

Who Can Forgive Sins

In reality, the whole issue of who we have sinned against rests with who can actually forgive sins. Now, we may think that we have the power to forgive sin, but that power can only rest with the the one who sets forth or issues the law that is transgressed. While it may be convenient and make us feel better to forgive one another, we cannot absolve one another of the fact of having transgressed the law of God with regard to the way we interact one with another. And, while we like to think we determine the parameters of our interactions with those around us, actually we do not. How we are to deal with everyone we meet is determined by the LORD Himself, and is plainly stated in the second commandment:

Then one of them, *which was a lawyer*, asked *him a question*, tempting him, and saying, Master, which *is* the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. **And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.** (*Matthew 22:35-39*)

What we see here is an open-ended commandment which is all-encompassing concerning how we relate to our fellow man. There are no qualifiers or limiting statements accompanying "Thou shalt love they neighbor as thyself." Because it is stated this way, it raises the question in the mind of a lawyer who was not willing to apply it in its entirety, but rather attempted to limit the scope of it:

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readeest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; **and thy neighbour as thyself.**

And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. **But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?** And Jesus answering said, A certain *man* went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded *him*, and departed, leaving *him* half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked *on him*, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion *on him*, And went to *him*, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave *them* to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. **Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.** (*Luke 10:25-37*)

Without doing so directly, the Lord Jesus rebukes the lawyer through the telling of the incident of the man who was robbed and beaten. The clear meaning of the story is that everyone we meet is our neighbor. That we are to have compassion and mercy to every man should be understood without the necessity of explanation and justification. The Scriptures are clear that mercy, and the compassion that drives it, are indispensable to our being, ((This is more completely addressed in Appendix C, which examines how man is made in the image of God.)) and are required of us:

Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: **Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?** And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should

pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. (*Matthew 18:32-35*)

And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash *herself* at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened *it*, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. **And she had compassion on him**, and said, This *is one* of the Hebrews' children. (*Exodus 2:5-6*)

He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: **but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor.** (*Proverbs 14:31*)

He that followeth after righteousness **and mercy** findeth life, righteousness, and honour. (*Proverbs 21:21*)

It is without question that the Levite and the priest had no compassion and mercy toward the man who was beaten and robbed. As an aside, it really raises the question as to either man's ability to minister to man, and unto the LORD:

For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things *pertaining* to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: **Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.** (*Hebrews 5:1-2*) ((Is it really necessary to point out the unbelievable hypocrisy of the priest and Levite? The very word "minister" means "to serve," which is what they deliberately and studiously avoided because it wasn't convenient.))

In returning to the original point, the clear implication from the Lord Jesus Christ is that every person we have anything to do with is our neighbor, and we are to treat them even as we would like to be treated. It is not, as some would claim, that certain are lacking in this area, as all are given the moral imperatives of compassion and mercy. Rather, it is that, like the priest and Levite, we can't be bothered to assist our

fellow man in their time of need. Nevertheless, it is clear there is a requirement laid upon us in the Scripture regarding how we treat our fellow man:

And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is none good but one, that is, God:* but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, **Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.** (*Matthew 19:16-19*)

And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, **and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.** (*Mark 12:32-33*)

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; **and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.** (*Romans 13:8-10*)

Hence, every commandment we have which relates in any way at all to interacting with our fellow man falls under the umbrella of “love thy neighbor as thyself,” and is an aspect of that law of God. When we violate the person of another, however small that violation may be, we transgress the above commandment. Moreover, while our neighbor may forgive us that transgression and sin, we did not violate the law of our neighbor who did not issue the law. Rather, that same law is

equally applied to them, and they are thus equal to us in the sight of God. What we violated is the law of the LORD God and that only. While it is fine that our neighbor may forgive us, our neighbor cannot speak for the LORD God. The reason for this is evident: LORD does not operate under the command of our neighbor nor under the command of any other person. Instead, it is He that issued the command applicable to all mankind equally. Accordingly, it is also clear that each and every person is equal in standing before the LORD God, and no one has any lawful capacity to command another, saving that which the LORD God delegates for specific purposes. ((It is typical for men to think they have broad leeway in the specific offices the LORD has ordained for the exercise of civil authority. However, they err in so thinking, as any ability to command another still falls under the specific commandment of "Love thy neighbor as thyself." In these cases, only those commands which rulers can lawfully issue, may rulers lawfully forgive. To quote the principle set forth by the Lord Jesus Christ "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's.")) Even those who are raised to leadership among men are still bound by the two commandments, and thus cannot reach the power or authority to forgive transgression and sin.

It being the case that all mankind operates under the command and authority of the LORD God, we must consider that while it is good for our neighbor that he or she forgave us, we are still guilty in the sight of God for the transgression and sin we committed when we acted unlawfully toward our neighbor – regardless of how slight that transgression may have been. However much we would desire that our fellow man release us from culpability, whoever they may be, the authority or power to forgive transgression and sin does not rest in them. This understanding was not lost among the Jews. Though they had "lost" other doctrines and the reasoning for them, they did not lose this understanding, as the following situation plainly illustrates:

And again he entered into Capernaum after *some* days; and it was noised that he was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive *them*, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them. And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken *it* up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, **Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?** And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, **Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins,** (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion. (*Mark 2:1-12*)

We cannot know how many there understood what the Lord Jesus was implicitly stating. But, He did declare to those present that He was indeed God come in the flesh by the statement “Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins,...”. We should also note that He did not attempt to explain to them how it is that God is able to forgive sins and man is not. Neither did He attempt to explain that, as a man, how it is that He has the power to forgive sins. Rather, He simply declared that it was equally easy for Him to forgive

the man's sins as it was for Him to heal that same man. This was not the only time His forgiving of a person's sins raised question:

Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, *the same* loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also? And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace. (Luke 7:47-50)

As they could not positively discern who He was, it raised legitimate question in the minds of those eating with Christ, as to who he was in that He directly and without hesitation forgave the woman of her sins. For those who care to discern, it was evident at the time and is evident now from the Scriptures, that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. He, being God, has the power to forgive sins. It is not that the Jews were wrong about this power and who could exercise it. Rather, they were wrong in failing to perceive the Person exercising the power. By way of explaining who we sin against, and who can actually absolve us of wrongdoing, the Lord Jesus Christ gave an illustration involving a rather foolish young man and his inheritance:

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth *to me*. And he divided unto them *his* living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have

bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, **I have sinned against heaven, and before thee**, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, **I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight**, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (Luke 15:11-21)

In the midst of the larger point about salvation, the Lord Jesus states who it is that we actually sin against. Here the young man states, not once, but twice "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee," (or, "in thy sight"), which is the clear declaration that, though he had wasted his father's money (though his inheritance, it was his father's labor that earned it), it was not his father he had sinned against, but "heaven," meaning that he had sinned against God. We should consider that the young man did not ask for acceptance from his father, but wanted only to have adequate provision, as he knew his conduct did not warrant acceptance. Moreover, since he did not ask his father to forgive him, but declared his sin to be against heaven, it is clear that his father had no capacity to forgive what he had done.

Having answered the question of who can forgive sins, and without touching on all the parallels and lessons in the above parable, we now have a subsequent issue arising from the above passages, which is:

If God only can forgive sins, under what conditions will He forgive them when we violate our fellow man?

In the Scripture, it is very clear that there exists only one condition in which the LORD God will forgive the sins of an individual:

The condition of being forgiven in and through the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is Salvation.

The following two passages are typical and authoritative concerning the forgiveness of transgression and sin. They state specifically and expressly that the Lord Jesus came and died on the cross for the express purpose of effecting the forgiveness of sin for all men everywhere.

In whom **we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins**, according to the riches of his grace; Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, **who first trusted in Christ**. (*Ephesians 1:7-12*)

And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and *from* the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, *and* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan unto God, **that they may receive forgiveness of sins**, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. (*Acts 26:15-18*)

It is clear in the totality of Scripture that the only way that sins are actually forgiven is in Christ. Without the Lord Jesus Christ's payment of the debt that each of us owe the

LORD God for transgression of His will, there exists no conveyance by which we may be forgiven. If we only look at the single aspect of grace and forgiveness, and ignore the fact that righteousness must be fulfilled (that is, all things must be balanced out or made equal, and that the LORD God will not violate His righteousness), then we miss the point that the forgiveness man receives from the LORD is strictly due to the fact that Jesus Christ paid what man owes, and therefore man can be forgiven in and through Christ. But, lest we think there is another means or conveyance by which this end can be accomplished, we are reminded that the end is not simply the forgiveness of our transgressions and sins. Instead, it is to be made acceptable in the sight of God so that we may have fellowship with our Creator.

There is yet one other condition in which forgiveness is available from the LORD God for man beyond that which occurs at the election of grace. However, that is available within the condition of salvation (which is being in Christ), and not outside of it. This is illustrated in the following passage from I John:

That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:3-10)

((Without getting into a long article about what part of man is born again, and why I John 1:9-10 is not contradictory to I John 3:9, it is imperative to understand that the flesh (or body) is NOT born-again, but the soul is. Ref. Romans 6-7, and John 6:63, et al.))

It is evident that forgiveness for transgression and sin is available at all times for someone who has salvation in Christ.⁵ Without salvation, there is no forgiveness for transgression and sin, as the only means by which one can be forgiven is in and through the salvation offered by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is imperative to remember that being forgiven (or forgiveness) is not an end in itself, but is part of salvation – which is the reconciliation of man to the LORD God. Reconciliation is the end, forgiveness is simply an essential part of that reconciliation.

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| <u>The Scriptural Case Against Abortion – Table of Contents</u> = | <u>Appendix F: Against Thee, Thee Only Have I Sinned – Table of Contents</u> = | <u>The Commandments of God</u> |
|--|---|--|