

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

While we did not conspire to have Jesus crucified, all of us share responsibility for His having gone to the cross. Every person who has sinned—including you and me—has made His death necessary in order for God to extend forgiveness to us. The problem is: while we may easily welcome God’s forgiveness, we may at the same time find it difficult to extend this same gift to others. Thus, I propose that many of us still do not know what we are doing—especially in the realm of forgiveness.

Why is that? This simple question has bothered me for years. Like many people, I have engaged in a great deal of reading, study, and soul-searching to make sense of this simple yet profound problem. This book is the product of such reading and introspection. While what is contained within may not address the question in the way you would do so (or as others have already done), it will likely provide an excellent springboard into further studies on a subject with which nearly every one of us has grappled at one time or another.

The subject of forgiveness is important and timeless. It will always be needed and relevant, since it is one with which every person and every generation must come to terms. As long as there are people in the world, there will be hurts, crimes, and injustices inflicted by one person against another. Some will be perpetrators, others will be victims; in due time, all will have taken on both roles. Yet both the inflictor and the one so inflicted—if they choose to stand righteous before God—must deal with what happened in a biblical and responsible manner.

Despite the broad scope of opportunity to practice forgiveness, there remains a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation on it. Many have waded into the arena offering their personal feelings, philosophical views, anecdotal testimonies, and even religious interpretations on the matter. Scholars, theologians, psychologists, therapists, moralists, philosophers, victims, survivors, and even atheists have all had something to say on forgiveness. Some of these views have merit; others are merely subjective theories and opinions. Most of the books I read in preparation for my own project are filled with stories—stories about how someone was hurt, suffered gut-wrenching loss, or was inflicted with horrible injustice. Most of these stories ended with (some form of) forgiveness; a few did not. Regardless, it seems that we do not need more heart-wrenching stories, but a straightforward, candid, and biblical explanation. My personal views or others’ stories may be helpful at times, but you cannot have a right relationship with God based upon someone’s personal story or ordeal.

For this reason, this book is not my personal “take” on forgiveness. I am not trying to impose my religious views upon you; I am not trying to justify my personal convictions to you. (In fact, my own views have changed because of having immersed myself in this study.) This book is an exposition on what God has said on the matter, as expressed in His revealed Word, the Bible. As important as this subject is for living in fellowship with God, He has not left us without sufficient instruction on the matter. One of the predominant messages of Christ’s own teaching dealt with forgiveness and reconciliation. Not surprisingly, then, the gospel of Christ is essentially a gospel—really, the gospel—of forgiveness. After hearing all that others have said and taught on this subject, no one can speak with the authority with which Christ speaks. Furthermore, no one can know the reality of the human condition than One who has not only been human Himself, but who never ceased to be God while He was human.

This does not mean that everyone is familiar with what He has said, however. It also does not mean that everyone understands what He has said in its proper context. Forgiveness is also an enormous subject, which makes the study of it daunting and involved. This discourages many people from studying it, especially if they are looking for only superficial answers. From

Genesis to Revelation, the need for, process of, and granting of forgiveness are dominant themes of God's Word. It is an absolutely essential component of God's covenantal relationship with His people. The reason for the Levitical sacrificial system, and its fulfillment in Christ, was to provide forgiveness for human sin in order to provide human fellowship with God. Just as the cross of Christ is central to God's plan of redemption, so forgiveness is central to God's reaching out in mercy and grace to those in need of that redemption.

What interferes with this, however, is our personal and religious baggage—i.e., our inaccurate perspectives and misunderstandings. No one comes to the table, so to speak, without already having some predetermined view of (or complaint about) forgiveness. To some, forgiveness is beautiful and virtually miraculous; to others, it is a weak and dishonest way of responding to human crimes. Without a fixed point of reference—which is exactly what God provides—we are left to define forgiveness according to our personal experiences or preferences. This is no longer a study of God's Word but descends into personal opinions and group therapy. These latter practices cannot forgive achieve forgiveness from or fellowship with God.

For these reasons, forgiveness is a highly emotional subject. When I gave a series of lessons on this subject in 2007, a number of people in the audience were in tears. Some were crying out of frustration, not wanting to put aside their anger toward someone else's offense. Some were crying out of the pain and guilt of their own injustices toward God or others. And some were crying due to their indescribable relief of finally being able to release their pain and discover joy instead. (It is not necessary to remain unemotional when confronted with moral responsibilities; it is only necessary that we not define moral beliefs by our emotions.) If you have been badly hurt by someone else—or if you have been the cause of someone else's pain—do not be surprised if during the reading of this book you also find tears streaming down your cheeks. If for no other reason, your own crimes against God are reason enough for tears of godly sorrow. But remember also what Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

Because it is a matter of theology and not opinion, forgiveness is a study of objective truth. Objective truth and critical thinking are neither popular nor easily attained. It is much easier to regurgitate someone else's philosophy (or theology), or to circumvent the necessary means of discovering what is true or not. God's Word dictates human morality, not the other way around. It is true that you have passionate convictions and that God knows your heart. It is not true that just because you have convictions means that they are legitimate, or that God is obligated to validate everything that is in your heart. Your responsibility is to discover and defend the truth as God has revealed it, not to justify your personal convictions.

For all the reasons stated above, forgiveness is a subject that is often abused or avoided altogether. It is a fact of human nature that the more time and energy that are required to learn something, the fewer number of people will objectively pursue that learning. This presents, then, a sad irony: while nearly everyone longs to be forgiven by God, relatively few are willing to invest the time and effort to learn how to be forgiving people. We want what God has to offer, but we do not necessarily want to become what God wants us to be. In other cases, we believe God is "right" to offer forgiveness to ourselves, but we impose our own standards and limitations upon offering forgiveness to others. And some simply cruise through life with little regard for what God has taught on the matter, forgiving when it benefits them and withholding forgiveness when it does not. Given such perspectives, it is easy to see how a biblical study of this subject is not a popular one.

This book was not intended to be read exclusively by Christians. However, it must be understood that in order to be prepared the life to come, you first need to be forgiven. No one is forgiven who has not become a Christian, and no one is a Christian who has not yet obeyed the gospel of Christ. I say this only out of necessity, not to discourage non-Christians from reading this book. My hope is that anyone reading this will either obey Christ's gospel or be drawn even closer to Christ Himself. Once we are truly forgiven by God, then we are expected to show to others what God has shown to us. Regardless of your present standing with God, you have made an excellent choice toward improving that standing. Your increased knowledge of God's teaching on forgiveness will give you spiritual enlightenment and will make you morally wise. When you direct that knowledge and wisdom toward your relationship with God, you will most certainly seek His forgiveness and become a more forgiving person.

My strong recommendation is that you read this book all the way through without stopping to make notes or read the citations. Do not merely read chapters of interest, or you will miss some of the important background or biblical perspective that led up to them. (Some of the information is purposely but usefully repetitive, as you will discover by the end of the reading.) After this, read through this book a second time, and make notes and look up the citations. This will maximize what you are able to get out of this book and your exploration of this subject.

Remember, this book is not meant to replace God's Word, but simply expedites the process of discovering what is in His Word. It is a tool, not a source of authority. Nonetheless, it has been my endeavor to provide you with a very *useful* tool in coming to a better understanding of the gospel of forgiveness.