

Preparation for Forgiveness

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis declares that Christianity tells us to repent and promises forgiveness. Therefore, Christianity has no relevance to people who do not think they have done anything wrong, people who do not feel any need to be forgiven.¹

If this is true, then there is a preparation that must take place before we can understand the Christian teaching on forgiveness of sin. As Lewis says elsewhere², we must first be made aware of our sin, and thus our *need* of forgiveness, before Christianity can really speak to us. The good news of Christ's forgiveness contains a painful diagnosis that must be attended to.

¹ *Mere Christianity*, p. 38.

² *God in the Dock*, pp. 95-96.

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The problem is that we often approach God as though *He* were in the dock, as though *He* were the One needing to be judged—or alternatively, forgiven—for having created the world in which we live.³ Lewis felt this way himself for a short time after the death of his wife. As he says in *A Grief Observed*, “Sometimes it is hard not to say, ‘God forgive God.’ Sometimes it is hard to say so much. But if our faith is true, He didn’t. He crucified Him.”⁴ If God gave His own Son for us, this should startle us into an awareness that God must not be the cruel god we sometimes think that He is. Perhaps, after all, He is a God of love. However, we must be brought to see our own sin so that we can become interested in the kind of love God has for us and the forgiveness of sins that goes along with that love.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *A Grief Observed*, p. 31.

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Another thing we need to recognize is that only a person can forgive.⁵

The Moral Law cannot forgive; it is as hard as nails. However, if there is a Person behind the Moral Law, then perhaps such forgiveness is possible.

A third thing that we need to recognize is the amazing claim made by Jesus of Nazareth. He claimed to be God, not only directly, but also indirectly by claiming to forgive sins. Lewis points out how Jesus told people that their sins were forgiven, but He never consulted the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. Jesus behaved as though He was the One chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if Jesus was God, only if He was the One whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.⁶

If we come to terms with these facts: that we have broken the Moral

⁵ *Mere Christianity*, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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Law of the universe and are in need of forgiveness, that only a personal God can grant cosmic forgiveness, and that Jesus made the amazing claim to forgive sins and thus claimed to be God, then we are ready to hear what Christianity has to say about forgiveness of sins.

A Definition of Forgiveness

In his essay, *On Forgiveness*, Lewis gives a definition of what forgiveness really is. It comes in a context where he is talking about the difference between forgiving and excusing. He maintains that what we often are asking God to do, is not to forgive us but to excuse us. There is a huge difference between the two. Forgiveness agrees that we were in the wrong and promises never to hold it against us ever again. Excusing says that we weren't really at fault. However, if

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we were not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive.⁷

Jeremiah 31:34 conveys the essential promise of forgiveness. God says, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” “Not remembering” is not the same as forgetting. God, being omniscient, does not forget anything. When He says that He will not remember our sins anymore, it means that He will not bring them up against us ever again.

The Basis of Forgiveness

Lewis points out the ultimate and immediate bases for forgiveness in *The Problem of Pain*. He says that mere time does not cancel sin. Guilt is cleansed only by repentance and the blood of Christ.⁸

⁷ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 122.

⁸ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 61.

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Lewis has captured the essence here of biblical forgiveness. There can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood.⁹ Without the shedding of Christ's blood, we cannot be forgiven by God for our sin. Lewis also notes, in *The Problem of Pain*, that a person who does not admit guilt cannot accept forgiveness. Forgiveness must be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete.¹⁰

Really Believing in God's Forgiveness

In 1947 Lewis was invited by Father Patrick Kevin Irwin to write an essay on the topic of forgiveness for the parish magazine of the Church of St Mary, Sawston, Cambridgeshire. In that essay Lewis writes that believing in the forgiveness of sins is not as easy as he once thought. Real belief in forgiveness very easily slips away if we don't

⁹ Hebrews 9:22

¹⁰ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 122.

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keep working at it.¹¹

Lewis was truly speaking from personal experience in the above mentioned essay because just a few years later, in 1951, he wrote to his friend, Sister Penelope, that he didn't really believe in God's forgiveness of his own sins until a month before writing to her. He thought he believed, but then realized it was a sham. He cautions that therefore we must never *say* we believe or understand anything because at any moment a doctrine we *thought* we believed may blossom into a new reality.¹²

Lewis went into more detail about this new reality in a letter to Father Don Giovanni Calabria, written later that same year. He tells Father Calabria that for some time he believed that he believed in the forgiveness of sins. But suddenly (on St Mark's Day) the truth of

¹¹ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 121.

¹² *Letters*, p. 410.

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forgiveness appeared in his mind with a new, blazing clarity. Then he realized that never before had he believed in forgiveness with his whole heart. There is a great difference, Lewis asserts, between the affirmation of the intellect and that faith which is fixed in the very marrow of our bones, the faith that Hebrews calls *substance*.¹³

This new realization of God's forgiveness of his own sins was confirmed again in a letter to Mary Willis Shelburne, written several years later. Lewis reaffirms that he had been a Christian for many years before he *really* believed in the forgiveness of sins ... before his theoretical belief became reality.¹⁴

It is doubtful, in referring to this 1951 experience, that Lewis was talking about the *feeling* of being forgiven. In another letter to Mary

¹³Moynihan, Martin, ed., *The Latin Letters of C. S. Lewis*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana, 1998, p. 69.

¹⁴ *Letters to An American Lady*, [15/4/58], p. 71.

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Willis Shelburne, he denies any great importance to the *feeling* of being, or not being, forgiven.¹⁵

The experience of 1951 was for Lewis something much deeper. What led him to say, twenty years after his conversion to Christianity, that he had, just that year, come to really believe that God had forgiven his sins? Biographer A.N. Wilson calls this Lewis' "second conversion" and relates it to the death, in January 1951, of Mrs. Moore, who had lived with Lewis for thirty years.¹⁶ Lewis himself attributed this new understanding to the prayers of Father Calabria.¹⁷ Whatever the reason behind Lewis' fresh experience of forgiveness it is clear from his letters that he felt a new lease on life after this point.

Forgiving Others

¹⁵ Ibid., [July 21st 1958], p. 74.

¹⁶ Wilson, pp. 233-234.

¹⁷ *Latin Letters*, p. 69.

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Much of Lewis' writing on forgiveness does not focus so much on our personal experience of God's forgiveness, but on the forgiveness that the Christian is obligated to give to others. In his essay on forgiveness written for Father Irwin, he notes that God will not forgive us unless we forgive other people for their sins against us. He declares there is no doubt about this because it is in the Lord's Prayer and was emphatically stated by Jesus.¹⁸

In a chapter on forgiveness in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis gives some practical advice regarding our forgiveness of others. He suggests that we need to start by forgiving those closest to us. He also declares, as many other Christians have said before and since Lewis' time, that we need to hate the sin but love the sinner. Lewis relates how this didn't make much sense to him when other Christians first told him to do it.

¹⁸ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 121.

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Then he noticed how he had been doing this with himself for years without realizing it; he hated the bad things that he did, but he still loved himself, cared for himself. On the other hand, Lewis notes that loving your enemy does not mean withholding punishment for wrongdoing. We may, in some situations, have to kill our enemies (Lewis was not a pacifist), but we must not hate and enjoy hating.¹⁹

Lewis suggests to Mary Willis Shelburne that forgiving others should be one of our main tasks as Christians. Once we have experienced God's forgiveness, we should spend most of our remaining strength in *forgiving*. We need to lay all our old resentments down at the wounded feet of Christ.²⁰

¹⁹ *Mere Christianity*, pp. 105-107.

²⁰ *Letters to an American Lady*, [25 June 1963], p. 115.

Forgiving Others Is Hard

Lewis makes it clear that this job of forgiving others is difficult. Being a Christian means forgiving the inexcusable, just as God has forgiven the inexcusable in us. This is hard. Maybe it isn't so hard to forgive a single great offense, but what about the seemingly unending provocations of daily life? How can one forgive those who don't seem to change very quickly—bossy mothers-in-law, bullying husbands, nagging wives, selfish daughters, deceitful sons? The only way, Lewis says, is to remember where we stand. We must really mean our words when we say to God, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.”²¹

The reason why forgiveness is so difficult is because we human beings

²¹ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 125.

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have a hard time keeping the promise of forgiveness. Lewis notes how the work of forgiveness has to be done over and over again. We may forgive someone and try to kill our resentment, but then a week later we may start thinking again about the original offense, and we discover that old resentment blazing away as if nothing had been done about it at all. Lewis says we need to forgive others seventy times seven not only for 490 different offenses but sometimes for only one offense.²² He remarks that this forgiving of the same offense every time it recurs to the memory is a real tussle. What he finds helpful is to look for some action of his own that is open to the same charge as the one he's resenting. If he still hurts to remember how A let him down, he tries to remember how he let B down. If he finds it difficult to forgive those who bullied him at school, he remembers and prays for those he bullied.²³

²² *Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 25.

²³ *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 27-28.

Lewis was not speaking as an armchair theologian about forgiveness. According to his letters, he struggled with forgiving others through his whole Christian life. This very real, personal struggle also appeared in his fictitious *Letters to Malcolm*. He remarks to Malcolm how, on one particular day, while at prayer, he was suddenly able to forgive someone he had been trying to forgive for over thirty years.²⁴ However, while Malcolm was fictional, the incident Lewis refers to was not. Lewis reveals the identity of the person he had been trying to forgive in one of his real letters to Mary Willis Shelburne on 6 July, 1963. There he comments that, only a few weeks prior, he realized that he at last *had* forgiven the cruel school-master who so darkened his childhood.²⁵ The person Lewis struggled to forgive through his whole life was Oldie, the sadistic school-master of Belsen, as he called

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 106-107.

²⁵ *Letters to an American Lady*, [6 July 63], p. 117.

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this horrid school of his boyhood in *Surprised by Joy*.²⁶ This teacher, who regularly caned the children under his care, was certified insane shortly after the school closed, and he died a few years later.

Perhaps this is the type of situation Jesus was addressing when He said, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”²⁷ When we stand praying, we cannot, at that very moment, make the promise of forgiveness to another human being. However, we can tell God of our willingness to forgive the person in question, whether that person is living or dead. If we are inwardly unwilling to forgive others, then we cannot expect forgiveness from God. But we can tell God that we are ready to forgive and we can ask Him to remove all bitterness and resentment from our hearts. Surely,

²⁶ *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 22-41.

²⁷ Mark 11:25

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something like this is what we all need to do in regard to the “Oldies” in our lives.

The Practice of Forgiveness

This sums up the core of what Lewis has to say about forgiveness.

However, he does make just a few other points about the practice of forgiveness.

In one of his letters, he says that a sin repented and forgiven is gone, annihilated, burnt up in the fire of divine love, but there is no harm in continuing to “bemoan it.” It is all right to express sorrow over sin once forgiven, but not to ask for pardon, for we have that from God already.²⁸

²⁸ *Letters*, p. 416.

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In this letter, Lewis once again shows himself to be an astute observer of the soul. Most Christians have experienced exactly what he is talking about. We often remember a sin from our past, and, if we are walking in a relationship with God, we are mortified by the very thought of that past sin. But what are we to do about it? If we have already confessed the sin to God and to anyone else whom we may have hurt, if we have already received forgiveness from God and others, we don't need to confess and receive forgiveness all over again. However, we may still, as Lewis suggests, bewail the sin, and express our sorrow for having been the kind of people who could commit such sins. We may also do one thing more. We may thank God that He has already forgiven us through Christ's shed blood. Thanking Him for what He has already done keeps us from setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal, and it keeps us from rejecting the forgiveness He has already given us.

A practical aid to feeling forgiveness, which Lewis mentions in his

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letters, is the aid of confessing one's sins to a priest. He writes of the contrast between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church in regard to confession. Rome makes Confession compulsory for all, whereas the Anglican Church makes it permissible for any. Lewis does not doubt that there can be forgiveness without confession to a priest. However, experience shows that many people do not *feel* forgiveness, do not effectively believe in "the forgiveness of sins," without the rite of confession. He asserts that the enormous advantage of coming *really* to believe in forgiveness is well worth the horrors of a first Confession.²⁹

In October 1940, Lewis decided to begin seeing an Anglican priest for weekly confession. He chose as his spiritual director Father Walter Adams, one of the priests of the Anglican Society of Saint John the Evangelist in Cowley, a town neighboring Oxford. This Society was

²⁹ Ibid., p. 431.

locally known as the Cowley Fathers or the Cowley Dads. Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope on 24 October 1940 about his decision to make his first confession the following week. He says that it was one of the hardest decisions he ever had to make, and so he posted a letter to the Cowley Fathers before he had time to change his mind!³⁰

Biographer George Sayer suggests that worries about the writing of *The Screwtape Letters* drove Lewis to seek out a spiritual director.³¹ Whatever initially drove him to do this, it is clear that he continued the practice for many years. On 14 April 1952, he wrote to Don Giovanni Calabria that he felt like an orphan because his aged confessor and most loving father in Christ had just died.³² Lewis continued, for the rest of his life, to go to confession, but he never

³⁰ *Companion & Guide*, p. 32.

³¹ Sayer, p. 274-275.

³² *Latin Letters*, p. 71.

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again took up with another spiritual director as he had with Father Adams.³³ It is clear, however from his letters, that he experienced the truth of James 5:16– “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*” (Emphasis mine.) Lewis says that the effect of a righteous confessor in his life was *indeed* powerful and effective.

One final note regarding the practice of forgiveness where Lewis gives advice is in *The Four Loves*. He comments on how a game, a joke, a drink together, idle chat, a walk, the sexual act, can all be modes in which we forgive or accept forgiveness. He asks, who would not rather live with ordinary people who get over relational disturbances quietly, letting a meal, a night’s sleep, or a joke mend everything?³⁴

³³ Wilson, p. 239.

³⁴ *The Four Loves*, pp. 184-185.

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Upon learning about the importance of forgiving other human beings, it is a great temptation for some Christians to become very fussy in their practice of forgiving others. One can become so over-scrupulous about confessing sins and asking forgiveness that it becomes an irritation to others. The constant guidance of the Holy Spirit is needed to know just when to confess a particular sin, or to know when it is best to let a game, a joke or a walk mend all. Also needed is the power of the Holy Spirit to enable the confession and granting of forgiveness, whether that is done verbally or enacted as Lewis describes.