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Receive Forgiveness

Throughout the NT, and especially in the book of Acts, the apostles speak of “receiving forgiveness.” We often think that this means we are not forgiven by our Father in heaven until we do something (such as repent, receive baptism, etc.) to earn our Father’s forgiveness.

Yet the Word of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, tells us something very different. The Word of God says that in him all creation is reconciled to the Father (Col. 1:20) and all humanity is forgiven and given eternal life (Rom. 5:18.)

How are we to understand what the bible means when it says “receive forgiveness” in the light of who Jesus is as the reconciliation between God and humanity?

Acts 26:17-18 will make a good example for our discussion. In this passage Paul recounts the commission that Jesus gave him as an apostle, saying:

I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may *receive forgiveness* of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. ~ Acts 26:17-18, NIV

The key is to determine what we think the word “receive” means in that passage and others like it.

Certainly it could mean to “take hold of something not previously possessed” as I might receive a package being delivered to my house. Before I received it I didn’t have it, then when I received it and signed for it I had it.

This interpretation of the word “receive” would lead us to a theology that says we earn our forgiveness by repenting.

On the other hand, it could mean to “accept that which is already true” as I might accept an idea or truth that already exists but which I have previously not known or have previously rejected.

So, my wife Beth might say “Jonathan, if you can receive (accept) this criticism, the truth is that your favorite old ratty t-shirt makes you look like a slob!” The truth is that I always looked bad in that shirt, now I need to receive that truth – but I didn’t begin to look bad at the moment I received the truth, I always looked bad, the difference is that now I accept it.

This interpretation of the word “receive” would lead us to a theology of grace that says we are freely forgiven apart from anything we do and that our receiving forgiveness is when we accept the truth that the Father has already forgiven us.

Since we know that all have been reconciled in Christ (Col. 1:20) and all made righteous in him (Rom 5:18) we know that Luke must have this second meaning in mind for the word “receive” in that passage.

God is sending Paul to the Gentiles so that they can receive (accept/believe) the forgiveness they already have in Christ.

The other words he uses in that passage are also clues to this interpretation. He says that he will “open their eyes.” This creates the image of something that is already in front of them that they need to open their eyes and see. The thing itself (forgiveness) doesn’t come into existence when they open their eyes, it already exists and is present and when they open their eyes they can see it.

Likewise, to turn toward something (in this case “the light”) is not to bring something into existence that did not exist before but it is to stop turning your back on it, turn around and see it. It already exists and when you turn toward it then you are acknowledging that it is there and responding accordingly.

So, the imagery here is of the forgiveness freely given by the Father in the Son. It is a forgiveness which belongs to the Gentiles. In saying that it belongs to the Gentiles Jesus is saying that it belongs to the whole world. In biblical language all humanity is either Jew or Gentile. The Jews are already the people of God and now the Gentiles have been grafted in as well. Since these two classifications of humanity are now one new humanity (Eph. 2:15) it means that all people are included in the reconciling work of Christ, regardless of whether they believe this truth or not.

This forgiveness is something the Gentiles already have, apart from any work, thought, or action on their part because of what Jesus has done to them in crucifying them in his death (2 Cor. 5:14) and raising them in his resurrection (Eph. 2:6.)

The problem is not that they are unforgiven, the problem is that they are forgiven but they have their eyes closed to that forgiveness, they have their backs turned to the light, and therefore they are unable to receive/accept/believe in what Jesus has done to them.

So, the Father is sending Paul in the power of the Spirit to open their eyes, enable them to turn toward the light, and help them receive and embrace what is already theirs – their inclusion as adopted children of the Father.

This is the basis of salvation by grace alone. Humanity is forgiven and reconciled as a free gift of the Father in Christ, apart from any work we have done: belief, repentance, or obedience. Now Jesus is asking humanity to receive, accept and believe this awesome truth about our relationship with his Father.

~ Jonathan Stepp