

**FORGIVING OTHERS:
A COMPLEX ISSUE?**

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Over the last thirty years in the Gospel ministry the author has been asked many questions by those wanting to find biblical answers to the questions of life. One of the subjects about which questions were most frequently asked was that of forgiveness. These were not questions about God's forgiveness for the believer in Jesus Christ, but questions regarding our need to forgive one another. The questions were ones like these:

Are we required to forgive only after the offender has repented and asked forgiveness, or are we to forgive whether they repent or not?

After we forgive, are there no longer any consequences, such as parental discipline, church discipline, and civil punishment?

What about trusting the person who has sinned repeatedly and keeps coming back for forgiveness, expressing repentance on some level? Are we unforgiving if we do not have an immediate and full trust in the person's reliability?

As this author has studied the Scriptures regarding forgiveness he has found only one way to bring all the biblical teaching together, and that is to recognize that different but related things are referenced in the Bible by "forgive" and "mercy". If we do not recognize the difference between these vitally related subjects, we cannot put all the biblical teaching together in a consistent way. This pamphlet argues that there are at least two different "levels" of forgiveness, and that the issue of a full restoration of fellowship must be seen as related to, but not identical with, "forgiveness" itself. Restoration of fellowship has a direct relationship with the doctrine of progressive sanctification, both from the perspective of the forgiving party and the forgiven party.

What is "forgiveness"? It is a refusal to get revenge for a wrong done; it is a refusal to make the other party pay back either by physical repayment or by emotional or mental anguish. It involves a determination to seek a godly relationship of love and harmony with this other party. It demands that the forgiver reject all animosity towards the offending party in his heart.

I. THE FIRST "LEVEL" OF FORGIVENESS: THE CHRISTIAN IS TOWARDS ALL PEOPLE. THIS INCLUDES THOSE WHO ARE STILL DOING WRONG TO US, EVEN THOSE WHO ARE NOT REPENTING TO HAVE A MERCIFUL, NON-VENGEFUL ATTITUDE OR SEEKING RECONCILIATION WITH US!

1. Some of the verses that teach this:

The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6: 12, 14-15

12 And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.

14 For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

15 But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This appears to refer to all our debtors; there does not appear to me to be any contextual reason for us to restrict this to fellow Christians, for example. We are to forgive "men" their trespasses against us.

Ephesians 4:31-5:2

4:31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

5: 1 Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.

2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

This is part of Paul's application of the Gospel doctrine he has reviewed earlier in the Epistle. It is part of putting off the old man and putting on the new (4:22-24). The context and actual words used may suggest he has in mind here fellow church members especially, but not exclusively.

Romans 1:31, "unforgiving" is characteristic of the unconverted, of the lost world.

Galatians 5:20, "hatred, contentions" are works of the flesh, contrasted to "love ... , peace, patience" as fruit of the Spirit.

2. How this looks in practice:

- When others are cursing me, I do not curse back but pray for God's blessing on them!
- When others are doing wrong to me, I do not do wrong back, but pray for their repentance and deliverance from darkness.
- When others speak ill of me, I do not speak ill of them, but speak of their wrongdoing only when it is necessary and to the right parties, to protect the innocent or to help further Scripture-commanded church and family discipline or civil punishment.
- When others have done harm to me, I do not desire to see them destroyed (which is malice), but pray for their salvation.
- I refuse to get "my pound of flesh"; I refuse to hate them though they might show hate for me; I refuse to get revenge or even to have malicious thoughts and desires towards them.

3. Jesus and His apostles commanded this:

Luke 6:27-29.

27 But I say to you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.

29 To him who strikes you on the *one* cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold *your* tunic either.

Romans 12:19-21.

19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance *is* Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

4. Why?

- i. This is one of the signs of a converted person, a sign of faith!
- ii. This is how we win others for Christ, or help restore the backslider!
- iii. This is the only logical and possible response when we have assurance of God's greater forgiveness towards us for our greater sins against Him, a forgiveness we have at such an incredible price, the death of His only begotten Son!

The Christian is to have a merciful, non-vengeful attitude towards all people, this includes those who are still doing wrong to us, even those who are not repenting or seeking reconciliation with us.

Addendum:

Because I believe the Bible teaches the appropriateness, and at times even the necessity, of self-defense and the protection of the innocent, I do not believe God considers legitimate defense against a violent aggressor as revenge. (However, revenge could enter the heart while we are engaged in self-defense, and that attitude *would* be sin.)

Because I believe the Bible commands that on certain occasions we are to press others to face up to their moral and legal responsibilities, I do not believe that to do so at those times is contrary to the prohibition against revenge nor is it to be unforgiving. For example, a parent can be forgiving while still administering appropriate discipline, as can a church session. It is my duty to testify against gross violators of the law of the land, in order to vindicate innocent victims and to safeguard against there being possible future victims, as well as to put a roadblock in front of a person bent on self-destruction. This is not revenge nor is it a matter of being unforgiving. (Though, again, revenge could enter the heart while engaged in this lawful activity, and the revengeful attitude would be sin.)

II. THERE IS A DEEPER LEVEL OF MERCY AND FORGIVENESS TOWARDS A REPENTANT PERSON, WHEREBY THERE IS A FULLER RECONCILIATION, FOR IT IS FROM BOTH SIDES AND NOT JUST ONE!

1. There seems to me to be two levels in God's mercy or in God being long-suffering toward sinners.

First, God does not immediately destroy the ungodly, but gives them time to repent. He sends rain and sunshine on both the evil and the good. This is often referred to in Reformed circles as part of "common grace" or God's general display of His goodness. This is taught explicitly in Matthew 5:45, in the very context where we are commanded to be merciful towards our enemies by not treating them as they treat us. Second, there is the full pardon and reconciliation that the repentant, believing sinner has with God through the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 1: 14 and Romans 5:1).

I am advocating that similar levels of "forgiveness" exist for the believer towards others. First, he is to have a merciful, non-vengeful spirit that refuses to retaliate and which actively seeks the good of the enemy. Second, when there is actual repentance on the part of the offending enemy, there can be a fuller pardon shown with full reconciliation.

2. This appears to me to be what Paul is commanding the Corinthian church in Corinthians 2:6-11.

6. his punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man,
7. so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.
8 Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. 9 For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. 10 Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, "lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Apparently this disciplined man had demonstrated repentant sorrow over his former sin. Now, since he is ready to be reconciled, there can be a full restoration of fellowship.

3. Matthew 18:15-35.

- i. (vv. 15-20) Church discipline is commanded, even leading, if necessary, to excommunication. This does not contradict Christ's command to forgive them, for it is also commanded by Christ. It is not vengefulness but needful discipline for the purpose of protecting the reputation of Christ, protecting the innocent from further harm and the church from corrupting influences, and with the hope that these measures will move the offender to repentance and salvation.
- ii. (vv. 21-22) How often then do we need to forgive someone who wrongs us and they come asking forgiveness? Seven times? No, 70 x 7, or no limit.
- iii. (vv. 23-35) Here is a parable reminding Christians that we have repented and received God's free forgiveness in Christ, and so we don't have to repay the debt we owe (for Christ has paid it by His vicarious suffering). Therefore, when others repent and seek our forgiveness, we are to forgive and to not make them pay the debt they owe us. We are to show them the mercy that God has shown us, and for the same reason: Christ's Cross!

4. This is a fuller reconciliation, for it is from both sides and not just from one.

- i. The more general forgiveness we have for all who wrong us, is from our side only.
- ii. When the offending party seeks forgiveness, and we forgive, both sides are now reconciled, and the harmony and peace that has been brought into the troubled situation is greater and bears greater fruit for good.

This is a deeper level of mercy and forgiveness, in the sense that there is now a fuller reconciliation, for both parties are seeking restored harmony and peace, the one party repenting of their sin (turning away from it in Christ's power), and the other party granting forgiveness as Christ has granted us forgiveness (when by the grace of Jesus Christ we repented before God)!

III. THIRD, THERE ARE RESULTS THAT HAVE TO DO WITH PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION, AND THEREFORE TAKE TIME AFTER THIS SECOND LEVEL OF FORGIVENESS.

1. Trust: trusting the repentant party to remain faithful, being able to rely on them again.

- i. It takes time for the repentant party to demonstrate faithfulness and discipleship and maturity, which are not instantaneous but a matter of spiritual growth over time.
- ii. And so the trust in the heart of the forgiving party grows as the repentance of the forgiven party is demonstrated over time.
- iii. Some do not trust because they are not forgiving; it is a way of punishing the other party. However for many Christians, they do forgive, but the trust requires time to grow.

2. Reliability: the repentant party manifesting true holiness, which is not instantaneous but progressive.

- i. It takes time, in which the repentant party is faithfully using the means of grace, for the sinner to grow in holiness and in spiritual reliability, in maturity in Christ. There are no shortcuts!
- ii. We must grow in our ability to use the means of grace properly, and we must grow in our application of God's truth, and it requires time for us to grow in practicing the truth consistently.
- iii. This means that the forgiving party must especially look at intent and not at all the details of practice, though they have a right and need to look for growth in the details. But it will take time! Neither side should expect the instantaneous!
- iv. The Bible speaks of looking at someone over time before you can fully trust them to be mature in their reliability. For examples see I Timothy 3: 10 (re: candidates for the deaconate), and Jesus' affirmation of this principle in Luke 16: 10 (and in several other places in the Gospels).

v. Repentance itself is not an instantaneous quality, but a growing way of life in the New Testament. See Luke 3:7-14.

vi. However, this is NOT an excuse for refusing to forgive and be merciful! The offender must keep growing in reliability, and the offended party must look for the positive evidence of this with expectation and not with doubt, so that he grows in trusting the one he has forgiven. See I Corinthians 13:7.

3. Companionship and other good fruits of reconciliation.

i. I see such things as fruits of reconciliation, and therefore relating not to forgiveness *per se*, but as being results of forgiveness, as aspects of sanctification.

ii. I believe sanctification is always progressive in this world, not instantaneous.

iii. Therefore, we will grow in our closeness to one another, in wanting to be around one another, etc., as time unfolds a consistent walk with the Lord by grace. *If we try to force this part of the process, to make it move faster than fits with the progressive nature of sanctification and the gradual growth in consistency in using the means of grace and in reliability in the Spirit, then we will do much harm! We will either expect too much out of the repentant party too fast, or we will expect too much out of the forgiving party too fast (for their forgiveness of the other party is also a matter of sanctification).*

4. Resentment and bitterness need to always be put off immediately, but they might try to keep coming back. We must keep putting them off as soon as these temptations attack, putting them aside by means of the Gospel.

IV. ONE MORE POINT: THINGS THAT DO NOT CONTRADICT FORGIVENESS ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE!

1. The civil ruler punishing evildoers: that is his God-appointed job! (I Peter 2: 13-14)
2. The church disciplining and even excommunicating impenitent members! (Matthew 18:15-35)
3. Parents disciplining their children in the Lord, so that the children learn to walk in God's commandments. (Ephesians 6:4 with Proverbs)
4. Rebuking someone who has sinned against you personally. It is necessary to follow Christ's instructions on how this should be done. (Matthew 18: 15)
5. Being a police officer or a soldier in a just war for one's country. (I Peter 2:13-14) But personal hatred and vengeance is not the way of a *Christian* officer or soldier.
6. Refusing to cast one's "pearls before swine"-that is, refusing to continue putting forth the Gospel or good counsel when it is only being ridiculed and rejected further by those of an especially hardened heart. (Matthew 7:1-6) ***There is a right kind of judging that we are commanded to make in this text!***
7. Realizing that we cannot associate with certain people, and that we cannot enter into certain relationships with the ungodly, for they pull us down instead of us pulling them up, and we do not glorify God if we befriend them in such a way as implies complacency in their evil works. (Proverbs and II Corinthians 6: 14-18)

CONCLUSION:

If we do not make the kind of distinctions I am suggesting, I believe we will leave people confused about how God would have them to live, especially as far as how they relate to those who do them wrong. Also, we might inadvertently make the Bible appear self-contradictory.