

What The Bible Says About Forgiveness By Steve Lehrer

Forgiveness is the heart and soul of Christianity. We are commanded to forgive others as God has forgiven us: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). We draw our understanding of forgiveness from the example *par excellence* of forgiveness demonstrated by God reconciling himself to us through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. God’s work in forgiving us must be the hub around which our understanding of forgiveness and our understanding of the depth of our responsibility to forgive others revolve. Therefore it is necessary that we pause here and reflect on some Scriptures that describe Christ’s work and just how much we have been forgiven.

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:20-26).

⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

A Christian is someone who recognizes that he has sinned against a holy God. He understands that he deserves an eternity in hell for just one of the thousands and millions of sinful thoughts and actions that he has committed. He realizes that no one can ever sin against him as offensively as he did against God and no one can be 1/100,000,000 as deserving of punishment from him as he is deserving of God’s punishment. Since a true Christian understands the gravity of his sin and the amazing gift of forgiveness that God has granted him, he is characterized by compassion on those who sin against him. This fact cannot be overstated. A Christian is a forgiven person who is characterized by being *forgiving* of others. Those who steadfastly refuse to forgive others and yet claim to be Christians are displaying the fact that they have never been forgiven by God and their claims to know God are false:

¹⁴For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15).¹

¹ This verse along with other verses, such as Mark 11:25 and Luke 6:36-37, is often misinterpreted by making a distinction between judicial and parental forgiveness, whereby although a believer’s “Fatherly” relationship with God is hindered or suffers because of an unwillingness to forgive, but that a believer’s salvation is still secure. In this view, a believer’s unforgiveness only jeopardizes God’s *parental* forgiveness, and is used by God to train or “discipline” the believer. This view can be seen in Jay Adams’ book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, (Amityville, N.Y.: Calvary Press, 1994), pp. 37-47.

The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1 John 2:4).

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:12-13).

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:19-21).

Forgiveness: What it is and What it is not

- 1) Forgiveness *is* a promise never to bring up someone's sin against you to yourself. It *is not* a feeling.
- 2) Forgiveness *is* choosing not to remember something. Forgiveness *is not* forgetting an offense since it is impossible to will yourself to forget something.
- 3) Forgiveness *is* a promise not to bring that particular offense up to the person again. Forgiveness *is not* simply accepting someone else's sin against you.
- 4) Finally, forgiveness *is* a promise not to bring up the offense to others. Forgiveness *is not* hiding someone's sin and it *is not* allowing and enabling a professed believer to continue to sin.²

Are There Any Exceptions?

I am a firm believer in loopholes. If there is any legitimate, God-honoring way that I can find to lessen pain, pay less in taxes, or do less hard labor, I'll take it. But when it comes to forgiveness Jesus makes it clear that there are absolutely no loopholes or exceptions: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25). You must forgive anyone who sins against you no matter what that person has done (even if the person is not sorry or repentant). There is no sin that is so big and so terrible that it gives you an excuse to be unforgiving.

But surely there must be one loophole, right? What about the brutal murder of a loved one? What about heinous sex crimes? Certainly those sins need not and cannot be forgiven, right? If you have been sinned against in these horrific ways, I am truly sorry. But let's remember that it is God who has given you these trials to deal with to refine you. God has given you a full plate of trials to deal with for His glory and your good. It will take more than a day, a month, or a year to work through the pain and the heartache. But if you think that the person who sinned against you is more guilty than you are; if you think that the way he sinned against you is worse than the way that you sinned against God, you may not yet understand who God is, who you are, the heinousness of your sin, and the extraordinary mercy of God. If there was one sin that was too big to be forgiven, it would not be one of the sins someone committed against you but one of the thousands and millions of offenses you committed against the God of heaven and earth.

² These points are adapted from Jay Adams' book on forgiveness. Ibid., p.82.

Blood, Sweat, and Tears

Some people see exercise as the high point of their day—I am not one of those people. Exercise is hard and sweaty work. When I first began jogging, I couldn't go very far and I had to work for every step. All I was able to think about was pushing myself to continue running and each teeth-jarring foot fall was an enemy that I had to overcome to accomplish my goal of running three miles. Now that I have been doing it for a while, jogging is somewhat second nature to me. I can think about other things. Although it is still hard work, it is not the grind that it used to be and I now come away refreshed rather than fatigued. Forgiveness is also hard and sweaty work. When I am sinned against, I am sometimes overwhelmed with anger, hurt, and even rage. I have to battle this tidal wave of emotions. Every thought is an enemy that must be subdued so that I can keep the promise I made to God. If I have been hurt to a great degree, then I will wake up dwelling on the way that I was sinned against and I will spend the day digging myself out of a hole of vengeful thoughts. I will have to spend my time repenting and asking God to help me to transform my sinful thoughts into thoughts that honor Him. Although forgiveness is hard work and there is no way to take the sweat out of it, like physical training it does get easier the more you work at it.

How Do You Forgive?

The “how to” of forgiveness is not complicated. You begin by recognizing your own sinfulness before God and what you deserve were it not for Christ standing in your place and taking God's wrath on your behalf:

³‘Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:3-5).

Do a thorough inventory of your life and your relationships and begin by repenting of all of the sin that you find in your own life. This is simply the obligation of every believer: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9). But it has a secondary benefit of preparing you to have compassion on the one who has sinned against you. This action makes you aware of the fact that you are a sinner just like the person who sinned against you. Recognize that dwelling on the offender's sin is rebellion against God. Be very careful how you talk to others about the situation. You might be able to disguise it well, but grumbling and complaining to others about how you have been wronged is sinful.

How Can You Know That You Have Forgiven?

It is not uncommon to hear people say, “I have forgiven him. I just don't want to have anything to do with him anymore.” Theologian and author Dr. Jay Adams makes some helpful comments on this:

Forgiveness is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end—a new relationship with those from whom we have become estranged because of some altercation. Not only does God want forgiveness to occur speedily, but His main interest is in the new relationship which forgiveness always ought to produce. Forgiveness is clearing the rubble of the past so that something fresh and fine may be built in its place. Again, the divine model predominates, setting the pattern for us. In salvation, God does not merely forgive you, removing the guilt of your sin and promising never to bring up your wrongdoings, only to forget you thereafter. No. He goes on to establish a new relationship with you in which He wants you to grow close to Him.³

³ Ibid., p. 68, 69.

If you are pursuing the person who hurt you with love; if you are willing and desiring to have a godly, close relationship with him; and if you are actively working on being faithful to your promise to God both in your thoughts and actions, then you have forgiven.

The Priority of Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a major goal of forgiveness. If you have actually forgiven the person who offended you, you must pursue a relationship with the person who hurt you. Depending on the severity of the sin committed against you, pursuing a relationship might be distasteful to you because when you see his face you are immediately brought back to the situation in which he sinned against you. That simply means that you need to work more diligently at taking every thought captive and repenting when you break your promise to forgive. Consider the following biblical argument:

(1) A believer is by definition a God-lover:

⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸*Though you have not seen him, you love him*; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:6-8).

(2) A God-lover is by definition a person-lover:

³⁴A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35; cf. 1 John 4:19-21).

(3) If one is both a God-lover and a person-lover, then he will pursue reconciliation with all men:

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14).

However, after considering all of that, reconciliation takes two willing parties. It is not always possible to be reconciled with all men, especially if the other person is an unbeliever. If one party is unwilling to have a relationship then there can be no reconciliation: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). When the other party refuses to reconcile with you, if he is not a professing believer there is nothing you can do. Let some time pass and then contact him and once again ask if he is willing to reconcile with you. This side of heaven, although you must desire to be reconciled with all men, it may be that another person may go to his grave unwilling to be reconciled to you.

Qualified Forgiveness

What we have studied so far is what we call *full forgiveness*. What you call it doesn't matter so much as understanding the concept in contrast to what we will call *qualified forgiveness*. We have these two categories because Scripture teaches us that there are certain situations when we may desire not to bring up another person's sin and we may desire to reconcile, but God commands us to bring up the sin and

remain unreconciled. This might sound like we are contradicting all that has gone before, but that is not the case. We are just being faithful to the totality of what God's Word says about forgiveness. Let's examine this matter more closely. As you have already seen, *full forgiveness* includes the following four requirements:

- 1) Forgiveness *is* a promise never to bring up someone's sin against you to yourself.
- 2) Forgiveness *is* choosing not to remember something.
- 3) Forgiveness *is* a promise not to bring that particular offense up to the person again.
- 4) Forgiveness *is* a promise not to bring up the offense to others.

Qualified forgiveness occurs when someone calls himself a Christian but refuses to repent of his sin. You must be willing to love this person rather than seek vengeance. But you cannot promise to "not remember" the sin because God commands you to bring it up to him. You cannot promise not to bring it up to others, because if he remains unrepentant then God commands you to involve others in this difficult situation: "¹⁵If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17). In light of that, *qualified forgiveness* is really a heart attitude in which you desire to move to *full forgiveness* and be reconciled with the offender. That is, you turn away from any anger or bitterness. Before God, show your complete willingness to forgive the offender and your desire to bless him in spite of the offense:

⁸Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. ¹⁰For, "Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. ¹¹He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. ¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:8-13).

It is only the offender's unrepentance and your subsequent biblical responsibilities toward him that are the obstacles in the way of moving to full forgiveness. You still have no right to grumble or dwell upon the wrong done to you. You cannot gossip with others about the sin or the sinner. But you must think about the offense and bring it up to the offender and others for the constructive and loving purposes laid out in Scripture.

It is wonderful that God has given us a rather detailed example of *qualified forgiveness* in the New Testament. Here is the situation: A professed believer was involved in unrepentant sin (he was sexually involved with his step-mother) and the church was turning a blind eye to this behavior. Paul chastised the Corinthians and pushed them to be faithful to Christ by exercising church discipline:

¹It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. ²And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? ³Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. ⁴When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵hand this

man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.

⁶Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? ⁷Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

¹²What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you'" (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

Up to this point we have a clear example of qualified forgiveness both with the Corinthians and with Paul in relation to this believer stuck in sin. The church at Corinth disciplined this professed believer (that is, they put him out of the church) and then he repented of his sin. Paul then tells the church that they need to *fully* forgive this believer since he gave evidence of a godly sorrow for sin (a.k.a., true biblical repentance). Only when he repented did the church grant him full forgiveness and reconciliation could take place.

⁵If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. ⁶The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. ⁷Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. ¹⁰If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes (2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

A Parable to Consider

Now we need to address some particulars about this amazing transaction we call forgiveness. But before we get into the very practical particulars, I would like you to consider a parable in Matthew's Gospel that is meant to get our thoughts about forgiveness on the right track:

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

³⁰"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³²"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:21-35).

Notice that in verse 24 the slave owes his Lord 10,000 talents. In U.S. currency this would be equal to several hundred million or perhaps even 1 billion dollars. But in verse 28 it says that this indebted slave had a colleague who owed him 100 denarii. This was a day's wages for most working men of that time. If you live in a major city, it might be the equivalent of 75 U.S. dollars today. Jesus tells us what this parable means in verse 35. God the Father is the king in this parable and those who do not forgive others fit the part of the indebted yet unforgiving slave.

What is a Good Way to Ask For Forgiveness?

Don't say, "I'm sorry." That is cheap and rarely means anything. Are you sorry for how you sinned against the person, or are you simply sorry for the situation? When you say, "I'm sorry," you are not admitting to the person that you have truly wronged him, you are not explaining what you have done, and you are not asking him to be reconciled to you despite your sin against him. In addition, saying, "I'm sorry" neither calls for nor allows for a response from the person you sinned against.

In order to ask for forgiveness, first you have to recognize that you have sinned against God and against another person. Psalm 51 puts the primary emphasis on your sin against God: "⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." That is, of course, the primary issue that you need to address. You need to recognize that you personally offended God by your willful rebellion. You need to actually be repentant. There can be no blame-shifting. You are 100% responsible for your sin. You also need to recognize how you have hurt the other person by your self-centered behavior. Once you have considered and embraced all of that, pick a good time to talk to the person when he is not busy, and it is convenient *for him or her* (though not necessarily for you). Tell the person what you have done and how you realize that you sinned against God and him or her. Spend time making it clear that you realize how your sin hurt the person. Then you ask the person to forgive you: "Would you please forgive me?" He or she does not have to answer right away. Allow time for the person to think about it and consider whether he is able to make that promise in front of God and you. If you have done all of this, you have been faithful. Pray that God would give the person you sinned against a forgiving heart towards you and that your sinful behavior would not make him bitter.

How to Grant Forgiveness

Once someone has gone through the steps above with you, I want to encourage you *not* to say, "Yes, I forgive you" right away. You need to consider if you are willing to make the solemn promise before the God of heaven and earth that you will not continue to dwell on this sin or bring it back up again. It is right to think about this in the light of all that God has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32). This should move you to praise God and make this promise to God. After that you should make this promise to forgive to the person who asked for forgiveness. Once you grant forgiveness you need to really work overtime at showing love toward the person you forgave. It is very likely that you will desire to keep your distance. That is a common and a sinful desire. Out of love for God you need to pursue that person with love.

