and most beautiful fruits of the Holy Spirit—an absolute sign of the love and grace of God. □

Join us for the complete message “Forgiveness—Why?” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of September 17, 2017.