

RESOURCE:

Q & A WITH N.T. WRIGHT ON MATTHEW 6:15

Q: I've got a deep regard for the Sermon on the Mount but I've always been bothered by Matthew 6:15: "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Likewise, the Lord's Prayer says: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Is God's forgiveness really contingent on our actions towards each other?

I'm fascinated that the one line of the Lord's Prayer which Jesus takes time to explain immediately afterwards is the part about forgiveness.

There are a lot of other things in the Lord's Prayer that we might wonder why Jesus doesn't explain more fully. For example: "Give us this day our daily bread" – Jesus could have said: "You're going to need this and so make sure you pray about it!" Nor does he choose to explain "deliver us from evil". Yet, Jesus seems to want to rub in this part about forgiveness.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is inaugurating God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." That kingdom – God's sovereign rule on earth – is all about forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. It's about the return of all creation from exile, as spoken about in Isaiah 40-55.

If somebody wants to be part of this great new movement – this kingdom of God on earth as in heaven – but decides to say: "Actually, I'm not going to forgive this person or that person", then they're saying something contradictory: "I want to be part of this, but I don't want to be part of it."

This view of the reciprocal nature of forgiveness isn't about God adding terms and conditions (something along the lines of: "By the way, there's a few boxes you've got to tick here"). This is, organically, what the whole business is about. This is a kingdom of forgiveness. If you say: "I want to be part of the kingdom of forgiveness, but I don't want to be part of the kingdom of forgiveness", then you're talking nonsense.

Matthew 18 also helps us to understand this. It's the (very worrying) parable about the servant who owes his master a fantastically large debt, but the master forgives him. Yet the servant then promptly goes out and tries to throttle somebody who owes him a few small coins. The master hears about it and says: "No, it doesn't work that way", and hands him over to the jailers. Then, at the end it says, rather scarily: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (v35).

Here's a metaphor that may help us to understand it: We all have a kind of 'gateway' in our innermost heart and mind and soul, which can open up to receive God's love and forgiveness. And it's the same 'gateway' which opens up to giving love and forgiveness to others. However, if we decide to shut that gate so that we refuse to give love and forgiveness to others, then we cannot receive the love and forgiveness of God either. It's the same gate.

So it isn't a matter of: "If you don't tick this box, God won't tick that box." Rather, it's organically true that, if you're a person of forgiveness, then you're a person of forgiveness! Whereas if you're a person of non forgiveness, you've said: "I don't want to believe in forgiveness." But that means you can't believe in or receive God's forgiveness either.

Ultimately, it's something to do with the deep recesses of our personalities, and whether we choose to be 'forgiveness people' or not.

FORGIVE