



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Grace and Forgiveness

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When love is unconditional, where does forgiveness fit in?

I live in Colossae in Asia Minor. I am a member of the church there. Colossae isn't much of a town and the church isn't much of a church, but we are a sort of satellite of Ephesus, and Paul, who founded the Church in Ephesus, is our spiritual mentor. True, he has never actually visited our church. Nor have I ever had the opportunity to meet him, but I feel as if I know him well.

Paul has always taken an interest in us. He seems to know us rather well. He keeps up with what is going on. He writes to us to instruct us in the Faith and to counsel with us about our problems. Though we are few in number, he knows we have learned (thanks to his teaching) to understand and to practice the love we have from God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Although I can't read myself, I listen with rapt attention when Paul's letters are read to the congregation – not just the ones written to us, but those addressed to other congregations in Asia Minor who also look to Paul for spiritual encouragement and instruction.

I like what Paul teaches us about what to believe and how to cope with our problems. I admit, though, that he stirs questions in me such as the one I asked in the beginning of our conversation.

Even in Paul's latest letter to us, he has a lot to say about both love and forgiveness. He urges us to love as God loves – which, as I understand it, is love without any strings. Then, with equal fervor, he emphasizes the importance of being forgiven and of forgiving. He tells us of God's love, and also of God's forgiveness. It seems to me that if one is true, the other isn't. I have trouble putting those two thoughts together.

I always thought that the reason forgiveness is needed is to heal a strained or broken relationship. But if God loves without any strings, why would the relationship ever be strained or broken? I wonder if forgiveness is needed.

Paul seems to think it is. In the letter, he said, "And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him (Jesus), having forgiven us all our trespasses, having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2: 13-14). He also admonished us to forgive each other, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Col. 3:13-14)

These aren't the only writings about Jesus read in our church that suggest the importance of forgiveness. There is the prayer Jesus taught his Disciples. One petition says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It bothers me that God's forgiveness of me may be dependent upon the level of my own forgiving of others

because, often, I don't feel very forgiving. I wonder if Jesus had something else in mind. I'll have to explore that sometime.

I can't forget what Jesus said, in the midst of his anguish on the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lk.23:34) Certainly what they were doing to him was a terrible thing. I thought they needed to be made to pay for what they did to him more than to be forgiven. I wouldn't have blamed Jesus if he had called the wrath of heaven down on them. If love is unconditional, does God require those who do things like this against Him to seek His forgiveness before they can be in relationship with Him?

Then there is Jesus' story of the loving father of the prodigal. Neither the younger nor the older brother had to seek the forgiveness of the father although both had done enough to need forgiveness. The story seems to say that, insofar as the father is concerned, neither son could do anything – function in any way – to cause the father to stop loving him nor to break the relationship. It seems to me that forgiveness wasn't an issue in that story. They were both accepted and loved – no matter what.

But I can't just ignore what I am told the Scriptures say about forgiveness as well as about love. I am confused. I must search further.

I know one thing. If a friend – anybody for that matter – insults me, affronts me, does me harm, I don't much like that person, and I certainly don't shut my eyes to what he has done. He needs to seek my forgiveness if he wants us to be friends. Why should I put up with abuse from anybody?

I can tell myself that I love the person but insist that he has to make amends, or at least let me know he is sorry, before I will allow our friendship to continue. Otherwise he might think he can get away with that sort of thing whenever he chooses. I couldn't have that. I can even persuade myself that I wouldn't really love him if I let him get away with his unacceptable behavior.

Is it a part of unconditional love to make people pay for their misdemeanors or to forfeit the relationship? Do I have the right – or the responsibility – to do that? If I do, then forgiveness is an issue in unconditional love.

What is the role of forgiveness within the context of unconditional love? That's the question I started with, isn't it?

Let us suppose that you have affronted me. You have done me harm. Or at least you have acted in thoughtless and uncaring ways. What is my reaction? Is our relationship strained or broken until you ask for and receive my forgiveness? Do I withhold my love until that has happened? Is forgiveness a condition for you to be accepted back into our loving relationship?

I may be upset and unhappy because of what you have done. I may feel stressed and deprived. I may not like what has happened. But, if I love you without any conditions, I do not break the relationship, nor declare it broken. Nor do I make restoring it contingent upon your seeking forgiveness and my giving it. Somehow that doesn't seem to really settle anything.

To forgive you is to excuse you from the consequences of your behavior and to not hold you accountable to me.

That's what forgiveness means, isn't it? I say to you, "Forget it. No matter. It's O.K." But I don't have the right not to hold you accountable. Come to think of it, I don't have the right to hold you accountable either. That's not my function. You are accountable. That's how it is. There are always results – consequences. I can't – don't have the right to – set them aside – nor to specify what they may be and require them of you.

My withdrawing from the relationship until you plead for forgiveness is not one of the consequences.

I know. People do it all the time. People are always estranged from each other because of a real or imagined affront. It happened to me here in our church. We men were preparing a dinner for the women of the church (that was an unusual thing for the men to be doing in itself). I had agreed to work in the kitchen and was a little late getting there to do my job. It was a jovial group and I spoke to everybody before getting started on my task – or I thought I did. Several days later, I encountered one of the men at the church and he didn't speak to me. In fact, whenever we met, he refused to speak. I finally confronted him.

"You didn't speak to me the night of the church supper," he said. "You spoke to everybody else and ignored me."

I was flabbergasted.

I tried to explain – tried to apologize and to seek his forgiveness. I'll never forget what he said.

"Maybe, in time, I can forgive you, but I can't ever forget what you did to me."

He meant that he would not forgive me either, and he didn't. He finally left the church, and our relationship was never restored. I am still sad over it.

That procedure – all too typical, I'm afraid – said that my relationship with that man was, in his eyes, conditional and so was any love between us. When I participate as I am supposed to, or as I am required or expected to, I have met the conditions. When I do not, I have not met the conditions. I must make amends in some way – some way that you prescribe – and beg you to forgive me.

I can't make that procedure fit with unconditional love. If my love for you has no boundaries within which you are to remain, forgiveness is neither given nor withheld. It is reality already. You are already forgiven.

I think I am beginning to see how forgiveness fits into unconditional love. I think I understand Paul's point when he emphasizes the importance of being forgiven and of forgiving. I am beginning to make sense out of the forgiveness of God, and to see why Jesus cried the words of forgiveness from the cross. I can even make sense out of the words in the prayer, "forgive... as we forgive."

Look at it this way. Forgiveness is the way of reconciliation. It is the way to mend a broken relationship. I must seek forgiveness and you must forgive, or we stay estranged. The forgiver holds the key. No matter how desperately I seek forgiveness, you determine whether or not the forgiveness is there. You decide whether or not we can be reconciled. You determine whether or not the estrangement is at an end. I can be sorry. I can pay high prices. I can beg and plead. But I can't fix the relationship until you forgive me.

God has already forgiven me. Before I did anything to merit forgiveness, God has forgiven me. Like the father of the prodigal, God was never estranged from me, nor saw me as estranged from Him. There is nothing to reconcile.

God is forgiving. It is one manifestation of His love. God isn't waiting to forgive. He has already done so. Now what Paul wrote makes sense to me. Until I understand and accept the reality of God's unconditional love, and of the forgiveness that is already a part of that love, I am under the demand of the law – the rules and regulations. I am burdened by the guilt of my trespasses. I am dead to the love of God. But God has made it clear that no trespass of mine can separate me from Him or His love. The reality of the cross proclaims that fact.

Now I know what Paul meant when he wrote, "As the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive." The forgiveness of the Lord is the guideline for my forgiveness. I don't wait for you to do something. I don't withhold forgiveness until you need it. Because I love you, I have already forgiven you. There is nothing to reconcile. That's where forgiveness fits.

The same line of thought fits for the Prayer petition. It doesn't say that God forgives only to the degree that I forgive. It does say that before-the-fact forgiveness is the way love works. I might reword the petition to say, I know your forgiveness in the degree that I, myself, am forgiving."

The answer to my question raises another question, though. What are the restraints on my behavior? If I am not ever estranged insofar as God – or you – is concerned, what constrains me?

I am sure of one thing. I don't want the basis of my decisions about what I do and say to be to please you, nor to meet demands of yours. Don't misunderstand. I like your approval. I like to know that I have pleased you. I might even make decisions and function in certain ways because I know you would like it if I did. It could be an expression of my love and regard for you.

I want to be clear. I don't want the basis of my decisions to be to please you. I want the basis to be within me. I want to be in touch with my principles and my values – my standards, if you will – and to decide what to do and say accordingly. I want to make and act on decisions because I love you, not because I fear being estranged from you. I want the restraints on my behavior to be based on what I understand about manifesting love in a relationship.

So I conclude that forgiveness is not needed to heal a strained or broken relationship. The obtaining of forgiveness is not an issue when love is unconditional. Of course, forgiveness is a part of the relationship, but when love is unconditional, forgiveness is – like love – from the forgiver to the forgiven because that is who and where the forgiver is. It does not wait for the trespass nor the affront. It does not make forgiveness after the fact a condition for maintaining the relationship.

Forgiveness after the fact doesn't really do much to strengthen and improve the quality of a relationship. In an insidious way, it demeans the bond. It leaves suspicion and distrust. It is conditional. For instance, two people have a falling out. He has been untruthful to her, and she doesn't think she can trust him to tell the truth in the future. Neither want their tie broken. So she tells him, "Confess your lie to me. Promise you won't ever do it again. Then I will forgive you." So he does as she specifies, and they are together again, presumably on a sound basis. But the conditions, the belittling of both of them, the suspicion and uncertainty about the quality of their relationship and of their love for each other all hang over them. A vague and settled uneasiness clouds all aspects of their involvement. They don't know when the same thing may happen again, and they will repeat the unhappy, hurtful encounter.

Forgiveness is important – perhaps more important to the one forgiving than to the one forgiven. It is an attitude that love without strings brings to all relationships. It is a reality from the beginning. It is not something available but withheld until the one seeking forgiveness says and does the required things.

Forgiveness is a natural expression of love. It is a normal position for the lover. When forgiveness is present this way, it strengthens the bond between the two. It enhances all the dimensions of their togetherness. It makes for security and trust. It encourages both of them to be more loving and responsive to each other. There is no need to ask for forgiveness. It is reality between them. They have a basis of understanding from which to approach all issues that need attention.

Of course God is forgiving. Loving as He does, it is His nature to be. And it can be our nature as well.

Let me say it all another way.

When I know that I am loved unconditionally, I don't need to seek your forgiveness, and you don't need to use forgiveness as a weapon over me to make me conform to your conditions. I do need to accept full responsibility for all that I say and do. I need to listen to you when you are hurt or unhappy, and try to understand. I need to confess to myself and you when I abuse our relationship. I need to acknowledge when I am unlovely and unloving. I need, for my own sake, to clear the slate, and to renew my commitment to love you without any strings.

Love and forgiveness go together, and forgiveness is a natural expression of love. Forgiveness is the normal state of affairs between two who love totally and wholly. Neither of us holds over the other the threat of broken relationship. We find the ways to love as we are loved.

But I need to ask forgiveness – to confess my unloving behavior. I need to clear my own slate and put my behavior in perspective. I need to do it for my own sake – not to try to hold onto a relationship, and certainly not to make you guardian over me and responsible for me.

Then, I can love as God loves. I can forgive as God forgives.

“As the Lord has forgiven you (me), so you (I) also must forgive. And above all things put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Col. 3:13-14)

Yes, I can.