

## Unforgiveness

*Just as the Lord has forgiven you,  
so you also forgive others.*  
- Colossians 3:13 b

**F**orgiveness was the first thing Jesus taught after reciting the Model Prayer (The Lord’s Prayer; Matthew 6:14, 15). To conclude forgiveness to be important would be an understatement; the word forgive is used 56 times in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> God has much to say to His people in regard to forgiveness and lack thereof.

Charles Stanley defined forgiveness well when he wrote, Forgiveness “involves three elements: *injury, a debt* resulting from injury, and *a cancellation of the debt. [... It is]* ‘the act of setting someone free from an obligation to you that is a result of a wrong done against you.’”<sup>35</sup> That is what God does when He forgave us. He set us free from our personal obligations of debt and placed those obligations on His Son. God in turn commands—yes commands—us to release others from their obligations of wrong actions toward us. (Note: God

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<sup>34</sup> See BibleGateway.com, “Forgive” search (NET version), accessed Nov. 4, 2019, <https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=forgive&version=NET&filter=NT&startnumber=1>

<sup>35</sup> Charles Stanley, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 2.

## UNFORGIVENESS

does not allow *any level* of unforgiveness for any sin committed against us.)

There is no unforgiveness “that fits all.” For some, it could stem from a failed business relationship, lousy parents, an abusive relative, a major crime, or even a sour look or sharp word. Unforgiveness can produce daily thoughts; it may be subtle and even forgotten about until it’s not. Unforgiveness may produce “in your face” actions and attitudes; it may be exposed during a heated argument or it may come to light after being “dormant” for decades.

We have the most trouble forgiving others who have sinned against us, but we also may struggle to forgive ourselves for something. Whether you are struggling to forgive others or yourself or both, know that unforgiveness is like a cancer to both your spiritual and physical conditions. A counselor, David Seamands, had this to say about unforgiveness:

*“Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of the most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people....We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that’s not the way we live. The Good News of the Gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.”*<sup>36</sup>

If you are harboring unforgiveness toward yourself or someone—anyone—you need to begin the process of forgiveness. Even in the case of a felony crime, *Christians must forgive*. At times Christians may need to seek out a close friend, pastor, or even a professional counselor. If you have unforgiveness in your life, begin to pray and ask God to give you the desire and strength to forgive. (See Appendix A if you need help finding a counselor.)

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<sup>36</sup> As quoted in, Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 15

### “Quantity” of Forgiveness

“The rabbis taught that a Jew should forgive a repeated sin three times, but after that there need be no more forgiveness.<sup>37</sup> [...] Peter suggested ‘seven times,’ and probably felt very [unselfish in] doing so. Seven was a round number, sometimes regarded as a perfect number, obviously exceeding what the scribes taught.”<sup>38</sup> Look again at the exchange between Jesus and Peter:

*Then Peter came to him and said, ‘Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times! (Matthew 18:21, 22).*

How many times has the Lord forgiven you of sins like impatience or anger? Aren’t you grateful that He has forgiven you over and over and over—for the same sins? How many times can someone sin against you before you “write them off”?

There is no limit to the times we are to forgive one another. We instead are supposed to be marked by forgiveness as Christians. It should be one of the ways we stand out from unbelievers. I can’t help but wonder if we stand out at all in this area. Do you?

We are to forgive those that have sinned against us, “Just as the Lord has forgiven....” Allowing unforgiveness to remain in our lives is at the foremost of mistakes when one considers the associated harsh warnings and rebukes in the New Testament.

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<sup>37</sup> See Donald A. Carson, “Matthew.” In *Matthew–Luke. Vol. 8 of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 245. As Quoted in Thomas Constable, “Matthew Notes,” accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/matthew/matthew.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Constable, “Matthew Notes,” accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/matthew/matthew.htm>.

### *The Quality of Forgiveness: Back to the Table*

The “Just as” phrase in Colossians 3:13 (the verse under the title of this chapter) defines the *quality* of the forgiveness we experience from the Lord and should model to others. When I think of my most grievous sins, I am grateful that God forgives even those. There is no limit to His forgiveness. This is how we are to forgive others.

Without forgiveness, there is no reconciliation. Forgiveness acts not only to stop the judgment of a wrong, but it works toward grace and full reconciliation.

“You can forgive someone, but you don’t have to be best friends with them.” Have you ever heard something like this? Or how about, “I will love you from a distance.” These are worldly teachings. Does a parent refuse for years to eat with his child after an offensive sin? Does a parent kick his 10-year-old out of the family for taking something from another family member? While it is true that we don’t have to be best friends with everyone; it is just as true that we are supposed to be *family* in the church.<sup>39</sup>

We are forgiven of billions of sins. Does God hold a grudge against us for our sins? No. The Father forgives us through Christ and invites us to dine and fellowship with Him. *That is partially what we celebrate when we participate in the Lord’s Supper* (Communion, The Table). God continually allows us back to the table of fellowship. We are to do the same thing. We are to put in the difficult work for reconciliation. Forgiveness is not real if a grudge is still present.

It is no wonder why we don’t have a witness in the world. It is no wonder young people don’t want to stay in church. We are foolish with our humanistic theology. I know families who will not speak to other families in the church because their teenagers have been offended at mere words. American church members can’t forgive people who disagree. The biblical standard is not being lived out in these cases. We are still drinking milk.

I once heard a Rwandan man speak to an American church. He summarized

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<sup>39</sup> There is a place for church discipline, i.e., shunning someone (see Matthew 18:15-35), but the goal of all discipline and forgiveness is *complete reconciliation*.

the way in which many Americans forgive:

*“I forgive you, but I don’t want to sit with you in the church again. I forgive you, but I don’t want to eat with you again. I forgive you, but I will never see you again [...]. That is not divine forgiveness. Forgiveness must create opportunities for [renewed] friendship and hope again.”*<sup>40</sup>

The man who said these things knows something about forgiveness. His father, brother, sister, sister-in-law and her child were murdered during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. To help heal his country, he started a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. There was complete silence in the church when he described the dinner he went to with his family’s murderers. He could educate us on forgiveness.

That, my friends, is biblical forgiveness. In the Rwandan genocide, people who went to church together killed each other. Why? They were tribal first, not family. We are family forever; it is time here to learn to live it.

### *Self Forgiveness*

Some people have trouble forgiving themselves. Your worst moment may haunt you. Often, Christians will ask forgiveness for a specific sin, at times, for years. Christians should *never* do this! The “unforgiveness loop” happens when a Christian remembers a bad—even heinous—sin that he/she committed in the past. The person has confessed the sin many times, but the confession continues when it is remembered. This is unbiblical behavior.

1 John 1:9 teaches us that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.” God’s forgiveness depends on Him, not us. If we continue to confess the same sins, we will feel guilty, but the guilt comes from not *believing* God and not taking Him at His word. *We doubt God when we confess the same sins over and over.*

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<sup>40</sup> Celestin Musekura, Sermon at Fellowship of Huntsville Church, Mar. 30, 2019, accessed Oct. 30, 2019, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/fohc-mp3/2019/2019.03.30.mp3>.

## UNFORGIVENESS

Our consciences may continue to “feel” guilty before God for sure, but that is when we need to remember the 1 John 3:20 verse: “that if our conscience condemns us, that God is greater than our conscience and knows all things.” Our feelings don’t ever govern truth. We must stop trusting our corrupted, sinful, weak emotions and learn that what God has said is true.

So what *do we do* when we remember past sins of ours that have been confessed? We should: 1) *Thank God that He has already forgiven us and cleansed us due to our past confessions.* 2) *Thank Jesus for the forgiveness we have because of His death and resurrection.* 3) *Remember that Jesus’ work is sufficient for the forgiveness we now stand in for that sin and all others.*

### *Being Mad at God*

Most people will experience a time when they are mad at God. There are times when God will allow great pain and suffering to come into the lives of individuals. These times have a tendency to make Christians angry at Him or even closed off toward Him; sometimes both! If you ever find yourself angry at God, confession is key. Relying on Him to soften your heart back toward Him is the next step. Jesus taught us that, “In the world you have trouble and suffering...” (John 16:33). It’s during these times that we must humble ourselves to His plan and carry on by faith, remembering that Jesus told us we would suffer.

### *Make Things Right Quickly with Others*

Here are a few things to keep in mind as we act on forgiveness:

- Get into the habit and practice of asking for forgiveness quickly.
- At times you might make a bad mistake. There might need to be a “cooling off” period before trying to make things right.
- Maximum grit and fortitude are what it may take if we are to work toward consistent forgiveness.

## THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Peter Tanchi suggests three questions to provide a basic framework that may help guide in restoring relationships face-to-face:

1. “How can I improve?” This allows us to be prepared to receive corrections. It is always easier when we are ready to ask for our weaknesses to be exposed. It is easier to ask for ways to improve our behavior when we are in a proactive process.
2. “How have I hurt you?” This question makes no excuses; it shows responsibility. It takes ownership. One must be prepared not to be defensive during this question. We always want to add a “but” to the conversation and critique others when hearing hard things.
3. “Will you forgive me?”<sup>41</sup> This looks to start the correction process. Forgiveness frequently is just the beginning of restoring people to the same meal table.

### *Forgiveness Cannot Be Forced*

Unfortunately, we cannot make each other do the right things. There will be times when people refuse to forgive us. Paul indirectly spoke to this idea with, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people” (Romans 12:18). The best we can do when we blow it is to go to the offended person, confess, and ask for forgiveness and look to restore the relationship. If the offended is a Christian, they must forgive us and seek to restore relationships, but this will not always be the case. God, help us to repent.

### Scripture Passage

Matthew 18:21-35

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Tanchi, GACX Compelled Conference Session (Denton, Texas), Sept. 26, 2019.

## UNFORGIVENESS

### Questions

- 1) Who have you not forgiven? Write one of their initials below.
- 2) Was question 1 easily answered? Yes or No  
If so, you should know that unforgiveness is a part of your life.
- 3) Why do you struggle in taking steps toward forgiveness and restoration?
- 4) Do you struggle with forgiveness regularly? Yes or No
- 5) Have you ever been angry or very disappointed with God? Yes or No
- 6) If yes, what were some of the reasons this was so?
- 7) Are you mad at God right now? Yes or No
- 8) Have you ever been angry at God and then later realized God's purposes in your life? If yes, describe it.
- 9) What are some of the reasons that bad things happen to humanity?
- 11) Have you ever ignored God when things were going well for you? Yes or No
- 12) What event got you praying again?



## THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

### Aim Point

- 1) We must recognize that we must forgive others as Jesus forgives us. Think about all the regular sins you are guilty of. Think of the sins that you have committed that have hurt people. Thank God for His forgiveness. Ask God to help you to forgive those that have harmed you.
- 2) Write emails, letters, make phone calls as necessary to ask for forgiveness or let someone know that you desire to stop holding a grudge against them.
- 3) To read more about forgiveness and/or to equip yourself better for a life of forgiveness, I recommend Charles Stanley's book, *The Gift of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991).