

FORGIVE AND FORGET

(Half Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible, Part 2)

Isaiah 43:25; Colossians 3:12-14; Matthew 6:12-15

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on May 14, 2017]

I

This month we are looking at well-known sayings that are part of our “folk religion,” but not necessarily part of our biblical faith.

These sayings are so familiar, we assume they must be found in the Bible—somewhere!

Last week we considered the saying,
“God helps those who help themselves”
which about 80% of Americans believe comes from the Bible.

We explored the subtle self-righteousness of this saying—
how it can be a way of blaming the victim while absolving us of
responsibility to do anything to help.

And we learned that the heart of the Gospel is that God always stands ready to help those who cannot help themselves.

II

Today we come to another such saying,
and it is the familiar phrase “Forgive and forget.”

How many times have we heard someone say,
“Well, doesn’t the Bible say we must forgive and forget?”

Does the Bible say that?

In my study I have a copy of the Exhaustive Concordance to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

I checked every reference for “forgive” and “forget,”

and even for related words like “don’t remember.”

As a result of my research I can assuredly state that “forgive and forget” is not in any verse in the Old or New Testaments.

But does that matter?

Isn’t it still good theology?

Doesn’t God expect this of us?

And isn’t this how Christians are supposed to live?

A survey last year by the Pew Research Center would seem to indicate so, as 69% of Christians believe that forgiving those who have wronged you is essential to being a Christian. (*Presbyterian Outlook*, February 13, 2017)

But what about “forgive and forget”?

To forgive without forgetting would seem to hold back on forgiveness, would it not?

Or, at least, it would mean a person was holding on to a grudge, right?

My concern today is not just to convince you that “forgive and forget” is not in the Bible,

but to help you understand that forgiveness may or may not include forgetting,

but it does mean no longer allowing what happened to us in the past to determine who we are in the present.

III

Here’s a case study:

Betty Jane Spencer was a victim of violent crime.

Years ago, a group of young men who were high on drugs broke into her Indiana farmhouse, murdered her four sons, and shot Betty Jane, leaving her for dead.

The prison psychologist reported later that the only regret the young men ever expressed was that they had not “finished her off too.”

Eventually, they were convicted of murder.

Years later, one of the men wrote to Betty Jane from prison.

He had “found Christ,” he said, and was now asking her for forgiveness.

Betty Jane went to her pastor and asked,

“Do I have to forgive a man who murdered my four sons? Am I obligated as a Christian to forgive in this situation? Just what does the church mean by ‘forgiveness?’”

Imagine yourself as the pastor—
what do you say to Betty Jane Spencer?

How would you answer such a profound and difficult question?

I’ll come back to this later—I want you to have some time to work on it first.

IV

There is no doubt that forgiveness is one of the Bible’s preeminent themes.

Several of Jesus’ parables are on the theme of forgiveness—
for example, the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward.

Forgiveness was on the minds of Jesus’ disciples,
as Peter once asked Jesus how many times should he forgive—
was seven times enough?

Jesus shocked Peter and the other disciples when he answered,
“Not seven times...but seventy times seven.”

In other words, there are to be no limits to forgiveness.

Paul’s letters are laced with verses on forgiveness.

A great example is Ephesians 4:32, which says,

“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

And in the Book of Colossians:

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Notice that for Paul, forgiveness starts with God.

The beginning point for each of us is to realize that God has forgiven us.

There may be no better summary of what the Bible says about forgiveness than this petition in the Lord’s Prayer:

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

It is important to cultivate within our hearts the attitude of forgiveness.

Why? Because it will open us to the receiving of God’s forgiveness.

But is that the same as **forgetting** the wrongs done to us?

The passage that comes closest to “forgive and forget” is Isaiah 43:25—

*“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions,
for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*

This passage begins with the assertion of who God is:

“I, even I, am God....”

It is God who forgives—that is always the starting place.

Then the verse moves to a second assertion, to answer the question,

“Why does God do it?”

God says, “*I blot out your transgressions for my own sake.*”

The motivation lies in God’s nature.

You are forgiven not because you deserve it,
not because you’ve earned it—
but because of who God is.

It is the very nature of God to forgive.

Then Isaiah goes on to express a third truth:
“*I will remember your sins no more.*”

The concept of sin used here is the rebellion that breaks off a relationship.

You can sin, God says,
you can rebel against me,
you can break off our relationship
and even forget about me—
but I CANNOT AND WILL NOT FORGET YOU!

I will forgive your transgressions and remember your sins no more.

When we look at it this way, we can begin to focus on cultivating the practice of forgiveness.

For in doing so, we declare that in Christ we are no longer captive to our sins and our failures.

Obsessing over our sinful failures,
cultivating resentments,
remembering petty slights—
these things do not liberate.

But the forgiveness that comes from Jesus Christ is liberating,
both to the sinner and to the one sinned against.

This gift turns us from the past to the future
and grants us an unexpected measure of forgetfulness.

Not the forgetfulness of erasing the past...

but that liberating forgetfulness that refuses to allow us to wallow in victimhood or continue to cultivate resentments.

God invites us to live as those whose sins have been forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross,
and then extend that same grace to others.

V

But here's the key point: this is not something we can do on our own.

As United Methodist pastor William Willimon writes:

“The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural.”

William Willimon is right: forgiveness is not natural.

So we start with this truth—
God forgives us.

It also applies to the one who has wronged us—
God offers forgiveness to that person too.

Forgiveness is a gift of grace that flows from the very heart of God.

For human beings, forgiveness is seldom easy or instantaneous.

Recently I saw an interview with the brother of a black man who had been shot to death by a police officer (I don't recall now who it was or the circumstances).

The brother was asked, “Have you forgiven the man who shot your brother?”

He answered: “I'm trying to...I'm not there yet but I'm trying.”

That humble statement expresses how forgiveness works for most of us.

“I’m trying to...but I’m not there yet.”

Forgiveness is, in fact, a process by which we begin to let go of the negative effects of what has been done to us.

It means replacing the negative emotions of anger, hate, and desire for revenge with positive emotions of love, compassion, and empathy.

Just as God offers each of us the gift of forgiveness,
so forgiveness is a gift we offer the person who has hurt us.

It is the means whereby we, in the words of theologian Lewis Smedes,
“surrender our right to get even.”

But here’s the rub: forgiveness doesn’t happen overnight.

Sometimes it proceeds in fits and starts.

Sometimes it is two steps forward and three steps back.

And never does forgiveness mean that we are required to forget.

VI

Jeanne Bishop is an assistant public defender and law school professor in Chicago. She is also a member and elder of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago.

In 1990, Jeanne’s then 25-year old sister Nancy, her husband Richard, and their unborn child were murdered, shot to death, in their home by a 16-year old high school junior who lived several blocks away.

The young man was tried and sentenced to the maximum sentence for a juvenile in Illinois, life without parole.

Jeanne Bishop supported the sentence at the time but over time God changed her heart and she no longer believed in a merciless sentence of life without parole for juveniles.

So she wrote to the young man who had murdered her sister, brother-in-law and their unborn child to say that she had forgiven him and she offered to visit him.

He wrote back a 15 page letter confessing to the murders and making a heartfelt apology.

So Jeanne Bishop went to visit him and is still visiting him to this day.

She writes:

“Love goes first; it doesn’t wait. It doesn’t tally up what one person owes to another, then wait for payment in full before there can be healing of the breach. It reaches out and embraces; it urges redemption and reconciliation; it celebrates restoration and return.”

A lot of people have the misunderstanding that forgiveness means always forgetting...

that it means trying to act as if nothing has happened.

But the victims of violence don’t want to forget.

They are deeply concerned that their loved ones not be forgotten.

So a psychiatrist once said:

*The stupid neither forgive nor forget;
The naïve both forgive and forget;
The wise forgive and don’t forget.*

VII

So if you were Betty Jane Spencer’s pastor, what counsel would you give her?

As a Christian, must she forgive the young man who killed her sons and tried to kill her?

I say, not necessarily.

There are times when forgiveness is not appropriate—
 for instance, when the wounds are too fresh,
 when the damage continues,
 or when the offender fails to take responsibility.

In that sense, perhaps it was not right for the young man to ask her for forgiveness.

He can write and express his remorse;
 he can say how sorry he is for the pain he has caused;
 he can tell her he has become a Christian and sought God's
 forgiveness.

If Betty Jane Spencer is to express her forgiveness to that young man,
 it must be like it was with Jeanne Bishop—
 at her initiative.

Requiring her to “forgive and forget” takes power from her a second time.

In fact, it makes her a victim of the same man twice.

What about the young man?

Does he need to have forgiveness expressed to him?

Certainly he does.

So let the church do it through a prison chaplain or a pastor or a lay minister.

Let the church assume that burden,
 not Betty Jane Spencer, who has lost so much.

VIII

Are there ever times when forgiveness should include forgetting?

I think so, and I'll grant that I've given you a couple of extreme examples today.

We know that forgiving is always right;
 how do we know when forgetting is also correct?

Psalm 103:12 can be helpful at this point.

*“As far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.”*

This is very close to the idea of forgetting.

God “removes” our sins.

How far?

“As far as the east is from the west.”

On the other hand, there is Psalm 90:8, which has the idea that God forgives our sins even while God remembers them.

*“You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.”*

So there is also the sense that God looks on our sins (even our “secret sins”) while extending grace and forgiveness to us.

So what is the conclusion?

God forgives, that we know.

Does God also forget?

The story is told about a woman who went to her priest because she kept having visions of Jesus.

The priest told her not to worry, that there were those in the history of the church who had such visions, and to welcome them when they came.

Then the priest said to the woman, “The next time Jesus appears to you, ask him what terrible sin your priest committed a long time ago.”

A couple of weeks later the woman again came to see her priest to report another vision.

The priest said to her, “And did you ask Jesus about the sin your priest committed long ago?”

The woman answered, “I did...., He said, ‘I forget.’”

May God enable and empower each of us...

to be forgiven

and to extend forgiveness,

as we follow the example of the One who,

on the day when he was nailed to the cross, said,

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Amen.

Original source of the sermon: The Rev. Charles W. Julian, Muncie, Indiana.

Jeanne Bishop, “Living restorative justice,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 13, 2017, 18-19.

Thomas W. Currie, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 13, 2017, 15.