

Theology 2.5 – Word made Flesh

A. LEVELS OF FORGIVENESS – FOR PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS – often we as Christian leaders press for one uniform response for approaching the requirement of forgiving others. In shepherding others we should remember that people are not problems to be solved, but relationships to be cultivated. In caring for others, here are some thoughts:

- 1. Forgiveness - We must realize that there are different degrees of wrong and of being wronged; there are also different degrees of personal, spiritual, mental, and physical health. Some people may have been so wronged and so devastated that forgiveness is not yet within their grasp. There is a Biblical standard to preach, and a practical approach to teach – the goal is to move people toward Christ and hope... Mat 18:21-35:**
 - a. If someone asks you for forgiveness as a Christian, the Biblical example is that you must give it.**
 - i. When we are asked for forgiveness from someone who is penitent, we should forgive.**
 - ii. The basis for the grace we give others is the Grace we have received from God.**
 - iii. Those who forgive little don't realize how much they have been forgiven. The result of a penitent heart convicted by their wrong doing is to love those who forgive them [Luke 7:47].**
 - b. If someone doesn't ask for forgiveness, the Christian should have an "attitude of forgiveness" toward them – but there is no forgiveness possible unless it is asked for.**
 - c. The request for forgiveness should be accompanied by repentance, and where appropriate restitution should be offered.**
 - i. There have been recent examples of those who have committed egregious wrongs such as ponzi-scheme perpetrators who destroyed many people's wealth. When caught they said they were sorry... but were they really penitent for their actions and the harm they caused? Or were they just sorry they were caught?**
 - ii. Many express remorse for what they have done, and as Christians we need to forgive them... the results of holding onto the wrong causes more damage to us on top of what we suffered by the act from them.**
 - iii. We may not know if someone is truly remorseful, but if they seek our forgiveness we should give it. It is not our responsibility to know the heart of another.**
 - iv. If someone is truly penitent, they should seek to make restitution and offer substance along with their words.**
 - d. Personal attitude of forgiveness (Eph 4:22) is not holding onto the wrong or the hurt, but rather it involves letting go of it. This prevents bitterness from taking root in one's**

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heart. There are some who can recount wrongs long past and even work up a passionate condemnation of the wrongs... whether they are substantive or slight. Holding onto such things is self destructive.

- e. **Returning evil with good (Rom 12:17-21) is overcoming evil with good.**
 - i. This is spiritual warfare – where the believer fights in the opposite Spirit from the attack. Turning the other cheek and speaking against an angry person in a soft voice are examples of responding with the opposite spirit... it breaks the hold of evil against you... as in a wrestling match.
 - ii. This is not forgiveness per-se, but forgiveness could/should be involved.
 - iii. Evil does exist and wrongs will continue because we live in a Fallen world... but living in this world as children of Light breaks the hold of darkness.
2. **Justice – there are truly evil people who do horrible things to others, but when contemplating justice believer’s should note:**
 - a. People can and do change – thereby allowing repentance and forgiveness to play through.
 - b. Some people will remain intractable – and God will deal with them in His good timing (Deut 32:35). Our response should be an attitude of forgiveness which prevents bitterness from developing, and our open attitude provides an open door for true change on their part.
 - c. There are temporal consequences for wrong doing and forgiveness may square us relationally and spiritually with another, but there may still be consequences that result.
3. **For wrongs discovered/realized at the Altar:**
 - a. Under the Law – a person guilty of committing a deliberate wrong could be dragged away from the Altar and punished. This is ‘compelled’ restitution.
 - b. Under Grace – when we remember a wrong we have committed we voluntarily walk away leaving our offering on the Alta and make reconciliation with the person we wronged. This is ‘voluntary’ restitution.
4. **God’s provision for Sin:**
 - a. It is God’s desire that all sins be forgiven and reconciliation/restitution achieved. The Law does this by compulsion and Grace does this voluntarily.
 - b. Universalism – would argue (wrongly) that all sins have been forgiven for all people for all eternity.
 - i. To take this position is not to understand the Justice of God. The problem people have is understanding how God employs all His attributes and characteristics perfectly and simultaneously. In God – Grace, Love, justice, mercy, goodness, etc. are each perfectly exhibited in perfect balance in God’s

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- righteousness. We have elements of these attributes and characteristics in a fallen and lesser form... this is part of being made in the image of God.
- ii. At the end when we stand before God and are judged, no one will be able to complain that God was unfair.
 - iii. God has made the provision for justification available to all, but under His terms and conditions. The grace offered through Christ is available for all who would claim it and abide under it. The result is 1st transformative change in us... and 2nd the opportunity for conviction and change in others.
- c. Justice is a part of God's character – He will deal with extreme evil and wickedness in a way we can trust.
- i. We can have confidence that God's justice will deal with such evil in a way humanity never could.
 - ii. Though it may be comforting to relish the thought of payback by God, and it is certainly understandable that God will repay... a believer should never hope for that end, but rather for conviction by the Spirit and redemption.
 - iii. Redemption is made available by God – but it is balanced with mercy and justice, and qualified by repentance and restitution.
 - iv. The Righteous Martyrs call out for justice from under the Altar (Rev 6:9-11) against the unrighteous/unrepentant perpetrators – we should trust in God's righteous nature, and His perfect timing.
 1. These martyrs had been freed of their sin-nature, and yet they still expected retribution and God didn't discount their claim.
 2. The most sacred part of the altar on earth was the sacrificed blood under it... by extension the most sacred part of the Altar in Heaven is likewise the blood of the martyrs under it.
 3. This is an amazing truth that shows the Old Covenant landing squarely in the New Covenant. It also demonstrates the development of redemptive history.
 - v. The standard of judgment that we use is the standard God will hold us to (Mat 7:1-2; Lk 6:37). Those who don't understand their sin-nature and the extent of our sin-debt that has been paid by Jesus, will have more trouble releasing the debt of others (Luke 7:36-50).
 - vi. Jesus' teachings cannot be taken out of context with His knowledge of the individual's inner condition (Lk 9:47), which we cannot know. We can only judge based on what people say and what they do.
 1. When what they say and do are in sync we can trust their intent, otherwise not. Belief that is not supported by action as well as faith is questionable at best.

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2. The story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) demonstrated his sincerity as he offered to pay back 4 times what he took inappropriately AND he gave ½ of his possessions to the poor – his actions corroborated his faith statement.
 - vii. Sin and sanctification play out in life – the restitution promised was at the person’s discretion – but once it was verbally committed, it became an imperative (thus the sin of Ananias & Sapphira – Acts 5:1-11).
 - viii. How we deal with our sin before God speaks to the legitimacy of our repentance. If you have the ability to make restitution and/or undo something that would amend the past action... we should.
 - ix. The Old Covenant restitution remedy was a way to maintain social order and harmony, the same principle applies with the different order of Grace.
5. What is necessary for salvation? What is the threshold event that demonstrates or at least indicates someone has arrived? What is the Godly thing to do?
- a. We cannot know the heart of another – we have to listen to what they say, observe what they do, and attempt to validate their profession of faith by their known actions.
 - i. Confession without producing fruit is questionable (James 2:18) – talk and walk should be consistent.
 - ii. Repentance may be the tipping point of conviction and faith realization – but a desire for providing restitution verifies the change of heart you profess.
 - iii. The unrepentant remain in their sin. The unrepentant maintain their position by self-justification.
 - iv. Those who refuse to provide restitution or in their self-justification may remain in their sin as well... regardless of what they have professed.
 - b. OT Law:
 - i. 65% of the Law is addressed to the just payment for sins – cultic sacrifice.
 - ii. 20% of the Law addresses worship of God.
 - iii. 2% deals with the positive/proactive ethic of kingdom living.
 - iv. The vast majority of the OT Scripture dealt with the penalty of ethical, moral, and cultic failures – it is action orientated.
 - c. NT Grace:
 - i. The positive/proactive inducement of compassion replaces the OT negative inducement of condemnation.
 - ii. The vast majority of NT Scriptures deal with love, hope, peace, compassion, and such rather than guilt or condemnation.
 - iii. The focus on the NT is not on compelling a rigid standard of external action, but of establishing an internal condition [Eph 2] that results in appropriate action.

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6. When we as Christian leaders fail to promote the transformational standard expressed in Scripture, along with the reasonable expectation of a changed life, we do a disservice to the body.
- a. **Mat 7:21-23 is not about respect for Jesus' deity.**
 - i. It is about being religious without personal relational commitment.
 - ii. It is about the failure to do the Will of the Father – which is to know and love Jesus the Son, and obey His Word.
 - b. **1 John is all about walking in the Light, loving God and not loving the world.**
 - i. The rich young ruler's hope was in the world, while the thief on the cross had no hope other than Jesus and eternity.
 - ii. The fundamental qualification for salvation is Grace, and the focus of Grace is the eternal not the worldly.
 - iii. The choice we have is to be children of God or children of the devil.
 - iv. The expectation of the OT and the NT is a standard of life satisfactory to a Holy God – though they went about it in different ways and means:
 - 1. OT Law was primarily about the people's rights and punishments for living in the land of promise – this resulted in a compelled form of righteousness.
 - 2. NT Grace is about deliberately setting aside our rights out of profound gratitude... a response of love to Love – our hope is in eternity. This results in a voluntary form of righteousness born of love and surrender.
 - 3. OT sin was primarily in action – which was a reflection of an internal life.
 - 4. NT Grace is primarily in thoughts and intent – with actions being a result of spiritual transformation.
 - 5. OT Law was about forced or compelled restitution – policed by the community.
 - 6. NT Grace is voluntary restitution – policed by the individual in cooperate dependence on the Spirit.
 - 7. NT Grace is superior as the Spirit provides the means to live a transformed life... which the Law encouraged but couldn't empower.
 - c. **Jesus taught of 3 aspects of Grace beyond the OT Law.**
 - i. Believers are to reflect Grace in the midst of difficult relations.
 - ii. Contrast of believers hope in eternity versus hope in the world.
 - iii. Contrast with dealing with sin as personal versus social.
 - d. **If we really understood our sin and the gift of Grace – it will fundamentally change us. Spiritual transformation in Grace changes who we are, what we do – all of this and**

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how our new priorities play out in our life in a proactive way – this is Love versus the compulsion of the Law.

- e. Sin is not a legalistic response in believers – it is repentance and restitution in love... being heavenly minded rather than worldly bound and determined.

B. SIN & CULTURE

1. Different Understandings of Sin – understood as outward actions as a reflection of the inward state:

- a. Buddhists have a cyclic ‘Karmic’ approach – what comes around goes around.
 - i. You break the cycle by becoming enlightened – a mental state where the desires of this world are no longer a motivation.
 - ii. Basic needs are understood to be met, but beyond that we need nothing to achieve happiness.
 - iii. The power to break the shackles of sin is within yourself – and is accomplished by disciplining/training your mind and body.
 - iv. Happiness is not based on material things.
 - v. The goal of ending the cycle is for the loss of individual identity and the merging into the cosmic consciousness.
 - vi. Buddhism is a mental framework that can fit into the faith-world view of any religious system... it is a methodology apart from God.
 - vii. Classic Buddhism is atheistic, and there is no sin-nature.
 - viii. There is no concept of a personal God and no eternal individual personal nature.
- b. Jesus approach was atonement built upon an OT mindset with a radical new application.
 - i. There is a reason we have self-interest, and the way to break it is not within us... we need God’s help.
 - ii. Happiness is surrendering to God because help lies outside of us – it is not in us and it is not in the world.
 - iii. Jesus taught that God centered thinking had life changing ramifications – it is accomplished through personal relationship centered in Him.
 - iv. Humanity has a sin-nature and an inherent self-interest – surrender to God and externally applied Spiritual transformation is the only way to overcome it.
 - v. The goal of breaking our sin nature is that we may become what God intended us to be – our Hope is not the annihilation of self, but the liberation and transformation of self, to be what God had originally intended us to be.
 - vi. The OT has 66% of the Law that deal with providing the means of atonement – guilt from wrong doing must be assuaged to remain in proximity to a Holy God.

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- vii. **Jesus atonement dealt with our sin-problem once and for all time. We only need receive it by faith and apply it through consistent life walking with God.**
- c. **Islamic approach says there is no need for atonement.**
 - i. **Have an OT view of sin as action – except they maintain that righteous actions will counterbalance unrighteous actions.**
 - ii. **In this system, you can make up for your deficiencies – it is a works based system.**
 - iii. **Life works are balanced on a scale and the righteous acts and unrighteous acts are applied – if you have more righteous acts, then you enter into bliss... if not... bummer.**
 - iv. **There are certain acts that provide an automatic get into paradise card... such is the hope of the Jihadists.**
- d. **Confucian approach – listed in the “Analects”**
 - i. **Sin in this context is breaking the bonds of the familial, fraternal, and filial order you are in. It is unforgivable to question/disobey your father’s orders, or any of the orders of those who are hierarchically ahead of you in the social order.**
 - ii. **If you offend them... even though they may be wrong – is a great offense.**
 - iii. **The customs of the elders prevail even past their death – this makes change an extremely difficult and lengthy prospect.**

2. Theological approaches to Sin:

a. Catholic view of sin addressed:

- i. **James 2:10** - For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. **If you commit even a minor sin you are guilty of all of it.**
- ii. **1 John 5:16-17** - If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. **There are degrees of sin... some will lead to death, others won’t. In this passage, John is speaking to believers: As a Catholic – this would be understood as the distinction between mortal or venial sin.**
- iii. **1 Cor 6:9ff** – Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the

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kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. **This defines mortal sin... commit this and you are toast.**

- iv. **Gal 5:19** - The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. **Deeds of the flesh need to be expunged... Catholicism is a pay-as-you-go methodology for expunging sin through rites and sacraments.**

b. Reformed view of sin addressed:

- i. **Salvation is by Grace appropriated by faith alone... there is nothing you can do to earn salvation, and nothing you can do to lose it.**
- ii. **However, those who are truly regenerated cannot continue in sin and the indwelling Spirit cannot exist with an ongoing sinner.**
- iii. **There are degrees of sin... though all sin is equally punishable by God... who demands perfection.**
- iv. **If after conversion, you commit any of these mortal offenses – it proves you never were saved to begin with.**
- v. **Rather than saying you lost your faith, they would argue that you can't lose what you never had.**

c. Spiritual life & physical death- there is a sin unto death... is this speaking about spiritual death or physical death? Are they still believers, or are they carnal Christians? Or perhaps they never really had it?

- i. **In the context of 1 John, this is speaking about physical death, not spiritual death.**
- ii. **Physical discipline includes pruning... and the removal of some from the flock (Rev 3:19; Heb 12:5).**
- iii. **Some problems or illnesses can result from unrepentant sin. This is a sign of God's relationship with us – He disciplines those He loves... as a father disciplines his child.**
- iv. **In confronting overt sin in those we hold to be believers, we can pray that God would work through physical circumstances to bring about repentance, change and restoration.**

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d. Arminian view of sin:

- i. They would hold to most of what the reformed thinkers would hold to, except they would conclude that spiritual life is not secure... you must persevere in order to maintain your salvation.
- ii. They would argue that you can't earn salvation through works, but you could lose it if you fail to maintain your spiritual life priorities.
- iii. Thus, the argument of the reformed thinkers that if you continue in sin... that proves you never were saved is not binding. You could have been saved, and you should have obeyed.
- iv. In this thought process, the physical death of repeat sinners may be an act of God's grace to prevent spiritual death.

e. Practical application to life and ministry:

- i. It is not completely clear how this plays out – we know that everybody dies... it is not a question of "If" but rather of "when, where and how."
- ii. Some may die for the wrongs they have committed. Others may die as a result of wrongs committed by others. It is not obvious, nor is it entirely 'fair' from our perspective.
- iii. When comforting those dealing with such questions we should be careful not to speak too authoritatively, but we also need to be aware that they expect us to know what is right and what is true... right or wrong, the words of those with spiritual knowledge includes spiritual authority in the minds of those we shepherd. This is a huge responsibility... and something we have to be mindful of.
- iv. When a Christian's sins are made known they must be disciplined by the church under the Biblical pattern and in accordance with church convention. All such discipline should be performed in the hope of restoration – even if ministry continuance is no longer possible (Ted Haggard, Jimmy Swaggert).
- v. We also need to be aware that God reserves the right to intercede with physical circumstance – God is Sovereign and is in control and we need to attest that this displays the glory of God when He does choose to act.
- vi. We need to be mindful that not every "act of God" (Katrina, AIDS, etc.) is the result of God's judgment. Conversely, because God doesn't act doesn't mean that the offenders will get off easy. God has repeatedly demonstrated that He holds His people to a higher standard of conduct and accountability... and Scripture affirms that all of humanity will give an account to God.
- vii. We need to be mindful that every "act of humanity" (Hitler, Stalin, 9-11-01 Trade Center attack, murders, rape, etc) are the result of sinful humanity and a Fallen world order. There is genuine evil in the world, but there are also a lot

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- of misinformed people doing acts of stupidity and ignorance with the wrong priorities and premises.
- viii. We will all experience circumstances that we don't understand that helps to develop our faith. Most of it helps to perfect us as children of God.
 - ix. Some people will seemingly suffer needlessly; others will seemingly not suffer sufficiently.
 - x. What we can rely on is that God is Just and will fairly account for all wrong doing.
 - xi. For believers, discipline by God is not something to fear. But it may well be something to remind those who commit acts of terror, injustice, or self-interest that ultimately God will act, and that all people regardless of what they thought was right or wrong will be held accountable under the same standard of truth and perfection.
 - xii. With regard to 1 Cor 5:5, this only plays out in the context of the church... and it is not a physical "handing over" through corporal punishment, it is expelling them from the church and society so they no longer have an ongoing negative impact of the fellowship.