

FORGIVENESS: THE MISUNDERSTOOD VIRTUE

Jason Dulle

Many Christians struggle with forgiveness. It's not that they struggle with the willingness to forgive. They are willing to forgive the person who wronged them, and have even told God that they forgive the person. And yet, they still struggle with feelings of anger and bitterness toward this person. Because the negative emotions remain, they conclude that their forgiveness must not have been genuine and affirm their forgiveness to God again. The feelings remain, and so the cycle continues. In desperation, they ask "How does one *truly* forgive?"

What's the problem? The problem is not with their desire or sincerity, but with their understanding of Biblical forgiveness. There are three primary misunderstandings that make it difficult to achieve true forgiveness:

1. Thinking forgiveness requires an emotional change
2. Thinking forgiveness is a unilateral transaction
3. Thinking forgiveness is unconditional

Let's look at each in turn.

Forgiveness Requires an Emotional Change

Many Christians have adopted a therapeutic view of forgiveness, seeing the release of negative emotions as the primary purpose of forgiveness. When Christians ask, "How do I forgive?," what they usually mean is, "How do I change my emotions so that I am no longer angry at the person who wronged me?" Forgiveness is understood to be primarily for the benefit of the offended, not the offender.

I've heard numerous sermons and memes promoting this view of forgiveness:

- "Forgiveness: a decision we make to release a person from the feelings of anger we have at them."
- "Unforgiveness is choosing to stay trapped in a prison of bitterness serving time for someone else's crime."
- "Forgiveness is not something we do for other people. It's something we do for ourselves to move on."
- "Forgiving doesn't make you weak. It sets you free."
- "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace."

Such memes perpetuate a therapeutic view of forgiveness. The problem with this view is that it has no basis in Scripture. Scripture never speaks of forgiveness in terms of feelings or letting go of one's anger. Forgiveness is not about ridding ourselves of negative emotions toward people who have wronged us. While we should seek to purge any negative emotions toward those who have hurt us, this is not the essence or purpose of forgiveness.

The Biblical concept of forgiveness

The Biblical concept of forgiveness entails the release of a debt owed (Matthew 6:12; 18:23-35; Luke 7:41-48). It's a monetary concept. If you owe me \$100, and I decide to cancel that debt, you are no longer responsible to repay the debt. Even today, we call such an action "debt *forgiveness*." It's interesting, then, that when Jesus wanted to illustrate the concept of forgiveness, He told a parable

regarding two men who owed a monetary debt to their masters (the parable of the unforgiving servant – Matthew 18:23-35).

Biblical forgiveness is not about the canceling of monetary debt, but moral debt. Our sin is a moral debt against God and others. When we forgive someone, we cancel their moral debt against us. We expunge their record of the moral crime. We affirm that the moral debt is no longer owed, and punishment for the sin will be abrogated. Why do we forgive? To restore relationships. The purpose of forgiveness is reconciliation (Matthew 5:24; 18:15; 2 Corinthians 5:19). Forgiveness is a commitment to restore the relationship that was fractured by some particular sin. This is what God does when He forgives us. He chooses to “forget” our sin, never bringing it up against us, and abrogates the punishment that was due for our sin (Psalm 25:7; 79:8; 103:11-14; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17). In short, He restores our relationship with Him – and He does so immediately, without us having to first “prove ourselves” to Him through some probationary period (Ephesians 1:7-11; 2:12-13; 4:18-24; Colossians 1:20-22). There is no forgiveness without reconciliation. God never forgives someone without also reestablishing relationship with them. Likewise, human forgiveness entails a reconciliation of the relationship that was fractured by sin. Forgiveness without reconciliation is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness, then, is a way of behaving, not a way of feeling. Forgiveness will change how we treat others, not necessarily how we feel toward others – at least not initially.

Forgiveness is about actions, not feelings

We know forgiveness cannot be about feeling a certain way toward others because God commands us to forgive (Matthew 6:12,14-15; 18:21-22,34-45; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). You can't command someone to feel a certain way. You can only command actions, so Jesus' command to forgive cannot be a command regarding our feelings. Rather, it is a command to restore relationships – to treat the offending party as if they had not sinned.

The command to forgive is similar to the command to love. When God commands us to love others, He's not commanding us to feel a certain way about them, but to act a certain way toward them: to act in their best interest and treat them as we would want to be treated ourselves. The same is true of forgiveness. It's about how we *treat* others rather than how we *feel* about others. "Forgiveness" that results in one feeling better emotionally but not a restored relationship is not forgiveness at all. It is just an emotional release. Forgiveness is about *reconciling* relationships, not *releasing* emotions.

While forgiveness concerns our actions rather than our feelings, that does not mean our emotions are of no concern to God. They are, and we should actively seek to release our anger and bitterness toward others, but because emotional change often follows behavioral change, the emotional release we seek may only come after we have forgiven. First we choose to forgive – treating the offending person as if they had never sinned against us – and then we begin to feel differently toward them.

While forgiveness typically leads to changed feelings, we should not judge whether we have forgiven someone on the basis of how we feel toward them at the moment. We judge whether we have forgiven someone based on how we treat them. If we are no longer angry at our offender, but have not reconciled the relationship, then we have not forgiven him. If we reconcile the relationship, however, treating our offender as we did prior to his sin, then true forgiveness has been achieved – even if we still feel anger toward him for a period of time.

Selfish forgiveness

I'm concerned that by thinking of forgiveness in terms of emotions and personal mental health, we have inadvertently turned the selfless concept of forgiveness into an act of selfishness. We forgive others because it benefits *us*; because it makes *us* feel better. In contrast, true forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the sinner, not the forgiver. We forgive others for their sake, not our own. God doesn't forgive us so that He can feel better emotionally, but for our benefit – to restore our relationship with Him. Likewise, we should forgive others for their sake, not because it helps us feel better inside.

This self-focused and emotion-focused understanding of forgiveness has even given rise to the unbiblical notion that we need to forgive ourselves.¹ Some have taken it further yet, suggesting that we need to forgive God if we are harboring anger against Him.² When one understands that forgiveness is about restoring relationships, and that forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the offender, notions such as forgiving oneself or forgiving God become meaningless.

Forgiveness is a Unilateral Transaction

"The 'forgiveness' of pop culture is a matter of personal psychological health that we perform by ourselves, for ourselves. 'Forgiveness' is essentially getting over an injustice; it is the near equivalent of releasing a grudge, and it can be accomplished unilaterally."³ If the essence of forgiveness is reconciliation, however, then forgiveness cannot be achieved through a solitary, internal process alone. Forgiveness is not the kind of thing you can do privately in prayer. True forgiveness requires the offended person to confront their offender and, upon his repentance, pronounce their forgiveness of him.

This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, *go and tell him his fault*, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." He reiterated this in Luke 17:4 as well: "If your brother sins, *rebuke him....*" Most people are not comfortable with confrontation, however, so we have redefined forgiveness as a solitary act of emotional release, allowing us to forgive people from afar. In contrast, Biblical forgiveness is a bilateral transaction involving the interaction of two human beings: a confessor of sin and a forgiver of sin. Forgiveness is only achieved after each party has done his part, and the relationship is restored to its pre-sin state.

Forgiveness is Unconditional

Many Christians believe that we are required to forgive everyone who sins against us, immediately and without condition – no repentance necessary. It is true that we are commanded by God to forgive others, as these Scriptures attest:

- **Matthew 6:12,14-15** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
- **Matthew 18:21-22** Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

¹Jason Dulle, "You Can't Forgive Yourself"; available from <https://theosophical.wordpress.com/2018/03/06/you-cant-forgive-yourself/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

²See Sam Storms, "Are We Supposed to Forgive God?"; available from <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/are-we-supposed-to-forgive-god>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

³Jerry Jarman, "Forgiveness in the Bible and in Pop Psychology"; available from <https://www.equip.org/articles/forgiveness-in-the-bible-and-in-pop-psychology/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

- **Matthew 18:34-35** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
- **Mark 11:25** And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.
- **Luke 6:37** Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven.
- **Luke 11:4** And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
- **Luke 17:3** Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.
- **John 20:23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.
- **2 Corinthians 2:7** So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.
- **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.

While we are commanded to forgive, are we also commanded to do so immediately and even in the absence of repentance? No. That idea is absent from Scripture. There are several places, however, where it is made clear that forgiveness is only extended to those who repent.

The preeminent example of this principle is God Himself. God only forgives those who repent (2 Chronicles 7:14; Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30-31; 20:21; Romans 2:4-5; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 2 Timothy 2:25-26; 1 John 1:9). If our forgiveness of others is patterned on God’s forgiveness of us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:31), then we should only forgive the repentant. Surely God does not expect us to forgive those who do not repent when He Himself is unwilling to do so.

Luke 17:3-4 is also clear that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents, forgive him*, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” Notice the several conditional statements. *If* our brother sins, we are to rebuke him. The purpose of rebuking him is not to condemn him, but to elicit his repentance. The second conditional, “*if he repents, forgive him*,” is clear that forgiveness is conditioned on repentance. The third conditional, “*if he sins against you seven times*,” hammers home the point even further. We are to forgive our brother all seven times *if* he repents all seven times. Jesus did not say, “If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. If he doesn’t repent, forgive him anyway.” Each act of forgiveness is preceded by an act of repentance. Forgiveness is only extended to those who repent, not to those who don’t. As such, the precondition for forgiveness is repentance.

Matthew 18:15-20 provides us with a process for dealing with an unrepentant Christian who sinned against his brother:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Note that Jesus did not say the offended brother should wait for the offending brother to seek him out. He said the offended brother should confront the offending brother privately in an attempt to restore the relationship. "If he listens to you" means the offending brother has repented over his sin. When he does so, the offended brother will forgive him, thus reconciling the relationship ("you have gained your brother"). The pattern Jesus established for us is to (1) confront, (2) repent, and then (3) forgive.

What if the offending brother does not repent after this private confrontation? Jesus did not say, "Oh well, you tried. Just forgive him anyway." Jesus considered the man's repentance to be so important that He commands us to confront this brother again, this time with two or three other Christians present to encourage the man to repent. If this second stage of discipline fails to produce repentance, the matter is to be brought before the church leadership.⁴ If he will not heed their instruction either, they are to excommunicate him from the church and treat him as an unbeliever.

If God intended for us to forgive people immediately and without repentance, there would be no need for such a process. We would simply forgive the unrepentant brother and move on. Instead, we are to follow the process of escalated confrontation, and if it does not yield the desired result of repentance, the unrepentant Christian is to be disfellowshipped, not forgiven. According to Jesus, then, if there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness.

Finally, this same theme of conditional forgiveness is found in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The master did not automatically forgive his servant of his debt. In fact, he planned to punish him for not paying it off. He only forgave the servant after the servant asked for mercy. The notion that Christians must forgive the unrepentant is unbiblical.

The harm of forgiveness without repentance

Not only is the unilateral, therapeutic view of forgiveness unbiblical, but it can be harmful as well. We may release our anger toward the unrepentant person, but the relationship continues to suffer because the sin has not been dealt with. Even if we manage to treat our offender as we did prior to their sin, by privatizing our forgiveness rather than following Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, we could be preventing our offender from repenting and making things right. We should not ignore their sin. "Ignoring sin teaches sinners that sin does not bring consequences. This is harmful to their souls. Continuing to have the benefit of a righteous relationship with another and yet remain in sin against that person results in fostering a habituation of sinful inclinations in their soul, which God says brings about suffering and death."⁵

God doesn't treat us this way. He doesn't resume a relationship with us by choosing to ignore what we have done. Our sin had to be addressed. We had to repent before we could resume relationship with Him. We need to do the same with others. We ought not short circuit the repentance process by treating the unrepentant offender as if they had never sinned. Reconciliation is a privilege extended to the repentant, not a requirement for the offended Christian to extend to the unrepentant.

⁴What constitutes "the church" is not clear. It could refer to the entire local congregation, but more likely, it refers to the local church leadership who is responsible for exercising church discipline.

⁵Kevin Lewis, "Conditional Forgiveness"; available from <https://www.facebook.com/kevin.lewis.77/posts/3469558173278?platform=hootsuite>; Internet; accessed 14 July 2015.

Should we remain angry with the unrepentant?

Does this mean we should be angry toward the unrepentant sinner and treat him badly? Does his lack of repentance justify our bitterness or hatred? No. We are to love all people whether they have repented or not (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27,35; Romans 13:8-10). We must not repay evil with evil or seek personal vengeance (Proverbs 24:29; Romans 12:17-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9-11), but rather do our best to live peaceably with all people (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). We should help our enemies and do good to them (Romans 12:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15). We should not be bitter and angry toward anyone, but be kind and tenderhearted (Ephesians 4:31-32). We should be willing and ready to forgive if and when the offending person repents.

We do not need to forgive someone to rid ourselves of our anger. We can release our anger before they repent (if they ever repent), and before we forgive them. What we should not do, however, is act as if nothing is wrong in the relationship. Restoration of relationship is a privilege extended only to the repentant.

Conclusion

Forgiveness is not about our emotional states. Forgiveness is about restoring relationships that have been damaged by sin. Forgiveness is about how we treat the sinner, not about how we feel toward him. Forgiveness is not a solitary act whereby I privately tell God in prayer that I forgive my offender, but my pronouncement to my offender that their moral debt has been absolved and that the relationship has been restored.

True forgiveness means you no longer hold one's moral fault against him. You will treat him as you had prior to the offense. It means you will not bring the sin up again or use it as a weapon against him in the future. Forgiveness means you will not talk to others about his sin.⁶

While we should always be ready and willing to forgive, we only extend forgiveness to those who seek it in repentance. In the absence of repentance, there can be no forgiveness; however, the Christian can still maintain a disposition of peace and love toward the unrepentant.

We can and should seek to overcome our anger toward the sinner, even in the absence of his repentance. We are commanded to love our enemies and do good to those who harm us (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27,35; Romans 13:8-10), and to live peaceably with all people (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). This includes the unrepentant. We should seek personal peace as well as peace with the unrepentant, but relational harmony only comes after repentance.

Objections

Jesus on the cross

The first and foremost objection to the conditional forgiveness view is Jesus' famous words on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). No one asked Jesus for forgiveness, and yet Jesus forgave them anyway. If Jesus is our moral example, shouldn't we forgive as well? A few things could be said in response.

⁶Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 190.

First, there is good reason to believe these words are not original to Luke's gospel, but a second century interpolation.⁷ If Jesus never uttered these words, the supposed conflict is resolved. For the sake of argument, however, let's assume that these words were uttered by the historical Jesus. What, then?

At best, this would seem to pit Jesus against the Father. If God only forgives those who repent, why would Jesus ask Him to forgive those who have not repented? Not only does this pit Jesus against the Father, but it even pits Jesus against Jesus. After all, it was Jesus that taught us forgiveness is conditioned on repentance (Matthew 18:15-35; Luke 17:3-4). Why would Jesus forgive someone without their repentance if He taught us that forgiveness requires repentance?

Finally, it should be noted that the text does not say Jesus forgave anyone. It says He prayed to the Father, asking Him to forgive.⁸ Was Jesus' prayer answered? I have no reason to believe it wasn't. The real question is *when* it was answered. It doesn't appear that they were forgiven immediately. Peter still held them guilty for crucifying Jesus on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23), and instructed them to repent for the forgiveness of their sin (Acts 2:38).⁹ Perhaps Jesus' prayer was answered, then, when some of those who were present for His crucifixion obeyed Peter's command and repented of their sin on the Day of Pentecost.¹⁰

Some relationships can't be restored to their pre-sin state

If forgiveness requires that we restore a relationship, does that require that we always treat the person as if they had never committed the sin? If so, this would lead to counter-intuitive and foolish decisions. For example, a parent would be required to allow their pedophilic relative private access to their child. A spouse would be prohibited from requiring her cheating husband to be accountable for his whereabouts, his phone usage, and electronic communications.

In some cases, it is not possible or wise to rewind the relationship to exactly the way it was before. Trust that was lost will need to be earned again. While our goal should be to return the relationship as close to its pre-sin state as possible, forgiveness does not require the abandonment of wisdom. It simply requires that we re-establish a relationship with our repentant offender. Once the relationship is re-established, additional steps may be required to regain trust or demonstrate true repentance (Matthew 3:8). In some cases (such as theft), restitution may be needed from our offender (Exodus 22:3,5; Leviticus 6:5; 24:18; Numbers 5:7; Luke 19:8). In other cases, wisdom may dictate that certain precautions be put in place. It's even possible that some sins will have legal consequences. For example, forgiving a pedophile does not mean we do not report him to the police and allow him to face the civil consequences for his actions.

⁷See Alan E. Kurschner, "From the Lips of Jesus or a Scribal Hand?: 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'"; available from <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/textual-issues/from-the-lips-of-jesus-or-a-scribal-hand-father-forgive-them-for-they-do-not-know-what-they-are-doing-2/>; Internet; accessed 24 February 2021.

⁸Unknown author, "Forgiveness is Conditional"; available from <https://learntheology.com/forgiveness-is-conditional.html>; Internet; accessed 23 February 2021.

⁹This assumes that the "them" Jesus asked the Father to forgive refers to the Jewish leaders and citizens who were egging on His crucifixion. It is also possible that "them" refers to the soldiers who carried out the crucifixion. They are the "they" referred to in verse 33, right before Jesus said "they do not know what they do." If Jesus was referring to the soldiers, then perhaps Jesus was asking that the Father not hold this against them since they had no knowledge of who Jesus was or why He was being crucified. They were simply following orders, and thus should not be held morally responsible for Jesus' death.

¹⁰Unknown author, "Forgiveness is Conditional"; available from <https://learntheology.com/forgiveness-is-conditional.html>; Internet; accessed 23 February 2021.

Most passages demanding forgiveness have no conditions

Most of the passages commanding us to forgive others do not place any conditions on that forgiveness, such as the offender's repentance. Doesn't this mean, then, that there are no conditions?

No. We should not assume that every mention of a topic will include everything we need to know regarding it. In many cases, seemingly *carte blanche* statements made in one passage of Scripture are qualified in another. For example, Jesus said that if we ask anything in His name, He will do it (John 14:14). While that sounds like a blank check for answered prayers, we read in other passages that our prayers must be according to God's will (1 John 5:14) and cannot be used for our own lusts (James 4:3). Similarly, in Luke 16:18 Jesus taught that "everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." No exceptions are given. And yet, in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 Jesus makes an exception for sexual immorality. We interpret those passages which lack exceptions in light of those that contain them.

In a similar way, we interpret those passages with less detail in light of those with greater detail. As Kevin Lewis wrote, "Other biblical texts that merely mention 'forgiveness' as a concept or an objective do not necessarily proffer every aspect of the doctrine of forgiveness. As such, they must be read in light of the clear conditions expressed in other passages."¹¹

What about the dead?

If forgiveness requires repentance, does that mean forgiveness is impossible in the case of those who have died unrepentant?

Yes. This situation is essentially the same as a living person who refuses to repent. The only difference is that with the living, there is still hope for future reconciliation. With the dead, all such hope is spent.

One might have unresolved anger regarding a deceased person, but remember, forgiveness is not about resolving anger. Anger is resolved through the power of the Holy Spirit, and we can experience a release from anger even after our offender has passed away.

Doesn't Mark 11:25 show that forgiveness doesn't require repentance?

In Mark 11:25, Jesus said, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Does this verse support the concept of unilateral forgiveness?

No. Perhaps "Jesus is concerned about the attitude of the believer as he stands before God in prayer. If he is inwardly unwilling to forgive his brother or sister, he cannot expect forgiveness from the Father."¹² Or perhaps Jesus is addressing those who have been reluctant to forgive someone who has already asked for their forgiveness. If so, then Jesus' point is that we need to grant the requested forgiveness before we proceed on in prayer. Either way, this verse is perfectly consistent with the view of forgiveness presented in this paper.

It is interesting to note some striking similarities between Jesus' teaching in Mark 11:25 and His teaching in Matthew 5:23-24: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother

¹¹Kevin Lewis, "Conditional Forgiveness."

¹²Unknown author, "Forgiveness is Conditional"; available from <https://learntheology.com/forgiveness-is-conditional.html>; Internet; accessed 23 February 2021.

has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

There are obvious differences between the two accounts:

- In Mark, the person is praying, whereas in Matthew, the person is offering a sacrifice at the temple.
- In Mark, the person is the offended party, whereas in Matthew, the person is the offending party.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, both teachings address what would-be worshippers are to do when they realize that they are not reconciled to their brother. Matthew’s account provides the most detail, instructing the worshipper to leave the temple, meet with the offended brother, reconcile with him, and then resume worship. If this is required of the offending person, wouldn’t Jesus have required it of the offended person as well? After all, Jesus put the responsibility of confronting the offender on the person offended in Matthew 18:15-17 and Luke 17:3-4. If Jesus expected the offended brother to take the initiative when repentance is not forthcoming, it stands to reason that Jesus expected the offended man in Mark 11:25 to do the same. Once he recalls the offense, he to stop praying, resolve the matter with his offender, and then resume his prayer.

Wouldn’t this require repentance for every sin?

If we are to forgive only those who seek forgiveness for their sin, wouldn’t that require a lot of people to repent for a lot of things on a daily basis? Wouldn’t this mean that every minor infraction requires repentance? If so, then most of our lives would be spent being out of relationship with people since few people are willing to repent. Even those who are willing to repent will be annoyed if we require their repentance for every small infraction.

It is true that requiring repentance for every minor infraction would be unlivable. However, there is no reason to think that we must require repentance for every minor infraction. Repentance should only be required in the case of serious infractions that seriously wound the relationship. For minor infractions, we can simply choose to overlook the matter. It’s not that we are forgiving in the absence of repentance, but that there is no need for repentance or forgiveness because the infraction never ruptured the relationship to begin with. We never consider the issue to be a moral debt owed in the first place. We simply overlook the matter. As Solomon advised, “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Proverbs 19:11). Our love covers a multitude of sins and keeps no record of wrongs (Proverbs 10:12; 17:9; 1 Corinthians 13:5; 1 Peter 4:8).

How do we determine what is a serious infraction requiring repentance/forgiveness and what is a minor infraction that does not require repentance/forgiveness? This can only be decided by the individual, because what may be considered a serious issue by one person may not be considered a serious issue to another. The question is whether or not the offense has caused a genuine rift in your relationship that cannot be overlooked. If so, then repentance/forgiveness is required. Personally, if a friend spoke to me in a tone that I found a bit offensive, I may not have liked it, but it would not cause a rift in our friendship. I would simply overlook it. However, if that same friend stole a \$20 bill from me, it would cause a rift in our friendship and would require repentance/forgiveness.

One might object that this is subjective? Yes it is, but this is to be expected. The Bible gives us objective principles related to forgiveness – not case laws. These objective principles need to be applied in real world circumstances, and it’s not always clear how to best apply them. Godly people will have

differences of opinion. But the subjectivity of what constitutes a serious issue does not negate the fact that all of us can distinguish between the categories of minor and serious infractions.

Questions

How often should I forgive?

Jesus was asked this very question by His disciples (Matthew 18:21). They attempted to answer their own question by suggesting a limit of seven times a day. In my book, such a limit would be quite generous. After all, one would have to doubt the sincerity of one's repentance if they sinned against you more than seven times in a day. Jesus, however, thought they were not being generous enough. He said "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22)

If this seems unreasonable to you, consider how many times you sin against God every day? How many times did you fail to love Him with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength? How many times did you fail to love your neighbor as yourself? How many times did you fail to love/respect your spouse? How many times did you fail to prefer others over yourself? How many times did you experience pride, jealousy, greed, selfishness, lust, wrath, etc.? We sin many times in many ways against God each day, and yet He continues to forgive us day-in and day-out. He is simply asking us to extend the same courtesy to others.

But, one will rightly object, if someone is sinning against you in the same way over and over again, surely this reveals that they are not truly repentant. Perhaps, but perhaps not. For example, if my wife convinces me that the way I speak to her is disrespectful, I can come to recognize that she is right and apologize for my actions, but that does not mean I won't speak disrespectfully to her ever again. The way I speak could be an ingrained habit that can be hard to break, despite my recognition of it as sinful and despite my best intentions to never do it again. I may need her forgiveness many times for the same sin, perhaps even on the same day. While one's repentance could be disingenuous, we should give them the benefit of the doubt unless we have very good reason to believe it is, in fact, disingenuous. Repeat offenses alone do not show that someone is disingenuous about their repentance.

How do you avoid a defensive posture when confronting the offending brother?

Nobody likes confrontation, so Jesus' instruction to confront the offending brother will be difficult for many to put into practice. We know that people rarely "receive" correction well, and many will become defensive at any hint that they have done wrong. Jesus was aware of this as well, which is why He created an escalation process to deal with this.

However, the way we approach the offending brother may help mitigate a defensive posture. People often get defensive when they feel like they are being attacked. To avoid making them feel attacked, don't verbally berate them or demand their repentance. Avoid using "you" statements, and focus on how the person's actions made you feel rather than on the wrongness of the actions. By doing so, you invite them to be part of the solution rather than merely making them out be the problem. Of course, some people will still get defensive despite being approached in this way. This can't be avoided entirely. If, however, you've done your part to raise the issue in as non-threatening and loving manner as possible, their defensiveness may just be a symptom of their lack of repentance.