

The Lord Jesus said ... My Sheep

The disciple of the Lord should understand what Godlike forgiveness is. Some store up bitterness and rage which can help destroy the guilty party as well as themselves. Others are ready to pronounce their forgiveness a minute after the other person sins, regardless of nonrepentance or restoration of the relationship. They believe this is Christlike love and will win one rather than destroy one. But “what saith the Scripture?”

Who is to seek forgiveness?

The subject of forgiveness takes for granted the understanding that there is right and wrong according to God’s standard. When one violates God’s standard it is called sin. Sin not only separates God and man (Isa. 59:2) but also man from man. When there is sin we have two specific parties in a relationship:

- #1. the party who did the wrong - the offender
- #2. the party sinned against - the offende

The responsibility lies with the offender to ask for forgiveness, for he committed the wrong. The first time the word “forgive” is used in the Word of God is when Joseph’s brothers were counseled by their father Jacob to say to Joseph, whom they had wronged: “So shall ye say unto Joseph, *Forgive*, I pray thee now, the trespass of thy brethren, and their sin; for they did unto thee evil: and now, we pray thee, *forgive* the trespass of the servants of the God of thy father. And Joseph wept when they spake unto him” (Gen. 50:17). Notice the same pattern elsewhere (Ex. 10:16,17, 1Samuel 15:24,25, Daniel 9:4-9,19).

If forgiveness is to reach its goal of a wrong being righted and reconciliation then the responsibility of acknowledging the wrong lies with the offender. The offende in that case has no wrong to acknowledge and so can’t. Forgiveness implies that sin has been committed because after all it isn’t a “right” that requires forgiveness.

What are the conditions of forgiveness?

Some might answer that there are no conditions for forgiveness. Isn’t love unconditional? Is love God’s only interest or do justice and righteousness enter in?

hear my voice, and

Does the gospel teach that God gives His love at the expense of His righteousness? (See Rom. 3:21-31).

The Old Testament God. To teach His ancient people, Israel, His character and salvation, God communicated on what basis He would forgive their sin against Him. God said concerning their sin that “*it shall be forgiven him*” (Lev. 5:10). But there were conditions that had to be met first for the guilty party to hear those words on behalf of a merciful God. The guilty party (not God) had to:

1. confess his sin (Lev. 5:5)
2. bring a trespass offering to the Lord (Lev. 5:6)
3. have blood (from death) sprinkled (Lev. 5:8)
4. offer a second sacrifice (Lev. 5:10).

Because sin is horrible and destructive its penalty is nothing less than death before God. Thus a death had to occur. Because of the mercy of God, He would accept an acceptable substitute. But the substitute could not bypass the justice of death.

Thus we see that without confession – the wrong admitted – and sacrifice – the wrong righted – God did not grant forgiveness.

The New Testament God. Did God change His character and principles in the New Testament gospel? Christians are told to:

“Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even *as* God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even *as* Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:13).

If we are to forgive one another the same way God and Christ forgave us then we need to ask, *how* did God forgive us? Were there any conditions? Is everybody just automatically forgiven in God’s gospel?

How did God forgive you? Was repentance necessary? Is confession required? Did God require a death sacrifice to satisfy His justice for the laws we break?

It is possible to love and not forgive. God so loves the world but He does not forgive all the world. Why?

they follow me ... John 10:27

There could be no forgiveness from God unless there was an acceptable sacrifice.

The very gospel of grace promises that “...through this man [Jesus Christ] is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 13:38). But though this forgiveness of sins is free of charge (works) to us it was not free for Jesus because of God’s justice. Because the wages of sin is death, God required an acceptable blood sacrifice. Only His sinless Son was acceptable and so Christ died for our sins on the cross.

Forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ would not be granted until there was a change of heart (repentance) toward God and reliance (faith) placed in His Son.

Now that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus was finished and He was risen from the dead, the gospel message was to go out to all nations: “Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21).

While forgiveness is not conditioned on the amount of law one keeps or performs (Acts 13:39), it is conditioned on repentance, faith and sacrifice – Christ’s sacrifice. The repentant believer is promised: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, *according* to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

The God of the New Testament doesn’t forgive without confession – based on sacrifice.

A believer might sin after he is saved. He still needs forgiveness to maintain close fellowship with God. He is told that because of Christ’s blood, “If we *confess* our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn. 1:7-9).

When does one forgive?

When does God forgive? God has made it clear when He will forgive. As the risen Lord commissioned His disciples in Luke 24:47: “And that *repentance* and remission of sins should be preached in his name” Repentance is the changing of one’s mind, the rethinking of a wrong attitude – an acknowledgment of sin.

“And we beheld His glory,

As the crucified Savior hung on the cross He cried out, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke. 23:34). The Lord Jesus perceived their ignorance just like you might perceive the ignorance of a one-year old who steps on your foot and withhold your anger. The Savior did not say “I forgive you.” Rather the Son requested the Father to forgive. But when and to whom did the Father answer His Son’s desire?

It was when the Lord’s apostle, Peter, stood up on Pentecost and announced to Israel that because of the resurrection of Jesus by God, they could now *know assuredly* that they had crucified their Lord Messiah. About 3000 Jews were convicted of their sin and asked in humble contrition, “What shall we do?”

The God of mercy did not say, “No way, I’m finished with you.” Nor did the God of righteousness say, “Nothing, I just forgive you.” He said, “*Repent*, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38).

About 3000 souls did change their minds and went home forgiven of their great atrocity and in a new relationship with God as *His* children. But thousands more were not forgiven. Why? They would not repent.

For one to grant the offender forgiveness without confession or repentance is not compatible with the gospel we profess nor the righteous character of God.

In Isaiah 2:9 a group of people would not repent of their sin and humble themselves by bowing low before God. God pronounced, “therefore *forgive them not.*”

King David found the forgiveness of God – but in this order: “I *acknowledged my sin* unto thee, ... I said, *I will confess* my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah” (Psa. 32:5).

God asked backsliding Israel to “Return again to me.” He had a marriage relationship with her. Though she was playing the spiritual whore, He desired the relationship restored–on this condition: “Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed” (Jer. 3:1,13).

King David greatly erred when he kissed unrepentant Absalom. Absalom then usurped his throne.

the glory of the only begotten

When should the Christian forgive? Shouldn't the disciple do it the way His Lord does?

EXAMPLE 1. The Lord Jesus instructed His disciples when to forgive in Luke 17:3,4.

If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and **if he repent**, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, **I repent**; thou shalt forgive him.

Consistent with the righteous character of the Father and the gospel, Christ taught repentance first. The Lord did not say to go to your brother and say "I forgive you" first, but rather "rebuke him." Maybe he sinned in ignorance. Once you make him aware of it, he is no longer ignorant. Now he must acknowledge the sin against you. It is not right to forgive without repentance. That would only tolerate sin in the name of grace.

Biblical grace does not overlook sin but rather gives the ability to overcome sin. (Rom. 6:1, Titus 2:11,12)

EXAMPLE 2 The Lord Jesus also instructed His disciples about disputes between individuals in Matt. 18.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and *tell him his fault* between thee and him alone: **if he shall hear thee**, thou hast gained thy brother (Matt. 18:15).

Again, rather than pronouncing forgiveness, first you are to confront him with his fault privately (in a meek attitude Gal. 6:1). If your brother listens, then there is restoration. A relationship has been righteously reconciled: the goal of forgiveness – just like the gospel.

If he doesn't hear or repent, rather than being forgiven, the matter progresses through witnesses and eventually to the church. If the trespasser doesn't submit to the church (God's supreme court on earth for Christians, 1Cor. 6), rather than embracing him in "forgiving love," he is to be treated *by you* as a heathen; an unsaved sinner – so says the Word of God (Mt. 18:16-20).

Even in the parable of the famous prodigal son where the Father showed great love and mercy to the wayward son, it occurred *after* the son returned. The fatted

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calf was not roasted nor the party begun until the longed-for words were heard, "I have sinned."

The church at Corinth was told to excommunicate a sinning person rather than offer forgiveness that the person's flesh would feel the pain and be destroyed. We harm individuals when we offer forgiveness without repentance. We encourage their mind-set that there are no consequences to their sinful choices. They will be more likely to pursue their destructive ways and God's Name will be blasphemed in the world (1Cor. 5, Rom. 2:24). We have also demonstrated a false gospel.

Yet after this sinning man in the Corinthian church demonstrated repentance *and punishment was carried out* – the church was *then* told, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" (2Cor. 2: 6,7).

Caution! In not glancing over sin in the name of grace we must not store up bitterness and rage when the person doesn't confess the wrong toward us. We should be like our Lord and be ready to forgive. As Psalm 86:5 reveals: "For thou, Lord, art good, and *ready to forgive*, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee." While we can't forgive until one "calls" (admits their wrong), we should have an attitude that conveys a desire to forgive on the right terms.

Many offences don't fall into the area of a personal trespass because no rights or persons were violated or damaged. These things might be annoying and troublesome but we are told in 1 Peter 4:8 that charity or love "shall cover the multitude of sins." For the sake of higher goals some things just aren't worth fighting over when justice hasn't been breached.

1Corinthians 6 says that while a defrauded believer cannot take another believer to the unsaved courts for judgment, he may take him to the church for judgment. It is better to "take wrong," (not *forgive* it) and just suffer the defrauding rather than involve the unsaved.

In cases where we have been offended, we should ask ourselves several questions: Does the person have knowledge of his wrong? Did he do it ignorantly or with intent? Will righteousness suffer if I ignore it? Will the testimony of our Lord be helped or hurt?

grace and truth." John 1:14

Why does one forgive?

A Christian should forgive a *repentant* person for two simple reasons.

One, God has provided a one-time blood sacrifice for sin in the person of Christ Jesus the Lord. Thus, whether saved or unsaved, there is a sacrifice available that God accepts and on which He will forgive *all* sin against Him: this is the gospel (Col. 2:11-13, 1John 1:7-9).

Two, because God has forgiven you when you trusted the Lord Jesus Christ and ever since. It is true that some wrongs do terrible damage and hurt. And sometimes the consequences of these wrongs cannot be undone. Yet if the person repents and asks for forgiveness, then it is Christ-like to do so and leave the results with Him. Yes, there might be necessary consequences but there still can be a letting go of anger.

The Lord also taught that to have experienced the forgiveness of God and others and then show no pity and "from your hearts *forgive not* every one his brother their trespasses" merits judgment (Matt. 18:21-35). Remember Proverbs 16:12: "love covereth all sins."

It is as wrong *not* to forgive a brother when he repents as it is to forgive a person before he repents.

Conclusion. Forgiveness comes down to timing. To forgive a person before he or she repents of the wrong is to do something God doesn't do. It's like the timing of giving a two-year old a loaded gun – destructive and wrong. But to not forgive one when he or she does repent is not to do something God does do. It's like the timing of withholding a gun from a soldier going into battle – setting him up to be hurt. May we as faithful disciples follow our Lord and glorify His wisdom.

Chronicle #3 of 'The Disciple's Walk' series looks at water baptism for the believer.

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The Chronicles of the

Disciple's Walk

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To Forgive or Not Forgive

The Chronicles of the 'Disciple's Walk' are various exhortations. The goal is to encourage the believer in the Lord Jesus to *follow Him* according to His Word and ways rather than tradition or popular thinking.

"To err is human, to forgive, divine" goes the famous saying. In Christian circles, forgiveness is looked at as an expression of love, therefore exemplifying God. To forgive is to disregard a wrong against you and in mercy "let it go" rather than punish or hold it against the guilty.

What is the purpose of forgiveness? Forgiveness is the means whereby a broken relationship is reconciled. If there is no desire for relationship on either side of a dispute, then forgiveness is futile. Consider God's gospel. It is God's desire to forgive the sinner who was born with a broken relationship with Him. The gospel is concerned about forgiveness of sins *and* reconciliation to God. (Acts 5:31, 13:38, 2Cor. 5:18, Rom. 5:10). To misunderstand forgiveness reflects poorly on the gospel.