

What The Bible Says About **Forgiveness**



Midweek Bible Study – February 20, 2002

Matthew 6:14-15 (NLT) If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

- C.S. Lewis observed, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word, until you have something to forgive."
- If you've spent any time in church at all, you realize the importance of forgiveness. You know that it is a biblical concept, you've read verses like our text, and you may even have been warned about the physical, emotional and spiritual consequences of unforgiveness.
- And, you are no doubt genuinely grateful for a God who was willing to take on human form and die an excruciating death so YOUR sins could be forgiven.
- Why then, is there such a discrepancy between our understanding of forgiveness and our willingness to grant it to others?
- Respected counselor and author David Seamands observes that most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are caused by the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional love, forgiveness and grace to other people. He says, "The good news of the gospel has not penetrated the level of our emotions."
- **The issue of forgiveness touches each of us every day.** Occasionally, it's a major crisis that forces us to choose between forgiveness and unforgiveness (i.e. an unfaithful spouse, an unwanted divorce, an unfair termination from your job, sexual abuse you experienced as a child, a slanderous rumor that has cost you your reputation). But most of the time it is lesser offenses that we must deal with (i.e. being overlooked by a friend, a fight with our spouse).
- Regardless of the size of the offense, **FORGIVENESS IS NOT USUALLY THE PREFERRED RESPONSE!**
- **Why do Christians, who have been forgiven so much, have such difficulty forgiving others?**

BECAUSE WE DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT FORGIVENESS IS!

- A survey by Barna Research Group conducted three years ago (July/August 1999) clearly illustrates the depth of misunderstanding that surrounds the subject of forgiveness.
- How would you respond to the following questions from the survey? Rate each statement as an **ACCURATE** or an **INACCURATE** description of forgiveness.
 - You cannot honestly forgive someone unless that person shows some remorse for what they did. **(62% agreed)**
 - If you really forgive someone, you would want that person to be released from the consequences of their actions. **(60% agreed)**
 - If you genuinely forgive someone, you should rebuild your relationship with that person. **(73% agreed)**
 - If you have really forgiven someone, you should be able to forget what they have done to you. **(66% agreed)**
- **The biblical perspective is that each of these statements is WRONG!** But only 4% of respondents gave the biblical response to all the questions. Among evangelical Christians, only 8% gave the biblical response to all the questions.
- The **FOUR MYTHS** identified above confuse the issue of forgiveness for many people. We're going to deal with all of these questions in this lesson, because it is vital that Christians have a biblical viewpoint – especially about an issue as crucial as forgiveness!
- A failure to understand the true nature of forgiveness leads to prolonged bitterness, illegitimate fears and unnecessary guilt, and prevents us from receiving and granting life's most important gift!

FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE

"You cannot honestly forgive someone unless that person shows some remorse for what they did."

- What about those who never ASK for our forgiveness? What about those who won't even acknowledge their wrongs? Should they expect to receive forgiveness from us? And, more importantly, should we be required to give it?
- In other words, **IS REPENTANCE** a requirement for granting forgiveness to others? Can you honestly forgive someone who is ...

- UNAWARE that he's hurt you?
 - UNMOVED by the fact that he's offended you?
 - UNWILLING to admit his mistake?
 - UNABLE to ask forgiveness because of illness or death?
- **There are at least three faulty arguments people use for demanding repentance BEFORE granting forgiveness:**

1. Forgiveness needs to be earned.

Those who demand that their offender "earn" forgiveness by demonstrating sorrow are operating under the illusion that somehow their offender's repentance will be sufficient to cover the offense. The words "I'm sorry" may bring momentary relief to a wound, but they are insufficient in themselves to effect permanent healing. Salvation is like that. We are not saved just because we told God "I'm sorry" – we are saved because He chose to forgive!

Ephesians 2:8-9 ⁸ For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast.

2. Forgiving an unrepentant person invites further abuse.

Aren't those who forgive their offender before he expresses any remorse in effect wearing a "Kick Me" sign? Aren't we doing a fundamental disservice to both the offender and ourselves by absolving his sin without at least waiting for a sincere apology?

What is being overlooked with this kind of thinking is the very nature of grace itself. Because it is "a deliberate decision to give something good to someone who doesn't deserve it," GRACE INVITES ABUSE! But God still chose to take the risk with us!

It's up to us whether we abuse His gift of forgiveness or not. And it's also up to our offender whether he abuses our forgiveness toward him!

The downside of forgiveness is that it invites further abuse; the upside is that it exposes us to a higher way of living!

Romans 5:20b, 6:1-2 But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound ... ¹What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? ²God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?

3. Forgiving an unrepentant person is unscriptural.

The strongest argument people offer for demanding repentance (an apology) before offering forgiveness is that the Bible seems to require it! After all, if God requires us to acknowledge our sin before He forgives us, and we are to forgive others in the same way God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32), then shouldn't we require our offender to repent before we forgive him? Seems logical, right?

This kind of thinking fails to note an important distinction – there is a crucial difference between receiving forgiveness and granting forgiveness. **The issue of repentance is vitally important to receiving forgiveness, but totally irrelevant to granting forgiveness.** In other words, REPENTANCE IS REQUIRED FOR THE OFFENDER, BUT SHOULD NOT BE REQUIRED BY THE OFFENDED.

Romans 5:8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

God offered us forgiveness before we asked for it (because He was the OFFENDED party). But we must REPENT before we can receive forgiveness (because we are the OFFENDING party). From God's viewpoint, BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS IS UNCONDITIONAL!

- The best reason to forgive unconditionally is the emotional and spiritual healing it brings into our lives. So often when people think about forgiveness, they think about what it's going to do for someone else. What they don't realize is that forgiveness is really an act of self-interest – we're doing ourselves a favor when we cut ourselves loose from being an emotional victim of someone else's wrong. **(i.e. 3-legged race)**
- Whether our offender repents or not is between them and God. **Don't let their wrong become an issue between you and God!**

FORGIVENESS AND CONSEQUENCES

"If you really forgive someone, you would want that person to be released from the consequences of their actions."

- One of the greatest barriers to forgiveness is the myth that forgiving someone automatically frees them from any consequences of their actions. Such a misunderstanding makes many people hesitant to forgive or condemns them to a lifetime of unnecessary bitterness.
 - What about the church treasurer who is caught embezzling funds from the weekly offerings? If he publicly confesses and pays the money back, then shouldn't the church restore him to his position if they have really forgiven him?

- What about the husband who had an affair and broke up his marriage? If his wife has really forgiven him, shouldn't she quit making him pay for his mistake over and over again by demanding child support each month?
- What about the convicted child molester who has paid his debt to society and now wants to work in the Sunday School department? Is the church really demonstrating forgiveness if they restrict him from working with children for the rest of his life?
- What about the murderer who gets saved on death row? If the victim's family has truly forgiven him for his crime, shouldn't they be petitioning the courts for his release from jail? Have they really forgiven him if they want his sentence to still be carried out?
- What about the Christian who became involved in an immoral relationship, but has now repented? If the church leadership demands that she prove herself before being involved in ministry, isn't that demonstrating an unforgiving spirit?
- The same dilemma lies behind each of these scenarios: Does forgiveness automatically erase the consequences of sin? Have I truly forgiven someone if, at the same time, I insist that they be held accountable for their actions? The answer to this dilemma is found in the important distinction between two words:
 - **VENGEANCE** is my desire to see another person suffer for the pain he has caused me. The Bible consistently warns against harboring this kind of feeling in my heart.

Romans 12:19 (CEV) *Dear friends, don't try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures the Lord says, "I am the one to take revenge and pay them back."*
 - **JUSTICE** is the payment God or society might demand from someone because of a wrong they have committed against us, or against society as a whole. While we are to avoid vengeance, the Bible teaches us to seek justice for those who have been wronged.

Isaiah 1:17 (NLT) *Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Fight for the rights of widows.*
- God says that I am to surrender my desire for vengeance, but I can never surrender society's responsibility to seek justice. The Bible teaches us that, in addition to God, the government and the church are to be administrators of justice in our society.
- God deals with us in the same way. When God forgives us, He removes the ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES of our sin, but not necessarily the TEMPORAL CONSEQUENCES of our actions. Why would a forgiving God (or a forgiving person) still allow someone to suffer such consequences?
 1. **Consequences promote order in society.** What would our world be like if there were no laws, no penalties, no red lights? Chaos!
 - ***Genesis 9:6 (NKJV)*** *Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made man.*
 2. **Consequences serve as a deterrent to others.** Fear of consequences is perhaps the most powerful incentive for obedience.
 - ***1 Timothy 5:20 (NLT)*** *Anyone who sins should be rebuked in front of the whole church so that others will have a proper fear of God.*
 3. **Consequences prevent us from further disobedience.** God regularly uses the consequences of sin to bring us back into a right relationship with Him – and keep us there!
 - ***Psalms 119:67 (NLT)*** *I used to wander off until you disciplined me; but now I closely follow your word.*
- Chuck Swindoll observes, "If I sin and in the process of sinning break my arm, when I find forgiveness from sin, I still have to deal with a broken bone." (i.e. nail removed from board still leaves a hole)
- If you're struggling with hurts inflicted by someone else, release your desire for vengeance and let God (or others) pursue justice. On the other hand, if you desire forgiveness, don't be discouraged over the lingering consequences of your sin; instead, view them as a gift designed to keep you close to a God who loves you!

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

"If you genuinely forgive someone, you should rebuild your relationship with that person."

- What if someone is hesitant to offer forgiveness to their offender because they have no desire to reestablish a relationship with a spouse who has been unfaithful to them, a friend who has cheated them, a coworker who has slandered them, or a relative who has abused them?

VENGEANCE	JUSTICE
Our personal desire for retribution against our offender	The repayment another person demands from our offender
Striving to settle the debt ourselves	Allowing someone else to settle the score
Leads to bitterness	Leads to healing

- The Bible teaches that reconciliation is important for at least two reasons: First, unity among believers testifies to the world of God’s power. Second, unity among believers empowers us to resist the attacks of Satan, who wants to divide, isolate and conquer us individually. There is spiritual strength in numbers!
- **Matthew 5:23-24 (NLT)** ²³ "So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.
- **Psalms 133:1** Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!
- The Bible teaches that reconciliation is important, but with **one major condition**: While I can unilaterally forgive another person, I cannot unilaterally be reconciled to my offender. **FORGIVENESS DEPENDS UPON ME; RECONCILIATION DEPENDS UPON US.** We need to understand that, while reconciliation between Christians is always PREFERABLE, it isn’t always POSSIBLE.
- **Romans 12:18 (NKJV)** *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*
- While I can express my desire for reconciliation in a relationship, I cannot demand it. Only if both parties agree can it be achieved. Even if someone has truly forgiven me for hurting them, it still may take a great deal of time and effort to rebuild the fractured relationship. In some cases reconciliation may never happen, even though real forgiveness has taken place, because one of the parties involved does not agree.
- **Amos 3:3 (NKJV)** *Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?*
- **Reconciliation usually involves three ingredients:**
 - **REPENTANCE** – admitting that we are responsible for the wrong that has been done to another person
 - **RESTITUTION** – offering some type of compensation to the person we have wronged for the loss they suffered
 - **REHABILITATION** – demonstrating a change in our behavior over a period of time toward the person we have wronged
- **Reconciliation doesn’t happen instantaneously.** That is why offenders are wrong to demand immediate restoration, and why the offended are unwise to offer it. Proper healing in a relationship takes time. (i.e. a marriage that is fractured through a few moments of adulterous pleasure may take years – and agonizing effort – to rebuild)

FORGIVENESS	RECONCILIATION
It takes one person to forgive	It takes two to be reunited
Forgiving happens inside the wounded person	Reunion happens in a relationship between people
We can forgive a person who never says he is sorry	We cannot be truly reunited unless he is honestly sorry
We can forgive even if we do not trust the person who wronged us once not to wrong us again	Reunion can happen only if we can trust the person who wronged us once not to wrong us again
Forgiving has no strings attached	Reunion has several strings attached

FORGIVENESS AND FORGETTING

"If you have really forgiven someone, you should be able to forget what they have done to you."

- Contrary to what many people believe, **FORGETTING IS NOT A TEST OF GENUINE FORGIVENESS!** Attempting to force oneself to forget a hurt simply results in bitterness or guilt, because we continue to remember in spite of ourselves!
- Someone may struggle on either side of the “forgetting issue” ...
 - If God has really forgiven me, why do I keep remembering my sin? Maybe I haven’t genuinely repented!
 - If I’ve really forgiven my offender, why can’t I forget what they did to me? Maybe I haven’t genuinely forgiven him!
- **BUT DOESN’T GOD FORGET OUR SINS? AND ISN’T HIS FORGIVENESS OF US A MODEL FOR OUR FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS?**
- **Jeremiah 31:34c** *... for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*
- The Hebrew word “zakar” (remember) in this verse has the significance of “causing to remember, mentioning, recalling, reminding, recording.” In other words, **it’s not that God CANNOT remember, it’s that He CHOOSES NOT TO remember.**
- 2 Corinthians 5:10 tells us that Christians will have their deeds, both good and bad, evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That means that God will obviously remember our bad deeds in a LITERAL sense, but He will not remember them in a JUDICIAL sense. He has chosen to eternally erase the consequences of actions that we have repented of!

- **Romans 4:7-8 (NLT)** ⁷ "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. ⁸ Yes, what joy for those whose sin is no longer counted against them by the Lord."
- **BUT YOU ARE NOT GOD!** Your memory fails you often, sometimes by forgetting things you want to remember, and sometimes by remembering things you want to forget!
- **Forgetting is a function of the brain; forgiving is a function of the spirit.** Our brain is capable of storing at least 600 memories a second (1.5 trillion bits of information in a 75-year lifespan). Although we may not be able to recall certain events in our life, those experiences are nevertheless permanently recorded in our memory and could resurface at any time. **Thus, any time we encourage someone to "forget" an event, we're asking them to do the impossible!** In fact, struggling to forget a past event can have just the opposite effect, searing the thought more deeply in our memory.
- **FORGETTING OFFENSES IS NOT HUMANLY POSSIBLE ... AND NEITHER IS IT PROFITABLE!**
- **HOW CAN I HANDLE MEMORIES OF A PAST HURT?**
 1. Do not cultivate the memories.
 2. Recall your own failures.
 3. Remember your decision to forgive.
 4. Realize that healing memories takes time.
- **Illustration:** Corrie Ten Boom (author of "The Hiding Place") had been unable to forget an atrocity committed against her while she had been a prisoner of the Nazis in a concentration camp during World War II. For years she was even robbed of sleep, just thinking about the event. She finally sought counsel from a pastor who said, "Up in that church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But do you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. The same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down. But once the force – your will – has gone out of them, the thoughts will diminish in frequency and intensity." **LET GO OF THE ROPE THROUGH FORGIVENESS!**