

JULY 2007—*Must I Forgive?*

Extending forgiveness is not the common currency of the fallen world. But it is a non-negotiable norm in the kingdom of God. Strangely, however, many believers do not seem to take seriously the necessity of forgiving others or realize the spiritual danger of refusing to do so.

C.S. Lewis, who had to forgive many injuries and offenses over his lifetime, speaks of the necessity of forgiveness:

We say a great many things in church (and out of church too) without thinking of what we are saying. For instance, we say in the Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." I had been saying it for several years before I asked myself why it was in the Creed. At first sight it seems hardly worth putting in. "If one is a Christian," I thought, "of course one believes in the forgiveness of sins. It goes without saying." But the people who compiled the Creed apparently thought that this was a part of our belief which we needed to be reminded of every time we went to church. And I have begun to see that, as far as I am concerned, they were right. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not nearly so easy as I thought. Real belief in it is the sort of thing that very easily slips away if we don't keep on polishing it up.

We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. There is no doubt about the second part of this statement. It is in the Lord's Prayer; was emphatically stated by our Lord. If you don't forgive you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't, we shall be forgiven none of our own.

The application is clear. We need to forgive anyone who sins against us quickly and fully. God forgives us this way, and we are obligated to do the same toward those who sin against us. In light of his grace to us, we can do no less. Failure to do so blocks the forgiveness of our daily sins and erects a barrier between us and God which disrupts our fellowship with him. If we persist, we will drift from God and can spiral into spiritual ruin. Forgiveness is sometimes very hard and may need to be renewed again and again when deep wounds are involved, but it is ultimately an act of the will that we can and must make.

*...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

MATTHEW 6:12, 15 (ESV)

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C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 177-178.