
BIBLE TALK

This week the question is: ***Does the Bible really teach the concept of "forgive and forget"? Is it truly possible to "forget" what others have done to you?***

You are probably very familiar with the old expression, "forgive and forget." This is a very popular notion and it is believed by many that this is a doctrine taught in the Bible. There are some passages in the OT which say something to the effect that God sort of "forgets" about the sins of some people who have decided to "change their ways" and start over. For example:

Jeremiah 31:34

³⁴ "... I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

When this passage says that God will "remember no more" it does not mean that God literally forgets something. He cannot literally forget. He is omniscient. This means He knows everything. So He certainly knows when He has forgiven someone, and He certainly remembers what it was that He had to forgive. But when this passage says He "remembers no more," this is an accommodative way of saying that He does not "*remember*" that sin as something that must still be punished; that is, He no longer looks upon that sin as though it were an unpaid debt that must still be collected.

ILL: When a store owner marks a bill as "paid" he no longer "remembers" it as a debt that must be collected. This store owner "remembers" the bill in the sense that he can recall there used to be a debt, but he does not "remember" it in the sense of needing to seek out this customer and collect some money.

Even so, God can recall all the things we have done that were wrong, but when He forgives us, He does not remember those sins as debts which must be collected upon.

In Mt 18:23-30 Jesus told a parable about a king who forgave his servant. This king represents God who forgives us. But this servant proved himself unworthy of forgiveness. He refused to forgive his own fellow servant when asked to do so. Now listen to what the king said:

Matthew 18:32-35

³² "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.'

³³ 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

³⁴ "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

³⁵ "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Listen to this! The king *remembered* the debt he had forgiven. When the unworthy servant refused to forgive others, the king "remembered" the debt he had forgiven. In other words, the king never really forgot the great debt which he forgave. He "forgot" about it only in the sense that he decided not to consider the debt as something that must be collected. However, when the servant proved his unworthiness, the king "remembered" the debt. That is, he once again considered the debt as collectable - as being due. And verse 35 says this is exactly how God forgives us!

WE CANNOT LITERALLY "FORGET"

All of this is important for us to remember when it comes to our forgiving others. We cannot literally "forget" what others have done to us - especially if someone has done something extremely hurtful to us. Yet, many people are made to feel guilty because they just can't forget what someone has done.

Here are two things you need to remember:

(a) God does not ask us to forgive people who don't ask for forgiveness. Nor does He ask us to forgive people who refuse to repent. Repentance and confession are both required before we are obligated to forgive others (Lk 17:3-4).

(b) When we do forgive others, it does not mean we can literally "forget" about what happened. It simply means we do not "remember" or consider their transgression as if it were an unpaid debt that must still be collected. We, so to speak, write the word "canceled" on their debt, and decide not to seek any revenge upon them for what they did.

Rubel Shelly wrote the following words many years ago:

Stop laboring under the false impression that you have not truly forgiven someone until you can forget all about the event involved. That day will probably never come. But by the grace of God, you can find the strength to forgive another by releasing him or her from the right or intention to punish or get even for what has happened. Even when something triggers the memory of that incident, you refuse to dwell on it and look for some way to get even. ...

The painful memory of a sinful deed may last a lifetime - even though one tries to push it out of mind. The beauty of forgiveness is in one's willingness to forego revenge in the face of such a recollection. Only God could have taught us the meaning of such an action only he could have made it possible for us to exercise forgiveness with one another.

Rubel Shelly, "When God Forgives, He Doesn't Forget," *Firm Foundation*, Vol. 98, Oct. 6, 1981, p. 8.

The point is, you are not unspiritual just because you can recall deeds of the past. The problem arises only if you forgive and then go back on it -- you remember the deed as something that still needs punishment. This is where 1 Cor 13:5 comes into play. There the scriptures says that true love does not "keep record of wrongs" (NIV). In other words, once a truly loving person forgives someone, he does not recall that sin later and "remember" it as a debt needing collection.

I hope this short study has been useful in helping you to see what true Bible forgiveness is all about.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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