Rethinking Forgiveness - A Biblical Perspective with Dr. John Harrison

Air Date: December 08, 2024

Guest: Dr. John Harrison

Resources: Oklahoma Christian University | Directory - John Harrison

Don Drew: 0:29
Hello everyone, and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio, your place on the internet dedicated to helping people live happier and more peaceful lives. I'm Don Drew, with me is David Lowry. David, how are you doing?

David Lowry: 0:40
Hey Don, it's good to be here today, and I'm excited about our guest.

Don Drew: 0:44
We've got a great guest today, but before we get started,

David Lowry: 0:48
Well, we want everybody to love us, okay? What we want you to do is download our program, like, share it. We want you to tell your friends about it. Go to our website, Peaceful Life Radio and look at our transcripts. It's all there for you. Please spread the word.

Don Drew: 1:03
Today, David, our guest is Dr. John Harrison. He is a professor of New Testament at Oklahoma Christian University. He has a PhD from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland New Testament. And he is here today to talk to us about forgiveness, and he has said that he wants to perhaps describe some concepts or ways of looking at forgiveness that many Christians or other people are not really all that familiar with.

David Lowry: 1:28
Unique perspective.

Don Drew: 1:30
It is a unique perspective.

David Lowry: 1:31
Dr. Harrison, welcome to our program.

John Harrison: 1:33

Thank you very much for having me. I feel very honored and blessed to be able to be here. So, this question about forgiveness. The reason I guess I feel I'm here is because some people know I hold a view about forgiveness that is probably not shared by many people, particularly within the Christian community. So, in a nutshell, oftentimes people will think about forgiveness in psychological terms. In other words, they're going to think about forgiveness as something I do for me. So, what I'm primarily doing here in my teaching, and I teach a course on healing and forgiveness in scripture. So, what I do with students, I introduce them to the concept of forgiveness as it is unfolding. Within the biblical text. So,how would early Israelites have understood this concept? How is it being understood by Jesus or the early Christian community when they talk about forgiveness because they don't address the subject in the same way that we today think about it. I think what has happened is The field of psychology understands the power of the concept of forgiveness and I've kind of hijacked it so that Now people think about forgiveness is this thing that I do in order to Let go of my anger or this is healthy for me. So, you get things that are said within the Christian community that are not really reflective of what we see going on in biblical text. For instance I worked in Northern Ireland one time. My wife is from Northern Ireland. So, in Northern Ireland, there would be times when the IRA would. bomb this town and, the media would be there and they would find, the parents of children who've been lost. And every now and then you'll see one of them said, well, it's horrible, disgusting, but I'm going to learn to forgive them. So, in other words, they have this idea that this is my responsibility as a Christian, that if someone commits anything, I am supposed to forgive that person no matter what their intent or background. So, this is an understanding that I think is on the wrong direction. And I've got some other illustrations we'll talk about.

David Lowry: 3:46
This thing happened to me. Okay. By the way, you can set us both straight, but I don't like that.

Don Drew: 3:52
He doesn't.

David Lowry: 3:53
Yes, that's true. That is true. I'm God's problem. Well, a situation happened in my life. I was very frustrated. Very upset. I seek some counseling and advice. So, the book they gave me was by a very famous author who's written a book on radical forgiveness. And if you really come down to it, it's like no matter what's happened to you, you got to forgive that stuff. You've just gotta forgive it. And you're kind of running contrary to this very popular book,

which says, it's your problem. If you hold on to it, it'll eat you alive. You've got to let it go. And as I read the book, I found myself getting mad all over.

John Harrison: 4:30
Making you guilty for doing what is actually right.

Don Drew: 4:32
You should be feeling better already.

David Lowry: 4:34
Suddenly a burdens been lifted. But here's the thing, Dr. Harrison. As I was reading the book , I felt I'd been wronged. I was left to do all of the hard work of letting it go. And we can talk about this later on that sometimes you have to move forward. You can't be victimized and live as a victim the rest of your life, but that aside, in the beginning, when we come up to people and say, Oh, you just got to forget that stuff. That might not be the best message to give somebody in the midst of crisis anyway.

Don Drew: 5:02
So, let's back up just a little bit, John, and start with how did this first come across your radar as being something worth your time and research?

John Harrison: 5:10
It was actually when I was working on my PhD in the University of Edinburgh. My professor at that time invited me to come with him when he was speaking to a group of ministers and was on the subject of forgiveness and he began by introducing them to the dilemma with forgiveness and raising the question, is forgiveness moral? Is forgiveness a moral thing to do?

David Lowry: 5:32
What a question.

John Harrison: 5:33
Because there have been, and he went over it three different authors of literature, not necessarily theologians or biblical scholars, but just within literature itself, people who have made the argument that forgiveness is actually an immoral thing to do. So, you have this idea that if somebody does evil, or somebody does bad, and we just forgive them, it encourages them to continue on doing bad. Yeah, they just continue, so,they're not held accountable. So, it's always this kind of question between what's just, and what's, gracious. So, these things kind of come back to each other. So, of course that struck me because I had always, grown up as well with this kind of idea of forgiveness. And I'm going to give a

personal story here, since you gave one. So, my mother was divorced by my father. And, he left her for another woman and left our family. That was, to me, a wrong that was done to her. I think there's a lot of people who find themselves in this situation when they have been wronged this way. And what's irritating is the church comes around and said, well, you just have to forgive that person for the wrong that they did. Now you've taken the victim and made them guilty that they're the wrongdoer because they're not going to forgive a person who is not asking for forgiveness. And they're not, acknowledging sin. So, these are situations where the question is, the person who the wrong, do they have some obligation to acknowledge the wrong that they have done, before, a person can tell them, okay, I forgive you. This is why we need to go into the biblical text because I'm not disagreeing with some of the things that you probably were taught by in that book about what is healthy for us emotionally of letting go of anger. And there are definitely some things that we, when we are wrong, that we should do. Love your enemies. We're definitely called to be gracious people, to be merciful, to be kind. So, that's very hard when you have a lot of resentment towards someone for doing the wrong that they have done. But in scripture, first of all, forgiveness is a thing that is associated with sin. We tend to use forgiveness to associate with all kinds of things that are not really sinful. If I've got my music on too loud and you tell me, I can't think over here. Your music is on too loud. Oh, oh, I'm sorry. Forgive me. And I'll turn my music down. Well, I mean, playing my music is not sin, too loud. But in scripture, forgiveness is a thing about dealing with sin. So, how is sin dealt with? In Scripture, the way that sin is dealt with by people is, first of all, acknowledgement of the sin. There is confession. There is a recognition. There is contrition that is had. And, at times, there can be a recompense. You can do something in compensation for the wrong that was done. So, right now I'm just thinking in terms of the Old Testament, Hebrew scriptures, and you may have noticed that really you never have in scripture, first of all, there's no commandment ever where God says, And you should forgive your brothers and sisters. There's no commandment in the Old Testament, you, must forgive, it's a requirement. So, in the Old Testament, when people wronged you, there is an expectation that the person who's wronged you makes it right. So we can get to the New Testament soon,

David Lowry: 9:00

I bought a book not long ago by Rabbi Dania Rutenberg, Basically writings of what a person should do to be forgiven. And it, and it's about a, like a seven fold thing. The idea of restitution. An amount of time to demonstrate repentance and wanting to do the right thing. And she, believes in a fairly strict code of just because you say I'm sorry, doesn't mean that I'm going to forgive you, even if you say I'm sorry. You know, in other words, there's a, plan of action that has to demonstrate one's willingness to do the right thing continually. And it even goes further to maybe working with other people that know about this situation or something that you've done and trying to make things right, even

in a broader community. You have to talk to other people, you have to encourage people not to do what you did, and I mean, it's a fairly involved thing. I mean, this was pretty involved.

John Harrison: 9:49
Yeah. Yeah. I'm not sure if I going the full extent of this person, but I do recognize that, especially when we get into New Testament texts that first of all, The ancient Israelites understand that it is God who forgives sins. Human beings don't forgive sins. Now, we think about that as something that we do. But that's not our business. I might sin against you. But if I sin against you, it's also sinning against God. So, that deed or activity is needing to be dealt with, as it were, by God. and God wants people who do bad things who sin, not just bad things, but who do things that are sinful, to recognize that what they have done is sinful, and then to make restitution or make a sacrifice or, or do, you know, whatever is in terms to receive his forgiveness. One of the things I found interesting, and I didn't discover this until more recently is about the priesthood and about forgiveness. It's interesting, we have no record at all where any priest ever tells the worshiper, you are forgiven, because that's not their business. Their business is the sacrifice that you're giving. Is it correct? And we'll receive the sacrifice, and we'll acknowledge that the sacrifice is done. Now, we won't know if you're forgiven until we see the circumstances in your life change. In other words, you've sinned, so now you've got these consequences that are happening, or you're aware that you have sinned, or bad things have now come to you because you have sinned, but if God's gonna forgive it, God is going to have to stop the circumstances. All we can do is Offer the right sacrifices.

David Lowry: 11:25
Now, as a philosophy, moving away from biblical text, where do you come down on that as quote, a way of living in life and and explain your position and how it could be helpful to all of us.

John Harrison: 11:37
All right, so, first of all, I don't want Christians to feel like they must forgive a person who is unrepentant. If a person commits a sin against you, and if they are unrepentant, I'm not sorry for what I did. I'm good with doing that to you. It's not wrong that what I did to you. That is an unrepentant person and I don't have to participate in acknowledging their forgiveness. So, in one sense when we say I forgive you, in the New Testament, we have to deal with as well what we translate into English as forgive, what those words actually are and what they're describing is we are in a sense saying, you're good with God. Now, we don't think that way. We think of it in psychological terms of, if I say I forgive you, I'm letting you know I'm not going to harbor resentment. I'm not going to harbor anger with you. I'm not going to seek vengeance on you. I'm going to let it go. But really, in biblical

terms, if you tell someone, I forgive you for the sin you commit me, I'm saying, You're good with God. Now, how can I say that if you're not doing the things that God requires when people are engaged in sin? Which is, acknowledging the sin, confessing the sin, having contrition, pledging not to do something again.

Don Drew: 12:51
So, let's get real practical here today in churches in Western American society, we assume that is both good and right to forgive for us to forgive someone. And to let go of that anger, that psychological, you're using the term sin, which is a religious term really. And, but the harm. Okay. So, when somebody has done some harm to us and our culture and our churches pressure us to let that go. And sometimes we make the argument, it's psychologically good for you. It's healthy for you to do that. But. I think what I'm hearing you say from a modern Christian religious standpoint, we also send this message that the morally responsible thing to do is to forgive. And you're saying that is not true.

John Harrison: 13:42
Yeah, if a person is unrepentant, not recognizing what they have done in sin. Then I'm in no obligation to say to that person, I forgive you. Now what I am under obligation to do is always to treat that person with grace. Treat that person with mercy, treat that person with kindness. I should not be harboring resentment. I should not be harboring anger. That's not healthy for me. But those things are not what in scripture is forgiveness. Forgiveness is about dealing with sin. We're trying to do things about our psyche, our emotion, our physical health, which is a completely different thing.

David Lowry: 14:17
Okay. So, I want to go back to my earlier example where I gave non specific things, but ask you for very specific answers. So, I'm back again at this counselor. And I feel I've been done wrong. Still feel it. Okay. Still believe it. And you are. And even to this day, I think, yeah, I wasn't treated right. I wasn't treated fairly.

John Harrison: 14:36
Justly. I don't feel like I was treated justly.

Don Drew: 14:39
And they're not repentant.

David Lowry: 14:40
And they're not repentant.

John Harrison: 14:42

Because they don't think they treated you unjustly.

David Lowry: 14:43
Well, either that or they don't care. They don't care. They don't care. Alright. What, what I think is of no consequence to them. Yep. Right. They moved on and I was, so much splatter on the windshield,

Don Drew: 14:56
it's very graphic. Yeah. Thank you for that picture.

David Lowry: 15:00
But I realized that some point that I can hang on to this and I lived with it for two years constantly. In my mind it was Yes, that's right. It was, it was, I would say, some people would say it was eating me up, but it was in my head a lot. Then somehow I realized that it's not going to go away. That person doesn't care. And I'm not going to be a victim anymore. So, I moved on. Now if I saw that person, I know there's some resentment there. But I would do my best to be kind and respectful. I don't think I would just turn and walk away. That's the best I can do, John. What do you think?

John Harrison: 15:34
Human beings are messy, and dealing with human drama and situations is messy. So, you know, I'm not here to judge if you're still holding hurt because of what was happened, and may even say you have every right to feel that hurt. That hurt is legitimate, So, of course, what you don't want to do is sin on the basis of your hurt. You don't want to then make decisions of ways that you can get vengeance way that you will hurt that person.

David Lowry: 16:02
I love that explanation. A person that I used to spend some time with once told me that everybody steps in dog poo. And unfortunately we're the ones who have to clean it off our shoe. I guess where I'm going with that is, is that that happened. I realized that it did, and now it's up to me. What am I going to do going forward? Am I just going to keep that in my brain for the rest of my life. And I realized that one moment I had a realization about another thing many years ago that I was still thinking about some things that had happened 30, 40 years ago. And it's like, you know, I'm going to put a statute of limitations on how much I carry stuff around and remember and talk about it and bring it up or allow myself to use it as an illustration.

John Harrison: 16:43

I wonder if you feel free if in your mind you just say, I don't have to forgive that person, but I do have to be kind to them. So, they're not forgiven. I got to be kind.

Don Drew: 16:50
Yeah. Well, we've given these, the, so the resentment of, Oh, I got to forgive. And I just don't want to. We've given the word forgive a lot of power here. And I think at the end of the day. You should not feel moral failure for your inability to forgive them.

David Lowry: 17:08
Or forget it. As some people say, you got to forgive and forget. That's good luck. That's not, well, our program is. Peaceful life radio.

John Harrison: 17:18
Yeah.

David Lowry: 17:19
And I believe a couple of concepts associated with forgiveness. One is, that when you decide to let it go, let it go. Don't bring it up anymore. Maybe your partner in life will never, ever agree that they did something very harmful or hurtful to you, but sometimes it's best to let it go, never bring it up again, and move forward, and try to rebuild stronger and better, and that's how it is.

John Harrison: 17:44
Here's another zinger. Forgiveness, as a Christian, can only happen in Christ.

David Lowry: 17:48
Now, I know, I've got a theologian sitting in the chair next to me. But, from my point of view, John, for a lot of people who don't acknowledge Christian teaching. I think what I'm hearing is, don't let the word forgiveness trip you up. Right. Don't let the word forgiveness trip you up. Even if you are a Christian, you have to know that forgiveness is a God thing, and I'm not God.

John Harrison: 18:10
That's right.

David Lowry: 18:11
You know, I'm just not. Yep. Although many times I've confused that. Yeah. I guess what I could say is, Maybe I just should maybe eliminate that word from my vocabulary and say, I'm going to move forward. I'm not going to, I'm not going to get tripped up by this. I'm

not going to let anger get the better of me. I'm going to be gracious. I'm going to be kind.

Don Drew: 18:29
It seems to me that a lot of our listeners may find their inability or struggle to forgive a harm that's been done against them at some point in their lives is, it is so problematic. So, difficult for them to forgive that individual, but then they harbor a certain amount because of our religious teachings and so on. They harbor a certain amount of guilt. Yeah, inability to do that. Yes. So, it just compounds that harm. In that sense, it's self harm. So, learning to let yourself go from having to forgive things that harms that are just so egregious that, that,

David Lowry: 19:10
Yeah, there's just some things that we're going to be we've had a psychologist on the program who talks about trauma. And moral injury. I mean, if you live long enough, you're going to suffer a moral injury. Somebody's going to do something to you and it's going to injure you or cause trauma in you. And it's going to trigger you. And sometimes it goes so far back into your childhood that there's no possible way you're ever going to get to it. Right. And you can't entirely get rid of those things and take them out of your mind of stuff that happened to you, but maybe it's not in your best interest to always feel like that's got to happen in order to live a happy life. So, I think as we go through life, we're going to injure and be injured, and we're going to have to learn how to move forward and despite all of that, without adding a lot of self recrimination because I can't let that other person off the hook. I think that's probably it. We're trying to let people off the hook for stuff they don't want to be let off the hook for, right? And, or shouldn't be. And maybe shouldn't be. Shouldn't be.

John Harrison: 20:09
No, they shouldn't be. I mean, you know, there's a lot of people who do immoral, unjust things. And we're under no obligation to say to that person, I forgive you when they're not repentant of the thing that they have done that is wrong. So, and they should be held accountable for the things that they do. And if they can make restitution, they can should make restitution or make some kind of recompense or suffer some kind of consequences for the wrong they do.

David Lowry: 20:33
Can we look to Dr. Harrison's life and maybe an instance in your life where you've had to deal with this notion of forgiveness? And even though maybe by your definition, it's not up to you to do but how do you move forward.

John Harrison: 20:48
I'm under, no obligation to say to Dad, Dad, I forgive you. He's not seeking my forgiveness, in the first place. He's not recognizing it as sin, and plus, there can't be forgiveness in it. But, I love my dad, spent time with him, was there for him during his last few months of life care for him, have fun, call him on the phone, talk about life, enjoy his company.

David Lowry: 21:12
Do you feel like you had a mental block in your head, an asterisk in your head every time you talk to your dad though?

John Harrison: 21:17
No, and I think, I think I got to a good place.

David Lowry: 21:20
Was it a genuine, loving relationship?

John Harrison: 21:22
Genuine, loving, enjoying, happy. I mean, yes, I, the asterisk is, I wish you didn't do that to my mother. I wish you didn't do that to my mother, and I wish you would take responsibility for that, but that wasn't going to happen.

David Lowry: 21:35
Wow, this is fascinating. And I really enjoy your point of view. I think on one hand, I think people should feel like if you've had a hard time letting something go or are struggling with the idea, I must forgive, you've given us a challenge of saying, well, maybe you put a little too much pressure on yourself when you shouldn't have.

John Harrison: 21:56
But it is hard, even when a person is repentant. to forgive. We need to let go of the resentment. Those are not healthy things. But forgiveness is about dealing with sin. So, keeping that biblical understanding frees me, as it were, of saying, I have to forgive this person, even when they, you know, don't.

David Lowry: 22:12
Love what you have to say.

Don Drew: 22:14

John, thank you very much for being here with us today. I know some of our listeners are going to be disappointed because when I said you had your Ph. D. from Scotland, they were probably expecting an accent. So, John's a bonafide American.

David Lowry: 22:27

I was hoping you would say something there's not enough room here to sling a cat or something like that. That's right. Because his wife is an Irish woman, and I figured we'd hear some some good Irish aphorism , but Here we go.

Don Drew: 22:40

Well, it's been great. Thank you so much. And we invite all our listeners to join us next week on Peaceful Life Radio, your place on the internet dedicated to helping people live happier and more peaceful lives.