

Thinking on Scripture

Thinking on Scripture with Dr. Steven R. Cook

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Two Kinds of Forgiveness with God

In our relationship with God, there are two kinds of forgiveness. One is judicial and the other is parental. Judicial forgiveness is the forgiveness we receive from God when we stand before Him as the Judge of all humanity. This forgiveness occurs at the moment of faith in Christ, where “everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43; cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:14). This is a one-and-done event that is never repeated, as we are “forgiven us all our transgressions” (Col 2:13). Parental forgiveness is the ongoing forgiveness we receive from God as our Father and is repeated many times throughout a believer’s life. Judicial forgiveness brings us into a right relationship with Him at the moment of faith in Christ. Parental forgiveness restores our fellowship with Him. Joseph Dillow states, “There are two kinds of forgiveness in the New Testament. One pertains to our eternal salvation (justification by faith), and the other to our temporal fellowship with the Father.”^[1] According to William MacDonald, “There are two kinds of forgiveness, judicial and parental. When we trust Christ as Lord and Savior, we receive forgiveness from the penalty of sins; that is judicial forgiveness. When we, as believers, confess our sins, we receive parental forgiveness (1 John 1:9); this maintains fellowship with God our Father.”^[2]

Judicial Forgiveness

Judicial forgiveness relates to our eternal salvation and right relationship with God. Paul wrote, “In Him we have redemption

through His blood, **the forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph 1:7), and God has “**forgiven us all our transgressions**, having erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:13b-14). God’s forgiveness is not arbitrary, as though He simply releases someone from their sin-debt without any payment for the offenses that were committed. The payment for sin was not made by us, but Christ. Peter states, “you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, **but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ**” (1 Pet 1:18-19). God’s judicial forgiveness was made possible by the blood of Christ, which refers to His sacrificial atoning death on the cross where He died in our place, where “Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18). The blood of Christ is the only coin of the heavenly realm that the Father accepts as payment for our sin debt. This is the forgiveness we receive because Christ shed His blood on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins. Harold Hoehner notes, “The shedding of blood is necessary (Lev 17:11; Eph 2:13; 1 Pet 1:19) for without it there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:22), and Paul makes it clear that God has been propitiated in Christ’s redemption, which was in connection with his blood (Rom 3:24–25), and that one is justified by means of Christ’s blood (Rom 5:9).”^[3] The benefit to us is, “**everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins**” (Acts 10:43). This means we are judicially forgiven all our sins, past, present, and future, and will never face condemnation. Jesus said, “**He who believes in Him is not judged**” (Joh 3:18a), and “he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and **does not come into judgment**, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). And Paul wrote, “there is now **no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**” (Rom 8:1). That’s good news, for we will never face the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). According to Norman Geisler, “Forgiveness does not erase the sin; history cannot be changed. But forgiveness does erase the record of the sin. Like a pardon, the crime of the accused is not expunged from history but is deleted from his account.”^[4] Paul Enns adds:

Forgiveness is the legal act of God whereby He removes the charges that were held against the sinner because proper satisfaction or atonement for those sins

has been made. There are several Greek words used to describe forgiveness. One is charizomai, which is related to the word grace and means “to forgive out of grace.” It is used of cancellation of a debt (Col 2:13). The context emphasizes that our debts were nailed to the cross, with Christ’s atonement freely forgiving the sins that were charged against us. The most common word for forgiveness is aphiemai, which means “to let go, release” or “send away.” The noun form is used in Ephesians 1:7 where it stresses the believer’s sins have been forgiven or sent away because of the riches of God’s grace as revealed in the death of Christ. Forgiveness forever solves the problem of sin in the believer’s life—all sins past, present, and future (Col 2:13). This is distinct from the daily cleansing from sin that is necessary to maintain fellowship with God (1 John 1:9). Forgiveness is manward; man had sinned and needed to have his sins dealt with and removed.^[5]

Though Christ died for everyone (Heb 2:9; 1 John 2:2), the benefit of forgiveness is available only to those who trust in Him as Savior, for “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12; cf., Acts 10:43). Judicial forgiveness of sins is available to all, but each person must exercise their own volition and turn to Christ, and Christ alone, for salvation. The moment we place our faith in Christ, we are judicially forgiven all our sins—past, present, and future—and receive the very righteousness of God as a free gift (Rom 5:17; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9). At that moment we are declared righteous in God’s sight for all eternity, being “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24), and “having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

Parental Forgiveness

The second kind of forgiveness is the parental forgiveness we receive as God’s children who have committed sin and broken fellowship with our Father. As Christians, we continue to live in a fallen world with all sorts of external temptations, and we continue to possess a sin nature that tempts us internally. The sin nature is what Paul

referred to when he gave instruction to “make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Rom 13:14), and to “lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22). Paul, as a Christian, described his own struggle with ongoing sin (Rom 7:14-20), saying, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good” (Rom 7:21). As Christians, we constantly deal with internal struggles as long we live in this world, as we have two opposing natures. Paul wrote of this struggle, saying, “the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). When we yield to temptation, whether internal or external, we sin, which means we are operating according to Satan’s world-system (1 John 2:15-16), have grieved the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), and broken fellowship with God as we are walking in the darkness and not practicing the truth (1 John 1:6). At that moment we are sinning saints, and we are not in fellowship with God. Being honest with God and ourselves is important, for “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us...[and] If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:8, 10). When we accept this truth, we can then be humble and honest with God and come before His throne of grace and find mercy (Heb 4:16).

Thankfully, God has made a way whereby we can be restored to fellowship with Him, and that is by means of confession of our sins. John wrote, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Once we confess our sins directly to God, He forgives us, and we are restored to fellowship with Him and ready to resume our spiritual walk by faith and advance to maturity. Concerning 1 John 1:9; William MacDonald states:

The forgiveness John speaks about here is parental, not judicial. Judicial forgiveness means forgiveness from the penalty of sins, which the sinner receives when he believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is called judicial because it is granted by God acting as Judge. But what about sins which a person commits after conversion? As far as the penalty is concerned, the price has already been paid by the Lord Jesus on the cross of

Calvary. But as far as fellowship in the family of God is concerned, the sinning saint needs parental forgiveness, that is, the forgiveness of His Father. He obtains it by confessing his sin. We need judicial forgiveness only once; that takes care of the penalty of all our sins—past, present, and future. But we need parental forgiveness throughout our Christian life.^[6]

If we don't confess our sins and continue to live in rebellion to God, we are subject to His discipline, for "the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastens everyone He accepts as his son" (Heb 12:6). But this chastening is always in time and does not extend into eternity, for "when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (1 Cor 11:32). If we continue in sin, or leave our sin unconfessed, we forfeit eternal rewards (1 Cor 3:10-15; 2 John 1:8), and are in real danger of divine discipline from God (Psa 32:3-4; Heb 12:5-11; 1 John 5:16-17; cf. Dan 4:37), which can eventuate in physical death (1 John 5:16; cf., Lev 10:1-2; Acts 5:3-5). This is avoidable, if we simply humble ourselves before the Lord, confess our sins, and resume our walk with God and advance to spiritual maturity.

In summary, there are two kinds of forgiveness between us and God: judicial and parental. Judicial forgiveness occurs once and is related to our eternal salvation, bringing us into a right relationship with God through faith in Christ (Acts 4:12; Gal 3:26). This forgiveness is made possible by Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, where His blood serves as the payment for our sin. It results in the removal of the record of sin, ensuring we will never face condemnation or the lake of fire. On the other hand, parental forgiveness is ongoing and pertains to our temporal fellowship with God. It is received through confession of sins to God, as stated in 1 John 1:9. While judicial forgiveness addresses the penalty of sins, parental forgiveness restores fellowship within the family of God. As Christians, we are encouraged to confess our sins continually to maintain our familial relationship with God.

Dr. Steven R. Cook

[1] Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, 4th Edition (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2018).

[2] William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 863.

[3] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 207.

[4] Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three: Sin, Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 227.

[5] Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 325–326.

[6] William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 2310–2311.