

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:

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (*Matt 6:14,15*).

He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him (*1 John 2:4*).

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye (*Col 3:12,13*).

We love Him, because He first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also (*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.

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: "When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (*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.

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. Consider Christ's words in Matthew 7:3-5:

Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

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 say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse 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." Listen to Dr. Jay Adams 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.

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:

The trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: *whom having not seen, ye love*; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (*1 Peter 1:7,8*).

2. A God-lover is by definition a person-lover:

A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to 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:

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness (*Col 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 be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men" (*Rom 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 is not contradicting what we've said; it's just being faithful to the totality of what God's Word says about forgiveness. Let's look at this more closely.

Remember *full forgiveness* includes all four of these: (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:

If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican (*Matt 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:

Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil (*1 Peter 3:8-12*).

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 constructive and loving biblical purposes.

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. Read 1 Cor. 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 (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 him 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. Read 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

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. Read the parable in Matthew 18:21-35.

Notice 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 a billion dollars. But in verse 28 it says that this indebted slave had a colleague who owed him 100 pence (a day's wages for most working men of that time). 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: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight: that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest" (v4). That's 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's not busy and it's convenient *for him* (though not necessarily for you). Tell the person what you have done and how you realize that you sinned against God and him. Spend time making it clear that you realize how your sin hurt him. Then ask the person to forgive you: "Would you please forgive me?" He does not have to answer right away. Allow time for him 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 God that you will not continue to dwell on this sin or bring it up again. Think about this in the light of all that God has forgiven you (*Eph 4:32*). This should move you to praise God and make this promise to God. After that, you should make this promise to forgive 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 sinful desire. Out of love for God you need to pursue that person with love. ☐

—Adapted from the writings of Steve Lehrer

What The Bible Says About FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is the heart and soul of Christianity. We are commanded to forgive others as God has forgiven us: "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (*Eph 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.

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus (*Rom 3:20-26*).

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (*Rom 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 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,