

Forgiveness

1) What does it mean to be forgiven?

A) When Jesus wanted to illustrate forgiveness, he told the story of a man who was in debt (Matt 18:21–27). In the story, the man owed the king 10,000 talents (it would have taken roughly 193,000 years of work to pay the debt).¹ The amount was so great that it was impossible to pay, and the man begged the king to give him more time. The king had pity on the man and “forgave him the debt.” This part of the story teaches us:

- (1) Our debt to God is impossible to pay. The 10,000 talents represent our debt to God. When we sin against God, we are sinning against an infinite and eternal being. This means that our sins take on an infinite and eternal quality that warrants eternal punishment. No matter how hard we work, we can never pay our debt to God.
- (2) Forgiveness flows from God’s love for us. The king’s “pity” for the man in debt represents God’s love and mercy to us. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
- (3) Forgiveness cancels our debt. The king’s forgiveness of the debt represents God’s forgiveness of our sins. When we confess and repent of our sins, God forgives us. This means that:²
 - (a) Our guilt is removed (Rom 8:1).
 - (b) We no longer have to pay the penalty for our sins—death (Rom 6:23).³
 - (c) We are reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:13, 19).

2) What does it mean to forgive others?⁴

A) Jesus’ story continues in the next few verses (Matt 18:28–35). The man whose enormous debt had been forgiven went out and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii (it would have taken roughly four months of work to pay the debt). He demanded the debt be paid immediately. The servant begged for more time, but the man rejected his plea and had him thrown into prison. When the king found out, he was furious. He summoned the former debtor and said, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” Then he handed the man over to the torturers until the 10,000 talents were paid. This part of the story teaches us:

¹ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Publishing, 2008), p. 449.

² While salvation clearly involves much more than what is mentioned here, the focus of this study is on forgiveness in particular.

³ This doesn’t mean that we won’t reap what we have sown (see the lesson on Sowing and Reaping).

⁴ You can’t understand what it means to forgive others until you grasp what it means for you to be forgiven by God.

- (1) We must forgive others because God has forgiven us. The king's mercy to the man in debt represents God's grace and mercy to us as sinners. His example of forgiveness is the basis and motivation of our forgiving others. God has forgiven our sins—how can we refuse to forgive the sins of others?
- (2) Refusing to forgive is ungrateful and offensive to God. The man whose enormous debt had been forgiven went out and began “to choke” a fellow servant who owed him a mere pittance. This represents the absurdity and ingratitude of refusing to forgive others after we ourselves have been forgiven. No matter how badly we are wronged, it cannot compare to our sin against an infinite and eternal God. Until we truly grasp the magnitude of our own sin, we will find ourselves unwilling to forgive others.
- (3) We must love others. The anger and hostility the former debtor had toward his fellow servant represents our misplaced resentment toward those who wrong us. God calls us to love one another in the same way that He first loved us (1 John 4:19–21). In the same way that God's forgiveness flows from His love for us, our forgiveness should flow from our love for others.
- (4) God will not forgive those who will not forgive others. The man whose enormous debt had been forgiven ruined his life because he would not forgive his fellow servant. If he had shown mercy, he would have remained in the king's favor. But the king was rightfully provoked to anger when he discovered what the man had done. In the same way, God is just to deny us forgiveness if we refuse to forgive those who have wronged us.
- (5) When someone repents of their sin against us and asks our forgiveness, we must forgive them. This means that:
 - (a) Their guilt toward us is removed (although they must also repent before God).
 - (b) They no longer have to pay us the penalty for their offense (although they may have to pay the penalty prescribed by law, make restitution and reap what they have sown).
 - (c) They are reconciled to us (although restoration is a process that is often difficult and painful).

3) What is involved in forgiving someone who has wronged me?

- A) Forgiveness involves cultivating the right attitude. You will be unwilling to forgive others until your heart and mind have been transformed by the truth of God's word. Meditate on the following truths:
 - (1) You can do nothing apart from God's power and grace (John 15:4; Phil 4:13). The ability to forgive others is not something you can do on your own—you have to have God's help. Pray and ask God to give you the love and humility necessary to truly forgive.
 - (2) Your sin before God is infinitely greater than the offense of the one who wronged you (Rom 6:23a; Matt 25:46). Can what was done to you be compared to the magnitude of what you have done to God?

- (3) God forgave you, thus you are obligated to forgive others (Col 3:13; Matt 6:14–16). If God was willing and eager to forgive your sins, how can you be unwilling to forgive the sins of others?
- (4) God loves the person who wronged you (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 3:10–11). If God loves the person who sinned against you, how can you not also love them and desire to forgive them?

B) Forgiveness involves loving the person who wronged you.

- (1) If the person who wronged you is a fellow believer, loving them means confronting them (see Matt 18:15; Luke 17:3).
 - (a) All too often we are silent and withdrawn when someone sins against us. We think they should come to us, but Jesus said we should take the initiative and go to them.
 - (b) Meet with them privately and entreat them in a spirit of gentleness and kindness (Eph 4:32). Tell them, “I love you as a fellow believer and want God’s best for you. When you did [clearly state the offense] to me, I believe that you violated God’s command to love others as Christ loves us. Can we discuss this so that there can be unity and peace between us?”
 - (c) Confronting another believer is appropriate only in cases of clear sin. We are not to be rebuking other Christians every time we feel offended or mistreated. Our feelings and interactions with others should be governed by 1 Corinthians 13. In cases of petty or trivial matters, it is best to overlook the perceived offense.
- (2) If the person who wronged you is not a Christian, loving them means responding with a Christ-like attitude (see Matt 5:39–48).
 - (a) Pray for them (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). Love for others compels us to pray for our enemies and seek their salvation. Never forget that you too were once a sinner.
 - (b) Return good for evil (Prov 25:21–22; 1 Thess 5:15). When we are kind to those who are cruel and help those who despise us, we demonstrate God’s love and bring conviction to their heart.
 - (c) Leave vengeance to God (Rom 12:19; Lev 19:18). Our natural response when someone wrongs us is to seek revenge: “Just wait until I get the chance, I’ll pay them back.” We must reject such thinking and leave the offender in the hands of God.
 - (d) Establish boundaries and limit contact where appropriate (1 Cor 6:19–20; 15:33; Matt 10:23). There are situations that require us to put distance between ourselves and the offender (e.g., physical/sexual abuse, etc.). Being kind and loving does not mean allowing complete access to your life. Sometimes the wisest course of action is to break off contact with the offender until such time as they are truly repentant.

- (3) In certain cases, the one who wronged you may no longer be alive (or you may have no way of contacting or interacting with them). In that case, I recommend that you imagine them coming to you and asking for your forgiveness. You should then make the conscious decision to release them from their debt (consider forgiving them in writing if it is helpful). This is not just a silly mental exercise. By doing this, you demonstrate to yourself and God that you are ready and willing to forgive. That is all that is required of you in this situation.
- C) Forgiveness involves releasing the one who wronged you. When the person who sinned against you repents and asks your forgiveness, tell them, “I forgive you.”
- (1) Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to release others from their debt to us. This means that we no longer charge them as guilty of sinning against us, and we do not demand that they suffer for what they did to us (although they may have to pay the penalty prescribed by law, make restitution and reap what they have sown).
- (2) We should be ready, willing and eager to forgive (this is our part), but if the person who sinned against us is unwilling to acknowledge their sin and repent (this is their part), then they cannot receive our forgiveness (Matt 18:15; Luke 17:3).
- (a) In the case of a serious wrong, you should make sure the offender is truly repentant. Reconciliation, the goal of forgiveness, is impossible if the person who sinned is unclear about his confession and repentance. Here are seven marks of a truly repentant person:⁵
- Accepts full responsibility for their actions (instead of: “If have done anything to offend you...”).
 - Welcomes accountability from others.
 - Does not continue in the sinful behavior.
 - Does not have a defensive attitude about being in the wrong.
 - Does not dismiss or downplay their sinful behavior.
 - Does not resent doubt about their sincerity or the need to demonstrate sincerity—especially in cases involving repeated offenses.
 - Makes restitution where necessary.
- (b) As long as the repentance is genuine, you must always forgive those who repent (Matt 18:21–22). There is no limit to forgiveness. How many times do you want God to forgive you?
- D) Forgiveness involves reconciliation with the one who wronged you (Matt 5:21–24). Restoration of a relationship that has been damaged by sin is a difficult and often painful task. But the true end of forgiveness is reconciliation.⁶

⁵ Steve Cornell, “How to move from Forgiveness to Reconciliation,” *The Gospel Coalition*. Cited: Oct 11, 2013. Online: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/03/29/how-to-move-from-forgiveness-to-reconciliation/>.

⁶ The suggestions mentioned are sourced from Cornell’s article above.

- (1) Be humble toward the offender. You should not demand that they “earn” your forgiveness (although it may be necessary for them to work to restore trust). This requires true humility. Those who focus on making sure the offender understands how much they have been hurt are allowing self-serving pride to control them.
 - (2) Be clear about guidelines for restoration. Restoration can involve things like restitution, maintaining financial accountability, holding down a job, or seeking treatment for substance abuse. Make sure these considerations are clearly communicated and understood.
 - (3) Be realistic about the process. Restoration often requires hard work and long periods of time. Periodic failure by an offender doesn’t always indicate an unrepentant heart. Behavior patterns often run in deep channels. A key indicator of change is the attitude of the offender. While you should proceed with caution, be careful about demanding guarantees from a person who has truly expressed repentance. If they stumble, the process of loving confrontation, confession, and forgiveness may need to be repeated. Setbacks and disappointments are often part of the process. Don't give up!
- E) Forgiveness involves taking your thoughts and emotions captive (2 Cor 10:5). The wrongs done to us by others can be very damaging and hurtful. If an unkind word can haunt our thoughts for months or even years, how much more can physical, mental and sexual abuse! Because of this, we must be proactive in bringing our thoughts and emotions into submission to God’s word.
- (1) Ask God to give you mental and emotional healing (Ps 34:18; 147:3). He desires to bring true healing and peace to your heart. Make it a matter of daily prayer. Ask God to replace the sorrow and bitterness with love and joy.
 - (2) Reject the impulse to relive the offense. You will never be free from the emotional damage of being wronged if you continue to relive the offense over and over in your mind. Ask God to help you reject those thoughts and purpose to meditate on Scripture whenever the memory returns (see the verses in this lesson).
 - (3) Remember that everything that happens to you is subject to God’s control (Gen 45:5–8; Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). Indeed, nothing can happen to you without His direct involvement and permission. God is not caught by surprise when people wrong you. You must learn to see the offenses of others as part of God’s working in your life.
 - (4) What others intend for evil, God can turn to good (Gen 50:18–21). God does not condone evil nor does He approve of wickedness. But because He is all-wise and all-powerful, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom 8:28 NIV). There is nothing anyone can do that can keep God from His ultimate purpose of conforming you to the image of Jesus Christ!

4) I confronted the person who wronged me, but they won't listen to me. What should I do?

- A) Jesus gave specific instructions about what to do if a fellow believer refuses to repent of their sin against us:
- (1) Confront them again with one or two other believers (Matt 18:16). This will confirm the fact that a sin has been committed, and they will be witnesses to your attempt to restore that person to fellowship.
 - (2) If that fails, bring the matter before the church body (Matt 18:17). In this way you will have the support and backing of the entire congregation in your attempt to resolve the issue.
 - (3) If the person refuses to listen to the church, the leadership and the congregation should jointly act to remove them from fellowship (2 Thess 3:14; 1 Cor 5:9-13). This does not mean that you simply forget about them. Instead, this action is intended to show the person the seriousness of their sin and call them to repentance. Continue to pray for them and ask God to restore them.
 - (4) Throughout this process, ask God to help you remain ready, willing and eager to forgive. God is always glad to welcome back a sinner who returns to the fold. How can we do any less?

5) How should I go about asking someone to forgive me?

- A) Since other people can't see into your heart and tell when you are truly repentant, it's important to be clear in what you say when asking their forgiveness. I recommend the following approach:
- (1) Acknowledge your sin. Consider saying, "What I did to you was sinful and wrong. It was a clear violation of loving God and loving others."
 - (a) Avoid saying things like, "If I offended you," or "If you felt wronged." These trite phrases do not express repentance and can often make the situation even worse.
 - (2) Express sorrow for hurting them. Consider saying, "I want you to know how sorry I am for hurting you. I know that what I did was very painful to you."
 - (3) Clearly ask their forgiveness. Consider saying, "I know I don't deserve it, but I want to humbly ask you to forgive me. I'm willing to make the appropriate restitution, and I purpose, through God's grace, never to do this to you again."
 - (a) Avoid saying things like, "Let bygones be bygones," or "The past is the past." If you do, they will often feel later that you never really repented.
 - (4) Remain humble. Avoid the impulse to justify your actions or give explanations for your behavior. If they express anger or sorrow over what you did, take it humbly and, if appropriate, repeat steps 1 and 2.