

Finding Forgiveness Romans 12:17-21, Part 5

This is kind of a strange picture. I thought I knew what I was looking at but then I started to have my doubts. In the background it is obviously a plane wreck of some kind. But in the foreground are these little race cars. I started to think it was some kind of funky photoshop thing. Then I saw what looked like a guy walking on a tightrope on the middle right of the photo. Then I really started to think this was a weird mash-up of a plane wreck, race cars and a tightrope walker.



What a random assortment of things to put in one photo, right? The crazy thing is that I was specifically searching for a photo of this particular plane wreck and even then, it threw me off.

But after I started reading the article, I understood the photo and realized it wasn't a fake. This is a photo of Air Canada flight 143

which crash landed on July 22, 1983. About half way through the flight the plane ran out of fuel and both engines died. It just so happened that the pilot was also an experienced glider pilot and knew better than most airline pilots how to handle the impending disaster. They started some complicated math calculations to determine how long they could glide and the possible locations for landing. Their calculations determined that they could land at a nearby Royal Canadian Air Force base that had a runway that was sufficiently long.

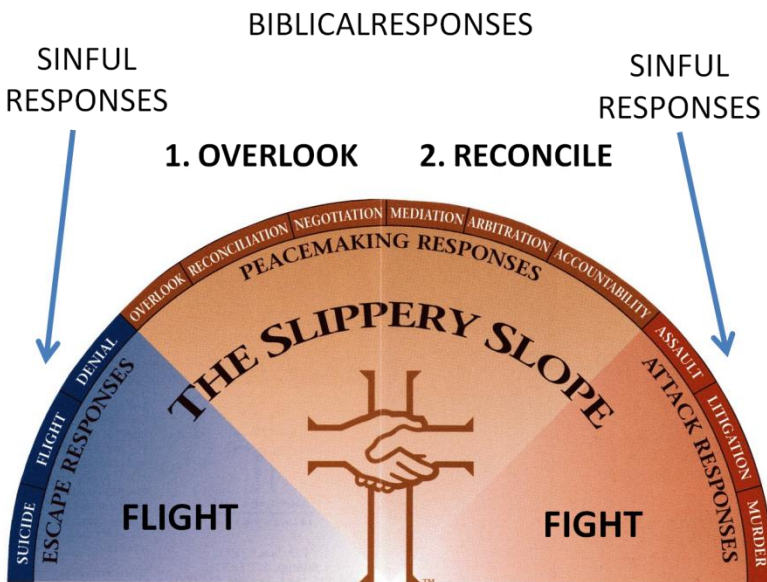
The only glitch was that the Royal Canadian Air Force base had been decommissioned and converted into a race track. And it just so happened that it was "family day" at the race track and the place was packed with people. So that explains the race cars in this photo. And if you look closely, the man who appears to be floating in the air is not a tightrope walker. he is walking on the planes upturned wing. Remarkably, the pilot was able to land the plane and all 69 passengers and crew escaped with only minor injuries. Had the plane slid two hundred yards further it would have crashed into a crowd of hundreds of people.

What went wrong? Why did the Boeing 767 run out of fuel long before it should have? It was due to a simple math error. The 767 had been only been flying for less than a year and the ground crew calculated the amount of fuel in pounds instead of in kilograms. The plane had taken off carrying less than half the fuel they actually needed.

For Bible believing Christians, the topic of forgiveness ought to be common and as simple as filling up the fuel tank of an airplane. Forgiveness is woven into every aspect of Christianity. The Bible bleeds forgiveness. So then why are we so bad at it? And we often don't escape such experiences with only minor injuries.

Mercy and forgiveness have been our topic for the past four Sundays and this morning my goal is to put it all together. I want to start with the offense--the hurt caused to us--and work through the steps necessary to lead to forgiveness and possibly reconciliation.

So let's start with the offense, the hurt caused to you. This part should not be hard to imagine, right? I want you to be very specific here. Don't think in generalities. Don't choose the hurt that has been caused to someone else. If someone has offended your wife or one of your children, don't use that example because that is not your hurt, is it? At the end of the day, there's very little you can do about that, other than helping that person work through these principles. So I encourage you to think about something that is relevant to you, maybe a hurt that is yet unresolved and looms over you.



Where do you start? Well let me take you back to the Slippery Slope. In any conflict, you only have two basic Biblical responses from which to choose. We see the slippery slope of sinful responses so obviously we want to avoid those. But stop and take a look at them for a moment. We all have a basic response to conflict and hurt. Some will tend to flight responses where you run away and others will tend toward fight response and get extremely angry. First you need to know how you usually respond. Second, you need to

figure out how you are responding to this particular situation. Burying your head in the sand and hoping it will go away is not a solution. Running around like a bull in a china shop is not the right way to go either. There are only 2 basic Biblical responses: overlook the offense or reconcile with the person.

Let me say something about that word reconciliation. I am using the term in a generic sense to represent all the things we have been talking about-mercy, love, blessing and forgiveness. If both parties do these well, it will result in reconciliation. Your relationship with the other person will be restored to its original state, or maybe it will even be better than it was before. But full reconciliation is not always possible or even recommended. I am referring to abusive relationships. If you have been abused in some way and the abuser is not repentant or changed,

then you should not be reconciled to them in terms of a restored relationship. It's just not wise and it's not safe. But regardless of what they have done to you, it is your Biblical responsibility to get to the place where you love that person, where you can truly bless them and be ready to forgive them if they repent.

So how do you decide to overlook the offense or start to reconcile? In general, more minor offenses should be overlooked but even then, we are not always the best ones to make that decision. For instance, if you tend toward the flight response, you will want to overlook offenses. And now I will have just given you a Biblical reason to take a sinful action. "Well the pastor said that the Bible says we can overlook offenses, so I'm not going to do anything about that problem." Or you could err on the opposite end. If you tend toward the fight response, then there will be offenses that could be overlooked but you plow ahead. And like the other example, you will be telling yourself that you are following Scripture when you plow ahead. So please take this step very seriously.

But once you have decided to move toward forgiveness, here is where the hardest and most important work happens. Let me give you a typical Christian understanding of forgiveness. It is natural to be angry at the person who has offended you. You know two key principles from Scripture. You know that harboring bitterness is wrong and you know that you are commanded to forgive the offender. And somewhere along the line, for many forgiveness has come to mean that you need to forgive them but you don't have to love them. Maybe you no longer hate them but it's not as if you have a warm fuzzy feeling in your heart toward them, not do you think that you have to. You never talk to the person about the offense but that doesn't matter because you have forgiven them. You believe that you have obeyed Scripture--you let go of your bitterness and you forgave the person. All is well

What I have just described is completely wrong. This is how most Christians understand forgiveness which is why, to use the illustration about the plane that ran out of gas, we constantly crash and burn. We have failed again and again to do something as basic as forgiveness but worse yet, we think that we have. There's nothing worse than thinking you are right when you are actually wrong because at that point, it is impossible for you to see the right way to go. if you are absolutely convinced that you didn't leave the stove on when you left for vacation then you won't know the truth until your house burns down. Our spiritual houses are burning down all around us but in many cases we don't even realize that it happened because we didn't know what we were doing. And since we thought we knew what we were doing, we continue to make the same mistakes all over again.

There are the two places we go wrong. One, we very often don't get to the place where we actually love the offender. Jesus and Paul commanded that we love our enemies, that we bless those who persecute us. You can't just release the offender without truly loving and blessing them. The second problem is that we offer forgiveness even though the offender never repented. Yes, you hear me right. we offer forgiveness even though the offender never repented. And that's because our forgiveness is dependent upon their repentance. I talked about this once before but in this context, it really needs to be said again. This is why we get the whole process upside down. We are commanded to love the person who offended us but we are not commanded to forgive them without repentance. But we largely ignore the command to love and we short circuit true

forgiveness. The plane has crashed and we didn't even know it. First, let me explain why forgiveness is dependent upon repentance and then I'll explain how love and blessing enter in.

1. Jesus clearly taught that forgiveness is dependent upon repentance.

1And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 2It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. 3Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:1-4)

When we read this passage, we tend to focus on the number of times we are supposed to forgive but completely miss the part about repentance. Forgiveness is given because the person came in repentance. Remember the parable of the unmerciful servant? The offense was real. He really did owe the king 10,000 talents, which is why he begged for mercy. The king did not sit in his office and cancel the debts of random people. The king responded with mercy because the servant repented. And this is ultimately why he was thrown in prison later in the story. He found a guy who owed him a few bucks and even though the man also begged for mercy, he refused to forgive him. Do you see how repentance is tied to forgiveness?

Now because we know "the rest of the story" we know that his repentance was not genuine. But that misses the point. From the king's perspective, he assumed that the repentance was genuine. He had no reason to doubt it and he didn't realize it until the servant refused to forgive the other man even though he had repented. Not to mention, we may never know if the other person is genuinely repentant or not. In the Luke 17 passage, a man comes seven times in one day and says "I repent." Now if this happened in real life, all of us would doubt the genuineness of the repentance. We would think he was playing us and we'd be right. But this misses the point of Jesus' teaching. His point is that forgiveness must be given if repentance is offered.

Let's not forget how the parable of the unmerciful servant begins. *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-22).* We all know that it would be silly to get caught up in the 70 times 7 figure. We don't start counting and then cease our forgiveness when the count reaches 491. Jesus used hyperbole-exaggeration to make a point. So it is in Luke 17. Don't get stuck on the fact that if the man repented seven times in one day, it would not be genuine. That is also hyperbole. The point is that repentance must be followed by our forgiveness.

2. God does not forgive us if we don't repent.

Luke 13:3-*I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*

Acts 2:38- *Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

This is the basic truth of the gospel, isn't it? If God forgave us without repentance that would mean that he would forgive everyone. And what is such a doctrine called? That is called universalism. This is what liberal theology teaches. God is loving and would never send anyone

to hell so he forgives everyone. This is a rank heresy. We just spent several weeks talking about God's vengeance. If God universally forgives everyone in the whole world without exception, then there would be absolutely no reason for vengeance and wrath, right? The Bible is crystal clear. God's forgiveness toward us is always dependent upon our repentance.

3. We are to forgive others as we have been forgiven.

Eph 4.32- *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Col. 3.13-*bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

If we are to forgive others as the Lord has forgiven us, and if God forgives us only if we repent, then it follows that we forgive others only when they repent.

4. The word forgiveness means an agreement between two parties.

One Greek lexicon describes forgiveness this way.

It is extremely important to note that the focus in the meanings of the three Greek words in the NT that are translated as forgiveness is upon the guilt of the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrongdoing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive, therefore, means essentially to remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing.¹

Forgiveness and repentance go together like 2 parties in a legal contract. Let's say you sold your house and you have an appointment at the bank to close the deal and have both parties sign on the dotted line. Tell me--does it take both parties to close the deal? What would happen if the buyer did not show up, would you be able to sign off and close the deal? Of course not. A legal transaction, like buying and selling a house, requires both parties be present. Nowadays, both parties don't actually have to be physically present, do they? You could be on opposite sides of the world and both sign off on a real estate or business deal. But that's not the point. The point is that both parties have to sign on the dotted line. But if you are the seller and the buyer never signs the deal, it can't happen, right?

But if the buyer never shows, can someone say to you, "Why did you refuse to sell your house to that guy? that house"? That won't work. You didn't refuse to sell the house but the buyer did refuse to buy it from you. The same is true with repentance and forgiveness. If the offender does not want to "come to the table," as it were, then you can't be accused of refusing to forgive them. They didn't seek forgiveness. To use the definition from the lexicon above--they did not seek you out so that you could remove their guilt. Maybe they don't have any guilt. Maybe they don't want to be released from the burden but regardless, you cannot release them if they don't want to be released.

Let me answer a common objection and then move to a final point. Whenever I have raised this topic, every single time at least one person says, 'Well what about Luke 23:34? While hanging on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."' That's a powerful statement from our dying Savior, but the question is, but what does it prove? Was Jesus asking God to forgive everyone who was standing there? Was he asking God to forgive all who

participated in crucifying him? And more important than who Jesus was praying for is what he was praying for. Was he asking his Father to forgive these people apart from their personal repentance? That's not possible, is it? If this were true then we are right back at the heresy of universalism. This would result in universalism, that God would be forced to forgive whether or not we repent. It would go against the entire gospel. So Jesus could not have been asking his Father to forgive everyone-or anyone-in the absence of forgiveness. So what then was he doing? he was simply appealing to God's mercy. Stephen followed in Jesus' footsteps in his own dying breath. The last words of Stephen while he was being stoned by an angry mob was, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Do you recall who was in charge of Stephen's stoning? It was a Pharisee named Saul and we all know that this man was radically saved a few years later. Could it be that Stephen's prayer was part of that? Could it be that Jesus' prayer on the cross led to the following result? *When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"* Notice carefully that it was not just one soldier who said this but many soldiers. Perhaps some of them were truly saved that day. Jesus and Stephen both prayed a prayer of mercy for their executioners but they most certainly did not ask the Lord to save anyone apart from repentance.

The other common objection is this: doesn't this understanding of forgiveness teach people to withhold their forgiveness? I have already answered this in the illustration of selling the house. If forgiveness means releasing someone's burden of guilt and they don't come to you to be released, you are not the one refusing the deal-they are. The second way to answer this objection is through our final point.

5. Our love is the willingness, the readiness and the pathway for their repentance.

What are we commanded to do with our enemies? We are commanded to pray for them, love them and bless them. None of these things are conditioned upon their repentance. If you prayed for persecutors and enemies and they repented, they would no longer be your enemy of your persecutor, would they? We love them despite what they do, not because of what they may or may not do. After all, who is forgiveness for? Many churches will teach that you need to forgive to get rid of your bitterness. The implication is that forgiveness is for you. But that's not the Biblical idea. Forgiveness is for the offender, to release their burden of guilt.

Love for your enemy is the hardest work of all, which is why I have been preaching about it for the past four weeks. This is where we need to apply the love of God and the wrath of God to our specific situation. God's infinite mercy flows from the Lord, through us and toward the person who hurt you. There is no hurt that is too great for the mercy of God.

If you can get to the place where you genuinely love the person who offended you, you are now ready and willing to forgive them should they come to you in repentance. Moreover, your attitude and acts of love can actually help them come to that place of repentance. In a very real sense, you are building a road--a pathway from them to you so that they will repent.. You are ready and willing to unburden their guilt through your forgiveness. What happens is that not only are you ready and willing to release them, you really want to do it. Your love for them has made you eager to release them. Your love for them creates in you a desire to see them released

from their burden. Do you know what you will begin to do? You will begin to pray that they will repent. You don't pray this prayer because you are angry and you think they owe you something. You don't pray that prayer for your benefit, you do it for their benefit. Do you realize what you'd be doing at that moment? You'd be praying for your enemies, for your persecutor, wouldn't you?

Now tell me--does that sound like a person who is refusing to forgive someone? Just because you conclude that the Bible teaches forgiveness conditioned upon repentance does not mean you will stay in your bitterness. Just the opposite in fact! If you step put in faith and ask the Lord to create love for them within you--and we know this is a supernatural act--then not only are *you* released from your prison of bitterness, you have the opportunity to release *them* from their prison of guilt.

Here's another question. Which is easier? Is it easier to tell your enemy that you forgave them or to demonstrate acts of love toward them? Anyone can mouth the words, "I forgive you." Most of us have probably done it before but not really meant it. It's much harder to love your enemy but once you do, you are now eager to release them.

Let me give you a Biblical definition of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the process of asking the Lord to have his infinite mercy flow through you so that by genuinely loving the offender, you will be ready and eager to release his burden of guilt.

Here is a summary of the benefits of this correct understanding of forgiveness.

- This models the gospel in every way.
- You obey the command to love and bless your enemy.
- You obey the command to forgive when they repent.
- You build a bridge of love to help them repent.
- You open the opportunity for full reconciliation.

How are you doing with the hurt you had in mind at the start? Have you started to think through how to apply this all the way through? Do you need anyone to come alongside of you to help walk you through it?

Rich Maurer
January 25, 2015

¹Louw, Johannes P. ; Nida, Eugene Albert: *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York : United Bible societies, 1996, c1989, S. 1:502