

More on Forgiveness

By Ron Norman

Ken Sande has written on the subject of forgiveness: “This issue can impact many other important theological issues, including our doctrine of God and soteriology. It is a serious issue.” The issue in a nutshell is this: “Is forgiveness of a serious offender to be conditional, only granted after repentance is forthcoming, or unconditional, to be granted whether repentance is forthcoming or not?” This matter is serious because it impacts not only our doctrine of God and soteriology, but our counselling parameters, our interpretation of many sections of the scriptures and how we perceive our own relationship with God.

Many of those who embrace unconditional forgiveness also hold an Arminian view of scripture. Arminians believe that Jesus, when He died on the cross, paid the penalty for everybody’s sins, even those of Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot. Jesus made it possible for everyone to be saved. No one needs to go to hell. God has done His part, paid the penalty for everyone, now it is up to every person to do their part, to repent and believe, otherwise they will not benefit from what Christ has done for them. So God has provided and GRANTED unconditional forgiveness for everybody. This would change the Gospel message from “Repent and believe so that you may be forgiven”, to “You are forgiven, now you must repent and believe”. Now sinners, using their free will, must receive the forgiveness which God has unconditionally granted, in order to benefit from it. So Christ’s work of atonement is undermined, our Westminster Confession of Faith is trashed and the justice of God is trampled under foot.

The Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 15:3,4,5, states:

3: Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ, yet it is of

such necessity to all sinners, THAT NONE MAY EXPECT PARDON WITHOUT IT.

4: As there is no sin so small. but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation on those WHO TRULY REPENT.

5: Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, BUT IT IS EVERY MAN’S DUTY TO ENDEAVOUR TO REPENT of his particular sins, particularly.

Surely the inconsistency of the WCF Ch.15:3,4,5 with unconditional forgiveness is obvious. The teaching of unconditional forgiveness as Biblically mandatory when one is seriously offended by another person, actually embraces the Arminian view of the forgiveness of God. Those who teach mandatory unconditional forgiveness say that we must do our part, that is unconditionally forgive, and then it is up to the serious offender to reciprocate, to repent and ask for forgiveness. If such is not forthcoming, the granting of our forgiveness and God’s, still stands. Forgiveness is used as an incentive to repent.

Those who teach mandatory unconditional forgiveness also teach that to withhold forgiveness inevitably leads to bitterness and grudge-bearing, and is therefore sinful. This is an incorrect and unbiblical assertion. According to the Biblical mandate, we are to show love to all people even our enemies (Matt.5:44), but love and forgiveness are not identical in Scripture. Forgiveness is noticeably not mentioned in Matthew 5:44 or 1 Corinthians 13.

To teach mandatory unconditional forgiveness is to say that we must unconditionally forgive at the expense of justice. But we would be perverting justice if we forgave in this manner, and

such is abhorrent to God and contrary to His Word (Job 34:12). We would be acting in a way that is unjust.

Does not God withhold His forgiveness from those who do not repent? (1 John 1:9) Is not our forgiveness of serious offenders to be modeled on God's forgiveness of us? (Eph.4:32, Col. 3:13) Does Jesus not command us in Luke 17:3,4, to practise conditional forgiveness?

The Reformed theological position and unconditional forgiveness of serious offenders, are Biblically incompatible. If we are to be consistent with our Reformed theological base, we must teach and practice love to all but conditional forgiveness of serious offenders. In doing so, we would not be unbiblically

burdening others. To extend more grace to others than God does is to actually place a stumbling block in the lives of our brethren or counselees. (Romans 14:13, Luke 17:1,2)

May God help us all to honour Him, love each other, even our enemies and uphold His truth even though it may sometimes bring us into conflict with those in the household of faith, with whom we may differ (Prov.27:17. Gal. 2:11-13).

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