

What does justice and being made in the image of God have to do with forgiveness? Why do we get stuck in regret and how can we escape? Is there restoration for all the wrongs suffered and committed? Applying the power of the cross is explored here.

A Publication of The Pool Ministries

The Multifaceted Cross

by Susan Bowman



The Multifaceted Cross

When Debts Are Owed and Justice Unmet

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6:12

I hesitate to begin our discussion of the cross with forgiving others because that aspect of our Christian faith has been taught in so many ways throughout the centuries that you might be wondering what more could possibly be said? Or perhaps you have suffered from well-meaning, but clueless believers telling you that the reason you continue in your pain is because you “just need to forgive,” as if forgiveness is some kind of magic ointment you apply and POOF everything is ok. The implication for those of us who are willing to do anything, including forgiving heinous sins committed against us if that is what Jesus wants, is that we have somehow failed and thus it is our fault we continue to suffer the same old agonies.

Obviously, forgiveness is a major component of our faith, both the receiving and giving of it. But what is forgiveness? Is it denying and minimizing the actions of others? Is it a feeling? Is it just something we say and do by faith? No one ever explained forgiveness to me to my satisfaction. Perhaps I have a really thick skull ...

As I have matured, I have come to realize that forgiveness is accomplished in steps as we follow Jesus. The problem is that often the first few steps are not explained very clearly. So we flail around trying to forgive without knowing what we are doing or how to get started. We just know that it is imperative to forgive. I am a very practical person who needs tools that actually produce freedom and life. As I pestered the Lord about the forgiveness issue, He showed me, when done right, forgiveness becomes a very powerful weapon against darkness. So what follows are insights the Lord has shown me about applying forgiveness.

First, here is a straight-forward definition. Forgiveness means to stop requiring payment of a debt that is owed to you. That’s it. We could get all theological and expand it, but that serves no purpose as far as this discussion goes.

Now, here is the big problem. We are constitutionally unable to stop requiring payment of debt when a debt is owed. We can deny, minimize, pretend and bury our unforgiveness, but we cannot actually forgive by deciding to get over it; let it go; forget it; make excuses; understand why they did it; or faith it away. This is because ...

We Are Made In His Image

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Genesis 1:27

We can't just let debts go, because we are made in God's image and God is a just God. Take a look at the pile of scriptures I have listed about God's attitude towards justice. And I culled the list considerably. You can't separate God from justice, so our insistence that debt be paid is actually you and me acting like God. When I realized this truth I was so relieved. I had been wrestling with forgiving some pretty bad things and felt like such a horrible person because I couldn't just forget it and move on. Here are the scriptures.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne ... Psalm 89:14

To do righteousness and justice is desired by the Lord more than sacrifice. Proverbs 21:3

Learn to do good; Seek justice ... Isaiah 1:17

For the Lord is a God of justice ... Isaiah 30:18

A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. Isaiah 42:3

For I, the Lord, love justice ... Isaiah 61:8

A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory. Matthew 12:20

So our basic struggle with forgiving is NOT because we are bad people. We struggle with forgiving because when we believe that we are owed a debt our very being cries out for payment. This expression of who we are means we cannot turn a blind eye to debts just as God cannot turn a blind eye to debts. This is one very important reason Jesus went to the cross. He paid off the debts humanity had and would accrue. We had spent centuries hurting each other and destroying creation. And we would continue ripping and tearing at each other after the cross. We turn on God, accusing, blaming and condemning Him. We believe lies about Him and propagate those lies. That is a lot of debt. I suppose God could have winked at the whole mess, but He didn't, because to do so denies His very character. He requires justice. Since it was His idea to get the whole creation ball rolling, he took responsibility and ...

Sent Himself in His Son

Jesus stepped up, identified with the tribe of humanity by calling Himself the Son of Man, which gave Him legal right to assume responsibility for humanity's debts, and paid what was owed so that it can no longer be legally held against us.

having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Colossians 2:14

Once a debt is paid in full, no one is required by law to pay it again. Because there is no higher judge than God, if He declares that our certificate of debt is paid, then it is paid. No one can appeal God's decision because there is no higher court to appeal to. Thus, we who were debtors, owing God and humanity recompense for our crimes, are now debt-free and can approach Him without fear. Accepting this truth is a struggle for many of us. I will discuss why shortly. For now, let's focus on the facet of the cross that helps us with forgiving others.

Here is an example of an everyday kind of offense experienced by all of us: **The Insult**. Let's pretend that someone insults my mentally challenged son by calling him ugly

names. This person has attacked my son's God-given dignity, upset my peace and generally caused us harm. That person is now our debtor. He owes my son and me recompense because he took something that belongs to us. Perhaps he repents and apologizes, asking what he can do to restore what he has damaged. Perhaps that is enough to satisfy our God-given need for justice and we are able to consider the offender's debt paid and stop requiring more from him. We are able to stop demanding payment because we accept that his debt is paid. Justice has been done.

But what if he does not repent or what if his repentance does not satisfy us? What if we continue to demand payment because we feel that justice has not been served? The fact of the matter is this: he does owe us a debt. This is a legal matter that calls for justice. What is justice in this case? That he pay his debt. Until his debt is paid in full, we will demand payment even if we long to just get over it and move on. We cannot help it. Our need for justice is built into us by God.

What Satisfies Justice

When Jesus chose to pay off the debts of all humanity, he acted as a co-signer for a loan. For those who don't know, a co-signer is someone who guarantees that the loan will be paid back in the event that the person borrowing the money defaults on his debt. Perhaps you know of someone who regrets co-signing a loan. I have a friend who co-signed a lease for her son who then got together with his friends and pretty much destroyed the inside of the house they were leasing. Guess who was held responsible when her son moved out and refused to pay up?

Jesus has taken responsibility for ensuring that all debts are paid. So when the person insults my intellectually challenged son and then goes on his way without making restitution for the damage he has done, my son and I can receive payment for his sin from Jesus who has co-signed for that person. Jesus didn't co-sign because He agrees with that person's sin. He co-signed so that He could help us.

Here is another example. There is absolutely no way that I can collect on all the damage done to me by a violent alcoholic father. First, he is dead. Second, he would never admit to damaging me unless doing so would in some way benefit him. Third, and this is the most important, he has no power to turn back time and redo fathering correctly. There is no way he can pay the debt he owes. It is simply impossible for me to collect from him.

That it is impossible to collect this debt does not in any way stop me from trying. Even after I learned that I had to forgive my father in order to please God – and I tried - something within me held on to him, crying out for justice.

When the Lord explained that He would pay what my father owed me, that He would take responsibility for what my father had done and restore everything that has been damaged, stolen and destroyed AND that He would hold my father accountable in a way that does not involve me, *my God-given need for justice was satisfied*. I was able to let my father go. Knowing that the legal debts would be paid supplied me with the power to release my father and turn to Christ for payment.

This facet of the cross makes it possible for us to stop clinging to those who have harmed us. This is so much better for us because these people who have hurt us CANNOT EVER undo what they have done. There is no hope for our recovery if we continue to hold on to them expecting, demanding, begging them to somehow make it right. Go squeeze a rock and see how much blood you can wring out. It is just as futile to keep squeezing our debtors in the hope that some recompense will ooze out.

One Thing Is Required

When we choose to accept recompense from the capable hands of God, one thing is required. We must release the people who owe us debts. I cannot hold onto some man or woman demanding they pay up while simultaneously asking God to pay up for them. It just doesn't work that way. Instead we accept the futility of holding onto a person(s) (since they cannot pay us anyway). Instead, we choose to accept recompense from

God's hand, trusting that He will restore all that has been lost AND hold our debtors accountable as He sees fit. This is an act of faith that is very pleasing to God.

Let's pray: Father God, my Creator, I admit that I have clung to the people who have hurt me in the hopes that they would, in some way, realize what they have done and be sorry and make it up to me. I have even prayed that You would show them what they have done and that You would make them sorry. Lord, there is no way that people can ever make it right for me. There is only one way that I am going to receive recompense and that is by releasing these people who HAVE hurt me and turning to You for justice, payment, healing and restoration. For this reason, Your glorious Son went to the cross. So that You could do this for me. I choose to release the people who I believe owe me debts. Would You take responsibility for their debts? And would You hold them accountable according to Your will? Please satisfy my God-given need for justice, restore what has been broken and fill me up with all the good things You desire for me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. (Customize this prayer and repeat as needed).

Stuck in Regret

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves. 2 Corinthians 4:7

Early one morning as I was walking in the park I found myself thinking about hurting a friend of mine when I was a teenager. We were in competition for a boy's attention and, in an effort to secure his affection, I was very cruel to her. That was a long time ago, but the memory had surfaced, as it will from time to time, and I found myself filled with deep regret. I could barely restrain my tears in this very public place, and as I walked and prayed, I asked the Lord how was it possible to recover from such deep regret where there is absolutely no way to repay the debt I owe this person, even if I knew how to find her? He was silent on the subject that morning, but the next morning, as I walked in the park, He gave me this vision:

I saw the cross emerging from my heart, reaching into the sky and as it rose up it branched like a tree and filled the sky. Then I saw the cross growing down through my

feet and dividing into roots that went all the way into the depths of the earth. As I clasped my arms around the cross, hugging it to me, the Lord gave me some understanding that is helping me escape from the grip of regret.

Up to that point, my understanding of the cross was fairly limited to it being the place Christ died for the sins of humanity. I understood the concept of justice that I have written about above which has proven helpful with forgiving others. What I didn't understand is that the cross has the power to restore the brokenness I have caused in the lives of others. I had never before considered the cross in that light.

Immersed in the vision that was showing me the power of the cross filling the sky above and the earth below, extending well beyond what I am able to understand or express, the answer to my every problem, I had such a faith-filled reaction – *I didn't believe it.*

The Struggle

So God hadn't asked me to go into the Syrian mission field. He hadn't called me to a forty-day fast or asked me to witness to some surly abortion advocate. I would have some problems with Him asking me to do any of those things. (Especially the third one. Been there. Done that.) But why would I have a problem with the Lord asking me to surrender my self-hatred, to stop punishing myself and to just trust Him to somehow fix what I had broken in my friend's life? What was this odd unwillingness to give up hating and punishing myself for my sins?

This returns us to the issue of justice. I had come face-to-face with my innate God-given need for justice alongside the sure knowledge that I could NEVER pay this girl what I owed her. The only thing I could do was hate and punish myself in an unending, unproductive loop of inescapable regret. I knew that God had forgiven my sins, but I did not KNOW that God had willingly become responsible for mending the wreckage I had foolishly left in my wake.

Because I did not know this truth I was caught in the ignorance of unbelief. Velcro the

ignorance of unbelief to my innate need for justice and it becomes impossible for me to believe or accept that God Himself has paid the bills for me.

having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14

So when the Lord asked me to trust Him to make right the many hurts I have dished out to others, my hesitation wasn't abnormal. I was simply expressing my design. As I continued my walk in that sun-bright park, hugging the vision of the Lord's cross to my heart, He gently pressed me to make a decision. Would I please just believe Him? He would be so pleased if I would let Him take care of this for me. He told me that it was an act of faith to surrender my debt to Him. So I walked and wept and surrendered.

But But I Don't WANT To Forgive!

*All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the Lord weighs the motives.
Proverbs 16:2*

I don't suppose anyone of us wants to admit that clinging to those whom we believe owe us debts or refusing to accept forgiveness for ourselves sometimes just feels like the right thing to do. We know we are not supposed to feel that way, but what's the point of kidding ourselves? There are times when forgiveness just doesn't seem safe or profitable. Usually it is fear that stops us, but sometimes we have another motive lurking about. The trouble with these pesky motives is that they tend to be hidden. And when someone shines a light on our hidden motives we are quick to justify WHY we are doing what we do. Let's take a look at the most common reason we struggle against the forgiveness work of the cross: Fear.

When Unforgiveness Is Our Hiding Place

In the prayer ministry field, you quickly become aware of how much life energy is spent by people doing whatever it takes to stay safe. If we have become ensnared by the lie

that forgiveness makes us vulnerable to being hurt again or that self-hatred and unforgiveness directed at ourselves will somehow stop us from doing bad things, then we become pretty invested in NOT forgiving. When we were little children and there was no safe adult to help us, it was not unreasonable for us to try to avoid future pain by holding onto the hurt. The problem is this: We become dependent on whatever we are trusting in.

Spiritual Principles and God Rules

All of creation is held together by spiritual principles. When we violate a spiritual principle (the structural foundation upon which all creation exists), bad things automatically result. Here is the spiritual principle that we bump into whenever we decide to shelter in unforgiveness.

Spiritual Principle: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Matthew 6:24*

Replace the word "wealth" in the above scripture with self-preservation and you have the principle behind the Lord's words. Accumulating wealth is the common way we seek to keep ourselves safe. Your wealth may be actual money, for others it may be education or influence. For some "wealth" or self-preservation is unforgiveness.

When we partner with unforgiveness to keep ourselves safe, we are turning away from God's offer of protection and turning toward the enemy's offer of protection. Thus, we have chosen (unknowingly) to serve a different master in this particular matter. Since one undergirding principle of all creation is that we can only serve ONE master, we are now utterly dependent upon our unforgiveness to stay safe. As much as God would like to help us, He cannot until we choose to reject our old master, in this case unforgiveness, and ask the Lord to keep us safe however that may play out.

The fact that we may be ignorant of an existing spiritual principle makes no difference. Just as gravity relentlessly operates no matter our understanding of it, so spiritual principles never change or waver just because we didn't know any better. God is well aware of how His creation operates, and He has put in place God Rules for our protection. Obeying God Rules keeps us safe from unintentionally violating spiritual principles. The God Rule we break when we shelter in unforgiveness is this one.

God Rule: *"You shall have no other gods before Me." Exodus 20:3.*

It may sound like God has a thing about being the one and only God, but the real reason He has that rule in place is because we have a spiritual enemy who is extremely invested in keeping us mired in unforgiveness. As long as we seek safety in darkness, the enemy can devour us by draining away our life energy.

The vows we form within our hearts in our efforts to stay safe such as *I will never be hurt like that again; I will never forget what they did or what happened; I will never forgive her or him*, serve as access points for our spiritual enemies who latch onto the vows, compelling us to keep them. I strongly suggest that you break any inner vows you may have taken by simply recognizing that your pain management strategy isn't a good one.

Say, I break the vows I took to stay safe from hurt by never forgiving _____ (Fill in blank. Include yourself if needed. Include God if necessary) Any evil spirits attached to those vows, I send to the feet of Jesus to be judged by Him.

Lord, help me understand how the cross makes it safe for me to forgive. Help me accept payment from Your hand. Forgive me for seeking shelter in unforgiveness. I had no idea I was violating a spiritual principle. Teach me to shelter only in You."

You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah. Psalm 32:7

When Unforgiveness Feels Profitable

Fear of being hurt again is one reason we resist the cross. But we may also be resisting the cross because we have swallowed some lies about vengeance, pride and attention. We will look at these in a minute but first let's discuss the nature of the flesh.

Have you ever noticed that being in the flesh feels good to the flesh? When I am throwing a tantrum, I actually feel pretty good. I'm completely focused on myself, my feelings and how I have been wronged. I feel very justified and righteous until my fit is over and I have to deal with the wreckage my self-indulgence has caused. Picking up the pieces is a lot harder than smashing everything. There's a scripture that makes the observation that it is easier to break something than it is to build.

A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, And contentions are like the bars of a citadel. Proverbs 18:19

A particularly enjoyable fleshly indulgence is self-pity. Again, all the focus is on the self and how you have been mistreated by various and sundry people including God. The flesh loves that stuff. Now, there is a time to seek healing from the wounds endured in life. I pray with people for the purpose of accomplishing that kind of healing. I even wrote a book about how to accomplish inner healing. Blessings be upon that journey. BUT when we DO NOT want to heal because we like the attention we get from being a victim, including the attention we give to ourselves when we focus on how bad we have it and how unfair it is that someone else has something we don't, we are in the flesh. Some of us have become addicted to a victim identity because of the following kind of twisted profit that comes with it: You can always seek vengeance; you can always be better than those who hurt you; and you can always demand attention because you are supposedly wounded beyond any hope of recovery.

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on

the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8:5-8

The Pit of Despair

Over the years, I have trained myself (been trained by the Holy Ghost is more like it) to be very wary of sliding into The self-pity, resentful, vengeful, jealous, self-righteous, enraged, I'm just a poor pathetic helpless victim that everyone needs to feel sorry for Pit of Despair. But there was a time when I mucked around down there pretty often. AND while I was down there I LIKED it.

When we are "*in the flesh*" our thoughts and attitudes are turned away from God's way of doing life. We are focused on death, despair, how hard we have it and how rotten everything is. This kind of thinking is hostile to God's truth and we can get stuck there, because feeding our fallen nature *grows that nature*. It is very easy to grow the flesh. Have no doubt about that. But God is good and gives us plenty of opportunities to choose NOT to grow the flesh by refusing to slide down into that Pit. Here is an example from my life.

When my husband Sam won custody of his two kids - one was turning 10 the other 13, and we had my 11-year-old son - we had been married less than a year. His kids were not exactly thrilled about my son or me, and I didn't have a clue about what they were going through emotionally. It was pretty disastrous for all of us. I remember shortly after they moved in, I escaped from the ruckus in my house to the garden where I pulled weeds and prayed about this situation that was making me feel all kinds of miserable. As I grubbed around in the dirt, I felt myself sliding into The Pit of Despair and was pretty ok with going there until the Lord pointed something out to me, something I knew from experience. Going into The Pit was way easier than climbing out. He told me if I chose to go there, I was on my own. He wasn't pulling me out this time.

So, I sweatily pulled weeds and struggled with my fleshly desire to sink into self-pity. It was a REAL struggle. I felt justified in my self-pity. I had lots of reasons to be angry and upset. I hadn't signed on for two emotionally wounded kids coming into the family

almost immediately after the wedding vows had been spoken. The only thing that won the day against my fleshy desire to muck around in The Pit was the knowledge that getting out of there was way harder than getting in. So that day I made the decision to set my mind on the Spirit. My circumstances remained difficult, but trying to do life from the bottom of The Pit would have only made them worse.

The Lies

There are many lies eagerly embraced by our fallen nature, but three of them are especially effective at preventing us from accessing the benefits of the cross.

1. Lie One: Vengeance. Believing that refusing to recover from our hurts somehow punishes our debtors. When we take vengeance into our own hands we are feeding our fallen nature aka the flesh.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Romans 12:19

2. Lie Two: Pride. Holding onto our hurts and offenses proves that we are better than those who hurt us because we would never do or act like them. Actually, we will do the same things we condemn other people for. We are just blind to our own shortcomings.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned." Luke 6:37

3. Lie Three: Attention. Giving up my victim status means no one will pay any attention to me. We agree with Lie Three when we believe in our hearts that no one wants to be with us. Best to ask the Lord for help with resolving that painful wound.

"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. Matthew 6:16

I think it is time to pray. Lord God, my Creator, You knew how I would respond to the hurts of this earthly life. You knew I would swallow some lies and that I would sometimes give in to feeding my fallen nature. Please forgive me. I want the life and peace that comes from a mind set on the Spirit. Help me resist the lure of my fallen nature. I want to stop feeding my flesh. I surrender my right to vengeance; my right to be better than those who have hurt me; and my right to use my victim status to get attention. I turn my back on the ways of the flesh which is death, and I choose to receive everything the cross has for me. In the beautiful and mighty name of Jesus we pray. Amen.