

Biblical Forgiveness: What Is It? Who Are We to Forgive? And When?

Forgiveness Quiz:

True or False?

- ◆“Jesus said little about how people should resolve interpersonal conflict.”
- ◆“Where deep wounds between people are concerned, forgiveness can be unpacked in a moment.
- ◆“Personal happiness and joy can legitimately motivate people to live out what the Bible teaches about forgiveness.”
- ◆“Most Christian pastors and counselors agree about what forgiveness is and how it should take place.”
- ◆“Forgiveness occurs properly only when certain conditions are met.”
- ◆“There are times when it is wrong to forgive.”

INTRODUCTION

Some of the primary texts:

- Ephesians 4:31-32
- Luke 17:3 (vv.1-4)
- Colossians 3:12-13
- Jeremiah 31:34
- Isaiah 43:25
- Hebrews 8:12
- Mark 11:25
- Matthew 6:12, 14-15
- Matthew 18:21-35
- The book of Philemon

1. God’s Forgiveness of Us.

- God’s Forgiveness is Available
- God’s Forgiveness is Granted when Asked
- God’s Forgiveness is Lavish
- God’s Forgiveness is Active (as opposed to passive/feelings oriented)
- God’s Forgiveness is a Promise
- God’s Forgiveness is Conditional (not unconditional, hence, leading to universalism)

It is beyond any reasonable dispute that God’s forgiveness is conditional. God is not a universalist who chooses to forgive all men for their offense against Him. (Tim Challies)

2. A Definition of Forgiveness.

What forgiveness is **NOT**:

1. Forgiveness is not just “being sorry”.

2. Forgiveness is not “apologizing”.

Seeking forgiveness is not apologizing. There is nothing in the Bible about apologizing—the World’s substitute for forgiveness that doesn’t get the job done. You apologize, and say “I’m Sorry,” but have not admitted your sin. The offended party feels awkward, not knowing how to respond. You are still holding the ball. You asked him to do nothing. But, confess your sin to him saying, “I have asked God to forgive me, and now I’m asking you,” and you pass the ball to the other person. You ask him to bury the matter for good. Jesus commands him to say “yes,” thereby making the promise that God does: “Your sins and you iniquities will I remember against you no more.” That brings the matter to a conclusion. Apologizing does not.

You don’t have to feel like it to forgive. Forgiveness is a promise that you can make and keep, whether you feel like it or not. And, it is easier to forgive another—even when he sins against you seven times a day—when you remember Christ’s great sacrifice for you sins by which He forgave you. And, then too, remember how many times a day He forgives you ever since you have become a believer. One other fact may help. If you have truly forgiven, it isn’t the fifth, or the third; it’s not even the second time. If you have truly buried the matter, truly forgiven—it’s always the first. (Jay Adams).

Again, hear from Tim Lane

Is an apology the same as asking for forgiveness? No. You must first name the specific sin, then explicitly ask the person for forgiveness. “I was wrong for yelling at you. Will you forgive me?” If I say, “I am sorry for yelling at you,” and stop at that, the typical response from the offended person is, “Oh, that is okay.” What has happened? First, the offender has not admitted his sin. And second, the offended person has lied and minimized the sin! It is not okay for someone to sin against another person! This false “forgiveness” is unbiblical and it can be very destructive over time in relationships. (Tim Lane)

What forgiveness **IS**:

➔What forgiveness IS: A PROMISE OF PARDON.

Stuart Scott defines forgiveness as "The full restoration of a sinning brother who is now repentant."

Time Lane: “Forgiveness cancels a debt.”

When you say “I forgive you” to someone, what exactly are you promising?

1. I promise I will not hold this offense **in my heart**. [to myself]
2. I promise I will not spread this around **to others**. [to others]
3. I promise I will not bring this up **against you again**. [to you]

Forgiveness is a “**promise**”

When God forgives our sins, he does not forget that they ever happened. Rather, He makes a **promise** not to treat you as your sins deserve. (Tim Lane)

The primary Greek verb translated "forgive" (*aphiemi*) means "to send away" or "to release." So in reference to sin it means "to pardon." But forgiveness has also rightly been described as a **promise**, because when God forgives, He promises that He will never hold our sins against us (Jeremiah 31:34).

We are to forgive one another **just as** God has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13), so when we grant forgiveness to someone, we are **promising** that we will "not remember" their sins anymore (Jeremiah 31:34).

-God says he will remember our sins NO more

-he doesn't say he will forget our sins. [There's nothing that omniscient God doesn't cognitively *know*.]

-God does NOT — indeed, He cannot — forget our sins.

-Is 43:25 – will remember your sins no more.

-**but, here's the meaning:** God does not **actively remember** our sins AGAINST us [=hold us guilty]

-we can actively NOT hold something against someone.

-the Bible **doesn't** teach forgive and forget

-the Bible **DOES** teach forgive IN ORDER TO forget.

Difference:

-forgive and forget – we can passively let things go. [can't do that; we're not to be passive]

-forgive in order to forget – we can actively not hold sins against people [an active choice of will]

“Obviously the omniscient God cannot ‘forget’, but he can “not remember.” you see, forgetting is “passive and is something that we as human beings do. “Not remembering” is active. It is a promise whereby one person determines not to remember the sins of another *against him*. To “not remember” is simply a graphic way of saying “I will not bring up these matters to you or others in the future. I will bury them and not exhume the bones to beat you over the head with them. I will never use these sins against you!” (Jay Adams)

In Summary, “When God forgives our sins, he does not forget that they ever happened. Rather, He makes a promise not to treat you as your sins deserve.” (Tim Lane)

3. Who Are We to Forgive?

****Remember our responsibility:***

“be kind to one another, tender-hearted, *forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*”

—Ephesians 4.32

We have to begin with this:

According to the Bible, our forgiveness of one another is to follow God's model of forgiveness. We see this in several New Testament passages.

- Matthew 6:12b “...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
- Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

- Colossians 3:13 "...bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

In each case you'll notice the little word *as*. We are to forgive *as* God forgives or in the same manner as He forgives. Thus we must first understand how God forgives if we are to rightly forgive.

False ideas of forgiveness:

- 1) Forgive anyone and everyone
- 2) Forgive all who have wronged you *even if they don't ask for it*.

Granting forgiveness to a non-asking person is a grace mistake. Some people call this extending grace, which is a nice way of being nice, while not serving the person who is caught in sin ([Galatians 6:1](#)). **Grace extenders do the Gospel a disservice by removing its efficacy.** (Rick Thomas)

Tim Challies provides some helpful thoughts on this:

Nowhere in the Bible do I find that God holds us to a higher standard of forgiveness than He does. If God's forgiveness is conditional, and if we are to model Him, our forgiveness will also be conditional.

Of course we will also freely offer forgiveness and we will pursue and long for the ability to extend forgiveness. We will seek reconciliation. But we will not forgive those who are not repentant. This makes sense when we understand that, in its fullest sense, forgiveness requires repentance.

Forgiveness is a commitment to restore broken or disrupted relationship. It is a letting go of the anger or hurt that has been caused and is a commitment to restoration. It is a commitment to no longer hold an offense and its moral liability against a person. This can only happen when one person repents and the other extends forgiveness.

The ultimate aim of forgiveness is to restore relationship, but a relationship can only be restored when both parties are willing. There cannot be communion when one party is willing and the other is not. To state that there has been full forgiveness in such a case is to make a mockery of the biblical concept of forgiveness.

Jay Adams provides a helpful summary of the error of 'unconditional forgiveness' (forgive all even if they don't ask for it):

"People who try to be kinder than God [by forgiving anyone & everyone even if they're not repentant & don't ask for forgiveness], end up becoming cruel to others. To ignore the biblical concept of forgiving others as we have been forgiven by God in Christ is to focus on one's self, saying, "I feel better since I forgave Bob, even though he didn't seek forgiveness," is the epitome of the modern, self-centered psychological error.

The Biblical teaching:

The key text — Luke 17:3

Luke 17:3 speaks of the horizontal axis of forgiveness: person to person. *Forgiveness as a transaction between two people is possible only if the offender repents, admits the sin, and asks for forgiveness.

In order to forgive someone, it must begin with me and my own heart attitude before God [*the vertical, attitudinal forgiveness*]. But even if the offender does not repent, the offended person must maintain forgiveness as an **attitude** in the **vertical** dimension. You cannot use the offender's failure to ask for forgiveness as an excuse to hold onto your anger and hurt.

If someone doesn't ask for forgiveness: we are *never* to be bitter, hold a grudge (Eph 4.31)!

The Big Question: So can you forgive someone who has not asked for it?

Short answer: no.

Let's clarify and explain...

**Luke 17:3;

Colossians 3:12-13;

Ephesians 4:31-32

Jay Adams does not recognize forgiveness for unrepentant people.

Writing in *From Forgiven to Forgiving* he says, "Forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably **conditioned** on repentance and faith." Adams does maintain the notion of heart forgiveness to a point. There is something that he calls forgiveness from the heart [*attitudinal forgiveness*].

In an earlier book, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, Jay Adams writes:

While forgiveness must not be granted to those who do not seek it repentantly ('if he repents, forgive him'--Luke 17:3), the one who 'has something against anyone' may not continue to hold it against him in his heart. Before God, in prayer, he is to forgive him (i.e., he must tell God that he will hold it against him no longer). He may not brood on it. But this forgiving in prayer (in his own heart before God) does not preclude his responsibility to pursue the matter with the offender [Matthew 5:23-24 if your brother has something against you...; or Luke 17.3, if your brother sins, rebuke him...].

An apparent discrepancy: dealing with the Texts -- comparing Luke 17:3 & Mark 11:25

Some passages in Scripture clearly imply that we can only forgive those who ask for it (e.g. Luke 17:3-4), while others seem to imply that we should forgive everyone who sins against us, regardless of whether they ask for it or not (e.g. Mark 11:25). How can we understand this apparent discrepancy?

Luke 17:3 — “if your brother sins, rebuke him; *and if he repents, forgive him.*

Mark 11.25 — “whenever you stand praying, *forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.*

❖Perhaps the best way is to make a distinction between the **transaction** of forgiveness and the **attitude** of being willing to forgive.

Transactional and attitudinal forgiveness

Forgiveness between two parties, whether with God or another person must be **transactional**. Both parties must be biblically engaged with each other, humbly seeking and granting forgiveness.

There is a chance someone will never humbly and genuinely seek forgiveness from you. If so, it will not be transactional and they will not be forgiven [that is, in the full biblical sense of being reconciled in the relationship]. Still yet, your forgiveness can be [and must be!] attitudinal.

Attitudinal forgiveness deals with your heart as you think about that person who has sinned against you. It also deals with how you relate to the LORD regarding that person. It essentially means you are not tempted to sin when thinking about them. Your attitude toward them is free from sin. (Ephesians 4:31)

Tim Lane and Paul Tripp help with this:

...the Bible is full of calls to forgive. There are two that almost seem contradictory: Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:3. Mark 11:25 says, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” Luke 17:3 says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (authors’ emphasis). Mark 11:25 seems to say that we are to forgive someone no matter what, while Luke 17:3 seems to say that you only forgive someone if he repents.

Which one of these verses is right? They’re both right!

The verses are talking about **two different aspects of forgiveness**. Mark 11:25 is talking about forgiveness as a heart **attitude** before God. The context is worship. When I consider someone’s sin as I stand before the Lord, I am called to have an attitude of forgiveness toward the person who sinned against me. This is non-negotiable. I do not have the right to withhold forgiveness and harbor bitterness in my heart. Luke 17:3, on the other hand, is talking about forgiveness as a **horizontal transaction** between me and the offender. This is often referred to as reconciliation. The point Luke 17:3 makes is that, while I am to have an attitude of forgiveness before the Lord, I can only grant forgiveness to the other person if he repents and admits he has sinned against me.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE: Even if he never does this, I am called to maintain an attitude of forgiveness toward the offender. The vertical aspect of forgiveness is unconditional, but the horizontal aspect depends upon the offender admitting guilt and asking for forgiveness.

Still yet another explanation of *transactional* and *attitudinal* forgiveness:

By Dr. John Street (biblical counselor, The Master’s University)

(1) The attitude of love — willing to forgive

Even though we may not be able to fully reconcile with everyone who sins against us, our attitude toward them should never be one of anger, bitterness, resentment, or any kind of ill will. We should also treat them very kindly and graciously (Romans 12:17-21). We are commanded to love everyone (Luke 6:27-35), so we must desire their best, which means we will do everything we can to bring them to repentance and we will always be ready to reconcile, as Psalm 86:5 says about God. (this can be called vertical forgiveness)

- (a) Mark 11:25 – when you stand praying forgive if you have anything against anyone
- (b) Luke 23:34 – father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
- (c) Matthew 6:12-15 and Luke 11:4 – and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

We can conclude from those verses (and others concerning love and graciousness) that any time someone wrongs us, we should pray to God in this way: ("Father, you know what has happened between _____ and me. Help me to not be angry or bitter at him, nor to seek revenge in any way, but help me to love him and desire only his good. Please work in his heart and bring him to repentance so that we can have a reconciled relationship. Use me in any way You can to help him.")

For a believer that help may involve a confrontation according to Matthew 18, and for an unbeliever it would involve witnessing to him if possible.)

(2) The transaction of forgiveness — “I’ve sinned, I repent, will you forgive me?” ... “yes!”

Just as God does not make His promise of pardon to people unless they repent (Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38), we cannot actually say "I forgive you" to people unless they admit their sin and repent. Therefore the transaction of forgiveness is conditional in that we can only be fully reconciled to those who repent. Those who refuse to repent of their sin are not forgiven by God (in the parental sense mentioned above) and so the consequences of a broken relationship with the offended person continue.

Luke 17:3 says that our part of responsibility to those who sin against us is to confront them, and if we have truly dealt with our own heart attitudes first (i.e. if we have a willingness to forgive heart attitude). Then, if they recognize their wrong and repent from it, we can be reconciled to them. Matthew 18:15-17 makes it clear that we cannot be fully reconciled to those who have not repented, because if we did we could not continue the process described in those verses.

-nobody has any unconditional forgiveness from God.

-in your heart before God, you have forgiven him, in that if he were to repent, you would offer him the promise of forgiveness.

-Luke 17:3 is KEY VERSE HERE

Guarding from Bitterness!

And note: Heath Lambert says we must always guard from **bitterness**.

When someone is not interested in confessing sin and asking for forgiveness, we are NOT allowed to become embittered (Eph 4.31). A lack of contrition and humility on the part of those who have sinned against us DOES NOT constitute a divine permission for us to nurture anger and bitterness.

We must always have a humble heart and an *attitude of forgiveness*.

And in this sense, we must develop a "*theology of suffering*" as we love others who are unwilling to repent.

Tim Challies has a good word on this:

God Does not Hold Us to a Higher Standard

Nowhere in the Bible do I find that God holds us to a higher standard of forgiveness than He does. If God's forgiveness is conditional, and if we are to model Him, our forgiveness will also be conditional.

Of course we will also freely offer forgiveness and we will pursue and long for the ability to extend forgiveness. We will seek reconciliation. But we will not forgive those who are not repentant. This makes sense when we understand that, in its fullest sense, forgiveness requires repentance.

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4. When and How are We to Forgive?

Matthew 18 - the parable

Some questions?

How Should We Handle Repeat Offenses?

Jesus answered this question expressly in Luke 17:3-4: "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." Again, our forgiveness is supposed to be lavish, enthusiastic, eager, freely offered, and unconstrained--even for repeat offenders. After all, we are all repeat offenders against God.

Can't I just overlook people's sins & not deal with all this confrontation, repentance stuff?

I've heard people suggest that God forgets our sins when He forgives. They usually cite Hebrews 10:17: "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (cf. 8:12). Or Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins." But those verses don't say God forgets our sins. They say *He will not remember them*. What's the difference? To forget something is to have no memory of it. Obviously God, who is omniscient, has not lost His memory of our transgressions. Rather, He refuses to call them to mind. He promises not to bring them up.

And that is exactly what is involved in forgiveness. It is a promise not to remind the person of the offense. Jay Adams characterizes this as a threefold promise: "You promise not to remember his sin by bringing it

up to him, to others, or to yourself. The sin is buried" (Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving* [Amityville, NY: Calvary, 1994], 25).

But what if I'm really hurt by the offense (adultery, slander, etc.)? Shouldn't I wait till I'm over my anger before I forgive them?

Some transgressions, particularly offenses involving marital infidelity, can cause pain so intense that the offended person imagines it is okay to withhold forgiveness in *this* case. They rationalize that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness might be all right for dealing with petty offenses, but a *serious* offense surely justifies a cooling-off period or a time of "emotional healing."

Normally, however, those who take that approach merely allow themselves to seethe, and thus the negative emotions are only fed, and the breach caused by the original offense is made worse by a heart-hardening resentment.

Much of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was given to teach us *not* to be driven by our passions in such matters. Allowing emotions to take over and control us so that we violate what we know rationally is our duty is the very essence of sensuality. And sensuality is sinful, whether it is the kind of sensuality that leads to sins of lust like adultery, or the kind of sensuality that allows emotions to become a roadblock to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is first of all an act of the will. It is not hypocrisy to will forgiveness when the emotions are screaming for vengeance. Be obedient to the Lord regardless of how you feel. If you refuse to harbor spite or dwell on the offense, evil emotions will be starved. Moreover, the Lord Himself will set your heart right. Right emotions will eventually come if you surrender to Him.

And ultimately a conscious, deliberate, willful choice to forgive is the *only* thing that can free a heart from the bondage of such emotions.

CONCLUSION

Does scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive?

I answer emphatically, it does not.

The word of God says, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repeat, thou shalt forgive him" (Luke 17:3,4). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first "repent", that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him.

But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbor ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong. That would be to condone the offence, and therefore I should fail to uphold the requirements of righteousness, and this the believer is ever to do. Does God ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for scripture declares, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). One thing more. If one has injured me and repented not, while I cannot forgive him and treat him as though he had not offended, nevertheless, not only must I hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also pray for him. Here is the value of Christ's perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him.

A. W. Pink, *The Seven Sayings of the Savior on the Cross*

A Brief Explanation of Biblical Forgiveness

By Geoffrey R. Kirkland

Christ Fellowship Bible Church

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

—Ps 103:12

When one examines the Word of God, he finds that God is a “forgiving God” (Ex 34:6-7; Num 14:18; Ps 99:8; Eph 4:32) who does not “remember sins any more” (Isa 43:25; Heb 8:12). The forgiveness of God serves as a model for how we as His people should forgive one another (Col 3:13; Eph 4:32; Matt 18:35). In an age where resentment, revenge, retaliation, and returning insult for insult abounds and, in fact, is glorified, what *is* biblical forgiveness?

Biblical forgiveness is a **promise of pardon**. That is, when one forgives someone, biblically speaking, he makes the following three promises to that person:

1. I promise to not bring this sin up to YOU again.

Just as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us (Ps 103:12). God promises that the sin is removed from us and has removed them far from us so that He will not hold us accountable for our sins. God does this because He forgave us because He crushed His Son, Jesus Christ, in our place. He removed our sins and the penalty those sins deserve by placing them — all of them — on Christ two thousand years ago. So then, God will not bring up sins to us or hold us accountable for our sins (cf. Heb 7:25). So then, when we forgive others we must affirm that we will not remind *them* of their sins. True forgiveness will not say: “But yesterday you did...” or “You *always* do...” or “You never...” True love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5). Thus, true forgiveness promises to pardon sin and thus not bring that sin up to the person again.

2. I promise to not bring this sin up to OTHERS.

God does not speak of all our sins to others. He does not broadcast all our faults and sins of omission and commission on heaven’s big-screen! They are all removed and forgiven (Ps 130:4). This is true biblical forgiveness. When we forgive others, we then promise to not mention the sin to others. If we were to mention it to others, we would then be guilty of the sin of slander or gossip (Ps 15:3; Prov 25:9). In fact, he who spreads slander is a fool (Prov 10:9). This is the very deed that God commands believers to put off in sanctification (Eph 4:31). When we forgive, we must in essence say “I forgive you and I will make a deliberate choice to not bring this sin up to others.” This eliminates such conversation such as: “Did you hear that ___ did...” or “Can you believe that ___ said....” Thus, true forgiveness promises to pardon sin and not mention the offense to other people.

3. I promise not to rehearse this sin to MYSELF again.

God says to His people: “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:34). This is reiterated in the NT as well (Heb 8:12; 10:17). God who is sovereignly omniscient (‘all knowing’) cannot ‘forget’ anything. But this means that He *actively chooses* not to remember the offense and thus hold it against us. He does not rehearse over and over again in his mind what we have done. Because Christ died for us and bore our wrath, God chooses to not rehearse our sins to Himself. And this is what our forgiveness must look like. When we forgive we cannot say in our hearts: “Man, I cannot believe that he did...” or “I would never do that!” Thus, true forgiveness promises to pardon sin and actively, deliberately, and carefully chooses to not rehearse the offense of another in my own heart and mind.