

Someone in my Preachers' Lectionary Forum brought up this question last week (Feb/86). Since it's (1) from Jesus and (2) what the old commentators used to call a *nux* (ie, a hard nut to crack), no Christian book on forgiveness can avoid it. This thinksheet is not a cataloging of scholarly opinions on this logion; it's some impressions of mine as to the logion itself and responses thereto.

1. In these latter days of enlightenment, some are offended--for God's sake (and I'm not blaspheming!)--at the notion that God's so-called "unconditional love" should be qualified by what is, on the plain reading of Jesus' words, any "except": Is God saying "My love is unconditional except that I do not extend my forgiveness to the unforgiving"?

2. As among the Beatitudes it's only the 8th that's commented on (Mt. 5.11f, L.6.22f, in the form of a 9th, final, beatitude, advising to rejoice in your coming reward--as it were, rather than to feel rejected and have to forgive!), in the Lord's Prayer it's only the forgiveness petition (Mt. "forgive us our debts," L. "forgive us our sins"--these being the two meanings of the underlying Aramaic word) that's commented on (Mt.6.14f, M.11.25f). The latter commentary has the +/- form: God forgives the forgiving but not the unforgiving. The statement on both sides, + and -, is unqualified--a case of "Where the plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense" (#2027), is it not? And to ram home the negative, Jesus tells us how God, who leans toward forgiveness, feels when we do not reciprocate (the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Mt.18.21-35, vv.32-35): "You wicked servant! I forgave you...; and should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Note the command to "Be merciful" (L.6.36; Mt.5.7 the parallel, "Blessed are the merciful"). Refusing to forgive is choosing to remain out of harmony with God and so rejecting his offer of pardon; it is to be of contra-inclination to God's pro-forgiving inclination; it is more than to fail, it is to reject the commandment "Be holy (including pro-forgiving), for I am holy (including pro-forgiving)."

3. Of the slippery evasion of this plain sense, I've seen none that deals with the plain fact that Jesus in the parable presents God as angry with, and unforgiving of, the unforgiving. Protestant interpreters who preach *sola gratia-fidei* (salvation, including the divine forgiveness, by God's grace alone without our good character and by faith alone without our good works) are especially in need of weakening, or riding themselves of, this conditionality, this qualifying or nuancing of Jesus' flat correlation of divine and human forgiveness. They may be right in denying that the two forgivenesses are sequential--God saying forgive, then I'll forgive you; and right in affirming simultaneity, the human and divine hearts atune and together forgiving (though the parable, being narrative, presents sequentiality--in reverse: God forgives, the servant proves unforgiving, then God withdraws the forgiveness). Heart to heart, not tit for tat. Psychologists, focusing on feelings, deny what looks like works-righteousness because it, and even the Holy/holy, bypass "How are you feeling?" Jesus asks us to forgive not from the feelings (which are not directly commandable) but "from the heart," ie, one's deep intentionality, which is sometimes at variance with one's feelings. (Here see again my definition of discipline: the systematic violation of one's feelings in the interest of a higher value or duty. No matter how you feel, you are to offer forgiveness--an act based on the attitude of obedience to God in acceptance of God's will based on God's nature. Cf. the church's discipline: Mt.18.15-20.)

4. Let's look a little more at this unforgiving servant (royal under-governor? royal taxcollector?): (1) He's a bad connection-maker, not noticing that the magnanimous king (like Pres. Aquino!) has modeled magnanimity for him; (2) He lacks empathy, not sensing that his servant is feeling exactly as he himself felt when asking the king's relief (either by writing off the debt or extending the payment-date); (3) He's a hypocrite, refusing to give as good as he gets; (4) He's egocentric, myopically seeing only what benefits him; (5) His own standard of behavior, viz, selfish unforgivingness, is the standard by which the king decides how to treat him (cf, elsewhere, "You'll be measured by the measure you use")--which is fair enough, though he wouldn't think so; (6) He lacks any sense of proportionality: forgiven \$20 million, he can't forgive \$20!

5. Yes, we should attend the context of the parable: Mt. is a manual for an immediately post- or sub-apostolic church, still a Jewish sect, with many tensions and responses similar to the Qumran sect. Jesus' radicality is retained in the parables, but his logia (sayings) are beginning to be softened by institutional necessities he as a peripatetic rabbi with loosely organized followers did not have to face. Yet in his discourses the eagerness to forgive ("70 x 7") is preserved, an eagerness in direct correlation with what he teaches about God's forgivingness. These Jewish Christians, in continuity with other Jews, saw themselves as living under Torah and needing release from the burden of "debts" accumulated by their imperfect obedience to the Torah-giving God. Where they differed from other Jews was in their experience and conviction of immediate release through Jesus, whose teaching of radical grace was their "good news." (A close parallel is Pure Land Buddhism: One can get on the road to the Pure Land purely by saying the "Nambutsu," without having to follow the prescriptions and practices of the monks: the Pure Land is for everybody, even the poor, not just for a spiritual-moral elite who have the will, time, & money for rigorism.)

6. No condition in the case of Buddhist "grace"; back to Jesus' one condition, viz, forgivingness, the theological-moral point I made about simultaneity (section 3, above). Unfortunately for this point, which KJV allows ("forgive us..., as we forgive"), the Greek vb. is perfect tense and so rendered ("have forgiven") in virtually all English versions and translations since RV(1881)--of which I looked up these: ASV, RSV, NEB, NIV, JB, Phillips, Amplified, Living. (A curious fact: NAB (1970) returns to the present-simultaneous tense, "as we forgive those who wrong us"; and another, somewhat less curious fact, given the poorer knowledge of Greek at the premodern stages: Tyndale(1525), Great (1539), Geneva(1560), Bishops(1568), Rheims(1582) all have "forgive" instead of "have forgiven.") Without question, the Greek makes forgivingness a PRIOR condition (action beforehand), not just a condition of soul (the pro-forgiving attitude with its consequent iterative action, in simultaneous parallel with God's forgiveness of the forgiver). In our Mt.18 parable we're shocked into time-reversal: God's forgiving is prior! But elsewhere (Mt.5.24) you are "first" to be "reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" "at the altar" of God's forgiveness; but note the simultaneity in the Markan parallel(11.25): "forgive...so that your Father...may forgive you."

7. In Biblical religion, sin/forgiveness are primarily vertical, only secondarily human-human. Psalms-saturated, we are to hear-feel-think "Against You, You only, have I sinned" (Ps.51.4): the exaggeration, while it preserves the divine priority, does not nullify the divine prerogative of requiring, for our forgiveness, that we be forgiving both passively (as another asks our forgiveness) and actively ("go...be reconciled" in the sense of "seek reconciliation"),

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8. What picture of God is to be derived from "If you do not forgive others...."? Neither a law-religion God nor a love-religion God but a God who plays by the rules, insists that we do the same, and suffers our infractions with a view to our returning clean to the game. Historically, part of the price Christians have played for demeaning Judaism as a law-religion is the antinomian tendency at the moral level and the universalist tendency at the theological level. In short, love-religion: Christianity, in eschewing "Jewish legalism," tends toward the sentimentalization of God into an allforgiving Grandfather and the trivialization of discipline (personal, ecclesial, societal). The polarization was at both ends: Judaism, embattled both by paganism (as culture and as colonial government) and by heresy (viz, the Christian sect), dug in on "the rules," endangering itself by sliding from rigorism toward rigidity. Note how different was Jesus' role from that of the Jewish religious authorities: THEY had the problem of social cohesion (How are we Jews, under external and internal pressures, to remain faithful to Torah in our hearts and in community?); HE had the problem of resistance to the inbreaking Rule-Realm of God (How can I persuade my people to open their hearts and lives, their homes and synagogues and temple, to "the new thing" the prophets foretold, in continuity with and fulfilment of the old thing?).

9. Liberal Protestant commentators-theologians have, in the service of their latitudinarianism, rejected the notion that God's so-called "unconditional love" does not imply unconditional salvation, ie, universalism. As I am more a liberal Protestant than anything else, I feel this tendency in heart and mind: will not the Allpower who is Alllove win all creatures into final cosmic unity? Does not our own magnanimity, large-mindedness, demand this picture of God? As Geo. Eliot put it in ADAM BEDE: "Father, I choose. I will not have a heaven haunted by far-off cries from hell. My heart has grown too big with things that might be." (I'm not very good at memorization, but these words ring in my soul's ears because I heard them often, almost ½ c. ago, from my tennis partner, Dr. E.E. Carr, a Christian Communist, who for four weeks at the 1911 Stuttgart Communist Conference sat at Lenin's immediate right and tried to persuade him to choose, instead of atheism, a fresh vision of God.) The analogy of breadth is in the word "latitudinarian"; and in Emily Dickinson's "The world moves on from side to side, / No wider than the heart is wide"; and in Paul's "Open wide your hearts." My heart is universalist, but my mind is realist. (See #33, "Biblical Perspectives on the Afterlife," detailing the four ways the Bible pictures human destiny beyond death, and stating my conviction that all four are severally applicable to rhetoric and devotion, depending on each particular situation.)

10. In our Cape Cod "Barnstable House of Correction," there's no punishment, capital or otherwise, and little correction (though the C.C. Council of Churches works hard on that both in chaplaincy and in half-way private houses). It isn't, either, a "jail" or a "prison." We are bidden to "avoid the very appearance of evil," and America's criminal-justice system tries to avoid the appearance of punishment. (As I write this, 6Mar86, capital punishment is being debated in our Statehouse in Boston--the antis limiting their opposition to the claim it doesn't deter crime, the pros limiting theirs to the diametrical: it does too deter crime. "Punishment" and social efficiency are taboo.) In his home recently, Paul Schilling--famous as M.L. King, Jr.'s PhD mentor and, less, for his book GOD AND HUMAN ANGUISH--responded to my question "Does God ever punish?" with the answer "No." Here we have

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the Christian-sentimentalist invitation to antinomianism (a la the Fr. bon mot "To know all is to forgive all"), though PS is, on matters of social justice and in his own personal life, the opposite of an antinomian). What is to be avoided is not God the punishing Judge but our own human tendency to punitiveness ("Vengeance is mine," says the LORD"), which Jesus resists with his answer to Peter's question about the limits of our forgiving, "70 x 7." We are not to be punitive, nor are we to impune God with being either a hanging Judge or a soft, impunitive Judge.

11. The controversy which, between Judaism and Christianity, took the form of law/grace, took the form, within Christianity, of works (James)/faith (Paul). In all four cases, rhetorical exaggeration was at work. James was against the overreading of Paul as a fideist (emphasizing faith at the expense of faithfulness); Paul was against the tendency of the earliest church to assimilate back into Judaism as legalists. But neither "Paul" nor "James" was a sentimentalist: neither would have any trouble with Jesus' qualifying of God's forgiveness (which is the subject of this thinksheet, I fear I need to remind you because I've been approaching it obliquely as well as directly). Hear Paul (Phil. 2.12bf): You are to "work out your own salvation" in cooperation with God, who "is at work in you." Sola fides is not "faith alone" in the sense of "with no other obligation"; it is "faith alone" in the sense that no other factor is needed for the gates of new life to open to you --but, if you do not walk through the gates into a life of faithfulness, the world has proof that whatever "faith" you had was not faith in the God who calls us to open our hearts to him so that, when he opens the gates of new life to us, we'll walk through into newness of life. (All this is so clear in the Hebrew word emunah, which means both--so that, eg, Hab.2.4, which becomes crucial as it appears in Ro.1.17, could be well translated "The righteous live by their faith-faithfulness.") Human life is inherently contingency and conditionality, and many forms of death await those who do not meet the conditions for life; one or more of these forms will get us, as we are all terminal cases ("None of us is going to get out of this alive")--but the God of Life longs that we participate in his victories over death, and offers himself to help us, suffering with and even for us, centrally in the Cross....ACTIVISM neglects "faith" and leads toward arrogance, self-righteousness and the righteousness of one's "cause" ("Let go and let me."): QUIETISM neglects "works" and leads toward overdependence on God ("Let go and let God."). At this life-stage, the latter is more temptation for me than is the former. I pray and work for balance, and ask forgiveness when I get off-balance. What is more important still is that in Christian community and in the wider community we hear one another's witness so that the balance is in community, the community of dialog and service, where the activist can truly hear "Let go and let God" and the quietist can truly hear "Let go and let me/us." One dimension of this great conversation is the intergenerational (though some youngsters are quietists and some oldsters are activists, and some issues transpose the speakers' "normal" positions).

12. Pres. Corazon Aquino, in her first speech as pres. of the Philippines, said "Let's get on with the future" (and try to forget the past). That's the Biblical God's will to amnesia, which is the goal of forgiveness (contra "I forgave but I can't forget"). Sept/59 as a pastor I took a woman out of a mental hospital, and first thing she said as she got into my car was "I can't do today because I'm so busy with yesterday." Unforgiveness is one way of being sick in the head as well as in the heart and in relationships. Excessive interiority makes forgiveness more difficult: Ernest Campbell in a letter last week said to me "I'm teaching in seminary to help students to stop exegeting themselves and start exegeting the Scriptures."