

Q&A: Does a desire for forgiveness mean faith?

Anonymous asks:

If someone claims to be without faith, yet morally knows they have done something “wrong” due to our God given in built moral compass (even if said person chooses to not believe that God gave them the compass) and is looking for forgiveness, does that mean they have faith...? I guess they will only feel forgiven if they realise who they must submit to, which leads them to faith...? It is almost like our inbuilt ability to continually fall short of the inbuilt compass leads us to God. Smart design. Seek and you shall find.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

This question has come in response to our latest sermon series in the evening at St. Nic's. Thank you for it. You've put forward something very interesting. Let's unpack it a little, explore this hypothetical person's situation, and look to see where faith can be found...



You talk about someone who “morally knows that they have done something wrong.” This is an experience that is common to all people (excluding a sociopath or two) and is simply the operation of our conscience. Theologically, we can find the roots of conscience in our identity as image-bearers of God, *and* in the loss of innocence grasped by the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But our conscience doesn't depend on faith, it is simply a part of

who we are as human beings. Similarly, a pricked conscience doesn't necessarily lead to faith, or anything else in particular. We all know what it means to deaden our conscience, and harden our hearts.

However, there is also an experience that we might describe as "being convicted of sin." This something different to feeling guilty about something, it is about an awareness of a fractured relationship with our maker. It can feel like dread, but always has a sense of hunger to make it right, even if we are at a loss for words and aren't sure of what we can do about it. It's what is happening when the *psalmist* writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This is what is happening when Peter witnesses Jesus at work and *cries out* "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The big question is whether this sense of conviction is an aspect of faith. I think I'd like to turn it the other way around and consider how faith is present in the conviction of sin. After all, you cannot understand yourself to be disconnected from God's holiness if you don't have some sense of belief that God exists, and that he is holy. The longing for forgiveness is a longing for restoration of relationship, and for me, that is faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

True conviction of sin, a ministry of God's Spirit awakening our own, draws us to God in search of his grace, even if it is on our knees. And, as you say, "seek and you shall find."

The conundrum with your hypothetical person is that we see something of an existential wrestle: Clearly he is looking for forgiveness from someone, yet has "chosen to believe that God has not given them their moral compass." It's a tension

that can't last! Either what we are seeing is simply the operation of conscience, or it is true conviction and will find its end. In the meantime it is existential disequilibrium, and while it may take some time for it to resolve, that is what will happen. As you say, it's a smart design.

What is clear is that it presents an urgency to be ready with the gospel, in word and deed. If someone is seeking the path of reconciliation, we show them Jesus, and bear witness to how he has overcome the power of sin with newness of life. Conviction finds its end in Jesus as forgiveness and assurance, and that is very much the stuff of a life of faith.

Q&A: Forgiveness... can you explore and unpack the topic (a little) and steer us towards some useful scripture.

Dave O asks:

Forgiveness. I've heard it said:-

"My dear wife I forgive you for last night's dinner!" is judgement rather than forgiveness – and I think I'd agree.

In a circumstance like sexual abuse we are "moving in a direction of forgiveness (and may never get there this side of heaven)." – which to me at least feels like a cop out.

"I forgave him as my gift to myself" – which doesn't seem to really be forgiveness.

"We forgive as God forgave us" i.e. unrepentant and dead in their sins – which I am inclined to, but ponder just how you do it, if that is the call.

Will, can you explore and unpack the topic (a little) and steer us towards some useful scripture.

Hi Dave 0

Two parts of scripture. Matthew 18:21-35, which in the ESV is as follows, and on which my boss preached the other week.

21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.⁷ 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.⁸ 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant⁹ fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,¹⁰ and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all

that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,¹¹ until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

And Romans 12:9-21

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. w0utdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit,⁷ serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.⁸ Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it⁹ to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."** 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Which takes us to Deuteronomy 32 which is in the context of noting Israel's rebelliousness and their rejection of God's grace.

"'Is not this laid up in store with me,
sealed up in my treasuries?

35 Vengeance is mine, and recompense,⁶
for the time when their foot shall slip;

*for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly.'*

*36 For the Lord will vindicate⁷ his people
and have compassion on his servants,
when he sees that their power is gone
and there is none remaining, bond or free.*

So here's my take on it:

God is judge. Sometimes the path of justice is clear. Sometimes the path of justice is murky. Either way, we are not able to be the judge because we neither have the capacity to see through the mirk, nor the integrity to condemn a fellow sinner. Vindication does not come from the assertion of our rights but when we are submitted under the grace of God when "our power is gone."

The outworking of this submission is in two modes. Firstly, when it comes to the dealing with our "brothers", as Peter asks Christ. The instruction to forgive here is in the context of ensuring the body/family of Christ demonstrates the grace of God. This involves truth, sometimes hard truth and conflict management as spelled out earlier in Matthew 18, and is towards repentance and reconciliation. The dynamic here is clearly one of an issue being faced, repentance occurring, and forgiveness offered. I don't think this is controversial.

The second mode is the more abstract dealing with the wrongs of this world. Paul's imperatives help us here as we are instructed to not be slothful, haughty, etc. Of particular relevance is his referral to dealings with people who are not brothers but enemies, and our interaction with evil. This mode takes us back to our "emptiness" before God. We are not to be "wise in our own sight" and so be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. That good coheres with the notion of "do not avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." This is not forgiveness in the sense of responding to

repentance but the individual responsibility of “so far as it depends on you, leave peaceably with all.” This is impossible without that empty reliance on the grace of God – which is faith. Faith that he will actually do justice, bring vindication, deal with this on his terms which are better than my own.

Looking at your two examples of “moving in a direction of forgiveness” and “forgiving as a gift to myself” – I think much of the inadequacy of these articulations can be alleviated by applying the above modes rather than the over-used term of “forgiveness.” The mode towards the unrepentant abuser is not so much forgiveness but “vengeance is yours, oh Lord, I trust you to judge him.” The “gift to myself” is the recognition that judgement is a heavy load to bear – and to hand vengeance to Christ is to take up the yoke and burden of grace that is easier and light.

Hope this helps.

W.