

FORGIVING OTHERS

Forgiveness is the central issue in man's relationship to God, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death" (i.e. separation from God, Rom. 6:23). The purpose for the first coming of Christ was to take upon Himself our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), and pay the penalty for it (Heb. 9:22) in order that we may be forgiven (Col. 1:14). It is also the basis for our relationships with other people. Comment on the following verses:

1. Matthew 5:23-26 -

2. Matthew 6:9-15 -

3. Matthew 18:21-35 -

a. How does our debt of sin before a holy God compare to the debt others may owe?

b. How would knowing this enable us to forgive others (see Luke 7:47)?

c. How often should we forgive others (see Luke 17:3-5)?

d. Is this a question of faith or obedience?

e. How does God feel toward those whom He has forgiven by sacrificing His only begotten Son when they will not forgive others?

f. Should we, as God's children, see forgiveness as optional or required by God?

1. Romans 12:19 -

2. 1 Peter 3:8-9 -

3. 1 John 4:19-21 -

4. Proverbs 24:17-18 -

5. What six responses stand in contrast to forgiveness in Ephesians 4:31? What are we to do?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

5)

6)

Forgiveness is not forgetting. People who try to forget find they cannot. God says He will remember our sins no more (Heb. 10:17), but God being omniscient cannot forget. What it means is that God will not take our past offenses and use them against us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

Forgetting may be the result of forgiveness, but never the means of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is also a hard choice because it pulls against the idea of justice. But our relationship with God is based on His mercy (Titus 3:5) and so must it be with others (Luke 6:35-38).

Forgiveness is costly. We must pay the price of the evil we forgive by accepting the consequences of another person's sin upon ourselves. Consequently, it is substitutional. No one really forgives another without bearing the penalty of the other person's sin. This is forgiving others as Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). You may say, "But I can't forgive them; they hurt me so bad." This is certainly true and, undoubtedly, nobody has really forgiven another without acknowledging the hurt and often the hate (Prov. 14:10). The point is they are still hurting you, and the hurt will continue to bind you until you release yourself from the past by forgiving. "But they are off the hook," the heart is quick to protest. Not really, for they will stand before God some day and give an account (2 Cor. 5:10).

STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

1. On a separate piece of paper, make a list of every person that has ever offended you. Face the specific wrong (i.e., rejection, deprivation of love, injustice, unfairness, physical and verbal abuse, betrayal, neglect).
2. Face the hurt and the hate. If you bury it, you bury the possibility of forgiving. It is not a sin to acknowledge the reality of these emotions.
3. Face the cross. It is the cross that makes forgiveness legal and morally right. Jesus died "once for all" when He took upon Himself all the sins of the world (1 Peter 3:18).
4. Decide that you will bear the burden of their sin (Gal. 6:2). This means that you will not retaliate (Luke 6:27-34), nor use the information against them in the future for "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8 and Prov. 10:12). "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends" (Prov. 17:9).
5. You are now ready to forgive or not forgive. Forgiveness is a crisis of the will, a choice to let the other person off the hook and free yourself from the past. Your feelings will follow in time. You need to release the desire to hate and seek revenge.
6. If bitterness has been present for some time, you may want to find a righteous and trusted counselor friend who will pray with you and for you (James 5:16). Otherwise alone before God, go down the list and pray, "I forgive (name) for (list the offenses) ."
7. Destroy the list and do not tell the offenders they are forgiven. Telling them that you have forgiven them may create more conflict because the offender may be projecting his problems onto someone else. Your forgiveness of others is between you and God.
8. Do not expect that your choice to forgive will result in major changes in another. Instead, pray for them (Matt. 5:44), in order that they may find the freedom of forgiveness in Christ (Gal. 5:1, 13-15). Try to understand them. They are victims also.
9. Remember that forgiveness is first a choice of the will in obedience to God. Some positive emotional results will come with time and include:
 - a. The ability to pray for the person without feeling hurt, anger, or resentment.
 - b. The ability to revisit people and places without a negative reaction.
10. Thank God for the lessons learned and the maturity gained as a result of the experience (Rom. 8:28-29).
11. Have you accepted your part of the blame for what happened and confessed it to God (1 John 1:9) and others (Matt. 5:23-26)?

SEEKING FORGIVENESS

The most important forgiveness that we can have is God's forgiveness. This can come only through our relationship with Christ "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14). Salvation assures us that our sins are forgiven--past, present, and future. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). We may be out of fellowship with God, however, and this requires our confession (1 John 1:9)

It is very important to distinguish between relationship and fellowship. When we are born physically, we are related by blood to our father. Nothing can change that fact, and we will be blood-related regardless of our behavior. Once born, however, we will be in and out of fellowship with our fathers, dependent upon our behavior. If we obey our fathers, we will be in fellowship with them. Disobey, and fellowship is broken.

When we are born again, we are related to the Father through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Peter 1:17-23). Nothing can change this fact (Rom. 8:31-39). We are His children, and we will remain His children. We entered into that relationship by our belief, not our behavior (Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7). But the harmony of our relationship with God can be interrupted by disobedience, just as harmony with our parents was interrupted when we disobeyed them. When we obey God, we live in harmony with Him. When we don't, our relationship with Him is disturbed, and we feel miserable as a result.

The primary purpose for this exercise is to seek the forgiveness of others. But if you are knowledgeable of sin in your life, than make a list of sins whether by commission or omission (James 4:17). Ask God to guide you. Then go through the list by confessing, "I did/did not (and name the specific sin)." There is a major difference between confessing and asking for forgiveness. Confessing is acknowledging what you have thought, said, or done. This is then followed by asking God to forgive you for the acknowledged sin. Refusing to acknowledge our sin before God is to choose to remain out of fellowship with Him and live a barren, fruitless life. The remaining portion of this exercise deals with our need to seek the forgiveness of others.

I. THE MOTIVATION FOR SEEKING FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS

Matthew 5:23-26 is a key passage on seeking forgiveness. Several points in these verses bear emphasizing.

The worshipper coming before God to offer a gift "remembers" that someone has something against him. The worshipper is the offender.

This does not mean that the worshipper is to become introspective, probing into his own soul to "dig up dirt" to be confessed. It means that a remembrance of another's feelings toward him is to be the motivating key. This remembrance is the working of the Holy Spirit.

It is the offense that is known by the other party that is to be dealt with. If you have had jealous, lustful, or angry thoughts toward another, of which the other person is unaware, these are to be confessed to God alone.

An exception to this (where the offended is unaware) would be where restitution needs to be made (e.g., something stolen to be returned, something broken paid for, someone's name restored, etc.).

II. THE URGENCY OF SEEKING FORGIVENESS

Christ says that **as soon as** the worshipper senses his need, he should go and be reconciled. This is a prerequisite to acceptable worship of God. Put another way, our worship is **unacceptable to God** if we have not made right an offense against another.

III. THE PROCESS OF SEEKING FORGIVENESS

- A. Regarding people whom you need to ask forgiveness, clearly identify to yourself the offenses committed. Write them out, including the **attitude** behind the wrong or offensive actions.
- B. Make sure you have already forgiven them for any wrongs on their part.
- C. Think through the precise wording you will use as you ask forgiveness.
 1. Label your action as "**wrong.**"
 2. Go into only as much detail as necessary for the offended person to understand what you are confessing.
 3. Make no defenses, alibis, or excuses.
 4. Do not project blame. Never confess for another.
 5. Your confession should lead to the direct question, "Will you forgive me?"
- D. Seek the right place and the **right time** to approach the offended person.

- E. Make your quest for forgiveness in person with family members or persons with whom you can talk face-to-face, with the following exception. Where there has been action of an immoral nature, **DO NOT** seek to deal with this alone and face-to-face confession.
- F. Except where no other means of communication are possible **DO NOT** write a letter.
 - 1. A letter can be very easily misread or misunderstood.
 - 2. A letter can be read by the wrong people, those having nothing to do with the offense or the confession.
 - 3. A letter can be kept when it should have been destroyed.
 - 4. You don't want to "document" your confession.
- G. Once you sincerely seek forgiveness, you are free.
- H. If forgiveness is refused, and there seems no hope of change on the part of the offended person, then prayerfully and humbly commit your case to "the Judge" (God, our Heavenly Father) and leave it there (Matt. 5:25; 1 Peter 2:21-23).
- I. After forgiveness, fellowship with God in worship (Matt. 5:24).