



# Relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING





## What is Forgiveness?<sup>1</sup>

- SCENARIO #1: A Christian is the victim of a horrific crime, and when the local news station interviews the victim or the family of the victim, they publicly announce, despite knowing nothing about the perpetrator, that they have forgiven him of his crime.
- SCENARIO #2: A pastor commits a ministry-disqualifying sin, and when he confesses his sin, the congregation gladly forgive him and ask him to stay on as their pastor.
- SCENARIO #3: A Christian is violently assaulted and robbed, presses criminal charges and files a civil lawsuit against his attacker—and then is rebuked by a brother for failing to forgive his attacker.

What do all of these scenarios have in common? All three represent some misunderstanding about or simplification of *forgiveness*—whether about the definition of forgiveness, the conditions for forgiveness, or the appropriate expression of forgiveness.

The idea of forgiveness is a common one in the New Testament, and almost always reflects the same Greek word, so we have a good sampling of usage and a fairly straightforward term. The Greek noun form is used seventeen times in the NT and is in all but one case translated in the English as *forgiveness*. The lone exception features the word *release*—Christ gives relief/release to the oppressed. The verb form is more abundant (it's used 143 times) and has a broader range of meaning. Some 44 times the NIV translates this term “to forgive,” but slightly more often the NIV prefers the English term “to leave,” with additional translations of the term as “to let/allow,” “to let go,” “to abandon,” and even “to divorce.”

All of this suggests that the term has as its most basic meaning to let go or to leave behind. The idea can be negative: The disciples left Jesus (they *deserted him*); a man can leave a wife (i.e., he can *abandon her*). It can be positive: James and John left their nets to follow Jesus; children were “left go” to come to Jesus. Most often, however, the verb is used to denote the action of some offended person or the action of an offended God in the act of *forgiveness*. But **what, exactly, do we “let go of” when we forgive?** This answer to this question is an elusive one, and, in fact, may be the *wrong* question. Still, it is a question that everyone seems to want to answer—and often answer quite differently. Here are some frequently raised possibilities:

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<sup>1</sup> Notes from Dr. Mark Snoberger E3 Conference workshop.

- It could mean that I just [sing] “let it go” in the sense of *ignoring* or attempting to *forget* that the sin ever happened (these are very popular understandings).
- It could simply mean that I let go or purge myself of all feelings of bitterness or revenge. This understanding is a good start (you will never forgive if you harbor resentment and bitterness), but probably is not enough to *fully* define biblical forgiveness.
- It could mean that I give up all hope for justice—that is, I relinquish all expectation that the offender will pay for his crime, whether financially (remuneration or fine) or punitively (jail time, a restraining order, or in the very worst of cases, even the death penalty).
- It could mean that I release the offender of all restrictions that were imposed as a result of his crime and a full restoration of that offender to all the functions/offices that he held before sinning—whether that be a pastor, an elected official, an employee, a spouse, a friend.

It is probable that none of these definitions (many of which are commonly held by believers and some of which are better than others)—none of them precisely captures the idea of forgiveness. The Bible has something to say about each of these possibilities, but none perfectly reflects the idea.

We will look at a sizable sampling of forgiveness passages to narrow down the possibilities and to construct a better understanding of God’s expectation of us. The governing text is: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you” (Eph 4:32). This is our model, and it is important that we keep coming back to it, even when the data surprises us.

1. The idealistic approach of forgiveness as “forgetting” is impossibly elusive.

Since God more than once promises not to “remember” the sins of his people (Isa 43:25; Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12; 10:17; etc.; so also the prayers of God’s people to this effect—Ps 25:7; Isa 64:9), it is often suggested that interpersonal forgiveness should have the same flavor: We should both forgive *and* forget or, better, conflate these two ideas (i.e., forgiving EQUALS forgetting).

There is some value in observing the close proximity of forgiveness to forgetting, but some qualification is in order. Firstly, we must be mindful of precisely what it means for God to “forget.” Since God is omniscient he cannot forget anything in an absolute sense or else he ceases to be God. And while as finite beings we *can* forget sins against us, it is exceedingly rare to do so and usually takes decades.

What God *does* do, however, is to promise not to remember our sins *against us*. That is, he withholds punishment, or, better, accepts the punishment of another for our sins (he forgives us “for Christ’s sake”), and he agrees never to remind us of them. As we shall see, this kind of language is also used of interpersonal forgiveness (1 Cor 13:5 and 1 Pet 4:8), but the expression of this is not always uniform.

We should also note that God’s “forgetting” of sin is neither universal nor absolute. He does not forget *all* the sins of *everyone* (Jer 14:10; Hos 7:2; 8:13; 9:9), and even when he *does* forgive sins, he does not always absolve the sinner of all punishment (e.g., David). And since we are to forgive *as God does*, these facts need to be incorporated into our understanding of interpersonal forgiveness as well.

2. The approach of forgiveness as concealing or ignoring sin is actually quite unbiblical:

Because NT forgiveness/love is of such a nature that it “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5) and “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8), many suggest that the essence of forgiveness involves concealing sin, even to the point of enduring abuse in silence.

This can hit close to home if, for example, one has a relative who was for decades treated with great wickedness by a man in her church but was told by more than one pastor that since the Bible teaches forgiveness, she had an obligation to conceal the matter, to quietly endure the injuries he was perpetrating against her, and never, ever to seek legal help or relief from them. This was a terrible miscarriage of due process on multiple levels—all based on a bad definition of forgiveness.

Now, most of us would respond that this is terrible. The Bible clearly tells us that there is, in fact, due process for situations like this.

First we have Matthew 18, which guides us in resolving and obtaining relief from sin: personal confrontation, confrontation by a committee of witnesses, confrontation by the whole church, and, if necessary, exclusion of the unrepentant offender from the church into the realm of Satan. But beyond the ecclesiastical courts, secondly, we also have both a criminal and civil justice system—what Paul calls “a minister of God for good.” We have recourse to the law, to legal protection, to prosecution, to which we may appeal for relief.

But then how do we harmonize these procedures for responding to sin with these verses that encourage the “covering” of sin? Some suggest that these references are to petty grievances or sources of annoyance—he sneezes too loudly or coughs too much. Surely, you say, I should overlook these annoyances. And indeed I should! Better yet, I should repent and show a little bit of sympathy—hand him a cough drop or something. But that’s not what Peter is saying when he tells us to cover a multitude of sins. He’s talking about sins. So what should I do? Should I follow Matthew and confront sin or follow Peter and cover it? Actually, you can do both. Turn to Psalm 32 with me and see what the Psalmist tells us about covering sin:

<sup>1</sup>How blessed is he whose transgression is **forgiven**, whose sin is **covered**!

<sup>2</sup>How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!

<sup>3</sup>When I **kept silent** about my sin [*i.e., when I concealed my sin*], my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

<sup>5</sup>I **acknowledged** my sin to you, and my iniquity I **did not hide** [SAME WORD AS IN VERSE 1: I did *not cover* my iniquity]; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” then you forgave the guilt of my sin.

There is much here about forgiveness but let’s focus in on the idea of “covering” sin. David longs to have his sins *covered*, but when he tries to “cover” them apart from confession, he finds no relief. But when he confesses his sin, God forgives his sin and then *covers* his sin. So, asking again whether we should follow Matthew and confront sin or follow Peter and cover it, we should do both: you **confront** sin, effect **reconciliation via confession/repentance** from sin, **forgive** that sin, and then cover sin—don’t ever bring it up again.

To summarize the point then, forgiveness most definitely does not mean I passively ignore or conceal sin (that's the opposite of forgiveness and actually can insulate us from the possibility of forgiveness); instead, I address the sin, forgive, reconcile, and seek the best interests of the repentant sinner, limiting the disclosure of his sin to the degree that the solution demands.

3. The above has been qualified in two ways: Having forgiven I (1) seek the best interest of a *repentant* sinner, which means that I (2) “cover” his sin (keep it private) *to the degree the solution allows*. as possible. **But it does not mean that I must abandon all hope that righteousness/justice will ever prevail.** This is a third misunderstanding about forgiveness that we need to address:
  - a. Forgiveness is extended to *repentant* people. This is perhaps the area that Christians most misunderstand about forgiveness—resulting in the extension of “forgiveness” willy-nilly when it is not in the best interest of sinners to extend it and also in a real sense of futility that wrongs will never be righted.

But biblical forgiveness is *never unconditional*—at least not in the sense that many people think of the term. If you mean by *unconditional* forgiveness that when we forgive, we should forgive with no strings attached, you are correct. We should not say, for instance, “I forgive you—if you let me buy a new set of golf clubs, or a new bedroom suite, or a new hunting rifle” or “I forgive you—if you agree to wash all the dishes for a month.” In Scripture, forgiveness is always granted free and clear: you don't require payment in the form of goods or services or enslavement. In this sense we can rightly say that forgiveness should be unconditional.

But the idea that we are to *automatically* and *immediately* forgive every sinner without exception is not a concept that can be sustained in Scripture. Instead, biblical forgiveness always occurs after the offender meets one very important condition—the offender must repent. This is how GOD forgives (and remember we forgive AS GOD FORGAVE US), and furthermore, how he instructs us to forgive.

2 Chronicles 7:14—*If* my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, *then* will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Jeremiah 36:3—Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin.”

Matthew 6:14–15—*If* you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. *But if you do not* forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

1 John 1:9—*If* we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Luke 17:3—If your brother sins, rebuke him, *and if he repents*, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, *and seven times comes back to you and says, “I repent,”* forgive him (so Matt 18:15–17).

In all of these verses, we are told that forgiveness is extended IF the sinner repents. Indeed, it’s not in the best interest of a sinner (especially a sinning *brother*) to forgive and reconcile and restore him *without first dealing with his sin problem*. The goal of church discipline is not firstly forgiveness, but rather purity. And once that happens, THEN forgiveness and restoration can be extended and unity and harmony restored.

And, in fact, if repentance does not happen, then forgiveness does not happen either. This is also a pattern that we see in the model of forgiveness that God provides us:

Deuteronomy 29:18–21: Make sure there is no man or woman among you whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations.... When such a person hears the words of this covenant and thinks, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way,” [i.e., he is made explicitly aware of his sin but persists in it], *the LORD will never be willing to forgive him*; his wrath and zeal will burn against that man. All the curses written in this book will fall upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. The LORD will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for disaster, according to all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law.

Joshua 24:19 Joshua said to the people,...“The LORD is a holy God; he is a jealous God. **He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.**

2 Kings 24:4 [Manasseh] filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and **the LORD was not willing to forgive.**

Matthew 12:31 I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit **will not be forgiven.** Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be **forgiven**, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit **will not be forgiven**, either in this age or in the age to come.

Mark 4:12 [Christ spoke in parables that confused the impenitent and drove them away] “so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding.’ Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

Note also several biblical prayers in which explicit request is made of God that he not forgive people (Neh 4:5; Isa 2:9; Jer 18: 23).

Now we must balance out these startling statements with a great many more that describe God as standing “ready to forgive,” “swift to forgive,” and “abundant to forgive” (Exod 34:7; Num 14:18–19; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:5), and scores of prayers requesting God to forgive. These passages inform us that we should be ready to instantly forgive sins as soon as repentance occurs; but the idea of automatically forgiving people while they are sinning or immediately after they have sinned, *without first seeking repentance* is a concept unknown in Scripture. And that is because forgiveness is fundamentally an act of *reconciliation* that cannot by definition be practiced alone. It is a mutual activity that necessarily involves two consenting parties (1 Cor 5:17–21).

- b. Forgiveness does not abandon the idea of justice or eliminate the possibility of consequences.

Note the following:

Exodus 34:6–7—The LORD God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; He keeps lovingkindness for thousands and forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; *yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished*, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.

Psalms 99:8—O LORD our God, you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds.



Leviticus 4–5 multiple times intimates that forgiveness is accompanied by *restitution* or *payment* (a fine or a penalty).

The Example of David (goes both ways—he got a *reduced* penalty).

The Restoration of fallen pastors, public officials, employees, etc.

There are, of course, many cases in which God in his mercy *does* choose to suspend a penalty for sin, but these passages clearly teach that forgiveness does not *require* the suspension of penalty. In fact, the broad scope of justice and propriety within the whole community regularly demands that consequences be meted out:

- Loss of a job—just because you forgive an employee who embezzled from your company does *not* mean you have to rehire him.
- Loss of an office—just because a church forgives their pastor for violating the qualifications for his office does not mean they must restore him to the pastorate. In fact, depending on the circumstances, they most emphatically must not.
- Loss of a function—just because you forgive the church treasurer for skimming the accounts does not mean you need to reinstate him. That’s not forgiveness—that’s stupid!
- Loss of freedom—just because you forgive a person for a violent crime does not mean that you cannot press charges or that you need to petition the court for a suspended sentence.

And that’s because forgiveness is not, by definition, the *removal of consequences*, but the *reconciliation of estranged persons*.

Summary: Negatively, God’s expectation that we forgive others as he has forgiven us does *not* mean that we must (1) ignore or conceal sin (in fact, we must *not*), (2) let sins go unresolved, or (3) endure sin silently, or abandon all hope of justice or relief from abusive sin. In fact, (4) we have even suggested that if we forgive like God forgives, sometimes we *won’t* and in fact *can’t* forgive.

So that’s what forgiveness does not mean. So what *is* God’s positive expectation of us when he tells us to forgive as he forgives?

1. It means that we should never harbor thoughts of vengeance or bitterness toward those who have sinned against us (Rom 12:19). This is not forgiveness *per se*, but it *is* a necessary prerequisite of forgiveness.
2. It means that, like God, we must be swift to forgive whenever forgiveness is righteously sought (Ps 86:5).
3. It means that once we forgive, we should “keep no record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5): our forgiveness should come with no “strings attached.”
4. It also means that, like God, we may not cast aside the ideals of justice and prudence when we forgive, though mercy should also be common among us who have been forgiven much (Luke 18:21–35). Mercy is likewise not forgiveness *per se*, but routinely accompanies forgiveness.

In summary, to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven us means that we must stand ready to reconcile from above (i.e., from the vantage of moral high ground of having been sinned against) whenever reconciliation is righteously sought from below (i.e., from the vantage of the moral low ground of having sinned).

Follow-Up Question: “Isn’t it true that Jesus forgave those who crucified him?” They allude to the crucifixion account in Luke 23.

*And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:33–34)*

The short answer to that question is no. Jesus did not forgive them. If you think carefully about this passage, you will see this is the case. Jesus prayed that those who crucified him would be forgiven in the future—he did not thank God that they were already forgiven. If they had already been forgiven, such a prayer would have been superfluous.

Jesus surely *could have* forgiven them on the spot himself, had they been repentant on the spot. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that Jesus had authority to forgive sins. Indeed, there were times when he told people that their sins were forgiven (for example, Luke 5:20–24; 7:49).

Notice also that on the cross, in exactly the same context where Jesus prayed that his killers would be forgiven, Jesus does grant forgiveness to someone else! There were two criminals hanging with Jesus, and one of them repented. Jesus forgave him immediately: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). He did not say, “I pray that you will be forgiven.” He forgave him. And Jesus’ forgiveness promised a new relationship: “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Stephen’s prayer for those who stoned him closely parallels the interceding prayer of Jesus on behalf of his tormentors.

*And falling to his knees he [Stephen] cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60)*

It has often been observed that the apostle Paul’s conversion was an answer to Stephen’s prayer. Paul, who stood nearby holding the garments of those who stoned Stephen (v. 58), was later saved. But again it could be pointed out that Stephen did not say to those stoning him, “I forgive you.” Paul was not forgiven until he repented on the road to Damascus. Hypothetically speaking, if Paul had lost his life in a chariot accident during the time period between Stephen’s death and his own conversion, Paul would not have gone to heaven.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 145–146.