

Forgiving Like God Forgives

God's plan for restoring peace to sin-shattered relationships

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Billy and Susy are married. They are both Christians. One day Billy comes home from a gruelling day at work and reacts to a minor comment from Susy. He raises his voice and shouts, "You don't even care how difficult *my* day was. All you do is talk about what you did with your stupid friends."

Having slandered his wife ("You don't care," and "A//you do..."), and having been sinfully angry, he retreats to the bedroom, slams the door, and spends the evening in front of the television.

Susy is deeply offended by Billy's outburst and false accusations. Tight-lipped, she bangs the pans in the kitchen in a far from silent non-verbal expression of anger. She waits for Billy to come ask her forgiveness. He never does.

By bed time the volcanic heat of their tempers has cooled down. In fact, the "temperature" in the house has now plunged far below zero. The bed is like an arctic ice-floe. An invisible wall of impenetrable ice bricks divides the bed in two.

Question: What do Billy and Susy do now? Should they just sleep it off and hope things are forgotten in the morning? Should they say "I'm sorry," and kiss and make up? And, what should they have done earlier in the evening right after Billy went ballistic?

It could happen to anyone

Billy and Susy are made-up people. Unfortunately their situation is not. It is lived out tens of thousands of times a day all over our country. But it is not just husbands and wives who act out this drama.

Billy and Susy could have been Bob and Stan, co-workers who share an office downtown. They could have been Brenda and Sylvia, church members who attend the same Bible study. They could have been anyone.

Sin is an ugly companion of us all. Sometimes we are the offender; sometimes we are the offended. But sin constantly affects our relationships with others. It causes hurt, pain, anger, bitterness, hostility, division, and untold misery. And that is just on the human level. More importantly our sin grieves God deeply (Eph 4:30).

The painful reality of what Paul called "remaining sin," determines at least one thing for every Christian: forgiveness is a basic survival skill. Knowing how to forgive and how to be forgiven is an indispensable component of godliness.

In our opening illustration, Billy shouldn't have shot off his mouth at Susy. Susy shouldn't have let her resentment against Billy's actions control her. But, the sin was done. What do they do now? What should *you* do when *you* sin? When you are sinned *against*?

As important as forgiveness is in a world populated by sinners and in churches populated by saved-sinners, we often do it poorly... or not at all. The purpose of this booklet is to give you a biblical model for forgiving and being forgiven.

God's plan

The obvious question as we begin is "What *is* God's plan for reconciling relationships injured by sin?" Paul gives a direct answer to that in Ephesians 4:31-32.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

How are sin-shattered relationships to be restored? Through forgiveness. And how are we to forgive? Just like God does. When sinned against, we are to imitate God's forgiveness. In the next verse, Paul states directly what he implied in 4:32: "Therefore, be imitators of God" (5:1).

When we have been the target of bitterness, wrath, anger, or any other sin, we have a biblical obligation: "[Forgive] each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." In other words, our forgiveness and God's forgiveness should look exactly alike. Forgiveness is how sin-broken relationships are restored. And the only forgiveness that counts is the kind which is an imitation of God's forgiveness.

That outlines our task pretty clearly when it comes to constructing a biblical model of forgiveness. Find out what God's forgiveness is like, and then copy it. Imitate it. Reshape all our thinking about relationships to fit the mould of God's divine pattern.

If Billy and Susy are to set things straight between them, they must become imitators of God. The same applies to us. Therefore, the first portion of this booklet will be dedicated to understanding God's forgiveness. The second will focus on applying the truths we discover.¹

¹ As always, theology (i.e., God's forgiveness) dictates practice (our forgiveness).

GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is God's nature

As we begin to study how God forgives, we must first consider who God is. His actions flow out of His nature. The Psalmist dramatically captures God's forgiving nature in the words of Psalm 103.

The psalmist (probably David) opened and closed his psalm with the words "Bless [i.e., Praise!] the Lord, O my soul," (103:1, 22). The very first reason David gave for such an exuberant outburst of praise is found in the opening line of verse 3: God "pardons all your iniquities." To strengthen his case, the psalmist drew the readers' minds to an historical example of God's forgiveness. The wording used leaves no doubt that this is a reference to God's pardon of Israel following the golden calf incident.² That pardon showed Moses and all Israel God's nature or His "ways."

He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel. The Lord is
compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.

(Psalm 103:7-8)

This merciful aspect of God's character has profound implications for repentant sinners.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our
iniquities... As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions
from us.

(Psalm 103:10, 12)

When the Jews were allowed to return to their land following the Babylonian exile, they were deeply struck by their forefathers' obstinate rebellion and God's tenacious forgiveness. Referring to the same golden calf incident as Psalm 103, the worship leaders in Nehemiah 9:17 prayed, "But Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate..."

The prophet Micah, after seven chapters of stinging rebuke for sin, confirmed God's forgiving nature when he wrote,

Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the
remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in
unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities
underfoot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

(Micah 7:18-19)

² Compare verse 8 to the wording of Exodus 34:6.

God's gracious and compassionate nature inevitably leads to action. That action is forgiveness. But what exactly is this forgiveness?

Forgiveness defined and illustrated

The various Hebrew and Greek words translated "forgive," "pardon," and so on, meant "to send away," "to blot out," "to lift up and carry away," and "to release from legal obligation."

We could be content to stack up definitions of forgiveness. However, I believe God's forgiveness is most powerfully explained by the dramatic imagery used in the Bible to depict it.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.
(Psalm 103:12)

He will tread our iniquities underfoot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.
(Micah 7:19)

One of my favourite images of God's forgiveness is found in the prophet Jeremiah.

"In those days and at that time," declares the Lord, "search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I shall pardon those whom I leave as a remnant."
(Jer 50:20)

When God forgives, you can send out a search party armed with radar, infra-red scopes, and satellite reconnaissance photos, but they won't be able to find the sin God has removed.

The parable of the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18 also gives us an important picture of forgiveness. There the first slave owed the king a debt of tens of millions in any currency you care to name. It was a debt impossible to repay. But, when the slave begged his patience to allow repayment, the king went a step further.

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.
(Matt 18:27)

The king forgave; he released the slave from the legal obligation of that massive debt.

Colossians 2:13-14

But perhaps the most graphic image of forgiveness in the scripture is contained in Colossians 2. Verse 13 of that chapter says that God has made believers "alive" in Christ. He did that through forgiveness. Paul writes, "...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions..."

Having made a statement about God's forgiveness at the end of verse 13, Paul continued to speak of that same forgiveness in verse 14, only using imagery.

...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

(Col 2:13-14)

Here is the picture Paul was painting to illustrate God's forgiveness: God had in His possession a legal document, a "certificate of debt." On that certificate were recorded "decrees against us." The word "decrees" had to do with God's laws.³ God had, as it were, a piece of paper that listed every one of His laws which we had ever broken. What a horrifying thought!

That certificate of debt detailed exactly what we owed God. Any one of those "hostile" decrees by itself would have cost us our life and eternal punishment. All of them listed together on one piece of paper was a staggering condemnation. We owed God an unpayable debt.

However, at the cross, that piece of paper – that document which recorded our unpayable debt – was "cancelled." The Greek word Paul used could be translated "erased." The certificate recording our legal obligation to God was rubbed out.⁴ It became unreadable. God took Christ's blood and wrote across it "paid in full."

The notice of our debt was blotted out. Or as Paul succinctly stated at the end of verse 14, it was taken "out of the way." God nailed that paper to the cross...and left it there.

So, in summary, God's forgiveness is the cancellation of an unpayable debt that the sinner owes to God. It is a blotting out or a complete removal of the guilt of sin.

³ The only other use of this word in the NT is in Eph 2:15 where it refers to the "ordinances" of God's law.

⁴ *εξαλειφω* was used of the process a scribe went through when he made a mistake. He would laboriously rub the still damp ink off of the vellum or leather scroll on which he was working and start over.

"THEREFORE, BE IMITATORS OF GOD"

It is now time for us to return to Billy and Susy. We left them angry, resentful, bitter, and sulking - unforgiven and unforgiving. Billy blew up, and knowing he was wrong but refusing to admit it, he went and sulked in front of the television. Susy's initial hurt and surprise eventually hardened into a silent bitterness, a slow-burning resentment.

Were either Billy or Susy imitating God? No. To borrow God's words in Genesis 4:7, sin was not "crouching at the door." It had crossed the threshold and devoured them. When we left them, an ice cube would have contracted pneumonia if you put it in the bed between them.

What can Billy and Susy do? Some people might try to bury the whole thing and hope it would all be forgotten in the morning. But God said, "[Be] forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against any one" (Col 3:13). And, in Ephesians He said those who let the sun go down on their anger are giving the devil a toe hold (4:26-27). Something must be done. To "let it ride" is disobedience and an open door for Satan.

Further, being unforgiven is the worst condition a person can be in. Psalm 32, 38, and 51 show us that not seeking forgiveness can lead to depression, anger, strife, physical lethargy, alienation from others, mental agitation, instability, indecisiveness, spiritual dullness, and a lack of joy.⁵

Bitterness is another child of a lack of forgiveness.⁶ Hebrews 12:15 says bitterness is like a noxious weed which will spring up and defile a whole garden. "See to it that... no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by it many be defiled." Bitterness is like a cancer - it eats the soul. It is also a contagious cancer. When it takes root, it defiles not only its host, but also "many" others.

Maybe "letting it ride" isn't such a good option after all. In fact, to do so would be disobedience.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander *be put away from you*, along with all malice. And *be kind* to one another, *tender-hearted, forgiving each other*, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you [emphasis added].

(Eph 4:31-32)

Instead of letting it ride, Billy and Susy need to imitate God - first for His glory, and then for their own good and the good of those around them. Where do they start?

Let me give you three steps which summarise God's forgiveness.

⁵ Note by way of contrast Psalm 32:1 "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!"

⁶ Billy and Susy should note that Colossians 3:19 indicates that bitterness is a sin to which marriage is especially susceptible.

1. Pursuing peace
2. A verbal covenant
3. Establishing a new and better relationship

Step 1 - Pursuing peace

Billy and Susy need to bring peace to their fractured relationship. Somebody needs to make a move to set things straight. While unintentional offences should be overlooked whenever possible⁷ (1 Peter 4:8; Prov 17:9), this situation is clearly far beyond that. This is something neither one can just mentally by-pass.

Who is responsible to pursue peace in Billy and Susy's situation? The obvious answer is Billy. It was his verbal napalm run – slander, anger, and untrue accusations - which began the whole matter. And, the scripture does indicate that Billy should not have stalked off to the bedroom and sulked in a puddle of guilt, self-justification, and self-pity.

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.
(Matt 5:23-24)

Billy, knowing his wife had something against him (anger and slander), should have slowed his furious stomping to the bed room, stopped, turned around, and come back to acknowledge his wrong-doing. What a difference his humble admission of sin would have made in their evening!

Billy was clearly at fault. His refusal to admit his sin was pride and nothing less. Biblically the offender must try to restore the peace he has upended.

But what about Susy? Many might think she was right to wait for Billy to come to her. After all, he was the one at fault.

But according to Ephesians 4:32 we must forgive as God forgives. What did God do when He had been sinned against? Did God wait for the rebels to come to Him before He made a move toward reconciliation? Gratefully, no.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us... while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son...

(Rom 5:8, 10)

⁷ An unintentional offence should be brought up by the offended only if he finds he can not put it out of his mind and might become bitter about it. In that case, an assurance from the other person that no hurt was intended should be enough to lay the whole thing to rest.

When God was sinned against, He pursued peace with the offenders by sacrificing His Son in the place of sinners on the cross. God acted to bring reconciliation while we were still hateful and embittered against Him. Even though He was the offended party, God made the first move.⁸

Should Susy have responded differently? Could she have done something besides wait in the kitchen for Billy to come out of the bedroom to ask her forgiveness? Yes. She could have imitated God by pursuing peace even though she was the one sinned against.

Beyond the command to imitate God, the following two verses make clear it was Susy's responsibility to pursue peace in the relationship, even if Billy sinned first.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

(Rom 12:18)

Pursue peace with all men.

(Heb 12:14)

If Susy had imitated God and had obeyed the scriptural instructions to pursue peace, she would have prayed, made her way down the hall, knocked on the door and said, "Billy, I love you. Can we talk about what happened? Please forgive me for just chattering on and not being concerned about the trying day you had at work. I was only considering myself."

That's imitating God. Not, mind you, that God has ever needed to ask forgiveness. He hasn't. But, Susy is imitating God by taking the initiative to pursue peace in the relationship.

Peace with God

But, there is even more to Susy's responsibility than that, isn't there. She is not just pursuing peace with Billy. She must also pursue peace between Billy and God. By coming to acknowledge that she could have been more considerate, she has opened the door (figuratively and literally) for Billy to admit his own guilt.⁹ This is important, because it is also Susy's responsibility to encourage Billy to turn from his sin.

If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

(Matt 18:15)

⁸ And every move after that. Everything that happens in the process of salvation is a gracious gift from God.

⁹ Notice another failure brought on by Billy's sin. When he did not go out to confess his sin and ask forgiveness, his wife had to take the first step in reconciliation. As the God-ordained leader of the home, Billy should be taking the lead in spiritual restoration.

Knowing that God's affront at Billy's sin is far more significant than her personal offence, Susy can't wait in the kitchen for Billy to come to her. She must obey the command of Matthew 18 and give her husband an opportunity to repent.

As we consider what happened after Billy's eruption, we realise that both Billy and Susy failed. Billy failed by becoming sinfully angry. And he failed by not repenting from his pride and going out to the kitchen to ask Susy's forgiveness.

Susy failed too. She should have swallowed her pride and imitated God's forgiveness by pursuing peace with her fuming husband. And, she should have gone to rescue her husband from his God-condemned, unrepentant anger. Billy and Susy should have met each other halfway between the bedroom and the kitchen, both carrying out their biblical responsibilities to pursue peace.

An illustration

Although Billy and Susy's is not a happy situation, I had to suppress a smile as I wrote that last sentence. It brought to mind a time when my wife and I had a meeting halfway down the hallway. My wife likes to listen to music as she works around the house. I study at home for my sermons, so I prefer quiet in order to concentrate. Normally we compromise without any problem.

There was one day, however, when her music was echoing into my office just a little too loudly for me to concentrate (or maybe I was just not very focused that day!). I went out to the kitchen and asked her to turn the tape down slightly. She gladly did so. When I returned to my office, I flicked the door shut behind me. However, the breeze through my office windows caught the door and slammed it home with a loud bang.

As I turned to my desk, I realised that my wife, not knowing what had happened, might think I had slammed the door in anger over the volume of her music. That would never do. As I stepped back into the hall, she was coming from the kitchen, visibly distressed at the thought I might be angry at her. We hugged and had a laugh when I explained what had happened.

That is the way reconciliation should work. Both parties should be concerned enough about fulfilling their biblical obligations that they meet, as it were, halfway down the hallway.

Step 2 - A verbal covenant

In the previous section we discovered that both people in a sin situation are responsible to pursue peace. That is the first step of the process of biblical forgiveness. The *second step* is a *verbal covenant*. This is an imitation of God's forgiveness as spoken of in 1 John.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

God promises to forgive the one who acknowledges his sin to Him.¹⁰

Based on that model, we can **define** forgiveness in this way:

Forgiveness is a covenant (i.e., an agreement) to erase the offender's sin debt in light of his admission of wrong-doing and request to be forgiven.

The implications of that biblical definition are many. Let's consider them in this section.

The right thing in the wrong way

Suppose that Billy and Susy have met in the hall, halfway between the kitchen and the bedroom. Billy scuffs the carpet with his toe and says, "Ah, honey, I... well, I'm sorry about what I said." Susy responds, "It's okay, Billy. It was nothing. Forget it."

"Well," you say, breathing a sigh of relief, "I'm glad they settled that biblically."

Hmmm. Do you really think they settled it *biblically*?

"But," you say, "Billy said he was sorry and Susy said it was nothing. Isn't that good enough?"

Billy and Susy's exchange was probably genuine. It certainly was the commonly accepted way of handling a blow-up. But was it actually *biblical*? What does it mean for Billy to say "I'm sorry" when the Bible talks about forgiveness? Was Susy really accurate when she said, "It was nothing"?

At the risk of being considered nit-picky and a splitter-of-hairs, let me suggest that Billy and Susy could have been significantly more biblical in the way they handled things. Let's consider Billy's statement first.

I'm sorry, so sorry...

It is common even among Christians to use the words "I'm sorry" when acknowledging sin. Let me suggest that those words are a worldly emasculation of the biblical concept of forgiveness. Consider for a moment what the words "I'm sorry" really mean. They mean, "I feel badly because of what happened." The words "forgive me" on the other hand mean something totally different. They mean "I owe you an unpayable debt because of what I did."

¹⁰ 1 John 1:9 assumes a genuine, rather than flippant, confession of sin.

Let me explain the difference between these two concepts with an illustration. If I accidentally spill a glass of water across the tablecloth and on to my wife's lap at the supper table, I say "I'm sorry." However, if I take that same glass of water and *pour it over her head* in a fit of rage, is "I'm sorry" really what is needed?

In the first instance, the spilling of the water was accidental. I express my distress over the discomfort I have caused my wife by saying "I'm sorry." That is adequate, no sin has taken place. I wish it had never happened.

In the second instance, sin has taken place. I was angry and malicious in my actions. I owe God and my wife an unpayable sin debt because of my attitude and actions. The fact that I feel badly ("I'm sorry"), may or may not mean anything. Judas was sorry after he betrayed Jesus (Matt 27:3-4). However, his sin debt was never cancelled. The fact that he felt badly about his sin did not remove the real guilt of that sin. The fact that he wished he had not done it did not erase his sin-debt.

I believe Christians should always be encouraged to use biblical terminology ("forgive me") to deal with sin. Jesus Christ had to go to the cross because I (hypothetically, mind you) emptied that glass of water over my wife's head. "I'm sorry" does not accurately express the heinous nature of what was done. Sin is an unpayable debt, nothing less. Only one thing in the whole of creation can remove that debt: a commitment by God and the one offended to cancel it.

When Billy met Susy in the hallway and said, "I'm sorry," he was trying to acknowledge the wrong he had done. However, to be biblical he should have asked for *forgiveness*. His side of the verbal covenant of forgiveness is *an admission of his sin and a request for its removal*.

The words "forgive me" are not magical syllables, which said in the right order and tone of voice will charm away Billy's guilt. They are, however, the only words which accurately represent his sin as seriously as God sees it.

Given the option, a Christian should never use watered-down substitutes for "forgive me." An interesting thing will happen when you start to use biblical terminology for reconciliation. You will find that it is far more difficult to say, "Forgive me," than to say, "I'm sorry." Instinctively, we realise the difference between those two phrases. One means, "I feel badly about what I did," but leaves you unscathed. You did not actually admit you were wrong, just that you feel badly. The other phrase, however, is devastating. "I owe you a sin debt I can never repay. All I can ask is that you mercifully cancel that debt."

It was nothing

When Billy and Susy met in the hallway and Billy admitted he had been wrong (however inadequately), Susy's response was, "It's okay, Billy. It was nothing. Forget it." Again, this is a

common and apparently mature way to handle someone's sin. However, was Susy's evaluation of the situation really accurate? Was it *nothing*? Why did Christ have to die if Billy's sin was "nothing"?

As with Billy's, "I'm sorry," Susy has unintentionally obscured or minimized the true nature of what happened. She has made no commitment to release Billy from the "legal" obligation of his sin. If she just shrugs it off, that debt remains hanging over Billy's head. That is not imitating God's forgiveness.

To imitate God, Susy must promise to erase Billy's sin-debt. She must promise to cast it behind her back, trample it under foot, and throw it in the deepest sea. That is what, "I forgive you," means. To forgive like God forgives is to make a promise or a *verbal covenant* with the other person. Essentially what Susy is promising when she says, "I forgive you," is the following:

- I will not bring this sin up again to you or anyone else.
- I will not brood over it (i.e., become bitter by regularly thinking about it).
- I will not try to make you "pay" for what you did.

Now you can see why, "It was nothing," doesn't cut it. It *was* something. What Billy did was *sin*. But by giving him her forgiveness when asked, Susy is promising to erase that sin's stain from their relationship. She won't use it to get back at him. She won't remind him of it the next time they disagree. She is promising not to dwell on Billy's sin.

Forgive and forget?

That last statement leads us to another issue. Is it biblical for a Christian to "forgive and forget"? No, it isn't. Let me explain.

Forgetting is a passive process in which time and situations crowd a memory from your mind. Forgiving is different. Forgiving is a promise not to think about what happened. This is exemplified by God in Jeremiah 31:34, "Their sin I will remember no more." Technically, God can't forget. He is omniscient. But He does *choose* not to think about the sin He has forgiven. He does *choose* not to deal with us according to our sin (Ps 103:10).

Susy may not immediately *forget* Billy's harsh words. That would be virtually impossible. But by giving her forgiveness, she has promised to imitate God by *not dwelling* on them. That is possible. It will be hard, but by God's grace she can take her thoughts captive (2 Cor 10:5), and think on that which is good (Phil 4:8).

The biblical concept of forgiveness is a radical alternative to what we often do. For the offender, it is an verbal admission of guilt and request for forgiveness. For the one sinned against, it is a promise to blot out the wrong and not to dwell on it. It is a commitment not to deal with the person according to his or her sin.

But what if...

At this point, Billy and Susy have made up. Next time they will do it in the biblical way using biblical terminology. However, in the scenario we have contrived, not all of the typical situations that could (and do) develop have been addressed.

What if Billy came back down the hall to the kitchen and said, "Susy, what I said was wrong and untrue. Will you forgive me?" But Susy responded, "Drop dead, buddy! Do you expect to come out here and have me just pretend it never happened? I'll forgive you when I am good and ready. I want to see you crawl for what you said to me."

Unfortunately, such a response from Susy would not be an uncommon one. She has been hurt. Pride says she must take revenge. Billy should pay for using her as a verbal doormat. Only when he has suffered enough or proven his repentance will she forgive him.

But is Susy forgiving like God forgives? No, she isn't.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

God forgives whenever we confess our sin.¹¹ To imitate God's forgiveness we must do the same. When they ask, we must forgive. This is not a made-up theological principle. It is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught.

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.

(Luke 17:3-4)

According to Christ's instruction, what should elicit our forgiveness? The offender's repentance - a verbal acknowledgement of wrong doing and request for a cancellation of his sin debt.¹² No wonder Jesus said "Be on your guard!"¹³ Such a humble response to repeated sin against us is hardly a natural one.

¹¹ God sees the heart. Therefore, He sometimes rejects what might seem to us to be genuine repentance (Judges 10:10-16). But God's omniscience is something we can not imitate. We can not judge a person's heart. We can only accept the person's words at face value. Love "believes all things," (1 Cor 13:7).

¹² Technically, forgiveness can't be given until it's asked for. That doesn't condone bitterness; we are always to be tender-hearted, willing to forgive. While Mark 11:25 legitimises "forgiving in the heart," the assumption is you'll speak to the offending person as soon as possible. People who say, "I've forgiven him," but have never spoken to the offender (assuming it's possible) are ducking their responsibility.

¹³ The disciples' response is fascinating: "Increase our faith" (17:5). It takes faith to forgive. It takes faith to believe that forgiving as God commands is better than taking personal revenge. When we have been hurt, it takes great faith to forgive and trust God to deal with the offender (especially a *repeat* offender).

Susy's reaction – "I want to see you crawl" – is much more common. "I will forgive him once I think he has suffered enough for what he did!" But that is not biblical forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness is a *merciful* erasing of a sin debt. If Billy has to "crawl" to *earn* a restored relationship with Susy, then Susy is not being "gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness." She is not imitating God.

To forgive like God forgives, we must forgive without conditions.¹⁴ You cannot both release a person from their guilt and demand that they suffer for what they did.

But I don't feel like forgiving him

Let's suppose for a moment that Susy's response in the hallway was slightly different (poor Susy – you can see that the one sinned against often has a greater challenge to be godly than the one who needs to repent). Let's suppose when Billy admitted his wrong-doing, Susy just bit her lip and said nothing.

When asked later she would probably say, "How can I forgive his verbal stabs? They still hurt too much. I don't *feel*/like forgiving him." Susy's sentiments are not uncommon. People often excuse their unwillingness to forgive by saying they do not feel forgiving toward the person.

But "not feeling like forgiving" isn't a biblical concept. Actually, that's not quite accurate. It is not a biblical concept *under that name*. The Bible calls not feeling like forgiving "*bitterness*."

Bitterness is a stubbornly maintained, resentful anger against another. It is the opposite of what Paul commanded in Ephesians 4:31-32.

Let all bitterness...be put away from you...and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other.

Let's simplify matters for a moment. Feelings are not the primary issue in forgiveness. A choice *to obey* Luke 17:3-4, "If he repents, forgive him," and Ephesians 4:31-32 is. Granting forgiveness when requested is an act of obedience to Christ's command. Susy is not free to obey Christ's commands only when she *feels* like it. Christians might often not *feel*/like doing what God's word commands. However, we still must obey. That is true of granting forgiveness as well.

If Susy continued to refuse to grant her forgiveness to Billy based on not feeling forgiving, then it is she who has become the offender. Billy is now doing his best to be at peace with his wife (Rom 12:18). However, she is refusing to forgive him, the one thing that will bring peace. In that situation,

¹⁴ Forgiving without conditions does not mean there are no *consequences* to a person's sin. The dating couple who sleep together are forgiven by God when they genuinely confess their sin. But they still might have to deal with the consequence of immorality - pregnancy. If Billy's outburst had been public, for example, Billy would have to bear the consequence of going back to all those present and correcting his slander against Susy. That he do so, however, can not be a condition Susy attaches to her forgiveness.

the tables have been turned. With great gentleness (Prov 15:1), Billy will need to encourage Susy to forsake her sin of bitterness.¹⁵

Step 3 - A new and better relationship

Let's assume that Billy and Susy have finally straightened things out. He has asked her forgiveness and she has given it. Is that the end of the process? You might think so, but you would be wrong.

That wrong idea about forgiveness could lead to an "I forgive you, but I never want to see you again as long as I live" kind of forgiveness. Many times in a situation like Billy and Susy's, forgiveness is asked and given, but then a cold silence descends on the relationship.

Maybe Billy wants to start over at the point he came in the door so he can handle things rightly this time. Susy, however, gives him the silent martyr treatment. She *says* she has erased Billy's debt. But her rigid silence and averted eyes say he is still paying it.

Or, perhaps Susy has lovingly forgiven her husband and wants now to comfort him after what has clearly been a turbulent day at work. Billy, however, sits at the supper table in glum silence, brooding over feelings of self-condemnation because of his outburst. Susy has taken his debt "out of the way." Billy is deep sea diving, trying to find it at the bottom of the ocean where Susy buried it. He is acting like he needs to suffer for what was graciously blotted out.

If the exchange, "Forgive me/I forgive you," were the end of biblical forgiveness, then there would be no solution for those kind of situations. But after *pursuing peace* and making a *verbal covenant*, there is a third step to the process of biblical forgiveness. That *third step* is the establishment of a *new and better relationship* between those involved.

God's example

Consider God's example of forgiveness. When God forgave sinners did He say, "Okay, I won't hold your sin debt against you anymore. Now scram! I don't ever want to see your face around here again"? Of course not! What God did was this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Eph 1:3

If you read through Ephesians chapter one, you would find God took the unruly rebels, forgave them, and made them sons and daughters. He gave them His Spirit as a promise of more to come.

¹⁵ If Susy's refusal would continue, then Billy would be obligated to carry out the process of Matt 18 for Susy's sinful response to his request for forgiveness.

God did not dismiss those He forgave with a cold stare. He blessed them. He loved them. He made His relationship with them *new and better*.

To forgive like God forgives, then, the last step in biblical forgiveness must be establishing a new and better relationship with the other person. In the previous section we talked about the issue of *feeling* like forgiving. How can the raw emotions in a situation like Billy and Susy's be overcome? How can Susy put out of her mind the biting lash of Billy's words? How can Billy wade out of the puddle of self-pity he is drowning himself in?

Replacing evil with good

As always, evil responses are overcome by good.

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

(Rom 12:21)

We have seen that principle already in Ephesians 4:31-32. Paul said to *put off* bitterness, wrath, and anger; he then said to *put on* kindness and compassion. The evil responses of bitterness and anger are not overcome by teeth-grinding tolerance or avoiding the person. Evil responses are overcome when they are replaced by *consciously doing good* to the other person.

Biblical forgiveness does not end with an uneasy truce. The goal of forgiveness is not cold neutrality. Often that is where people stop. It is not surprising that bitterness, coldness, and avoiding are the result. The natural, sinful responses of vengeance, resentment, and self-pity have not been *replaced*. Therefore, they come sneaking back to take control. Choosing to put them out of your mind (2 Cor 10:5) is only part of the solution. All those evil responses are ultimately overcome by specifically doing good to the other person.¹⁶

Billy and Susy will overcome the coldness and silence at the supper table only when they *actively* start to do good to one another. The solution for their bruised feelings is to work at establishing a new and better relationship with each other. To illustrate, let's consider two biblical examples of this principle in action.

Paul's example

When Paul wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians, the church in Corinth had been in upheaval. Among other things, someone in the church had sinned against Paul in some serious manner. However, eventually the person had repented. Giving guidance for handling the situation, Paul taught the Corinthian church a significant lesson about forgiveness.

¹⁶ The reason many people never overcome emotionally-driven sins is they do not apply both God's tools for controlling emotions. One must both *think rightly* and *act rightly* to break the grip of dominating emotions. The caboose of emotions will inevitably follow the engine of thinking and actions once it starts rolling.

But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree – in order not to say too much - to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.

(2 Cor 2:5-8)

Since the offender had repented, Paul wanted the church to forgive him (v. 7). However, notice that their forgiveness was not to be merely a verbal token: "Okay, buddy, you can come back to church, but you will have to sit in the corner all by yourself."

Biblical forgiveness includes pursuing *a new and better relationship* with the other person. Paul said the church was to *comfort* and *reaffirm their love* for the repentant one (vv. 7-8). If they did not do that, he might be overwhelmed by sorrow (v. 7). Moreover, Satan might take advantage of the situation to cause division (vv. 10-11).

If Susy becomes the human refrigerator after she "forgives" Billy, then she has not really forgiven him. Forgiveness is not complete until she reaches out to comfort him in his sorrow over his sin and reaffirms her love for him. The last step in biblical forgiveness is not an uneasy truce. It is a new and better relationship in which the other person's good is actively sought.

Joseph's example

Another example of the third step in the process of forgiveness is found in Genesis 50. You remember that Joseph's brothers nearly murdered him, and then did sell him as a slave when he was a young man. Years later, when they discovered he was still alive and in a position of authority over them, they were "dismayed" (Gen 45:3). They were certain Joseph was going to take revenge for their despicable actions. Joseph, however, chose to blot out their evil deeds with forgiveness.

When Jacob, the father of Joseph and his brothers died, the brothers again became dismayed. They feared that Joseph had merely been delaying his vengeance until their father was out of the picture. Now that Jacob was gone, they were sure Joseph would unleash his pent-up resentment.

Therefore, the brothers devised a scheme in order to protect themselves. They sent a message to Joseph claiming that their father, just before his death, had begged Joseph to forgive them (Gen 50:15-17).

The text says Joseph wept upon the reception of this message –probably over his brothers' distrust. Did they not understand forgiveness? The brothers feared vengeance. This is what Joseph gave.

"So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

(Gen 50:21)

Rather than chop off his brothers' heads (probably within his power), Joseph calmed their fears. He promised to provide food for their families in case of famine. He comforted and spoke kindly to them.

Joseph understood forgiveness. He refused to brood over the wrong done to him. Instead, he pursued a new and better relationship with his brothers. He calmed, comforted, spoke kindly to them, and fed them.

The application for Susy is obvious. Having forgiven Billy, she must calm, comfort, and assure him of her love (not to mention feed him!).

However, there is another application in this account. It is for Billy. Joseph's brothers lived in fear because they refused to accept and believe Joseph's forgiveness. They manufactured a message and put it in their dead father's mouth in order to manipulate Joseph into restraining his hand of vengeance. Was all that necessary? No. Joseph had erased the record of their sin debt. They were living in mental turmoil because they refused to accept Joseph's forgiveness.

In the same way, it is wrong for Billy to mope at the supper table, eyes down cast, wallowing in self-condemnation. Susy has forgiven him. Sure he didn't deserve it, but that is what forgiveness is - a *merciful* cancellation of a sin debt. Billy needs to swallow his pride along with his roast beef and accept Susy's forgiveness.

The solution for both him and Susy is to replace their evil thoughts and actions with good. They must actively establish a new and better relationship by doing good to one another. Their kind words and actions toward each other the rest of the evening will be the death of any lingering bitterness or self-preoccupation.

Conclusion

Billy and Susy could be anyone. Maybe they are you. How consistent are you at forgiving like God forgives? The steps are relatively simple. You must *pursue peace* with others. You must make a *verbal covenant* to blot out all repentant sin. By doing so you are promising not to dwell on or bring up that sin again. Thirdly, you must *actively establish a new and better relationship* with the other person.

Biblical forgiveness is simple, but not easy. But by God's grace it can be done. We are His children. We must imitate Him by forgiving as He forgives. "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted,

forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Ephesians 4:32-5:1).