

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 12 – Forgiveness

Randy Thompson
Valley Bible Church
www.valleybible.net

Introduction

Do you have relationships or interact with other people? Of course. Relatives (sometimes a lot of relatives)? Fellow believers? Friends? Co-workers? Team-mates? Club-mates? Strangers? Interactions among people can be some of the most difficult experiences in life. We can easily (intentionally or inadvertently) offend or be offended. Think about these situations in which the offender could or could not be a believer and the one offended is a believer.

- Along the road, someone cuts a believer off and gives them a hand gesture.
- At a store, a shopper pushes in front of a believer in line and calls them a rude name.
- At home, someone breaks into your house and steals your belongings.
- At work, a believer is gossiped about and it hurts their reputation.
- At school, a believer is singled out, teased, and bullied.
- At church, a believer treats another believer unkindly.
- In the family, a child is rebellious and says awful words to the believing parents.
- In the family, parents have provoked their children to anger.
- In marriage, a believer's husband is embittered against his wife and treats her with anger.
- In marriage, a believer's wife treats her husband disrespectfully.
- In marriage, a believer's spouse behaves selfishly toward them.
- In marriage, a believer's spouse commits adultery.

What is the common event in each of these situations? Sin! The Scriptures tell us that, ultimately, all sin is against God (Psa 51:4). But the Scriptures also tell us that while missing the mark of God's perfect righteousness (Matt 5:48) people can sin against other people (Matt 18:21).

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Matt 18:21

In each of these examples just given, a believer is sinned against. What should the believer's response be when sinned against? Should it be anger, hatred, resentment, bitterness, vengeance, or a heart that wants to "get even"? No, it must be forgiveness.

❖ **How do you find yourself responding when you are sinned against?**

We already talked about a believer's responsibility to confront sin in other believers with the goal of their restoration (Gal 6:1) with God. This confrontation includes church forgiveness in church discipline (Matt 18:15-20; 2 Cor 2:5-11). Our study today will focus on personal, relationship forgiveness modeled after God's forgiveness.

Word Uses

There are primarily two Greek words that are translated "to forgive" in the NT. The gospel writers most often used the Greek word "aphiemi" (Matt 6:12, 14-15; 9:6; 12:31-32; 18:21-35; Mark 2:5-10; 3:28; 4:12; 11:25-26; Luke 5:20-24; 7:47-49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34; John 20:23; Acts 8:22; Rom 4:7; James 5:15; 1 John 1:9; 2:12).

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I **forgive** him? Up to seven times?" Matt 18:21

“Aphiemi” literally means to “hurl away” or “let go” or “give up a debt.” This paints a vivid word picture of forgiveness as sending the sin away. This word was also used in secular Greek to mean “canceling a debt”. Believers are called to forgive or send away the debt of those that sin against them in word or deed.

The other Greek word, “charizomai,” was used primarily in Paul’s epistles (Luke 7:42-43; 2 Cor 2:7-10; 12:13; Eph 4:32; Col 2:13; 3:13). “Charizomai” comes from the word for “grace” meaning “unmerited favor” It means “to give freely and unconditionally” or “to bestow as a gift of grace and then to remit a debt”. The idea of unconditionally and completely are conveyed.

Forgive “Just as” God

Two passages form the foundation for us forgiving other people: Eph 4:30-32 and Col 3:12-14. Both passages describe forgiveness in a similar way.

³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.** Eph 4:30-32

¹²So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³bearing with one another, and **forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.** ¹⁴Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Col 3:12-14

“Forgive” in these passages is “charizomai”. It is in the present tense which calls for forgiveness to be the believer's continual practice; forgiveness is to be unceasing. The word usage also pictures believers as those who are to initiate the action of forgiving.

The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul draws a comparison/contrast between how God in Christ has forgiven us and how we are to forgive others. The phrase, “just as,” conveys the sense of “in the same way as”, “just like”, “according as”, “to the degree that” and designates our model for forgiveness. The phrases, “just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” and “just as the Lord forgave you”, indicate that there is a perspective from which we are to look at God’s forgiveness to be the example of our forgiveness. That perspective is from God’s viewpoint. So, if we are commanded to “forgive each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you”, the question is, “How has God in Christ forgiven us?”

God has forgiven us **unconditionally**. Before Christ, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). At some point, God called (Rom 8:30) and drew us to Himself, brought the gospel to us (Acts 10; Rom 10:8-17), and gave us the gift of grace and faith. In fact, the true saving faith that we exercise, which includes repenting (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 20:20-21) and surrendering our life to Christ (Luke 9:23-26), is a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9). We did nothing to deserve, earn, or obtain forgiveness. It is **unconditional**.

❖ **When you think about times when you have forgiven others, do you forgive unconditionally or do you require something from them before you forgive?**

Let’s look at several passages that describe God’s forgiveness.

¹⁰**He has not dealt with us according to our sins,** Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. ¹²**As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.** Psa 103:10-12

When God forgives sin, he does not deal with us according to our sin (i.e. the way we deserve) and he removes the sin far from us.

²⁵“I, even I, am the one who **wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.** Isa 43:25 (see also Jer 31:33-34)

Forgiveness is for God’s sake, not ours; for His own glory. God is God and he cannot “forget” sin. In forgiveness, God makes a conscious choice to not bring our sin to memory or judgment.

¹⁸Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not counting their trespasses against them**, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 2 Cor 5:18-20

Forgiveness plays a critical part in relationship reconciliation. In forgiveness, God chooses to not count our sins against us.

Forgiveness Defined

So, we have seen that forgiveness is:

- Sending away a debt of sin
- Freely and unconditionally canceling a debt of sin
- Unceasingly practiced
- Initiated by the one sinned against
- A conscious choice to not bring a sin to memory or judgment
- To choose to not count a sin against someone

We must also note that love is the basis for forgiveness. Someone who is loved by God in a saving relationship through Jesus Christ is able to love other people. This love “covers” a multitude of sins because it forgives.

¹⁹We love, because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because **love covers a multitude of sins.** 1 Pet 4:8

The great passage in 1 Cor 13 that describes the human outworking of God’s agape love through the believer makes it clear that “love does not take into account a wrong suffered”.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, **does not take into account a wrong suffered**, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Cor 13:4-7

The one who loves does not hold on to a sin committed against them. Since love is a choice, we can choose to love even when we do not “feel” like. In the same way, we can choose to forgive even when we do not feel like it.

❖ **Do you love? If you love, you will forgive. An interesting way to apply this passage is to replace “love” with your own name and see if it is true. If not, then repentance and commitment to honor God by loving is needed.**

Let’s bring the parts of the definition for forgiveness all together:

Forgiveness is the unconditional, gracious act of not holding personal sins (relationship breaking acts) against a person. It freely and unconditionally cancels a debt of sin, sending it away. It must be unceasingly initiated by the one sinned against. It is a conscious choice to not bring a sin to memory or judgment or to not take into account a wrong suffered.

❖ **Does your definition of forgiveness differ from the Bible’s definition? If so, what must you do with your definition?**

“A person who forgives is a person who emulates godly character. Nothing so much demonstrates God’s love as His forgiveness. A person who does not forgive is therefore a person lacking in godly character and without Christ-like love, no matter how orthodox his theology or how outwardly impeccable his morals appear to be. A Christian who will not relinquish a hateful, resentful attitude toward someone who has wronged him is a person who knows neither the true glory of his redeemed humanity nor the true glory of God’s gracious divinity. An unforgiving Christian is a living contradiction of His new nature in Christ. It is central to the heart of God to forgive, and only the Christian who radiates forgiveness radiates true godliness.”
MacArthur's NT Commentary: Matthew 16-23

It is worth noting that personal forgiveness does not necessarily release offenders from the consequences of their sin.

¹Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ²Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Rom 13:1-4

¹³Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. 1 Pet 2:13-14

⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Matt 19:9

The God-ward Aspect of Forgiveness

We often view forgiveness as part of what heals relationships between people. However, forgiveness is really centered around the relationship between the offended person and God. Withholding forgiveness is a sin which interrupts our intimate fellowship with God. Holding on to any sin in our heart causes a break in our fellowship with God (Psa 66:18; Eph 4:30).

²⁴Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you. 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.** ²⁶[But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”] Mark 11:24-26

The forgiveness that Jesus is talking about in this passage is not salvation, but maintaining our intimate relationship with God.

When we look at the passages on forgiveness, primarily in the gospels, we see something interesting. We are called to forgive “anyone” and “everyone” who has sinned against us (Matthew 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:24-26; Luke 11:2-4); regardless if they have repented or not. The reason is clear, unforgiveness is a sin which breaks our relationship with God. We are called to put off sin and put on righteousness (Eph 4:22-24). Therefore, we must put off unforgiveness and put on forgiveness.

❖ **Do you view unforgiveness as a sin?**

Self-Assessment

What are some ways to discern if you are harboring unforgiveness? Ask yourself the following questions while meditating on the Scriptures already mentioned in this study to help discern if you are holding onto unforgiveness:

1. Does my mind continue to dwell on instances when I have been sinned against?
2. Can I remember details of sins against me from a long time ago?
3. Do I continue to bring a sin up to the one who sinned against you?
4. Do I find myself telling other people about how I have been sinned against?
5. When I think of the person who sinned against, am I angry, bitter, or resentful?
6. When I think of the person who sinned against me, do I desire to see that person "pay" for what they did to me?
7. Do I have a secret desire for revenge against the person who sinned against me? Do I think something like "I wouldn't mind if something bad happened to that person.?"
8. Do I seek opportunities to agape-love the person who has sinned against me?

If you answered "yes" to any question 1-7 and "no" to question 8, then most-likely you are holding unforgiveness in your heart. You must repent from this sin of unforgiveness and ask God for grace to be obedient in this area toward the one who sinned against you.

❖ **Is there someone in your life who you choose to not forgive?**

Practicing Forgiveness

Fortunately, the Scriptures are not silent on forgiveness and give us very practical ways to work at practicing forgiveness. Here are several:

1. Recognize that forgiving just as God has forgiven us in Christ is only possible through God's strength as we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Christian life is not lived in our own strength. It is a life lived filled with the Spirit as the life of Christ flows through us. When a believer is submitted to God (Eph 5:18-6:9) and His Word (Col 3:16-4:1), the indwelling Holy Spirit fills (or controls) them and produces Christ-like character, heart motives, attitudes, words, and reactions. The believer in a right relationship with God will be filled with the Spirit. This is the usual, expected state of a believer. Being filled with the Spirit is the surrendering of every area of our life to God so that the Holy Spirit is controlling our words, worship, reactions, and relationships.

Being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18-6:9) is also described as "letting the word of Christ richly dwell within you" (Col 3:16-4:1), "abiding in Christ" (John 15:1-11), "setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart" (1 Pet 3:15), "living by faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20), and "presenting your bodies a living and holy sacrifice" (Rom 12:1-2).

Those filled with the Spirit will manifest the fruit of the Spirit.

¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ... ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Gal 5:16, 22-23

The true believer has all the resources they need to glorify God. They can forgive in the power of the Holy Spirit regardless of the circumstances as they display the fruits of the Spirit.

❖ **Are you living consistently filled with the Spirit?**

2. Recognize that unlimited forgiveness is commanded by God.

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “**I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.**” Matt 18:21-22

The point that Jesus is making is that forgiveness has no bounds; there is no number limit to forgiveness. God’s commands are not optional. We have no right nor authority to discard those commands which we find distasteful. The Scriptures are clear that the person who has exercised true saving faith will love Jesus (1 John 4:19; 1 Pet 1:8-9). Since we love Jesus, we will seek to keep His commands out of gratitude for all that He has done for us.

¹⁵“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. John 14:15

²⁸Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire. Heb 12:28-29

Because we have been forgiven by God, we can choose to forgive others. We can choose to obey and forgive or we can choose to not forgive and disobey. We should never say that we “cannot” forgive someone. The truth is that we choose to not forgive. Those that have exercised true saving faith in Christ have been born again (John 3:3-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17) and the power of sin over them has been broken (Romans 6). Sin and righteousness are now choices. Forgiveness is an act of love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Therefore, just like love, forgiveness is a choice of the will. We can choose to love (or forgive) even when we do not feel like.

❖ **Do you love Jesus enough to obey even the difficult commands?**

3. Recognize that forgiveness is a decision of the will.

²⁵“I, even I, am the one who **wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.** Isa 43:25

In forgiveness, God makes a conscious choice to not bring our sin to memory or judgment. We must do the same thing in forgiving others.

Forgiving does not mean lying to ourselves and making the past better than it was. But it does mean refusing to live in the moment of the past offense. By continuing to bring to memory the past offense we allow the sin of bitterness to take root in our lives (Heb 12:14-15).

We can tell if we are bitter if we can remember details of an offense against us from long ago. Memorization is helped by repetition. If we bring to memory offenses against us over-and-over again, we begin to harbor anger and bitterness against the offender. By not bringing an offense to remembrance, by not dwelling on the offense and instead forgiving, we ensure that roots of bitterness will not take hold.

❖ **Is there bitterness in your heart toward someone?**

4. Recognize that the small debt of sin against me is nothing compared to my huge debt of sin against God.

Matthew 18:21-35 gives us a great comparison between two people who forgive. One, a king, was owed much by one of his slaves. The other, a slave, was owed little by a fellow slave. The king forgave the huge debt, but the slave refused to forgive the puny debt.

Christians must always reflect God’s forgiveness because they have experienced that same forgiveness. The one-and-only, all-holy God has forgiven a lifetime of sin against Him. The very sin that sent His Son to the cross, He has forgiven. How could we then not forgive a small sin, by comparison, against us?

Imagine this: You have been graciously forgiven the debt of a large amount of money (say \$20,000,000). How could you not forgive someone else a small amount of money (say \$1,000)? The “small” amount is still a lot of money and it costs you something to forgive it, but it is nothing in comparison to the huge debt you have been forgiven.

❖ **How big do you view your debt of sin that God has forgiven?**

5. Recognize that God will execute perfect justice.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹**Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord.** ²⁰“BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:14-21

God is the avenger of all wrongs. He is the perfect Judge to execute perfect justice for all people. Knowing that God will ultimately judge those who have wronged us helps us realize it is not up to us to take revenge. Every wrong will be dealt with by God: either by the blood of Christ in salvation or through God's judgment. This frees us to forgive others.

❖ **Do you demand justice for offenses against you?**

Relationship Reconciliation

Unfortunately many people equate forgiveness with relationship reconciliation and restoration. Forgiveness freely and unconditionally releases the offender from their debt of sin toward the one they have offended. The continuing result of forgiveness is that reconciliation and restoration of the relationship is possible, but forgiveness does not guarantee restoration. Reconciliation and restoration require both parties to work towards that end. Some key principles:

- Forgiveness covers a multitude of sins.

⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because **love covers a multitude of sins.** 1 Pet 4:8

- Believers are to do everything they can to live at peace with all people.

¹⁸**If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.** Rom 12:18

¹⁴**Pursue peace with all men,** and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. Heb 12:14

- Believers who are sinned against are to forgive everyone (both the repentant and not repentant).

³Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and **if he repents, forgive him.** ⁴And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” ⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” Luke 17:3-4

²⁵Whenever you stand praying, **forgive**, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. ²⁶[But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”] Mark 11:25-26

- Believers who repent of their sin against God (and other people) will pursue relationship reconciliation and restoration with zeal.

⁹I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of repentance*; for you were made sorrowful according to *the will of God*, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. ¹⁰For the sorrow that is according to *the will of God* produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. ¹¹For behold what **earnestness** this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what **vindication of yourselves**, what **indignation**, what **fear**, what **longing**, what **zeal**, what **avenging of wrong**! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 2 Cor 7:9-11

²³Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Matt 5:23-24

❖ Are you stingy with either forgiveness or repentance?

Challenge

We must recognize that forgiveness is only possible as we are filled with the Spirit, unlimited forgiveness is commanded by God, forgiveness is a decision of the will, the small debt of sin against me is nothing compared to my huge debt of sin against God, and that God will execute perfect justice.

A Christian who chooses to not forgive from the heart is a contradiction. A true believer will desire to forgive because this honors and glorifies God. Unconditional, unlimited forgiveness is not easy in our own strength. But as we bow before God in complete submission, filled with the Spirit, the life of Christ will flow through us. Forgiveness will result.

Are you willing to be used by God to display His character in the world by forgiving and bring Him glory?

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 12 – Forgiveness – Additional Study

Paul's letter to Philemon is a picture of forgiveness. Read the epistle looking at the principles of forgiveness in the letter detailed below.

v8-10, 21 – The one who forgives **responds to an appeal** for forgiveness; either an individual, Scripture, or the Holy Spirit.

v11 – The one who forgives **changes the opinion of the offender**.

v12-13 – The one who forgives **receives the offender back**.

v14 – The one who forgives **does so willingly**.

v15-17 – The one who forgives **restores the offender**.

v18-19 – The one who forgives **releases the claim/right of restitution**.

v20 – The one who forgives **is a blessing to many**.

v21 – The one who forgives **does so zealously**.

Read these passages on forgiveness: Psalm 103:10-12; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Matthew 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:24-26; Luke 11:2-4; Romans 12:14-21; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 4:30-32; Colossians 3:12-14; and 1 Peter 4:8.

What aspects of God's forgiveness do you fail to live out in your own life?

Is forgiveness prominent in your life?

When you forgive, what are you trying to accomplish?

When you do not forgive, what are you trying to accomplish?

Re-read the self-assessment from this study.

Are you holding onto unforgiveness toward someone?

If yes, God calls unforgiveness sin. What are you called by God to do?