

Biblical Forgiveness

What is Forgiveness?

Introduction

- Back on 8/31/2025, I preached a sermon on Matthew 18:15-35 titled “Biblical Forgiveness”.
- The purpose of that sermon was to see what that text said concerning how we are to forgive those around us compared to many modern misunderstandings.
- In this series, I propose to lay a strong Biblical foundation for what forgiveness is and how we are to practice forgiveness.
- Lewis Sperry Chafer – “The correct understanding of the teaching of Scripture on forgiveness will go far in the direction of clarifying other doctrines of the Bible.”

Etymological Roots and Definitions

- Hebrew
 - The only Hebrew word used is *salah* (Strong's H5545, verb), meaning “to forgive, pardon, or spare”, and is used 46x.
 - Etymologically, it is related to words meaning “to lift up”, “to sprinkle”, or “to pour out”.
 - It is used exclusively for God forgiving man's sins.
- Greek
 - *Aphiemi* (Strong's G863, verb) and *aphesis* (Strong's 859, noun), meaning “to send away, forgive, forsake”, found 146x in Greek, and translated as “forgive” or “forgiveness” around 50x.
 - *Charizomai* (Strong's G5483, verb), meaning “to grant as a favor or to forgive”, found 23x in Greek, and translated as “forgive” or “forgiveness” around 12x.
 - *Apuluo* (Strong's G630, verb), meaning “to free or release”, is generally translated as “forgive” 2x only in Luke 6:37.
- English
 - From etymonline.com on *forgive* - “Middle English *foryeven*, from Old English *forġiefan* ‘give, grant, allow; remit (a debt), pardon (an offense),’ also ‘give up’ and ‘give in marriage’ (past tense *forġeaf*, past participle *forġifen*); from *for-*, here probably ‘completely,’ + *ġiefan* ‘to give’ (from PIE root *ǵhabh- ‘to give or receive’).”
 - Webster's 1828 on *forgive* – “To pardon; to remit, as an offense or debt; to overlook an offense, and treat the offender as not guilty.”

Essential Concepts in Forgiveness

- Debt
 - Webster's 1828 – "In scripture, sin; trespass; guilt; crime; that which renders liable to punishment."
 - Most of the definitions related to forgiveness carry with them a picture of a debt being relieved or remitted.
 - When a person commits a sin against God or man, that breach of holiness creates a debt toward the wronged party.
 - Christ uses this imagery to explain proper forgiveness in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35.
 - The servant had a literal debt to the king which he could not repay.
 - The king forgave that literal debt.
 - The servant then refused to forgive an inconsequential debt to another man.
 - The king then calls the servant to account for the debt, reclaiming its value in punishing the unforgiving servant.
- Remission
 - Webster's 1828 has two relevant definitions:
 - "3. Release; discharge or relinquishment of a claim or right; as the *remission* of a tax or duty."
 - "5. Forgiveness; pardon; that is, the giving up of the punishment due to a crime; as the *remission* of sins. Matthew 26:28. Hebrews 9:22."
 - By remission, the right to hold the debtor accountable is released.
 - Note that this does not remove the debt, only the obligation or penalty of the debt.
- Imputation
 - Webster's 1828 provides these definitions of *impute*:
 - "1. To charge; to attribute; to set to the account of; generally ill, sometimes good."
 - "2. To attribute; to ascribe."
 - "3. To reckon to one what does not belong to him."
 - Henry Thiessen – "In other words, the sinner must not only be pardoned for his past sins, but also supplied with a positive righteousness before we can have fellowship with God."
 - This is modeled by Paul in Philemon 18.
- Atonement
 - Webster's 1828 on *atone* – "To stand as an equivalent; to make reparation, amends or satisfaction for an offense or a crime, by which reconciliation is procured between the offended and offending parties."
 - The etymology for *atonement* is literally, I kid you not, "at-one-ment", meaning a payment that reconciles two parties through satisfying the debt between them.
 - In Hebrew, the word *kaphar* (Strong's H3722) means "to cover", as in the blood of a sacrifice covering and hiding a debt.