

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Answering the Hard Questions About Forgiveness

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: P05

by John MacArthur

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You. -Ps. 86:5

I know a young man (we'll call him Jim) who believes he was mistreated by a fellow Christian several years ago. There was a dispute about who was wrong in the incident. Jim brought the matter to the elders of his church for resolution. The elders attempted to investigate the matter but ultimately concluded there was insufficient evidence to determine who was at fault. It was one person's word against the other's, with no other witnesses. The elders finally advised both Jim and the other party to forgive one another and put the dispute behind them.

Jim refused to do that. He had read a popular Christian book on forgiveness, and the book taught that forgiveness can never be granted until the other party repents and seeks forgiveness. Jim now believes he is justified in withholding forgiveness from his brother as long as the other man refuses to admit he was wrong. Jim is determined to see that he gets justice, and he has already spent several years seeking someone who will take up his cause. But almost everyone has given him the same advice: "The issue is petty. It's your word against the other fellow's. This might not be resolved until Christ Himself sorts it out and you lay your differences aside in heaven. Give it up and move on. It is beginning to dominate your life and rob you of opportunities to bear the fruit of the Spirit."

Jim refuses to heed that advice. He believes that God, who hates injustice, would *never* want him to suffer an injury and simply forgive the offender unconditionally. Although numerous Christians have shown him 1 Peter 2:20-23, Jim has somehow managed to explain it away in his own mind. For years he has gone from counselor to counselor, desperately seeking someone who will agree with him and help him pursue justice against this other Christian who Jim says sinned against him. He believes he is obeying the biblical injunction of Colossians 3:13 ("Just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you") because, after all, God does not forgive apart from the repentance of the offender. Thus he has twisted a commandment to forgive into an excuse for withholding forgiveness.

I don't know whether Jim or the other fellow was at fault in the original dispute. It may well be that both of them were partly wrong. But even if the other fellow was totally at fault, I believe Jim is clearly wrong to hang on to his bitterness and justify his refusal to forgive on the ground that the offender has not repented. This is precisely the kind of situation in which we are supposed to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39). Those who keep account of such wrongs, constantly demanding redress of personal affronts, are violating the very spirit of Christ.

I am convinced that many, if not most, of the personal problems Christians see counselors for have to do with forgiveness. And there are some difficult questions surrounding this subject of forgiveness.

In this booklet I want to address some of those issues. These are some of the hardest questions about forgiveness that have come my way in thirty years of ministry.

What Is the Difference Between True Repentance and a Mere Apology?

Genuine repentance always involves a confession of wrongdoing and a willingness to make things right. An apology often takes the form of an excuse.

The word *apology* comes from the Greek *apologia*, which literally means "a speech in defense of." Apologies are often nothing more than self-defense: "I'm sorry if you took offense, but . . ." Genuine repentance is properly expressed in an admission of wrongdoing and a plea for forgiveness: "It was unthoughtful of me to say that. Will you forgive me?"

Be wary of using merely apologetic language in place of genuine repentance.

To Whom Should We Confess Our Sins?

Confession of guilt must *always* be made to God. Confession is also owed to whomever our sin has injured. The arena of confession should be as large as the audience of the original offense. Public transgressions call for public confession; private sins should be confessed to God alone.

What If I Sin with My Thoughts Against Another Person?

Only actual injuries require confession of a wrong. It would be inappropriate for a man who had a lustful thought to confess that thought to the woman who was the object of his lust. Confession in such cases should be made only to God.

That does not, however, rule out confession in every case where the victim is unaware of the offense. If you have quietly slandered someone, that person may be unaware of the offense. Nonetheless, the offense is real. It needs to be made right not only with those who received the original slander, but also with the person who was slandered, even if that person is not yet aware of the offense.

Should I Confess My Unfaithfulness to My Wife, Even If Telling Her About It May Hurt Her More Than Keeping It a Secret Would?

There is no doubt that in some cases confessing a sin may cause as much hurt as the offense itself. Nonetheless, I believe that in all cases the unfaithful party in a marriage relationship broken by adultery should confess the sin to his or her spouse.

Why? For one thing, it takes two people to commit adultery. The other party in the sin already knows about the offense. It compounds your unfaithfulness to share a secret with your cohort in sin but keep your spouse in the dark. The lack of total openness--the need to hide things and keep secrets--will continue to be a barrier to the proper unity of the marriage. Something as serious as a breach in the marital union cannot be repaired if the truth must be kept from your marriage partner. Failure to confess simply compounds lying and cover-ups. That sort of thing will eventually destroy the relationship, whether or not the adultery is repeated.

As difficult as it may be for both you and your spouse, you must deal honestly with a sin like this. If the offended spouse discovers the sin through other means, the hurt that is then caused will be drastically increased. You owe it to him or her to confess.

How Should We Handle Repeat Offenses?

Jesus answered this question expressly in Luke 17:3-4: "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." Again, our forgiveness is supposed to be lavish, enthusiastic, eager, freely offered, and unconstrained--even for repeat offenders. After all, we are all repeat offenders against God.

But What If There Is Reason To Think That the Offender's "Repentance" Is a Sham?

In normal circumstances, love obliges us to assume the best about those who profess repentance (1 Cor. 13:7). Scripture does suggest, however, that there are certain times when it is legitimate to demand fruits of repentance before assuming that someone's profession of repentance is genuine

(Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8).

One author paints a hypothetical scenario where an offender intentionally punches an innocent person in the nose. After the first offense, the offender asks for, and receives, forgiveness. Moments later, in another unprovoked attack, he punches the same person in the nose a second time. The cycle is repeated a third time, and a fourth, and so on, with the bully professing repentance each time and the victim granting forgiveness each time. That author suggests this is how Jesus' words are to be interpreted: "If he . . . returns to you seven times, *saying*, 'I repent,' forgive him." All the offender needs to do is to say he repents, and the offended person is obliged to forgive.

But that is far too wooden an interpretation of Jesus' words. Our Lord was not suggesting that the disciples should throw discernment out the window when it comes to evaluating a person's repentance. Nothing in the context of Luke 17:3-4 suggests that the offense Jesus had in mind was deliberate or that the repentance was feigned.

In fact, it is important to be wary of feigned repentance in cases like the hypothetical one just described. Such deliberately repeated offenses, especially when accompanied by phony repentance, are evidence of a profoundly evil character and a cynical hatred of the truth. John the Baptist was justified in refusing baptism to the Pharisees until they showed the reality of their profession of repentance (Matt. 3:8).

So there are times when it is sheer folly to accept a mere profession of repentance, especially in the wake of several deliberate repeat offenses.

Nonetheless, even after multiple offenses, the offended person must be prepared to forgive--*eager* to forgive--unless there remains some very compelling reason to doubt the offender's profession of repentance. Even the hardest and most deliberate offender should never be permanently written off; rather, complete forgiveness and reconciliation should remain the offended person's goal.

When Is Restitution Appropriate?

Whenever an actual loss has been caused by a wrong, restitution is certainly appropriate. The granting of forgiveness for the guilt of the offense does not automatically nullify the need to make reparations, especially when the injured party's loss is quantifiable. Whether the loss was caused deliberately (as in a theft) or accidentally (through some form of negligence), restitution should be made.

Under the Old Testament law, most restitution was as nearly as possible matched to the actual loss (Lev. 24:18-21). If your negligence caused your neighbor's ox to die, you had to pay him the value of

the ox (Exod. 21:33-34). Deliberate thievery was punished with additional restitution. Someone who stole money had to repay an additional 20 percent (Lev. 6:4-5; Num. 5:6-7). Certain thefts of animals (especially if the stolen animals were killed) required four- and fivefold restitution (Exod. 22:1).

Zaccheus offered fourfold restitution to those he had defrauded, more than the law required (Luke 19:8). That spirit of willingness to make restitution should accompany all true confession of wrongdoing.

Restitution should never be regarded as a meritorious act of penance. The purpose of restitution is simply to restore the value of the damages. Under Moses' law, when restitution was required over and above the actual amount of the loss, the purpose of the restitution was both to punish and to deter.

The one forgiving is free, of course, to forgo restitution and to choose to suffer the wrong without demanding repayment. But that is the offended person's option. The offender, if truly repentant, must be willing to right the wrong as much as is possible (cf. Matt. 18:26, 29).

What Restitution Can Be Made If the Offense Was a Sin Like Lying, Slander, Dishonoring One's Parents, or Other Sins Where No Actual Value Can Be Attached to the Damage?

In some cases tangible restitution is impossible, and yet reparations need to be made. Lies should be confessed and the truth communicated at least as widely as the lie was. Slander needs to be corrected by a sincere effort to restore the offended person's reputation and honor.

Restitution in all such instances begins with a humble confession of the wrongdoing and a willingness to do whatever is reasonable to right the wrong.

Is the Forgiver Obligated to Forget the Offense?

"Forgive and forget." The expression has attained the status of a cliché. When we grant forgiveness, does that entail a promise to forget the offense completely?

Yes and no. There is obviously no way to purge the memory of an offense. And the more severe the offense, the more difficult it may be to keep the memory from coming to mind.

I've heard people suggest that God forgets our sins when He forgives. They usually cite Hebrews 10:17: "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (cf. 8:12). Or Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

But those verses don't say God forgets our sins. They say *He will not remember them*. What's the difference? To forget something is to have no memory of it. Obviously God, who is omniscient, has not lost His memory of our transgressions. Rather, He refuses to call them to mind. He promises not to bring them up.

And that is exactly what is involved in forgiveness. It is a promise not to remind the person of the offense. Jay Adams characterizes this as a threefold promise: "You promise not to remember his sin by bringing it up to him, to others, or to yourself. The sin is buried" (Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving* [Amityville, NY: Calvary, 1994], 25).

What If I Cannot Forgive Myself?

I realize there are some who teach that a kind of self-forgiveness is necessary. I find this nowhere in Scripture. I've met many people who *claim* to be unable to forgive themselves, but on careful examination this usually turns out to be a kind of sinful pride exacerbated by modern self-esteem philosophy. The person who complains about not being self-forgiving is often simply looking for flattering or consoling words from others as a way of salving the hurt that guilt has caused to their pride.

Jay Adams offers good insight into this question. He writes:

The problem is not self-forgiveness. Their expressed agony stems from the very fact that, in the worst way, they want to forgive themselves. They want to put it all behind them, they want to bury it once and for all. . . .

The problem is that people who talk this way recognize something more needs to be done. Forgiveness is just the beginning; it clears away the guilt. They also recognize that they are still the same persons who did the wrong--that though they are forgiven, they have not changed. Without being able to articulate it, and using instead the jargon they have heard all around them, they are crying out for the change that will assure them they will never do anything like it again. When, as a counselor, I help them to deal with the problems in their lives that led to the wrong, in such a way that they lead a more biblical lifestyle, I then ask, "Are you still having trouble forgiving yourself?" Invariably, they say no. (*From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 64)

What If the Offense Was a Grave One and I Am Still Hurting? Shouldn't I Wait To Forgive Until I Can Be Honest About It? Wouldn't It Be Hypocritical To Do Otherwise?

Some transgressions, particularly offenses involving marital infidelity, can cause pain so intense that the offended person imagines it is okay to withhold forgiveness in *this* case. They rationalize that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness might be all right for dealing with petty offenses, but a *serious* offense surely justifies a cooling-off period or a time of "emotional healing."

Normally, however, those who take that approach merely allow themselves to seethe, and thus the negative emotions are only fed, and the breach caused by the original offense is made worse by a heart-hardening resentment.

Much of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was given to teach us *not* to be driven by our passions in such matters. Allowing emotions to take over and control us so that we violate what we know rationally is our duty is the very essence of sensuality. And sensuality is sinful, whether it is the kind of sensuality that leads to sins of lust like adultery, or the kind of sensuality that allows emotions to become a roadblock to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is first of all an act of the will. It is not hypocrisy to will forgiveness when the emotions are screaming for vengeance. Be obedient to the Lord regardless of how you feel. If you refuse to harbor spite or dwell on the offense, evil emotions will be starved. Moreover, the Lord Himself will set your heart right. Right emotions will eventually come if you surrender to Him.

And ultimately a conscious, deliberate, willful choice to forgive is the *only* thing that can free a heart from the bondage of such emotions.

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