

(Part One)

## Forgiveness: The Key to Holy Living

by  
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On September 14, 1990, Ruben Carrillo struck down and killed Brian Boley, who was riding his motorcycle home from work. Compounding this tragedy was the fact that Ruben Carrillo was facing imminent sentencing for 20 months in prison for drunken-driving manslaughter, which would result in his not spending the remaining few months given to his son, who was dying of an inoperable, congenital heart defect. At the last moment, the Boley family requested of Judge Gilroy, Clackamas County Circuit Court judge, that Ruben be allowed to spend the last months with his son before beginning his prison term. Judge Gilroy consented, calling it "one of the most noble and gracious things I have ever seen anyone in the Boleys' position undertake." The Boleys could only respond, "God was telling me" to defer this sentence.

Where does this kind of forgiveness come from? Is it available to me now? How can my life be characterized by something so clearly from the life of Jesus? Forgiveness for the Christian is both positional and relational - both actual and available. In order to understand this wonderful Christian truth, and its application to the troubled and guilt-ridden lives today, we must go back to the cross.

### Confession: Remedy for Sin among the Saints

Forgiveness is ours in Christ, fully and completely. Yet it is not effectually applied to the shoe leather of our lives without the resolve and discipline seen in passages like 1 John 1:5-10. The Bible says,

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1:9)*

This basic Christian truth is overlooked by Christians, churches and Christian organizations.

In the Old Testament, forgiveness carried the idea of being pardoned from deserved punishment. In the New Testament, forgiveness means "to send away" - thinking of the removal of the condemnation of sin in our lives, and "to loose" - catching the sense of freedom that allows us to live radical lives characterized by forgiveness. So, why don't Christians' lives match up with this fact? The answer comes in understanding the difference between positional forgiveness (fully applied to a Christian at his salvation) and relational salvation (the progressive work of God to remake us in the image of Jesus).

### Forgiveness: Relationships Restored

So, how does this get put into action? There are three steps:

First, the principle: "if we confess our sins." This first step is the hardest. Confession is taking God's mind on my sin. The Scriptures warn us that no one is immune from self-deception in this area: *If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (1 John 1:10).*

Grading on the curve is dangerous here: My sin may be sin, but it is nothing compared to the greater or more obvious sin of my neighbor, or of that church member. This distraction is Satan's trick to get our eyes off of our spotted skirts, looking rather for the soiled garments of other Christians. The condemning results in my life are that I live with pride, self-righteousness, slandering the person of my Savior, and without Christian joy or contentment in my heart because of an absence of the living and written Word. Christians who measure their commitment to forgiveness on the basis of the scoring of the Christian community

only guarantee that the whole church remains mediocre and lifeless, and the outside world rejects a caricature of Christianity rather than the living Christ in us, our hope of glory. Sadly, every Christian sins on a regular basis - I am no exception.

This behavior is akin to a person receiving a cure for cancer that guarantees a restoration to full health. Rather than following the physician's instructions carefully, the medicine is taken in a haphazard fashion which, while the patient is saved from his terminal condition, nevertheless prevents his restoration to full health and vigor within the remedies design. The question remains: why remain in (spiritual) ill health when the full cure is available, if only we summon the honesty and humility of confession?

Second, the promise: "he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins." Notice the strong and sure promises. Sin remains first and foremost an offense against God. Confession is our reaching out for this divine medicine. As certainly as God is God, he everytime forgives us for our sins as we confess them. An important note: this forgiveness is sure, even if Christians refuse to agree with God and similarly forgive Christians who have sinned. Ultimately, God will take issue with them for their unwillingness to take God's mind in these matters. The battle and offense is God's mind in these matters. The battle and offense is God's, not ours. Our job is to keep the slate clean, and live with short spans between sin and confession, and increasingly longer spans wherein our lives are characterized by the life of Jesus.

Third, we find the pattern:

But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One (1 John 2:1).

What an incredible picture. Apart from the condemnation of Satan, of other self-righteous Christians, of an unbelieving world, of even a weak forgiveness, comes the promise that the very Godhead convenes for the purposes of advocating my forgiveness! No wonder the Bible can exclaim, "If God is for us, who can be against us (Rom 8:31)?"

### Jesus: Our Model for Life

Back to our Clackamas County courtroom. If the Bible gives me a formula for godly living from the inside out, what is my obligation for forgiving others? The Scriptures are equally clear:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave you (Eph 4:32).

Life is not usually made up of the big tasks of forgiveness that faced the Boley family. Rather, we decide on a daily basis whether to trade insult for insult, wrong for wrong, gossip or unconfirmed rumor for seeming injustices, pride and half-truths for hurt or broken promises and self-righteous postures for my conceptions of how the Kingdom should proceed.

Such was the case with the Boleys. This kind of compassion and forgiveness is not reserved for Mother Theresa or Billy Graham. Here is the good news - every believer who follows the biblical blueprint for holy living and taking God's mind on sin can live in the same way.

One critical point remains: What if it is impossible to forget some offenses? Does forgiveness of sins mean forgetting the offense? Whether the perspective is from God to us, or us to others, the answer is a resounding "no." God does not require us to forget in order to forgive. In fact, God forgives us every day without "forgetting our sin." This fact has confused and discouraged more Christians than any other single issue in the doctrine of forgiveness. Part Two of this series will address this issue.

Judge Gilroy was correct. The example of the Boley family was noble and gracious to be sure. But it was more simple to the Boleys - God was telling them what was the right thing to do, in the midst of a horrific loss of their son. By God's grace, whether our challenges are small or large, God similarly has told us to forgive in the same manner as Christ has forgiven us. Nothing less is a genuine measure of the grace of God in our lives, or the life of the Christian church.

*"Why remain in spiritual ill health when the full cure is available?"*

## TABLETALK

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