



God's Definition of Forgiveness

Forgiveness?! What does that word mean? You hear so much about this word in Christian circles, and yet so much of what you hear is contradictory! There are so many different ideas and questions out there about what forgiveness is and what it isn't: Is it a promise or a feeling? Do I forgive for my good or the good of the person who sinned against me? Is forgiveness conditional or unconditional? How are we to know which ideas are true and which are not? The only infallible rule for defining matters of faith and practice is the all-sufficient Word of God. Therefore, to define forgiveness, we have to ask: how does God define forgiveness in His Word?

In the New Testament, there are three words translated as "*forgiveness*."¹ As we look at how these words are used in Scripture, they give us the background meaning for forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness involves "letting go" of bitterness or revenge and "graciously giving" pardon to those who ask. This is, by no means, a full definition. To develop a full definition, we need to look at specific instances of how these words are used. With so many references to forgiveness in the Bible, one has to ask: Where do we start? We know that we must interpret Scripture with Scripture – So, the best thing to do is to begin with the clearest teaching on forgiveness and work our way to the more obscure and difficult passages. So, let's begin with God's clearest statement about how we are to forgive:

*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour 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. Ephesians 4:31-32 (emphasis mine, see Col. 3:13).*

In this passage, Paul uses a word for forgiveness that includes the idea of "giving graciously" or giving something which isn't deserved. So, God is commanding us to forgive others in a tender-hearted way (even when that forgiveness isn't deserved) "*just as God in Christ also has forgiven*" us. This is probably the most important text for explaining forgiveness! Here, God is clearly aligning our forgiveness with His. God offers forgiveness of sin to *all men everywhere* who repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38, 3:18-21, 17:30-31). There are two parts to God's forgiveness:

- 1) the attitude and offer of forgiveness through the Gospel, which is preached to all nations; and
- 2) the gracious forgiveness of all those who actually repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

Likewise, our forgiveness is defined by those same two elements. First, we are to be tender-hearted in attitude – willing to forgive all those who offend or sin against us. Second, we are to actually forgive those who repent and come asking for forgiveness.

As helpful as those two parts of forgiveness are, we are still left with the same question: What actually is "forgiveness"? Is it a feeling, some form of emotion, a sense of duty, a decision or what? Again, Ephesians 4:32 tells us: "*forgive as God in Christ forgave you.*" How did God forgive us in Christ? For those who repent and believe in Christ, God has removed their sin and promises never to hold it against us because of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. There are a few things we must point out. First, God's grace is not free; it was purchased for God's elect by Christ's obedience, specifically His suffering and death on the cross. Second, God's removal of our sin and guilt (His forgiveness) is conditioned upon our repentance and faith in Christ. Third, once God has removed the burden of our sin, He promises to *remember it no more* and releases us from the moral obligation to suffer in hell forever (Romans 8:1-2; Heb. 10:17).

However, before we proceed further, we must recognise one more thing. We know, by biblical example, that God doesn't necessarily remove **all** consequences of sin when He forgives. In 2 Samuel 12, we have the story of Nathan confronting King David about his murder of Uriah and sin with Bathsheba. In vs. 13-14, David repents, and Nathan replies, "*The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.*" How can God say in one breath "*your sin has been taken away*" and yet in the very next, give grievous consequences? Did God take away David's sin or not!? Yes, He did. But, "*if He no longer holds the sin against the forgiven, then why are there still consequences? The answer is that God disciplines His own – not for the purpose of punishing them, but for His glory and for their joy in the future.*"² As Hebrews 12 explains, "*For those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives ... God deals with you as sons ... He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.*" In other words, God disciplined David to sanctify him and draw him closer to God Himself.

Through these various passages of Scripture, we see God's forgiveness defined as: *A commitment by the one true God to pardon graciously all those who repent and believe in Christ so that they are reconciled to Him, although this commitment does not eliminate all consequences in this life.*³ This definition of God's forgiveness then lays the foundation for how we understand Christian forgiveness.

Christians are thereby called to have a gracious attitude which offers forgiveness/pardon to all those who offend us. It is this tender-hearted attitude which prevents bitterness and resentment (Eph. 4:31-32). Just as God's offer of forgiveness is extended to His enemies who don't deserve a second chance, so we must offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us – even when we don't think they deserve it! Our forgiveness is graciously offered to ALL who sin against us.

Christians must also make that commitment that God makes to us. He promises to pardon us and to remember our sins no more (Heb. 10:17). Likewise, when we forgive, we are making a four-fold promise:

"I will not dwell on this incident."

"I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."

"I will not talk to others about this incident."

*"I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."*⁴

In these four promises, we are committing to remove the burden of sin just as God has forgiven us. Since we are not God, we cannot remove the eternal consequences for sin, but we can remove the burden of sin. We do so by refusing to dwell on that particular offence (which leads to disruption in the relationship) and by refusing to bring it up to the offender or others (which would lead to disruption in the offender's relationship with others). In other words, we are promising not to remember the matter in such a way that we seek the offender's harm. While forgiveness does not eliminate all consequences for the offender, the offended person's attitude should not be one of saying, "I'm gonna make him/her pay." Rather, just as God often gives us consequences to restore us and bring us closer to Himself, so, earthly consequences complete the restoration started by forgiveness (these consequences are not arbitrary or personally invented; they must be based on principles from God's Word).

From these principles we can derive a definition for forgiveness. It is *A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.*⁵ This is a good definition from which to work, and serves as a foundation for looking at the more obscure Bible passages on forgiveness.

I know that we have barely begun to scratch the surface of this topic. There are probably many more questions that have flooded your mind as you read this article, but don't worry, we will address a lot more in future articles. For instance, in later articles I will answer the questions: Does every offence need to be confronted and forgiven? Do I have to wait until someone repents in order to forgive them? Doesn't conditional forgiveness lead to bitterness? Didn't Jesus forgive

unconditionally on the cross? Aren't we told to forgive everyone? Do I have to forgive if they aren't truly repentant? Who can judge repentance? Isn't it hypocritical to forgive when I don't feel like it? And many more...

If I have whetted your appetite for this topic, and you find yourself not wanting to wait for future articles, then allow me to recommend a great resource. You may have noted it already from the footnotes, but I have found Chris Braun's book *Unpacking Forgiveness* to be very helpful. Pastor Brauns addresses the painful and deep implications of God's view of forgiveness. He doesn't shy away from looking into the application of Scripture to situations of rape, murder, molestation and violent crime. If you don't already have this book, I highly recommend it for every church library and for every family in the church. It is a book which you will turn to again and again for helpful advice and biblical comfort. It will serve as a scriptural guide through the often troubled waters of forgiveness and conflict resolution. May God be glorified as we, His people, forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us!

There you are, sitting in church, when you see **that person** coming over to talk to you. You know who I mean: that *former friend* who offended you a couple of months ago. He made that rude comment to you and NEVER apologised or said sorry or anything! Well, here he comes ... and what do you know, he wants your help with a project he is working on around his house. He is acting as if nothing happened at all! Oh, the arrogance of some people! You politely (but somewhat coldly) reply that you are simply too busy to help him out. You know you have some free time, but you tell yourself that your time would be better spent with your family and your *real friends*. Over time, *that person* gets the message and stops bothering you, and you both learn to politely avoid one another at church functions. You both rationalise that you aren't bitter or anything; you just aren't as "close" as you once were. And in this way, Satan successfully drives a wedge between two brothers/sisters in Christ to the harm of many in the church – perhaps for generations to come.

In Ephesians 4:31-32 (and Colossians 3:13), God calls believers to forgive *each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven us*. As Christians, we know a good bit about how God has forgiven us in Christ. We know that while we were still His enemies, God loved us and sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. We know that God offers forgiveness and salvation to ALL His enemies – none of whom deserve it! And we rejoice that God saves all those who repent of their sins and receive His gift of forgiveness through faith in Christ. God's forgiveness shapes our understanding of human forgiveness, which we defined last time, as follows:

*Forgiveness is a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.*⁶

Now, to some of you, that definition is about as clear as mud. So, think of it this way: Forgiveness is essentially an attitude that leads to action. We graciously offer forgiveness to all who offend us; promising to actually forgive those who repent. And our forgiveness is a four-fold promise not to bring the matter up again to yourself, to others, or to the offender – nor will you use it against them.

But wait a moment ... Does this mean that I have to wait until someone repents before I can forgive him? What if I knew he didn't mean to do it? Or, what if he now lives far away, or is even dead? There are many situations where someone might not have repented, and yet I want to forgive him and move on with my life... Are you saying that I can't? **No**, I am **not** saying that. Rather, this is where God's teaching on "*covering in love*" is so important. Repeatedly in Proverbs, God gives principles of conflict resolution. Gossip and a vindictive spirit flow from hatred, but love covers sin and keeps offences quiet (see Proverbs 10:12; 17:9). As Peter says in 1 Peter 4:8, "*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*" Paul expands on this principle in 1 Corinthians 13,

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (emphasis mine)

In these Scriptures, God is teaching us HOW we show the love of Christ to our neighbour. We love by overlooking small offences. We love by not getting angry easily. We love by refusing to gossip about the offences of others. We love by not keeping records of the sins of our friends and family. Covering over offences in love is the fundamental expression of the *attitude* of forgiveness. If you have a heart willing to forgive all those who offend you, then you will cover many offences in love. But recognise this: *“covering an offence in love”* means that you are making the same four-fold promise as forgiveness! You are promising to shove that offence under the blanket of love, never to bring it up again to yourself, to others, or to the offender – nor will you use it against them! It is very easy to tell yourself that you are covering an offence in love, when in reality, you are actually just writing it down on a ledger in your mind. And then you pull it out at the next fight or disagreement as a trump card, “Remember when you did this?!” But God says that *love keeps no record of wrongs*. If you choose to cover or forgive some offence, make sure you truly throw the blanket of love over the whole incident.

However, what do you do when you try to cover an offence in love, but the memories of that incident just keep coming back to mind? Perhaps, you tried to overlook some rude comment a friend made, but you just can’t seem to help being upset about it. Whenever a particular incident continues to “throw off the covers” of love, you need to resolve it according to Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18 and Luke 17.⁷ Keep in mind that the offence may not clearly be sin; it might just be your perception of another’s attitude or actions. But if you simply cannot keep the matter covered in your mind, *then you must deal with it God’s way*.

Jesus gave us the most basic principle of resolving these sorts of conflicts in Luke 17:3b, *“If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”* Matthew 18:15-17 explains this more extensively, *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”* The goal of confronting your brother is not to get even. It is not to rub his nose in his error. Jesus tells us to show our brother his fault, in a private way, in order to win him back as a friend. Furthermore, you rebuke him with the intention of forgiving him as soon as he repents. Remember that you should have already tried to cover the offence in love. Therefore, your tone and words must reflect your desire to cover this offence under the blanket of loving forgiveness. Many minor disputes have been made worse by harsh words, when a soft answer would have led to reconciliation.

Did the situation described at the beginning of this article sound familiar? Perhaps that describes one or more of your relationships. How do you change those situations? Or, do you need to change them? In Romans 12:18 the Apostle Paul gives us this instruction, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”* (emphasis mine) God went to great lengths to make peace with us in Christ. And His love constrains us to show that same love as we seek to live at peace with others. Biblical repentance and forgiveness is God’s appointed process for restoring broken relationships. *As far as it depends on you*, don’t leave problems unresolved and relationships cold or distant. Simply put, you need to decide whether you should cover that past offence in love, or whether you should still go and speak to the other person about it. Either way, you may need to ask for forgiveness for the way you acted.

Practically: if you decide to cover the offence in love, you could say something like this, “Mike, a long time ago I got upset about something you said to me. Since then, I have decided that it wasn’t such a big deal. But, for a long time, I have sinfully held a grudge against you. I allowed my sinful reaction to affect our friendship. Will you please forgive me for the way I reacted?” Or, if you believe the offence still needs to be confronted, then you must preface your confrontation with your own confession of sin. “Alice, I need to ask your forgiveness for not coming to you about this sooner. I was offended by something you said to me back in April. I should have come and spoken to you about it then, but I didn’t. I have sinfully let that offence harm our friendship ever since. Will you please forgive me?” At that point, most friends will either know or will ask which comment was so offensive. And you can work matters out from there.

Now, some of you might be objecting in your mind, “No! I don’t have to go to them. They sinned against me. I know the Bible too, and Matthew 5 says that the offender has to come to me!” But

that is the beauty of God's commands! If believers obey Matthew 5:23 and Matthew 18:15, then the offender and the offended should meet each other halfway – both going to talk to the other. The reason Jesus spends so much more time explaining that the **offended** must go speak to his brother, is because the **offender** may not know he has done anything wrong! He may have said or done something without thinking it was offensive. One of my professors had a great saying to explain this concept: *He who has the sore toes goes, because he is the one who always knows*. If someone has “stepped on your toes” in some way, he may not know it. But the one with flat toes certainly knows. Therefore, he is the one who must cover the offence in love, or if that is not possible, he must go, confront his friend, and seek reconciliation.

If your friend doesn't listen to you, you should let the situation and emotions cool down a bit and try again later. If he still does not listen to you, then you should choose one or two wise friends (that you both respect) to help you seek reconciliation. If possible, it is best to avoid choosing office-bearers at this point, in order to avoid escalating the conflict. The one or two friends' job is not to side with you. They are to evaluate the entire situation. If you are in the wrong, they should tell you, so that you can go and repent to your brother. The witnesses are there to explain to you both where you are wrong and to help you reconcile. If you can't resolve the matter at this point, then you may need to take it to the elders of the church for resolution. Much more could be said about this part of Matthew 18, but that would be better reserved for a series on church discipline.

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Endnotes

¹ For those with Bible Software, here are the 3 words so that you can study how they are used in the NT. (1) Aphiemi (αφιημι) has the meaning of “to let go” or “to allow/leave alone.” This is translated “forgive” in the sense of forgiving or leaving a debt or sins alone. 1/3 of 143 times it is used for forgiveness in NT; notable examples: Matt. 6:12-15, 18:21-35, 1 John 1:9. (2) Aphesis (αφεσις) is a derivative from the first word aphiemi, but it is used almost exclusively for forgiveness (16x out of 17x). Ex: Acts 2:38, 5:3, 13:38-39, Heb. 9:22. (3) Charizomai (χαριζομαι) means to “graciously or freely give” (1 Cor.2:12, Gal. 3:18, Phil.1:29) or more often it means “to forgive debt/sin” (Eph.4:32, Col.3:13).

² Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 49.

³ Ibid, 51.

⁴ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 209.

⁵ Brauns, 55.

⁶ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 55.

⁷ Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, (Merrick, NY: Calvary Press, 1994), 34-35.