

Sermon follow-up
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Forgiveness

These notes are just a bunch of other stuff on forgiveness – very rough, not intended for serious use, just some thoughts in seed form along with some resources.

Forgiveness is, on the one hand, very simple: You just do it. On the other hand, it raises a host of complicated theological and pastoral issues. The sermon obviously barely scratched the surface.

Forgiveness should be like breathing to the Christian. We inhale God's forgiveness of our sins; we exhale forgiveness of others' sins. Forgiveness should be a daily practice, a continually practiced virtue among God's people. Indeed, forgiveness is one of the core practices that sustains the life of the church. Without ongoing forgiveness, a church body is sure to collapse (as is a friendship, a marriage, or any other kind of relationship).

There are a lot of good resources to read on forgiveness. I think one of the basic dividing lines is the conditionality of forgiveness: Is granting forgiveness conditioned in any way on repentance? I would reiterate what I said in the sermon: We should implicitly forgive anyone who sins against us. We always stand ready and willing to grant forgiveness. Nurturing bitterness and holding grudges is never acceptable. But the transaction of forgiveness can only happen when the offender repents and seeks forgiveness. This mirrors God's treatment of us: He offers forgiveness to all, he desires to forgive all, he is eager to forgive all. But forgiveness can only be received by the repentant. I will still quote many who teach an unconditional view (e.g., Miroslav Volf), but now you know fully where I stand. More on all this below.

Some books worth consulting:

Unpacking Forgiveness by Chris Brauns
From Forgiven to Forgiving by Jay Adams
The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness by John MacArthur
Exclusion and Embrace, The End of Memory, and Free of Charge by Miroslav Volf
Seventy Times Seven by Chris Arnold
How to be Free From Bitterness by Jim Wilson
Embodying Forgiveness by L. Gregory Jones
The Peaceable Kingdom by Stanley Hauerwas
Chapter 9 in *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, by Paul Tripp and Tim Lane
Chapter 9 in *The Great Work of the Gospel* by John Ensor
Chapter 21 on bitterness in John Piper's *Future Grace*
The Peacemaker by Ken Sande
The Peacemaking Pastor by Alfred Poirier
Selections from *The Divine Conspiracy* by Dallas Willard
No Future Without Forgiveness by Desmond Tutu
Radical Forgiveness by Antoinette Bosco
Forgive and Forget by Lewis Smedes

What is forgiveness? The sermon did not attempt a definition. Forgiveness is surprisingly tricky to define with precision because there are so many intricacies and complexities involved. Forgiveness means something somewhat different in varying situations.

To keep it simple, *forgiveness is a promise*. When God forgives us, he promises to not use what we have done against us in his law court. God promises to remember our sins no more (Isa. 45; Jer. 31). This does not mean God actually gets amnesia and forgets. He is always omniscient. It does mean he promises to not treat us as our sins deserve, to not hold our sins against us. He may still discipline us for our sin, but he will not condemn us for it.

When we forgive others, we are also promising to not remember the offense. We are promising to not bring it up to ourselves (nurturing bitterness) or to others (spreading gossip), or to the person who sought forgiveness (and if we do so, we have broken our promise to forgive, and now we are the ones in sin!).

Some sins certainly require confrontation. But most do not. In these cases, we grant an implicit forgiveness and allow love to cover the sin. The difference in these two categories of sin comes down to a simple test: Can you let it go? Can you forget about it? Can you bury it? If you can't, then you need to confront the person. (A sub-test: Are you going to find yourself talking about it to others? If so, then you need to talk to the offender! If love covers it, it covers it all the way! Some people want love to cover the sin enough that they do not have to confront the sinner, but still leave enough uncovered that they can talk about the offense to others.)

The vast majority of sins should be covered by the blanket of love. These are the sort of "nickel and dime" sins, "paper cut" type sins, that we continually commit against one another as we go through daily life in community. We need to cut one another slack and overlook a lot of things. Proverbs 19 says it is glorious to overlook an offense. Proverbs 12 says it is prudent to overlook an insult. So overlooking sin in these kinds of cases is a matter of sanctified common sense. The Bible's oft repeated declaration, "Love covers a multitude of sins" should be a guide for daily life. Jesus does talk about rebuking and confronting our brothers for their sins, but those should be isolated, extreme cases.

Unfortunately, there are some in the church body who find themselves getting offended all the time. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Where love is thin, faults are thick." If you are consistently getting your feelings hurt, you're probably too self-centered and not loving enough. Some people seem to think they have the spiritual gift of rebuking/correcting, and do it at every opportunity.

This should not be. But if we do find ourselves in a situation where we have to go to a brother about his sin, Gal. 6:2 provides guidelines. We should go in the Spirit. We should go in love, gentleness, and humility. We should be wise and winsome in how and when we make our approach. There is a good chance the brother has no idea he hurt us, and a good chance that some of our unknown offenses against him will come out in the course of the conversation. Be patient, explain yourself carefully, avoid unnecessary accusations, and make your aim full reconciliation.

To repeat: reconciliation (not winning an argument) is the goal! If our brother is indeed in sin, we want him to repent, and we want the relationship restored. We should go with the stated intent of being a peacemaker. Being a peacemaker is not primarily a matter of following a set of rules or even having a set of certain skills. It is ultimately a matter of applying the gospel to our relationships. We are to relate to every other person through Christ and his cross. Jesus stands between you and every other person; he mediates all your relationships. When you look at those who wrong you through the lens of Christ, what happens? The offender and offended quickly become the forgiven and forgiver!

Forgiveness is a hard topic to deal with. It can leave many of us who have struggled with bitterness feeling somewhat melancholy. My job as a preacher is not to make you feel good about yourself, but to make you feel good about Jesus. If you are struggling to forgive, struggling to feel forgiven, struggling with your inability to grant or receive forgiveness, the best thing I can do is keep pointing you to Jesus.

Stories of forgiveness that I would have loved to use in the sermon to illustrate the way forgiveness works:

1. Corrie ten Boom's family sought to protect Jews from the Nazis during WW2. They were betrayed, arrested, and sent to a concentration camp. Corrie's sister Betsie was among the nearly 100,000 who died there. Years later, after the war, Corrie gave a speech at church in Numich. Afterwards a large man approached her; Corrie immediately recognized him as one of the most brutal guards in her camp. She froze in pain and anguish. The man said to her, "Since then, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Will you forgive me?" Corrie wrestled with what she said. It was the most difficult thing she ever did. In her own words:

I had to do it - I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

This is a beautiful picture of forgiveness. It is also a sterling reminder that the power to forgive is a gift of God's grace.

2. Miroslav Volf tells the story of the accidental death of his brother Daniel in *Free of Charge* 121ff. Volf's aunt was supposed to watch the boy, but her carelessness led to his death. Volf's parents forgave her.

3. Stories of reconciliation in Rwanda from the book *As We Forgive* by Catherine Claire Larson. See also <http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/12014-as-we-forgive> and http://commongroundsonline.typepad.com/common_grounds_online/2009/02/conversation-between-reggie-kidd-catherine-claire-larson-about-as-we-forgive.html.

4. Erwin Lutzer, *When You've Been Wronged*, 128f, tells the story of a Muslim who sent a letter of cursing to a Christian missionary: "Cursed be you, cursed be your wife, and cursed be your children. Cursed is the home you live in and cursed is the car you drive." The missionary wrote back: "This is my prayer for you: Blessed be you, blessed be your wife, and blessed be your children. Blessed is the home you live in and blessed is the car you drive."

5. John Perkins' story, as told in *Let Justice Roll Down*. Lutzer, *When You've Been Wronged*, 147f, gives a good summary.

6. Robert E. Lee once spoke in the highest terms to president Lincoln about an officer who was known to have nothing but hatred and disrespect for Lee. When someone pointed out to Lee that the very man he was praising held him in contempt, Lee replied, "Yes, that's true. But the president asked for my opinion of him, not his opinion of me." Lee chose to bless rather than curse.

7. The story of an Armenian Christian nurse who helped an enemy, as told in *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, by Paul Tripp and Tim Lane, 103.

8. An excerpt from Ronald Reagan's journal, the first day he wrote after the assassin attempt in March 1981:

...I walked into the emergency room and was hoisted onto a cart...It was then we learned I'd been shot & had a bullet in my lung...

Getting shot hurts. Still my fear was growing because no matter how hard I tried to breathe it seemed I was getting less and less air. I focused on that tiled ceiling and prayed. But I realized I couldn't ask for God's help while at the same time I felt hatred for the mixed up young man who had shot me. Isn't that the meaning of the lost sheep? We are all God's children & therefore equally beloved by him. I began to pray for his soul and that he would find his way back to the fold.

I opened my eyes once to find Nancy there. I pray I'll never face a day when she isn't there. Of all the ways God has blessed me giving her to me is the greatest and beyond anything I can ever hope to deserve...

...Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will try to serve him in every way I can.

C. S. Lewis :

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out, church discipline the ultimate proof that forgiveness cannot be totally unconditional.

From Volf (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/october23/7.94.html>):

When my Yale colleague Professor Carlos Eire visits his elderly mother, he often ends up as a resident theologian for a small Cuban-immigrant community of her friends. "Is it possible," one woman asked him, "for Castro to convert on his deathbed and end up in heaven?" "It is possible," Professor Eire assured her. "This is what Christian faith is all about. Nobody is beyond the pale of redemption." "Well, if that were to happen," said the woman, "then I would not want to be in heaven." Karl Barth was once asked the antithesis of that Cuban expatriate's question: "Is it true that one day in heaven we will see again our loved ones?" Barth responded with a chuckle, "Not only the loved ones!" The sting of the great theologian's response—be ready to meet there even those whom you dislike here—was directed against our propensity to populate heaven only with people whom we like. Most of us have our own "Castros" with whom we would rather not share the space of the world to come. Heaven with them, we imagine, would feel more like a forecourt of hell. This dilemma contains a serious personal challenge and, it turns out, an inadequately addressed theological issue. How can those who have disliked or even had good reasons to hate each other here come to inhabit together what is, in Jonathan Edwards's memorable phrase, "a world of love"?

On seeking to use sin against us in harmful ways, see Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, 99f. This entire chapter is an excellent, and very practical, study of forgiveness. On asking forgiveness vs. saying "I'm sorry," see 100f. On conditional forgiveness, see 96ff.

The Peacemaking Pastor by Alfred Poirier has a helpful critique of therapeutic models of forgiveness. See 143ff. See also Greg Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, ch. 2, which is especially critical of Lewis Smedes' work on forgiveness.

On conditional forgiveness, see Poirier, 155ff and Ensor, 139ff, 180ff. Conditional forgiveness reminds us that forgiveness is never a matter of indulging the wicked or letting selfishness run unchecked.

When you see that your greatest need in the world is to have your sins forgiven, and you see that God has provided for this need in Christ, suddenly forgiving others does not seem quite so far-fetched.

We often forget the good times and focus only on the wrongs done to us, e.g., we might remember wrongs done to us in our school days many years later. We are in danger of carrying these sins against us to the grave. We must learn to let them go.

We must learn to accept God's forgiveness for our sins. Wallowing in guilt does not please God. God gave his Son to cancel our debts; he wants us to *know* and *feel* that forgiveness – what David called the joy of salvation!

Non-Christians are guilty even though they don't feel it, Christians are not guilty even though we often feel guilty. Guilt is a helpful mechanism, reminding us that our sin is really sinful and justice demands that it be dealt with. But we should always be taking our guilt to Jesus and dumping it on him.

We know that we are called to forgive others in a way analogous to God's forgiveness of us. Remember the "just as" and "even as" statements I pointed out in the Scripture.

But how does that work? Where can we get some practical tips on how to exercise this grace towards others? Are there limits to forgiveness? Does forgiveness cancel out discipline or punishment for the wrongdoer? How does offering forgiveness relate to repentance and to justice? Does forgiveness require full reconciliation? How do I cope with lingering bitterness and resentment? What if the person who wronged me is dead?

Forgiveness is a free gift we offer to one who has wronged us; that gift is received as the wrongdoer repents and seeks it out. Forgiveness is not (merely) a private feeling in the heart, but a social transaction with public consequences. Our practice of forgiveness is grounded in the gospel itself, especially our union with Christ.

Christ humbled himself to forgive us. He was sinless, but identified with sinners. He stooped from the glories of heaven to the depths of our depravity. It is also an act of humility for us to forgive – but we do not have to travel nearly as far. Frankly, if we know ourselves, it should not be that difficult to identify with those who wrong us.

John MacArthur:

How do we know when to confront and when to quietly forgive and forget?

That's a good question because most people seem to err on one side or the other. Some people think it is best to overlook every offense and take pride in their tolerance.

However, Paul confronted the Corinthians for tolerating sin in the church and rebuked them for failing to deal with a man living in sin (1 Cor. 5).

On the other side of the issue are people who confront over any slight infraction and make themselves intolerable.

Are there any biblical principles to help us make the right choice? *Yes!* Here are six guidelines to help you know whether to quietly forgive or to lovingly confront.

1. Whenever possible, especially if the offense is petty or unintentional, it is best to forgive unilaterally. This is the very essence of a gracious spirit. It is the Christlike attitude called for in Ephesians 4:1-3. We are called to maintain a gracious tolerance ("forbearance") of others' faults. Believers should have a sort of mutual immunity to petty offenses. Love "is not easily angered" (1 Cor. 13:5). If every fault required formal confrontation, the whole of our church life would be spent confronting and resolving conflicts over petty annoyances. So for the sake of peace, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we are to show tolerance whenever possible (see 1 Pet. 2:21-25; Mat. 5:39-40).
2. If you are the only injured party, even if the offense was public and flagrant, you may choose to forgive unilaterally. Examples of this abound in Scripture. Joseph (Genesis 37-50), David (2 Sam. 16:5-8), and Stephen (Acts 7:60) each demonstrated the unilateral forgiveness of Christ (Luke 23:34).
3. If you observe a serious offense that is a sin against someone other than you, confront the offender. Justice never permits a Christian to cover a sin against someone else. While we are entitled, and even encouraged, to overlook wrongs committed against us, Scripture everywhere forbids us to overlook wrongs committed against another (see Ex. 23:6; Deut. 16:20; Isa. 1:17; Isa. 59:15-16; Jer. 22:3; Lam. 3:35-36).
4. When ignoring an offense might hurt the offender, confront the guilty party. Sometimes choosing to overlook an offense might actually injure the offender (by allowing him to continue unwarned down a wrong path). In such cases it is our duty to confront in love (Gal. 6:1-2).
5. When a sin is scandalous or otherwise potentially damaging to the body of Christ, the guilty party should be confronted. Some sins have the potential to defile many people, and Scripture gives ample warning of such dangers (see Heb. 12:15; 3:13; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). In fact, Scripture calls for the church to discipline individuals who refuse to repent of open sin in the body, so that the purity of the body might be preserved (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5).
6. Lastly, any time an offense results in a broken relationship, confrontation of the sinner should occur. Any offense that causes a breach in relationships simply cannot be overlooked. Both the offense and the breach must be confronted, and reconciliation must be sought. And both the offended party and the offender have a responsibility to seek reconciliation (Luke 17:3; Matt. 5:23-24). There is never any excuse for a Christian on either side of a broken relationship to refuse to pursue reconciliation. The only instance where such a conflict should remain unresolved is if all the steps of discipline in Matthew 18 have been exhausted and the guilty party still refuses to repent.

Proverbs 18:19 says an offended brother is harder to win than a walled city. Why? Because the offended brother builds walls! If you are offended, do not build walls. Open the gates to forgiveness!

Forgiving is a form of hating the sin and loving the sinner. Forgiveness is an act of love towards the one who has wronged us, but it does not mean we love what he has done. Rather, in love, we pry apart the doer and the deed. We do not impute his sins to him.

C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* has a great section on loving the sinner and hating the sin, modelled on self-love. This is one of the keys to forgiveness. That section was way too long to read in the sermon, but here it is in full (great stuff!!):

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. "That sort of talk makes them sick," they say. And half of you already want to ask me, "I wonder how'd you feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?"

So do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you ... what I could do--I can do precious little--I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sinned against us." There is no slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it. What are we to do?

It is going to be hard enough, anyway, but I think there are two things we can do to make it easier. When you start mathematics you do not begin with calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want (but all depends on really wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one's husband or wife, or parents or children, or the nearest N.C.O., for something they have done or said in the last week. That will probably keep us busy for the moment. And secondly, we might try to understand exactly what loving your neighbor as yourself means. I have to love him as I love myself. Well, how exactly do I love myself!

Now that I come to think of it, I have not exactly got a feeling of fondness or affection for myself, and I do not even always enjoy my own society. So apparently "Love your neighbor" does not mean "feel fond of him" or "find him attractive." I ought to have seen that before, because of course, you cannot feel fond of a person by trying. Do I think well of myself, think myself a nice chap? Well, I am afraid I sometimes do (and those are, no doubt, my worst moments) but that is not why I love myself. In fact it is the other way

round: my self-love makes me think myself nice, but thinking myself nice is not why I love myself. So loving my enemies does not apparently mean thinking them nice either. That is an enormous relief. For a good many people imagine that forgiving your enemies means making out that they are really not such bad fellows after all, when it is quite plain that they are. Go a step further. In my most clear-sighted moments not only do I not think myself a nice man, but I know that I am a very nasty one. I can at look some of the things I have done with loathing and horror. So apparently I am allowed to loathe and hate some of the things my enemies do. Now that I come to think of it, I remember Christian teachers telling me long ago that I must hate a bad man's actions, but not hate the bad man: or as they would say, hate the sin but not the sinner.

For a long time I used to think this is a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life--namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact, the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things. Consequently Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again.

Here is some book review material I wrote for another sermon a while back – it is relevant here as well:

We know that we are called to forgive others in a way analogous to God's forgiveness of us. How does that work? Where can we get some practical tips on how to exercise this grace towards others? Are there limits or conditions on forgiveness? Does forgiveness cancel out discipline or punishment for the wrongdoer? Does forgiveness require full reconciliation? How do I cope with lingering bitterness and resentment?

One the best books I've read on forgiveness is Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge*. Volf teaches at Yale, but don't let that throw you off -- he writes in an easy to understand fashion, full of relational illustrations. Further, he upholds the evangelical convictions he was raised on when he grew up in a Christian home in Croatia. The fact that he comes from a country torn by racial and religious strife means he has seen first hand the need for and power of forgiveness. This book was chosen by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the 2006 "Lent book," meaning that he recommended it for reading during the season of Lent. While I do not agree with all of Volf's exegesis or applications (I guess that goes without sayng!), I think any Christian who struggles to forgive would be greatly encouraged by his work. Volf emphasizes that forgiveness is a gift we offer to one who has wronged us. It is not a private feeling in the heart, but a social transaction with

public consequences. Volf grounds our practice of forgiveness in the gospel itself -- particularly our union with Christ.

Another book worth looking into is Jay Adams' *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. Adams is noted for his rigorous application of Reformed theology to counseling concerns. This book handles several issues quite differently from Volf's work, and for that reason they are good complements to one another. Adams is not afraid to tackle hard questions, such as forgiveness as it relates to cases of marital infidelity, the extent to which we can forgive the unrepentant, the danger of taking shortcuts in working towards reconciliation, and what to do when *you* are the offender. It a solid and practical book.

Ken Sande's work *Peacemaker* is very useful in understanding how relationships work and how conflicts should be settled in a biblical fashion. Sande's follow up work *Peacemaking for Families* applies these same principles to spetic situations within the household. I highly recommend these works.

A few other books to consider include *Exclusion and Embrace* by Volf; *Embodying Forgiveness* by L. Gregory Jones; *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Stanley Hauerwas; and the chapter on bitterness (ch. 21) in John Piper's *Future Grace*.

The Internet Monk on repentance and forgiveness:

<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/on-repentance-and-forgiveness>

More on forgiveness:

<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/the-journey-of-forgiveness>

Mark Horne on what it means to forgive yourself:

<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/mark-horne/on-forgiving-oneself-nine-reasons-why-it-can-be-appropriate>

Byron Smith's series on forgiveness starts here:

<http://nothing-new-under-the-sun.blogspot.com/2007/11/what-is-forgiveness-i.html>

Miroslav Volf:

When we need to forgive, most of us, perhaps unconsciously, feel entitled to draw a circle around the scope of forgiveness. We should forgive some, maybe even most, wrongdoings, but certainly not all....

Repentance is important, even indispensable, and it is indispensable because forgiveness is an event between people, not just an individual's change of feelings, attitudes, or actions. Instead of being a *condition* of forgiveness, however, repentance is its necessary *consequence*....

If on the bottom line of our lives lies the principle that we should get what we deserve, whether good or ill, forgiveness will sit uncomfortably with us. To forgive is to give people more than their due, it's to release them from the debt they have incurred, and that's bound to mess up the books.....

For a Christian, however, a bottom-line principle can never be that we should get what we deserve. Our very existence is God's gift. Our redemption from the snares of sin is God's gift. Both are undeserved, and neither could have been deserved. From start to finish, we are always given free of charge and given more than our due. Therefore it is only fitting that we give others more than they are due.

C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness":

A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in [the forgiveness of sins]: from thinking that God will not take us to himself again unless he is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favour. But that would not be forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness; and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.

When it comes to a question of our forgiving other people, it is partly the same and partly different. It is the same because, here also, forgiving does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think it does. They think that if you ask them to forgive someone who has cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out that there was really no cheating or no bullying. But if that were so, there would be nothing to forgive. They keep on replying 'But I tell you the man broke a most solemn promise.' Exactly: that is precisely what you have to forgive. (This doesn't mean you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every trace of resentment in your own heart – every wish to humiliate or hurt him or pay him out.) The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God's forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily, in other people's we do not accept them easily enough. As regards my own sins it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are not really so good as I think: as regards other men's sins against me it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are better than I think. One must therefore begin by attending carefully to everything which may show that the other man was not so much blame as we thought. But even if he is absolutely fully to blame we still have to forgive him; and even if ninety-nine per cent of his apparent guilt can be explained away by really good excuses, the problem of forgiveness begins with the one per cent of guilt which is left over. To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christians means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the

incessant provocations of family life – to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son – how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God’s mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what he says.

If we forgive those sin against us and bless those who curse, where do things like imprecatory psalms fit in? Why does Paul sometimes curse enemies of Jesus and the gospel?

How David treats his enemies is the way we should. For example, in the case of Saul, David prays God would deal with them (e.g., Ps. 57, 59), but in his interpersonal relations he seeks to bless and honor them (e.g., he could have killed Saul twice but instead let him go, and even repented for cutting Saul’s robe).

Your journey to wholeness must include forgiveness; you are a raw, incomplete person unless and until you learn to forgive. Being able to forgive quickly is a sign of Christian maturity.

Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1996), 128-129:

When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become, in Irenaeus’s beautiful image, the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God’s embrace... That same love that sustains nonself-enclosed identities in the Trinity seeks to make space “in God” for humanity. Humanity is, however, not just the other of God, but the beloved other who has become an enemy. When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others—we, the enemies—are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.

Luther said sin is what happens when we are curved in on ourselves. The life of God – the life of the Trinity – is curved outward. Each of the three persons encircles one another with love. Now those circles of love stretch to include us.

Our love must imitate God’s. When we are curved in ourselves, we nurse our bitterness, and it spreads. When we are curved out towards others, we are ready to embrace in love even those who harm us.

Peter Leithart:

Hannah Arendt's claim that Jesus' offer of forgiveness was his "most endangering action because if a society does not have an apparatus for forgiveness, then its members are fated to live forever with the consequences of any violation. Thus the refusal to forgive sin (or the management of the machinery of forgiveness) amounts to enormous social control. While the claims of Jesus may have been religiously staggering, its threat to the forms of accepted social control was even greater."

The rule of forgiveness is found in Matthew 6:14-15. It's very significant that the Lord gave no exceptions to this rule of forgiveness. There's no "wiggle room" in this Scripture. It's cut-and-dried: If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive.

The golden rule of judgment day is this: God will do to us as we have done to others. He will do to our sins against him what we have done with the sins of others against us.

Sin disrupts the web relationships in which we are called to live. Forgiveness restores the torn web.

Forgiveness is necessary to achieve a productive prayer life: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11:24-25)

The desire for revenge is a completely normal reaction to being wronged by the world's standards. But as Christians we are called to live by a higher standard – the standard of Christ's love.

One of the main reasons people refuse to forgive is their sense of justice (or righteous indignation). To forgive makes it feel like we are indulging the wicked, like we aren't taking sin seriously enough. But what does this attitude say about God and the gospel?

In reality, forgiving someone takes sin with ultimate seriousness. To forgive is to say, "What you did is damnable, but I will not hold it against you." This is seen in that a person cannot accept forgiveness without also admitting that he has sinned.

Furthermore, to forgive means that we put the wrongdoer fully in the hands of God. By forgiving the offender, we're not putting our faith in our own ability to exact justice, but resting our confidence firmly in a righteous and faithful God.

We must forgive others because God has provided the basis for forgiveness in the cross. Volf makes the point that by virtue of our union with Christ, when we forgive others, Christ forgives them through us.

Toby Sumpter on the Lord's Supper and forgiveness:

This table is for people who don't have it all together. It's for people who have made mistakes; it is for people who have guilt and who need pardon. It is for those who struggle with sin and know that they need strength. This table is for those who need the remission of sins, for those who need the blood of Christ to cleanse them from every stain. Therefore do not think that being worthy to partake means that you are not sinner; do not think that being worthy means you have put to death every sin in your flesh and you're just whistling and waiting for the resurrection. Christ said that eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood was necessary that you might have life within you. Do you need life? Do see the remnants of death and decay still your members? Are you a sinner? Then this meal is for you. God has sent his Son into the world that you may have life, and after Jesus died and rose and ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit on the church. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives you his life here at this table with bread and wine. So come, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and Jesus will give you rest.

Nancy Wilson:

I'm pretty sure it is John Piper in *Future Grace* who uses the illustration of the muddy windshield, spattered with the mud of unbelief, and how we need a perspective adjustment to see straight. This is a helpful metaphor, because sin really muddies our understanding.

Once a little resentment, a little discontent, a little disappointment, or a little envy steals into our hearts and minds, nothing is in focus any more. The devil loves to fish in troubled waters, and the water can get pretty stirred up in a very short time.

Once a woman told me she was ready to leave her husband. When I asked her the obvious question of why? she said it was because he always left his socks on the floor. She needed a perspective adjustment.

If a woman is minding her own business, doing her work cheerfully, when along comes discontent disguised as friendly concern and splatters her clean windshield, she has to do something fast. Either she can deal with it immediately (turn on the wipers!) or she can let it sit. And discontent is never static. It grows. One discontent leads to another, and pretty soon the windshield is positively plastered with mud. No wonder you can't see anything and you get a warped perspective on the road ahead.

Gratitude is a good way to clear the mess away. Count your blessings. Thank God for His preservation, protection, kindness, forgiveness. Gratitude is not a substitute for confession, but rather what should follow on the heels of confession.

Years ago before I was married, I was restless, and I thought my problem must be in my location. I told the Lord I would go to the ends of the earth for Him if only He would get

me out of this town. I must have realized as I prayed that I was discontent. So I went for a walk and began to thank God for everything I could think of that was admirable about this place. I got creative. But the fog cleared. My perspective on life was revived. He changed my attitude. And, some thirty years later, I am still here. Not chafing. I actually like it here.

But the point is that women often get their perspective warped by many means. Could be someone sinned against you. Could be you got tired and sorry for yourself. Either way, you start to see all the negatives and none of the positives. Until the windshield gets cleared off, no one can hope to see what is really going on. Once the mud and filth is wiped away, you can see the sunshine, the grass, the blue sky again. Many blessings. Too many to count.

Stanley Hauerwas:

Is it any wonder we find Good Friday so shattering? On this day and with these words, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," all our presumptions about God and the salvation wrought by God are rendered presumptuous. Moreover, that is how we discover that what happens on the cross really is about us, but the 'what' that is about us challenges our presumptions about what kind of salvation we need. Through the cross of Christ we are drawn into the mystery of the Trinity. This is God's work on our behalf. We are made members of a kingdom governed by a politics of forgiveness and redemption. The world is offered an alternative unimaginable by our sin-determined fantasies.

Tim Keller:

How does vengeance not manifest itself in the Christian community?
In most people's minds there is a false "either-or" between vengeance and forgiveness. But that is a mistake. Forgiveness is not simply resignation or capitulation to evil. In vengeance we simply pommel the enemy to hurt them worse than we were hurt. Our motivation is neither the common good nor the upholding of justice and truth per se. We simply want to assuage our own pain by seeing our enemy in worse pain than we were. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is not 'letting him off scot free'. Forgiveness is a means of giving up the hate and the desire for personal vengeance so that we can then pursue justice and maybe even reconciliation. I have personally found that I can't really confront a wrong-doer effectively about his or her sin until I've forgiven it. Then I am sometimes able to help the person see their wrong, or at least I am able to wisely pursue justice and restitution. But if I keep my heart full of hate, I never get anything done except fuel the cycle of retaliation. When I aim not to bring a person to see the truth, but rather only to hurt them, I never get anywhere. In other words, forgiveness does not 'let a person off'--rather it frees my heart to pursue justice and/or reconciliation, depending on the reaction of the wrongdoer. At the very least, forgiveness prevents me from becoming as evil as the other party. The basic plot-dynamic of The Lord of the Rings revolves around the conundrum of the Great Ring of the Dark Lord. The 'good' people have found his ring,

but they can't use his own power against him without becoming just like the one who made it. They can, as it were, defeat the Dark Lord, but only by becoming an evil Dark Lord in his place. Unless we forgive our enemies, our anger could turn us as demonic as it has turned them.

Now that we know what forgiveness is, how can we do it? I don't know how to do that without embracing the message of the cross. The Cross means at least that a) God so hates evil and injustice that he is willing to come suffer himself in order to end it, but b) we are so tainted by evil as well that Jesus had to die so that we could be forgiven. Both of these truths are absolutely essential for forgiveness. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf puts it perfectly: "Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of [the Cross] for long without overcoming this double exclusion....When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is freed to rediscover the torturer's humanity and imitate God's love for that person. And when one knows that the love of God is greater than [my] sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of the justice of God and so rediscover one's own sinfulness." (Volf, *The Spacious Heart*, p.57)

From C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, in which senior demon Wormwood writes to his nephew apprentice:

Later on you can venture on what may be called the Generous Conflict Illusion. This game is best played with grown-up children for example. Something quite trivial, like having tea in the garden, is proposed. One member takes care to make it quite clear (though not in so many words) that he would rather not but is, of course, prepared to do so out of 'Unselfishness'. The others instantly withdraw their proposal, ostensibly through their 'Unselfishness', but really because they don't want to be used as a sort of lay figure on which the first speaker practises petty altruisms. But he is not going to be done out of his debauch of Unselfishness either. He insists on doing 'what the others want'. They insist on doing what he wants. Passions are roused. Soon someone is saying 'Very well then, I won't have any tea at all!', and a real quarrel ensues with bitter resentment on both sides.

You see how it is done? If each side had been frankly contending for its own real wish, they would all have kept within the bounds of reason and courtesy; but just because the contention is reversed and each side is fighting the other side's battle, all the bitterness which really flows from the thwarted self-righteousness and obstinacy and the accumulated grudges of the last ten years is concealed from them by the nominal or official 'Unselfishness' of what they are doing, or at least, held to be excused by it. Each side is, indeed, quite alive to the cheap quality of the adversary's Unselfishness and of the false position into which he is trying to force them; but each manages to feel blameless and ill-used itself, with no more dishonesty than comes natural to a human. [...] Some degree of mutual falseness, some surprise that the girl does not always notice just how Unselfish he is being, can be smuggled in already."

Cal Thomas, suggesting that forgiveness may be our most powerful tool:

[Forgiveness] is a concept virtually unknown in our take-no-prisoners culture. So much rhetoric today is angry and judgmental and condemning. So much is about defeating the other person, taking revenge and demanding entitlements. ... [T]he power of forgiveness—especially when forgiveness is not asked for—has a power that no one else can touch.

Charles Spurgeon:

Faults are always thick where love is thin.

Thomas Watson:

Fault finding is the easiest thing in the world.

George Herbert:

He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass if he would ever reach heaven; for every one has need to be forgiven.

When you refuse to forgive, you are burning your only bridge to heaven.

Doug Wilson:

We are dealing here with deep forgiveness. The Lord Jesus did not come, live a perfect life, die on the cross and come back from the dead in order to dab around the edges of our wound. Our complicity in the sin of Adam, and our continuing screwed-up-ness required a great remedy, which could not be had apart from the work of a great Savior. But remember that Jesus is saving us from our *sins*, and not merely from the *consequences* of our sins. And one of the central sins he is saving us from is the sin of the double standard — wanting to receive forgiveness on easy terms, and wanting to extend it with the heart of a stickler for justice. We want to borrow easily, and lend with difficulty. We want our fingers open to receive, and our fist clenched for giving. But Jesus has given us fair warning that we do not receive forgiveness on our terms. Not at all. In the Lord's prayer, we are taught to say this to God — 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (Matt. 6:12). 'Dear God, please harbor toward me all the thoughts I harbor toward others.' Do the words stick in the throat? 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart' (Matt. 18:21-35). Forgiving others is *not optional*. This is the very heart of the *gospel* message.

Nancy Wilson:

How do you forgive the people who have never sought your forgiveness? And what do you do when you have sought to restore fellowship and the other person just won't respond? These are two tricky situations and here are just a few thoughts. Every situation is different, so of course there is no "three steps to a quick solution." But, we can and should do all in our power to put things right. Sometimes you have to accept the fact that there is nothing more you can do.

Let's begin with the people who never seek your forgiveness. You just can't go through your whole life being miserable about how someone wronged you long ago. If they were the ones who sinned in the first place, there is no sense getting bitter. Why? Because that puts you into sin as a result of their sin. That is like lying down on the ground and letting your enemy put his foot on your neck. That is what bitterness does to you: it wields power over you, giving the adversary (the devil) the advantage. So we ought to first get rid of any bitterness. Then we must make sure that we are in a mindset to forgive. The best way I can think of to test whether or not you are able to forgive someone is to imagine how you would react if they came to your door and apologized. If you know for a fact that you would readily extend forgiveness to them, then I don't think you have an unforgiving spirit. But if you know that you would not be disposed to forgive them readily, then you have some work to do.

Because forgiveness is a transaction of sorts, it is difficult to say you have forgiven someone when they have never sought your forgiveness. But Jesus asked God to forgive those men who crucified him, and they certainly did not seek His forgiveness. We are to forgive those who trespass against us. So that means our hearts must be disposed to forgive, even if they never ask. We cannot devote our thoughts to how they wronged us if we have forgiven them. We cannot think up snappy comebacks if we have forgiven them. If we have really forgiven, we are able to press on, and their old sin becomes completely irrelevant to us and our lives.

Some people carry their past around behind them like a ball and chain. They think of how they have been wronged and mistreated, misunderstood or ignored. It is very easy to remember the sins of others and forget how much we provoked them. Sometimes I think it helps to simply make a list of all the grievances you have against others. Then you can pray through the list, one grievance at a time, asking God to forgive you for holding a grudge. Then you can ask God to give you the grace to forgive those who wronged you. Only then can you breathe a sigh of relief that God has chucked your record-keeping far from you, and you can move on. Sometimes going through the list may work for a while, but then all the memories and the bitterness comes back. That is a very predictable temptation and you have to refuse to go there, reminding yourself that it has all been forgiven.

There is much provocation in this world. We have to be the kind of people who can overlook it. If we are always waiting around for an apology, chances are good we will be constantly provoked.

Adso, in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*:

What is the purpose of the holy cleansing of confession, if not to unload the weight of sin, and the remorse it involves, into the very bosom of our Lord, obtaining with absolution a new and airy lightness of soul, such as to make us forget the body tormented by wickedness?"

Calvin:

For God does not consider, in chastising the faithful, what they deserve; but what will be useful to them in future; and fulfils the office of a physician rather than of a judge. Therefore, the absolution which he imparts to his children is complete and not by halves. That he, nevertheless, punishes those who are received into favor, is to be regarded as a kind of chastisement which serves as medicine for future time, but ought not properly to be regarded as the vindictive punishment of sin committed.

Toby Sumpter:

Scripture says that "love covers a multitude of sins". It does not say that it might or that it could. It says that it does. This means that if we are not regularly covering sins, then whatever we have, it certainly is not love. Our love for our brothers and sisters must be so great that we will do everything in our power to forgive, forget and cover over the blemishes of others. This begins with our attitudes: A firm commitment to this means that we must think the best of everyone. Paul says that love "hopes all things". And one of the things this means is that it is a Christian duty to tell the story, remember the event, recall what he/she said, shedding the best possible light on all people involved. Your mission as a Christian is to make everyone else's reputation as good as possible. And this is our mission even when we think someone has snubbed us, ignored us, and perhaps shown some level of disregard for us. Your mission as a follower of Jesus is to bless that person and think and speak about them in the best possible light. This is at least one meaning of "love your neighbor as yourself." Remember the words of Christ: But if you do not forgive, neither will your father in heaven forgive your trespasses. You will be judged by the standard with which you judge. And if you are picky and critical, then God will be picky and critical of you. And God knows that on even on one of our very best days, he'd have more than enough to condemn us all. But God in His great love has covered our sins. Therefore go and do likewise.

The church lives by forgiveness – by God's forgiveness of us, and by our forgiveness of one another. Without such forgiveness, the life of faith quickly dies.

R. J. Rushdoony:

The word confession is not primarily associated with the confession of sins but with confessing Christ....By this simple act of confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the whole burden of sin is forever removed. By this simple act of confession of faith in Jesus Christ, we step from the realm of sin into the realm of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ.....To confess sins, to deal with confession of sins at length, is to continue struggling in terms of the law, trying to make atonement by word of mouth, by acts of contribution or penance, trying to gain a personal righteousness in terms of our own nature.

C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective*:

Strictly speaking, forgiveness and reconciliation of the offender in the biblical sense of these words was an impossibility in the ancient, prephilosophical Athenian society. Offenses were viewed as uncleanness which polluted the land, and there was no remedy for the impurity short of exile or execution of the defiling person. Only the exclusion of the offender could atone for sin and cleanse the homeland of dishonor. Thus we can speak only of the annulment of sin, not its forgiveness. So long as the defiling person remained in exile the sin was expunged from the homeland.

"So far as the offender was concerned, his or her physical removal to a new place, a new homeland, provided the only possibility for a new beginning. In the new homeland under the jurisdiction of new laws 'he was given new purity,' says Ricoeur. This finding a new place where one can begin again with a new identity is just what the Christian doctrine of forgiveness proclaims. Paul says that we are removed from the old jurisdiction of the law and placed under grace. The idea is the same; only the figure of exile is changed to the figure of return to the father's house. We are *forgiven*."

Gilbert K Chesterton:

A stiff apology is a second insult... The injured party does not want to be compensated because he has been wronged; he wants to be healed because he has been hurt."

Will Willimon:

To reach out for forgiveness means that I am not the sole author of my life story. Nothing assaults the contemporary understanding of our lives more than to ask for forgiveness. Indeed, in putting forgiveness on the table for consideration, I have now learned that it is precisely my sinful desire to be the sole author of my life that creates my debts. So we are asked in this petition to come out from behind our facade, to become exposed, vulnerable, empty-handed, to risk reconciliation to the one who has the power to forgive us. To do so is to learn the painful but liberating truth that our lives are not our own.

Eugene Peterson:

The word sinner is a theological designation. It is essential to insist on this. It is not a moralistic judgement. It is not a word that places humans somewhere along a continuum

ranging from angel to ape, assessing them as relatively 'good' or 'bad.' It designates humans in relation to God and sees them as separated from God. *Sinner* means something is awry between humans and God. In that state people may be wicked, unhappy anxious, and poor. Or, they may be virtuous, happy and affluent. Those items are not part of the judgment. The theological fact is that humans are not close to God and are not serving God.

To see a person a sinner then, is not to see him or her as hypocritical, disgusting, or evil. Most sinners are very nice people. To call a man a sinner is not a blast at his manners or his morals. It is a theological belief that the thing that matters most to him is forgiveness and grace.

If a pastor finds himself resenting his people, getting petulant and haranguing them, that is a sign that he or she has quit thinking of them as sinners who bring "nothing in themselves of worth" and has secretly invested them with divine attributes of love, strength, compassion, and joy. They, of course, do not have these attributes in any mature measure and so will disappoint him or her every time. On the other hand, if the pastor rigorously defines people as fellow sinners, he or she will be prepared to share grief, shortcomings, pain, failure, and have plenty of time left over to watch for signs of God's grace operating in this wilderness, and then fill the air with praises for what he discovers.

An understanding of people as sinners enables a pastoral ministry to function without anger. Accumulated resentment (a constant threat to pastors) is dissolved when unreal—that is, untheological—presuppositions are abandoned. If people are sinners then pastor's can concentrate on talking about God's action in Jesus Christ instead of lamenting how bad the people are. We already know they can't make it. We already have accepted their depravity. We didn't engage to be pastor to relax in their care or entrust ourselves to their saintly ways. 'Cursed be he that trusteth in man, even if he be a pious man, or perhaps, particularly if he be a pious man.' (Reinhold Niebuhr) **We have come among the people to talk about Jesus Christ. Grace is the main subject of pastoral conversation and preaching."**

Ken Sande:

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel, and so the gospel is at the heart of our ministry. Even when we were still his enemies, God made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son. And since we have been reconciled with God, we can be reconciled with one another. Because God has forgiven us in Christ, we can forgive others. This is a radically different way for Christians to relate to each other—a way that glorifies his Son and powerfully appeals to a watching world. Peacemaker Ministries exists to help the church live out this wonderful truth.

Mother Teresa:

Confession is nothing but humility in action When there is a gap between me and Christ, when my love is divided, anything can come to fill the gap. Confession is a place where I allow Jesus to take away from me everything that divides, that destroys.

Dave Harvey on how mercy sweetens marriage:

Notice that Luke 6 is not a call to discrete, isolated acts of mercy, but something much broader -- to a merciful disposition of the heart, to lovingkindness. Dwelling in the heart, lovingkindness preempts our sinful judgments. God doesn't just dispense mercy. He *is*merciful (Luke 6:36).

Such kindness expressed to us makes a claim upon us: We are called to continue in the kindness we have received (Romans 11:22). We don't wait to be sinned against and then try to respond with mercy. Rather, we adopt the posture of being willing to experience sin against us as part of building a God-glorifying marriage in a fallen world. Kindness says to our spouse, "I know you are a sinner like me and you will sin against me, just like I sin against you. But I refuse to live defensively with you. I'm going to live leaning in your direction with a merciful posture that your sin and weakness cannot erase." How can you be kind knowing that there may be another sin against you right around the corner? Because kindness does not have its origins in you, but in God. It isn't a personality trait, it's a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12) and an expression of biblical love (1 Corinthians 13:4). Kindness recognizes that God's mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23). There is fresh grace for each failure for both the sinner and the one sinned against. And kindness is a posture of heart that flows out into actions -- daily-life stuff that reprograms behavior in marriage away from self-focus to the redemptive purposes of God.

The faithful practice of lovingkindness sows experiences of grace into marriage. The coffee run for the husband working late, the mini-van washed and cleaned out for the busy mom, the intentional words of encouragement in an area of weakness -- these are more than good manners or duties. They are kindnesses sown into the normal routine of life. They are the grace moments that we draw on in times of trial.

An article on mercy/forgiveness:

<http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2008/08/12/on-john-edwards-blessed-are-the-merciful/>

Thomas Watson gave this definition of forgiveness as he taught from the Lord's prayer about forgiving our debtors: "When we strive against all thoughts of revenge; when we will not do our enemy's mischief, but wish well to them, grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them, and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them."

Tom Wright:

Instead of genuine forgiveness, our generation has been taught the vague notion of "tolerance." This is, at best, a low-grade parody of forgiveness. At worst, it's a way of sweeping the real issues in human life under the carpet. ... Jesus' message [of forgiveness of sins] offers the genuine article and insists that we should accept no man-made substitutes.

Miroslav Volf:

The feeling that the command is against us, a sense of reluctance in giving, is not unfounded. When we have failed to put away our 'former way of life,' the new self becomes an obligation that butts against the ingrained habits of the old self. Yet as uncomfortable as it may feel, the pressure is not to our detriment, but in our favor. It pushes us to act true to who we most properly are. That's why we can be obliged to give freely: the obligation nudges us to do what the new self would do if the old one didn't stand in the way.

Imagine your life as a piece of music, a Bach cello suite. You've heard it played by a virtuoso. You love it and would like to play it well. But try as you might, you fail -- not so much because you've had a bad teacher or haven't practiced enough, but because your left hand has a defect. You make music, but it's nothing like it's supposed to sound. Then you have surgery performed by a magician with a scalpel. Your hand heals. You return to your lessons with new vigor. And then one day, you play the piece nearly perfectly. Full of joy, you exclaim, 'Yes! I love it! This is the way the music of my life should sound!' Constrained by the score because you have to follow its notation? Well, yes. But loving every moment of that constraint -- and not feeling it as constraint at all -- because the very constraint is what makes for the beauty and delight.

Volf:

In a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship.... My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone...Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.

Volf:

Forgiveness may well leave the forgiven one humiliated on account of having been forgiven and therefore also repelled from the forgiver; and it may leave the forgiver proud on account of having forgiven and therefore disdainful of the forgiven one....

So even after the question of "right and wrong" has been settled by the judgment of grace, it is still necessary to move through the door of mutual embrace to enter the world of perfect love. And through that door the inhabitants of the world to come will move enabled by the indwelling Christ, who spread out his arms on the cross to embrace all wrongdoers. When former enemies have embraced, and embraced as belonging to the same community of love in the fellowship of the Triune God, then and only then will they have stepped into a world in which each enjoys all and therefore all take part in the dance of love.

Pete Enns:

We are commanded by Jesus to forgive others, even those...especially those...who have wronged us. He commands us to do so, because, when we forgive, especially those who have wronged us terribly, we are most like him.

Forgiveness does not mean that we make believe the injustice never happened, or make light of it. It means we cease harboring ill against the other. We let it go.

It does not depend on our ability to bring the other to the same realization. We cannot control the other. We can only control ourselves.

Our forgiveness must commence regardless of the other. We can only make the decision for ourselves to move to the center. We cannot force the other to take that same step.

Forgiveness is not for the weak.

A barrier to forgiveness is our sense of justice. If we forgive the other and move on, where is justice? But this is why forgiveness is so hard. It is easier to forgive if we feel some guarantee that justice will be delivered in the near future. But that is not forgiveness.

Forgiveness looks only within, what we can do. It does not think of what should be done to the other.

When we focus on the injustice that has been done, it will become a dominant thought, and so we might be tempted to be God's instrument of justice, to help things along.

But we should be careful in our zeal about seeking justice, for God is an impartial judge. If we call upon him to bring justice to our offender, he will begin with us. So we should not call down justice upon the other. The role we have been given is to forgive. Justice is what God will do, mercifully.

When we forgive, we are reminded of the mercy that has been shown to us. When we forgive even the most malicious of acts, we begin to see—only then can we see—how we have been forgiven.

When we forgive, we know God more clearly.

Even when the wrong done to us carries with it such an overpowering sense of malice, when we are filled with disgrace, humiliation, isolation—even then we forgive. Especially then.

Because,

When we feel this way, we have the privilege of feeling what Jesus felt—disgrace, humiliation, isolation, and

When we forgive, we are most like Jesus.

Forgiveness is deciding what kind of person you want to be, what kind of life you want to live. It is a decision whether to be more or less conformed to the image of Christ. That decision is before us more often than we might think.

Calvin on private confession:

The utility of private absolution it is not my purpose to deny. But as in several passages of my writings I commend the use of it, provided it is optional, and free from superstition, so it is neither lawful, nor even expedient, to bind it upon consciences by a law.

A helpful story about the intricacies of forgiveness:

<http://theologica.blogspot.com/2008/12/governor-ryan-willis-family-and-pursuit.html>

And these are helpful too:

http://www.geneveith.com/10-year-old-mutilated-for-her-faith-forgives/_1199/

<http://bookstore.peacemaker.net/blog/?p=226>

Bonhoeffer:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon no longer be listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping

quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

On conditions in bestowing forgiveness:

<http://trsbu.blogspot.com/2009/02/sin-of-unconditional-forgiveness.html>

Forgiveness research:

http://www.garythomas.com/index.php?option=com_article&key=article_personalstruggles_givingup

Helmut Thielicke:

[Forgiveness] cannot mean that we cover up a fault with the "mantle of charity." Divine things are never a matter of illusion and deception. On the contrary, before the sin is forgiven the mantle with which it is covered must be removed. The sin must be unmercifully—yes, unmercifully—exposed to the light of God's countenance (Psalm 90).

L. Gregory Jones:

Christian forgiveness should not be a refusal of strength, but rather ought to manifest an alternative power; Christian love, whether of neighbors or of enemies, should be a sign not of repressed anger and hatred but of anger and hatred confronted and, eventually, overcome and transcended; it should not be an internalized guilt that further diminishes and destroys but a truthful engagement with the causes and motivations underlying the situation of brokenness.

Conviction or accusation:

<http://christisdeeperstill.blogspot.com/2009/05/conviction-or-accusation.html>

Martin Luther:

You must by no means make Christ to seem paltry and trifling to us, as though he could be our helper only when we want to be rid from imaginary, nominal, childish sins. No, no! That would not be good for us. He must rather be a Savior and Redeemer from real, great, grievous, and damnable transgressions and iniquities, yea, from the very greatest and most shocking sins.

Luther's final words are always appropriate:

We are all beggars, this is true.

Calvin:

Wherefore, we are not to ask the forgiveness of our sins from God, unless we forgive the offenses of all who are or have been injurious to us. If we retain any hatred in our minds, if we meditate revenge, and devise the means of hurting; nay, if we do not return to a good understanding with our enemies, perform every kind of friendly office, and endeavour to effect a reconciliation with them, we by this petition beseech God not to grant us forgiveness. For we ask him to do to us as we do to others. This is the same as asking him not to do unless we do also. What, then, do such persons obtain by this petition but a heavier judgment?

Abe Lincoln:

Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?"

Frederica Mathewes-Green:

Someone once said that staying angry is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die. If your cause is just, you would still find the energy to fight for it even without anger.

Pope John Paul II:

True mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice.

While disagree with Volf on conditionality/repentance in relation to forgiveness, he does have some helpful quotes:

The apostle Peter wrote that destined as God's Lamb "before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20)...God decided to redeem the world of sin before the Creator could lay down its foundations. Each of us exists because the gift of life rests on the gift of forgiveness.

God doesn't angrily refuse forgiveness until we show ourselves worthy of it by repentance. Instead, God loves us and forgives us before we repent...God's forgiveness is not reactive.

Forgivers' forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders' being forgiven, however, is conditioned by repentance — just as being given a box of chocolate is

conditioned by receiving that box of chocolate. Without repentance, the forgivers will keep forgiving but the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness.

Offenders often seem unable to redeem themselves on their own. They need help from the victims of their misdeeds. By forgiving, victims enact a divine kind of love toward their enemies — and help overcome evil by the power of good. But both parties need to participate in the process for it to be complete...Forgiveness does not cause repentance, but it does make repentance possible.

[Forgiveness is] not primarily to benefit ourselves...In the Christian account of things, we forgive because we love — specifically, because we love our debtors, our offenders, and even our enemies. The same love that motivates forgiveness pushes forgiveness not just from exclusion to neutrality, but from neutrality to embrace...Forgiveness doesn't stand alone, as a punctual act or even as an isolated practice. Rather, it is embedded in a way of life that is committed to overcoming evil by doing good. That's how Luther interpreted "forgetting" in the phrase "forgive and forget." Not to count the offenders guilty and not to press charges against them is important but insufficient. Luther insisted that you should "load" the enemy "with kindness so that, overcome with good [Romans 12:21], he will be kindled with love for you".

When God forgives, offenders need to respond in faith and repentance. But what if they don't repent? Like a package, forgiveness will then be stuck between the sender who dispatched it and the recipient who refuses to receive it...

For the Christian, forgiveness never involves just two parties, the offender and the offended. Forgiveness necessarily involves God, too.

For Christians, forgiving...always takes place in a triangle, involving the wrongdoer, the wronged person, and God. Take God away, and the foundations of forgiveness become unsteady and may even crumble...God is the God who forgives. We forgive because God forgives. We forgive as God gives. We forgive by echoing God's forgiveness. So to understand our own forgiving, we need to start with God's...

Because God has forgiven, we also have the power to forgive. We don't forgive in our own right. We forgive by making God's forgiveness our own.

All sins against us are also sins against God. Every wrong committed against a creature is a sin against the creator....

If on the bottom line of our lives lies the principle that we should get what we deserve, whether good or ill, forgiveness will sit uncomfortably with us. To forgive is to give people more than their due, it's to release them from the debt they have incurred, and that's bound to mess up the books.

Once a culture has become litigious, forgiveness starts making less and less sense...To forgive, we need an environment in which forgiveness is valued and nurtured....Do you want to become a forgiving person? Seek the company of forgiven forgivers.

God didn't just say, "I forgive you." Fundamentally, forgiveness is not about saying something, not even about putting something into effect by speaking. It's about doing something. When God forgave, he "put forward" Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement...."While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" ([Romans] 5:10). Forgiveness takes place through Christ's death....

The Christian tradition has always maintained three propositions simultaneously.

Proposition one: No matter how good our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, before the eyes of the all-knowing and holy God, we are always sinners, all of us, victims included. Proposition two: No matter how evil our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or

practices are, we always remain God's good creatures, all of us, offenders included. Proposition three: No wrongdoing is an isolated act of the pure evil will of an individual; it is nourished by our sinful inclination and reinforced by a sinful culture....All of us forgive as sinners, not as the righteous. All of receive forgiveness as God's good creatures, not as despicable devils. This knowledge should counter the pride of any presumed innocence on the part of forgivers.

George Bernanos:

God wants us to be merciful with ourselves. And besides, our sorrows are not our own. He takes them on Himself, into His heart.

Tom Wright:

God's justice is his love in action to right the wrongs of his suffering world by taking their weight upon himself. God's love is the driving force of his justice, so that it can never become a blind or arbitrary thing, a cold system which somehow God operates, or which operates God.

Cyprian:

Before all things, the Teacher of peace and the Master of unity would not have prayer to be made singly and individually, as for one who prays to pray for himself alone. For we say not "My Father, which art in heaven," nor "Give me this day my daily bread; "nor does each one ask that only his own debt should be forgiven him; nor does he request for himself alone that he may not be led into temptation, and delivered from evil. Our prayer is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because we the whole people are one. The God of peace and the Teacher of concord, who taught unity, willed that one should thus pray for all, even as He Himself bore us all in one.¹⁷ This law of prayer the three children observed when they were shut up in the fiery furnace, speaking together in prayer, and being of one heart in the agreement of the spirit; and this the faith of the sacred Scripture assures us, and in telling us how such as these prayed, gives an example which we ought to follow in our prayers, in order that we may be such as they were: "Then these three," it says, "as if from one mouth sang an hymn, and blessed the Lord."¹⁸ They spoke as if from one mouth, although Christ had not yet taught them how to pray. And therefore, as they prayed, their speech was availing and effectual, because a peaceful, and sincere, and spiritual prayer deserved well of the Lord. Thus also we find that the apostles, with the disciples, prayed after the Lord's ascension: "They all," says the Scripture, "continued with one accord in prayer, with the women, and Mary who was the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren."¹⁹ They continued with one accord in prayer, declaring both by the urgency and by the agreement²⁰ of their praying, that God, "who maketh men to dwell of one mind in a house,"²¹ only admits into the divine and eternal home those among whom prayer is unanimous.

He has clearly joined herewith and added the law, and has bound us by a certain condition anti engagement, that we should ask that our debts be forgiven us in such a manner as we ourselves forgive our debtors, knowing that that which we seek for our sins cannot be obtained unless we ourselves have acted in a similar way in respect of our debtors. Therefore also He says in another place, "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again."⁶¹ And the servant who, after having had all his debt forgiven him by his master, would not forgive his fellow-servant, is cast back into prison; because he would not forgive his fellow-servant, he lost the indulgence that had been shown to himself by his lord. And these things Christ still more urgently sets forth in His precepts with yet greater power of His rebuke. "When ye stand praying," says He, "forgive if ye have aught against any, that your Father which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive you your trespasses."⁶² There remains no ground of excuse in the day of judgment, when you will be judged according to your own sentence; and whatever you have done, that you also will suffer. For God commands us to be peacemakers, and in agreement, and of one mind in His house;⁶³ and such as He makes us by a second birth, such He wishes us when new-born to continue, that we who have begun to be sons of God may abide in God's peace, and that, having one spirit, we should also have one heart and one mind. Thus God does not receive the sacrifice of a person who is in disagreement, but commands him to go back from the altar and first be reconciled to his brother, that so God also may be appeased by the prayers of a peace-maker. Our peace and brotherly agreement⁶⁴ is the greater sacrifice to God,-and a people united in one in the unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Ben Witherington tells a story of forgiveness:

Lessons from the Amish-- the Power of Pacifism

Marian Fisher was only thirteen. She had a lot to live for, and probably many years yet to live. Yesterday she was buried in a cold steady rain in a little farm graveyard near Georgetown Pennsylvania. When Marian went to her little Amish school last Monday morning she had no idea what she would face, certainly not that her faith in her Christian principles would be tested to the max earlier this past week. After all, she was thirteen, and like most Amish girls her age was wrapped up in farm life, and perhaps beginning to think about the period of time when she would be allowed to 'experiment'. During the teen years the Amish allow their children to go out and experience the world for a few years, date, go to movies, and the like, so they can make up their mind whether they want to continue to faithfully live the Amish life or be like the 'Englishmen' as they are sometimes called--- the outsiders. I should know. I lived in the middle of the Amish for eleven years and watched their witness. It puts most other Christians in the region to shame.

Picture a small one room Amish school house. Picture Emma Mae Zook, only twenty, and yet already for three years the school teacher of these children. She ran from the school house to alert the police, while her fifteen or so boy students were escaping or

being allowed to go. Ten girls remained, between 6 and thirteen, and Marian Fisher last Monday stood up first to a crazed and tormented man named Carl Roberts a 32 year old milk man who shot the girls and then turned the gun on himself.

Marian sister, Barbie who was wounded, reported what happened next. The girls asked 'Why are you doing this?' Carl Roberts replied 'I am angry with God'. Angry that God had not stopped him from molesting some children in his past. But as it turns out, he was delusional. He had not molested those children. Was he driven mad by pornographic images of young girls? Did he imagine himself at the scene having sex with such girls but never managed to do it? One thing for sure. He was sane enough to realize that a school full of Amish young children was a vulnerable place, and he was a predator. His plan apparently was to have sex with some of those school girls and then kill. But Marian Fisher intervened.

She said to Carl Roberts in somewhat broken English "Shoot me, and leave the other one's loose." She knew the Amish way. She knew Jesus' way. She was prepared to die for the others. And some of them are still clinging to life and it appears some will survive. Roberts of course escaped human accountability by killing himself as police stormed the building hearing shots, but there is a God in heaven who is not deaf to the cries of the saints and martyrs.

But that is not all of the story coming out of Nickel Mines Pennsylvania. Carl Roberts had a wife and three kids who live right there on the edge of the community. Marie Roberts, the wife has been embraced by many of the Amish. They have invited her to please stay, in fact to come and mourn together, because the Bible says we should mourn with those who mourn. She has been told that everyone is forgiven by the Amish, even Carl Roberts who did this hideous thing.

This friends is real Christianity. Christians do not retaliate. They do not seek revenge, for the Bible says that vengeance should be left in the hands of the Lord. In fact they do quite the opposite. They offer forgiveness even to their tormentors. They seek peace at the least and reconciliation at the most with those who revile them, harm them, kill them. And there is another side to this as well. Richard Gelles is an expert on violence and children. He says that psychologically the practice of forgiveness will help the Amish themselves heal far faster than others would. Forgiveness also heals the forgiver.

Somewhere out there, there is someone who is muttering about meekness being weakness. There is someone out there suggesting that violence is the way to answer and silence senseless violence. There is someone simply ignoring the words of Jesus that those who live by the sword die by the sword.

But it isn't Marian Fisher. She passed the test of her Christ-like faith. She was braver than a hundred men with guns in their hands. She gave the last full measure of her devotion to God by giving up her life for others, and some of them appear likely to survive this tragedy. In fact, if we really knew the heart of Jesus, we would know that he himself died a little once again last Monday when those girls were killed. It was Jesus who said "inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me". It was Jesus who confronted Saul on Damascus Road, Jesus who was dwelling securely in

heaven, and asked Saul "Why are you persecuting me?" There is a deep, spiritual connection between Jesus and his people, like a head attached to a body, such that what happens to us, in some mysterious way, happens to him, though he be in heaven. I do not understand it, but I know this is true for he said so.

So I stand with the Amish and I stand with Jesus. Not all the armies who ever marched have had the power or effect on history of that one single and solitary life, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, on all of humankind going on now for over 2,000 years.

Long ago Jesus said to me and to us all "take up your cross, and follow me". The Amish understand that that is an invitation to lay down your weapons and be prepared to die rather than fight for what you believe. They understand that love and forgiveness are stronger forces than death and destruction. They understand that forgiveness breaks the hideous cycle of violence. That's what a real Christian life can and will do. And yes friends, it takes a lot of courage to stick by these principles in the age and culture and world we live in. Make no mistake. Revenge and retaliation come natural to fallen human beings. Forgiveness however comes from God. It is supernatural and it transforms both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Some years ago, Mother Teresa was crossing the Allenby Bridge into the Holy Land from Jordan. She was stopped of course by Israeli border guards, who troubled to search this diminutive little nun. They asked her "have you any weapons?" --a ridiculous thing to ask a nun.

"Oh yes" she said boldly. "I have my prayerbooks." And she held them up. The Amish have said this week that they have felt uplifted by the prayers of millions who have been told about this story. Prayer--- now there's a dangerous weapon that can change the landscape of the world.

This story about Marian Fisher will stay with me for a long time. I hope that if it comes to that, I someday will have the courage she did to confront the violence and absorb it by giving a life. I hope I will continue to 'stick to my guns' which are my prayers and continue to forgive those who would do me and mine harm in any form.

This I know for sure. This world is run by a God who answers prayer, not by a God who calls us to other sorts of arms. This world is run by a God who died for me on the cross and shouted out with his dying breath about those who were tormenting and killing him "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." If we could only see with Jesus' eyes, we would know that suffering love and forgiveness is what saves and heals the world. The Amish know that. And they have borne witness to us all this week. May the memory of Marian Fisher be seared into our hearts for a long time to come. It is a portrait of our Lord.

Anonymous:

How will we know that we have truly forgiven someone? When we can think of the person in full acknowledgement of what he has done without feelings of pain and resentment, honestly desiring the best for him.

Stanley Hauerwas:

Our first task is not to forgive, but to learn to be the forgiven. Too often to be ready to forgive is a way of exerting control over another. We fear accepting forgiveness from another because such a gift makes us powerless, and we fear the loss of control involved. ... Only by learning to accept God's forgiveness as we see it in the life and death of Jesus can we acquire the power that comes from learning to give up control.

On the distinction between guilt and grief:

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2009/04/26/grief-and-guilt/>

Bonhoeffer:

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so it also does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man; in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God's forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

Gustavo Gutiérrez:

Pardon is an inherent characteristic of the Christian community. To pardon means not to fixate [on] the past but to create possibilities for persons to change and to realign the course of their lives. ... Pardon forges Christian community.

R.J. Rushdoony:

Christendom has been marked by the confession of sin. The non-Christian world does not confess its sin on the whole so much as confessing victimization, by the gods, or by other men..."

C. J. Mahaney:

Do you relate to God as if you were on a kind of permanent probation, suspecting that at any moment He may haul you back into the jail cell of His disfavor?

When you come to worship to you maintain a 'respectful distance' from God, as if He were a fascinating but ill-tempered celebrity known for lashing out at His fans?

Are you more aware of your sin than you are of God's grace, given to you through the cross?....

Don't buy the lie that wallowing in your shame is pleasing to God....

When I become bitter or unforgiving toward others, I'm assuming that the sins of others are more serious than my sins against God. The cross transforms my perspective.

Through the cross I realize that no sin committed against me will ever be as serious as the innumerable sins I've committed against God. When we understand how much God has forgiven us, it's not difficult to forgive others.

Doug Wilson:

Once there was a young man who worked for a retail store that was owned by a fellow Christian, and his job was that of a cashier. Although he was tender-hearted, he was also undisciplined and weak-willed, and when he was running short on funds one month, he "borrowed" from the till one day with every intention of paying it back. Of course, his lack of discipline made that impossible, despite his intention, and he was not able to do it.

Some time went by, but one day as his boss was going through the books, the discrepancy was discovered. His boss confronted him, he confessed, and his boss, not surprisingly, fired him. The young man was in agony over this for some days, but after about a week, he borrowed from his parents the amount he had taken, came back to his former boss, gave him the money back, and sought his forgiveness for what he had done.

His boss said that he did forgive him, completely. The air cleared, they had quite a good conversation. At the end of the conversation, the young man asked, quite casually, if he could have his job back. Much to his surprise, his boss shook his head *no*.

"What do you mean?" the young man asked, before he really had a chance to think. "I thought you forgave me!"

"Well, I did," his boss said. "I am more than willing to come to the Lord's Supper together with you" (the two attended the same church). "I have not needed to tell the police about what you have done at all."

"But I thought forgiveness meant putting everything back just the way it was before."

"Well, no," his boss said. "It means putting *some* things back. Like fellowship. But qualifications for fellowship are not the same thing as qualifications for office. Simple forgiveness is all that is necessary for the former. But qualifications for holding office are higher. And if you don't meet them, and I see that you don't, it doesn't mean that I have not forgiven you."

The young man shook his head, confused. "I thought . . ." he began.

His former boss interrupted him. "I have forgiven you," he said, "completely. *Nothing* stands between us. You have sought forgiveness, and I owe you that forgiveness. But I don't owe you a job."

Lancelot Andrewes:

Secondly, in the things to be remitted the number of God's debts are thousands, ours are but hundreds; His, talents, ours are but pence. The condition therefore is reasonable on God's behalf, if we consider the excellency of His person and the vileness of ours; if we regard how greatly we are indebted to God more than our brethren can be to us, ut pudeat aliâ lege petere remissionem, that we may be ashamed under any other condition to ask forgiveness.

Then we may not think much that He requireth this forgiveness at our hands, but magnify His mercy, that having forfeited our first bond it hath pleased Him to remit it, and only to tie us to this; we are to thank him that He vouchsafeth accipere stipulam pro margaritis, 'to accept our stubble for His pearls,' for the forgiveness of our sins (which was brought at so dear a rate) to accept the forgiveness we shew to our brethren.

Some would give 'thousands of rams, and ten thousand rivers of oil' for this great benefit: much more ought we condescend to God, when He offereth us so great a benefit upon so easy a condition. And thus we see that to be true in some part, which some of the heathen have observed de utilitate capiendâ etiam ab inimicis; it is not altogether for our hurt that they wrong and injure us, for unless there were some to offend us we should not have occasion to exercise this part of our mercy in forgiving; and therefore, where David compares his enemies to 'bees' and not to wasps, the reason is, for that albeit bees have stings yet they yield honey also, and so no doubt David received great comfort inwardly by means of his enemies, though outwardly they persecuted him with all the malice they could; for he, that can master his own affections so far as quietly to put up a wrong offered by an enemy and to forgive the same, may be assured that his sins are forgiven of God.

Wherein we are to consider the goodness of God That vouchsafeth to set men in His own place, and to give men a power to forgive even as He himself doth forgive; whereby it cometh to pass that one man is to another even in God's place, so that if we would know whether God do remit our sins or no, we need not to 'climb up to heaven' to be certified of it, nor 'go down into the deep, for the word is near, even in our heart and in our mouth.'

If thy heart tells thee that thou forgivest thy brother, doubt not but God doth likewise forgive thee; and it is His mercy that He vouchsafeth to frame His pardons after our pardons, to assure us that as we forgive one another in earth so God forgives us the sins that we have committed against Him; and He layeth this necessity upon us, not only to shew that He is careful to have peace among men, but also that He would have us to be perfect as Himself; for God is said to be *proclivis ad misericordiam, tardus ad iram et vindictam*, 'prone to mercy, slow to wrath and revenge.'

So Christ, requiring of us that we should forgive our brethren that offend us willeth us to be slow to anger, and long suffering, as God is, for it is not as man judgeth an honourable thing to be revenged. Wicked Lamech thought it an honour to take revenge 'seventy times seven times' of any that offended him, but contrawise Christ tells St. Peter that it should be a great honour for him to forgive until 'seventy times seven times.' Therefore it becomes a Christian rather to follow Christ than wicked Lamech; for as Christ says, It were better to lose the right eye, and the right hand, than to have 'the whole body cast into hell-fire,' so it were better for us to suffer wrong for righteousness than for worldly honour seek to deprive ourselves of the remission of our sins, which cannot be obtained of God except we be content to put up injuries offered to us.

C. S Lewis' "Essay on Forgiveness" (http://oholy.net/stolga/cs_lewis.html):

We say a great many things in church (and out of church too) without thinking of what we are saying. For instance, we say in the Creed "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." I had been saying it for several years before I asked myself why it was in the Creed. At first sight it seems hardly worth putting in. "If one is a Christian," I thought "of course one believes in the forgiveness of sins. It goes without saying." But the people who compiled the Creed apparently thought that this was a part of our belief which we needed to be reminded of every time we went to church. And I have begun to see that, as far as I am concerned, they were right. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not so easy as I thought. Real belief in it is the sort of thing that easily slips away if we don't keep on polishing it up.

We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. There is no doubt about the second part of this statement. It is in the Lord's Prayer, it was emphatically stated by our Lord. If you don't forgive you will not be forgiven. No exceptions to it. He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins, provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful,

however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't we shall be forgiven none of our own.

Now it seems to me that we often make a mistake both about God's forgiveness of our sins and about the forgiveness we are told to offer to other people's sins. Take it first about God's forgiveness, I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says, "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before." If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites. Of course, in dozens of cases, either between God and man, or between one man and another, there may be a mixture of the two. Part of what at first seemed to be the sins turns out to be really nobody's fault and is excused; the bit that is left over is forgiven. If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your actions needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. But the trouble is that what we call "asking God's forgiveness" very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses. What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some "extenuating circumstances." We are so very anxious to point these things out to God (and to ourselves) that we are apt to forget the very important thing; that is, the bit left over, the bit which excuses don't cover, the bit which is inexcusable but not, thank God, unforgivable. And if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves without own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves.

There are two remedies for this danger. One is to remember that God knows all the real excuses very much better than we do. If there are real "extenuating circumstances" there is no fear that He will overlook them. Often He must know many excuses that we have never even thought of, and therefore humble souls will, after death, have the delightful surprise of discovering that on certain occasions they sinned much less than they thought. All the real excusing He will do. What we have got to take to Him is the inexcusable bit, the sin. We are only wasting our time talking about all the parts which can (we think) be excused. When you go to a Dr. you show him the bit of you that is wrong - say, a broken arm. It would be a mere waste of time to keep on explaining that your legs and throat and eyes are all right. You may be mistaken in thinking so, and anyway, if they are really right, the doctor will know that.

The second remedy is really and truly to believe in the forgiveness of sins. A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in it, from thinking that God will not take us to Himself again unless He is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favor. But that is not forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.

When it comes to a question of our forgiving other people, it is partly the same and

partly different. It is the same because, here also forgiving does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think it does. They think that if you ask them to forgive someone who has cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out that there was really no cheating or bullying. But if that were so, there would be nothing to forgive. (This doesn't mean that you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every taste of resentment in your own heart - every wish to humiliate or hurt him or to pay him out.) The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God's forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily, in other people's we do not accept them easily enough. As regards my own sins it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are not really so good as I think; as regards other men's sins against me it is a safe bet (though not a certainty) that the excuses are better than I think. One must therefore begin by attending to everything which may show that the other man was not so much to blame as we thought. But even if he is absolutely fully to blame we still have to forgive him; and even if ninety-nine per cent of his apparent guilt can be explained away by really good excuses, the problem of forgiveness begins with the one per cent of guilt that is left over. To excuse, what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life - to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son - How can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night "Forgive our trespasses*" as we forgive those that trespass against us." We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what He says.

From Chuck Colson (<http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/12014-as-we-forgive>):

As We Forgive

The Mirror of Christ's Love

March 11, 2009

"Can a country known for radical brutality become a country known for an even more radical forgiveness?" That's the question BreakPoint's own Catherine Claire Larson asks in her new book, *As We Forgive*.

Larson, whose book was inspired by the award-winning documentary film of the same name, paints a gripping picture of the Tutsi survivors of genocide, who in 1994 endured 100 days of unimaginable violence at the hands of their Hutu neighbors. In just three months, nearly a million people were shot, macheted, raped, and tortured. The survivors lost everything—homes, families, hope.

But that was only their first trial. Seven years after the storm, the Rwandan government started releasing from prison more than 70,000 perpetrators of genocide.

Larson vividly describes the dreadful decision the survivors had to make. The people who had destroyed their lives were returning. Would they choose fear and hate? Or forgiveness and reconciliation?

As Larson writes so beautifully, many are choosing forgiveness. Take the story of Rosaria. Her sister and her two children were pummeled to death by a group of Hutu men from their village. Among them was a man named Saveri.

While in prison Saveri heard the Gospel. He repented of his cruelty, and through a reconciliation program begun by Prison Fellowship Rwanda, asked Rosaria for forgiveness. After a series of painful meetings, she forgave him—freeing him from despair, and herself from the coils of hatred.

Later, Saveri, along with other repentant killers, built homes for Rosaria and other survivors. “Hands that had once swung machetes in violence,” Larson writes, “now smooth clay bricks in peace.”

Or take the stories of Devota and Monique, both of whom lost all of their children in the genocide. With the help of Christian volunteers, they came to understand that Christ not only bears their sin, but their pain. And once they gave their pain to Christ, they actually sought out their perpetrators—and forgave them.

One of the most poignant stories Larson tells is of the children of the Nyange School. These children, Hutus and Tutsis, had become close friends in the wake of the genocide. When Hutu militia invaded their classroom, their love for Christ and each other was put to the ultimate test. The Hutu militiamen ordered all the Tutsis to one side, all the Hutus to the other. The students refused to move. Many of them were shot because of their love and faithfulness to one another.

If that love, that forgiveness, can be so strong in such darkness, then it is possible for all of us. Possible for the husband who continues to put his heart on the line when his wife has grown cold to him. Possible for the church deacon who won't ignore the growing rift in the congregation, but who seeks to be a mediator. Possible for the daughter who refuses to let her mother's stinging criticisms keep her from loving her.

Ultimately, what Larson shows us in *As We Forgive* is that of all human actions, forgiveness is perhaps the most powerful mirror of Christ's love.

And that love is reflected so well in this marvelous book.

Miroslav Volf (again, quoted without full endorsement):

Yet even when offenders are unrepentant, we can and should forgive. There are better ways to protect ourselves than the refusal to forgive. And when it comes to reminding offenders that they've committed the offense, we do that precisely by forgiving. Recall that to forgive is to blame. We do condemn when we forgive. We do it gently and lovingly, but we still do it.

There's no question that it is more difficult to forgive when offenders refuse to repent. Their lack of repentance is, in a sense, a continuation of their offense in a different form. But the forgiveness is unconditional.... It's predicated on nothing perpetrators do or fail to do. Forgiveness is not a reaction to something else. It is the beginning of something new....

Forgiving the unrepentant is not an optional extra in the Christian way of life; it's the heart of the thing. Why? Because God is such a forgiver and Christ forgave in such a way. And you know what? We also bear the burden of forgiveness because when we are

forgivers we are restored to our full human splendor. We were created to mirror God. Anything less is really Judas' kiss on our own cheek, a betrayal of ourselves by ourselves.

The apostle Peter wrote that destined as God's Lamb "before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20)...God decided to redeem the world of sin before the Creator could lay down its foundations. Each of us exists because the gift of life rests on the gift of forgiveness.

God doesn't angrily refuse forgiveness until we show ourselves worthy of it by repentance. Instead, God loves us and forgives us before we repent...God's forgiveness is not reactive.

Forgivers' forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders' *being forgiven*, however, is conditioned by repentance — just as being given a box of chocolate is conditioned by receiving that box of chocolate. Without repentance, the forgivers will keep forgiving but the offenders will remain unforgiven, in that they are untouched by that forgiveness.

Offenders often seem unable to redeem themselves on their own. They need help from the victims of their misdeeds. By forgiving, victims enact a divine kind of love toward their enemies — and help overcome evil by the power of good. But both parties need to participate in the process for it to be complete...Forgiveness does not *cause* repentance, but it does make repentance possible.

[Forgiveness is] not primarily to benefit ourselves...In the Christian account of things, we forgive because we love — specifically, because we love our debtors, our offenders, and even our enemies. The same love that motivates forgiveness pushes forgiveness not just from exclusion to neutrality, but from neutrality to embrace....Forgiveness doesn't stand alone, as a punctual act or even as an isolated practice..Rather, it is embedded in a way of life that is committed to overcoming evil by doing good. That's how Luther interpreted "forgetting" in the phrase "forgive and forget." Not to count the offenders guilty and not to press charges against them is important but insufficient. Luther insisted that you should "load" the enemy "with kindness so that, overcome with good [Romans 12:21], he will be kindled with love for you".

When God forgives, offenders need to respond in faith and repentance. But what if they don't repent? Like a package, forgiveness will then be stuck between the sender who dispatched it and the recipient who refuses to receive it...

For the Christian, forgiveness never involves just two parties, the offender and the offended. Forgiveness necessarily involves God, too.

For Christians, forgiving...always takes place in a triangle, involving the wrongdoer, the wronged person, and God. Take God away, and the foundations of forgiveness become unsteady and may even crumble....God is the God who forgives. We forgive because God forgives. We forgive as God gives. We forgive by echoing God's forgiveness. So to understand our own forgiving, we need to start with God's...

Because God has forgiven, we also have the power to forgive. We don't forgive in our own right. We forgive by making God's forgiveness our own.

All sins against us *are* also sins against God. Every wrong committed against a creature is a sin against the creator.....

If on the bottom line of our lives lies the principle that we should get what we deserve, whether good or ill, forgiveness will sit uncomfortably with us. To forgive is to give people more than their due, it's to release them from the debt they have incurred, and that's bound to mess up the books.

Once a culture has become litigious, forgiveness starts making less and less sense... To forgive, we need an environment in which forgiveness is valued and nurtured.... Do you want to become a forgiving person? Seek the company of forgiven forgivers. God didn't just say, "I forgive you." Fundamentally, forgiveness is not about *saying* something, not even about putting something into effect by speaking. It's about *doing* something. When God forgave, he "put forward" Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.... "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" ([Romans] 5:10). Forgiveness takes place through Christ's death.... The Christian tradition has always maintained three propositions simultaneously. Proposition one: No matter how good our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, before the eyes of the all-knowing and holy God, we are always sinners, all of us, victims included. Proposition two: No matter how evil our inclinations, thoughts, deeds, or practices are, we always remain God's good creatures, all of us, offenders included. Proposition three: No wrongdoing is an isolated act of the pure evil will of an individual; it is nourished by our sinful inclination and reinforced by a sinful culture.... All of us forgive as sinners, not as the righteous. All of us receive forgiveness as God's good creatures, not as despicable devils. This knowledge should counter the pride of any presumed innocence on the part of forgivers.

When God sets out to embrace the enemy, the result is the cross. On the cross the dancing circle of self-giving and mutually indwelling divine persons opens up for the enemy; in the agony of the passion the movement stops for a brief moment and a fissure appears so that sinful humanity can join in (see John 17:21). We, the others - we, the enemies - are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.....

Without entrusting oneself to the God who judges justly, it will hardly be possible to follow the crucified Messiah and refuse to retaliate when abused. The certainty of God's just judgment at the end of history is the presupposition for the renunciation of violence in the middle of it. The divine system of judgment is not the flip side of the human reign of terror, but a necessary correlate of human nonviolence."

A helpful article on forgiveness (<http://www.fortmilltimes.com/241/story/689027.html>):

By Jonathan Riddle
(Published August 05, 2009)

Learning to forgive is complicated and difficult and my attempt here will not solve the problem but it can give you a place to start.

What is forgiveness?

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The original word used for sin infers that some sort of debt has occurred. In other words, when you've been wronged by someone, they have in a sense robbed you of something; they have stolen from you, be it money, reputation, integrity, self-esteem, etc. Often what makes people feel better is when the offender's own behavior catches up with them, and they experience the pain they have given others, that's the way the debt is paid down. Depending upon the size of the debt (the level of the wrong), there is a desire for

justice, a desire to see them pay, a desire to see them hurt. The worldly answer is to make them pay, because they have stolen from you. What Jesus is saying is different, radical, and life changing, instead of making our enemy pay the debt, we assume the debt, *"Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors."*

I rarely meet people who don't want to forgive, for most un-forgiveness leaves them bitter and cynical. Un-forgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It never works, and leaves you worse than before.

What's the solution?

Let me suggest two things:

First, we cannot ask Jesus to forgive us our debts if we're not willing to forgive others ourselves. Forgiving enemies is not a prerequisite for God's forgiveness to us, but rather it's a manifestation that comes from knowing that God has given mercy by not making you pay down your debt, Jesus has already paid it by his death on the Cross.

Secondly, when wronged, there is a tendency to label the whole life of the offender.

Example: If they've lied to you, they immediately become a "Liar!" Even though you've lied in the past, no such label is placed on yourself. The reason: We've all made mistakes purposely and inadvertently. We've done bad things, but there are many good things we've done as well.

We're a mixture. We have history for some of our wrongs, none of that excuses our behavior, but it doesn't demonize us either. We're a work in progress; we are a sinner in need of grace. The problem is we don't see it that way with others, we tend to see that one sin, and it apply it to their entire lives. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf writes in his book, *"Forgiveness flounders because I exclude my enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners."*

Forgiving enemies is doable if we don't place them outside our community. It doesn't excuse or condone their behavior but rather believes that like you, they are also in need of God's grace and mercy. It believes just as our Father has forgiven our debt that we couldn't pay, we also have forgiven their debt. Newton's famous hymn, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see!" If we *really* believe that we can live out the Lord's prayer, "Jesus forgive me for my wrongs, as I have forgiven those who've wronged me."

David Field:

Because forgiveness has two poles, it is possible for the offended to say "I forgive you" or "I have forgiven him" even while the offender (because unrepentant - and therefore not having sought forgiveness from God, nor endeavoured to make restitution, nor apologised and sought forgiveness) *cannot* say, "I have been forgiven".

Desirable, of course, is the full restoration of relationships (F3 below) and it feels good and right to call that Forgiveness. But we must not deny that it is possible for the offended really to forgive the offender even while the offender remains unforgiven (F1 + unrepentant offender).

Why is this important?

Because otherwise when we read Jesus telling us that "if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" then we are making the offended's reception of God's forgiveness dependent on someone else's repentance. If I can only say "I have forgiven him" when he can say (because repentant) "I have been forgiven" then so long as he is unrepentant I cannot be forgiven by God.

Remember that a significant part of the idea/vocabulary of "forgiveness" is that of "release". Imagine, then, that the prisoner is foolish enough to stay in the cell. Having unlocked the doors and taken off his handcuffs and ball and chain I can say, "I have released him from prison". And yet, still sitting there, the foolish offender can say, "I am still in prison".

It's important for the offended party in a more subjective way, too. If we tell the offended that he is only allowed to say, "I have forgiven him" once the offender has repented then we are denying the offended not only God's forgiveness, but also the subjective healing/restoration/release which comes to those who forgive. If - to change the use of the metaphor above - it is true that "To forgive is to set a prisoner free - and to discover that the prisoner was you," then we are making the subjective freedom of the offended depend upon the action of the offender.

Finally, think about situations in which it is impossible for the offender to repent. My father treated me abominably (DF - *mine* didn't - he's great!) and I'm badly messed up and begin to discover some of this long after my father has died. Does my father's inability to repent mean that I cannot forgive him? Well, of course, it makes F3 impossible. But insofar as it's easy to see that I could say, "I *don't* forgive him", so, in an F1 sense, I am allowed to use the words, "I have forgiven him". And, again, this gloriously opens up the way to my reception of God's forgiveness and my release into integrity and maturity.

Another helpful article on forgiveness:

By Paula Friedrichsen

I was seething!

I stared stonily out the passenger window as our car flew down the highway. My husband and I had just argued, and as the landscape passed by I silently vowed not to speak to him until he apologized. That was until the Lord began to deal with me requiring my forgiveness. And after squirming in my seat for awhile, I finally relented. "OK, Lord, I don't want to...but with your help I will forgive Jeff for disagreeing with me."

And then the shock! Forgiving him was not the only thing God was asking me to do. He was also requiring that I ask Jeff to forgive *me!*

Hello? What did I do wrong?

After stewing for a few more minutes, I began to recognize my own part in the argument. So, in what I thought was a beautiful and benevolent display of humility, I turned to my husband and said, "Honey, I'm sorry" — fully expecting that he would then say he was sorry too.

He turned to me. "Yeah, OK."

Yeah, OK? *Yeah, OK?* Where was the "Paula sweetheart, I'm sorry too! Please forgive me, my darling?"

I felt set up by the Lord, and in truth, I probably was. He taught me a valuable lesson that day on forgiveness—one that has taken me through almost twenty-three years of marriage. The lesson was this: Don't apologize to get an apology. We don't meet in the middle with an apology; rather, we choose to ask forgiveness for our sin, and at the same time choose to overlook and forgive the other person's sin. Period. End of subject. Certainly, apologizing goes a long way in making amends and healing offenses—but it's not "I'll say *I'm* sorry if you say *you're* sorry." Forgiveness is a gift with no strings attached. It's a gift to the offender, a gift to ourselves, and a gift to God. One which He requires us to give.

Let's face it, forgiveness is not what they write love songs about. It's not touchy-feely or romantic. Forgiveness is not for sissies. It doesn't *feel* good. Forgiving is for the brave at heart and the determined. It's perhaps the most Godlike love there is.

Why Must I Forgive?

Out of obedience to God's Word. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14–15)

I think it's very significant that the Lord gave no exceptions to this rule of forgiveness. There's no "wiggle room" in this Scripture. It's cut-and-dried: If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive.

To achieve a productive prayer life. "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11:24–25)

One day, after another "leaden heaven" kind of prayer time, I cried out to God in frustration. He revealed to me two very consequential things about prayer: The first was that I must forgive those who wound me if I was to expect answer to prayer, noted in the Scripture above. The second was that God wouldn't accept my offering of prayer unless I went to the people I wounded and sought their forgiveness (see Matthew 5:23–24).

To lay down the desire to avenge. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Romans 12:17–21)

The desire for retribution is a completely normal reaction to being wronged, but as Christians we've made the decision to live by a higher standard.

One of the main reasons people refuse to forgive is their sense of righteous indignation. Believing (incorrectly) that they are behaving with complete fairness and equity, they make the choice to hold onto the offense. "Just letting it go" feels like they're making it way too easy on the sinner, and giving the offender *carte blanche* to sin against them again.

On the contrary, forgiving someone means that we put them fully in the hands of God to deal with. By forgiving the offender, we're not putting our faith in our own ability to exact justice, but resting our confidence firmly in a righteous and faithful God. My pastor, Eric Stovesand, likes to say that "unforgiveness is the poison you drink hoping the other person will die."

This Kid Needs a Time Out!

My two kids are almost eight years apart in age. When they were younger, I would occasionally ask Andrew to babysit his little sister Amy. Many times I would arrive home to my son's bitter complaints about his sister's naughty behavior. In his adolescent mind he felt completely justified meting out punishment—typically a very wordy tongue lashing, followed by a very long time-out. So you can bet that when he gave me a complete rundown of her unpleasant behavior and the ensuing penalty, I did not continue her discipline. Why? Because he had already taken matters into his own hands. She had already been punished—a bit too thoroughly I might add. He could have chosen to wait until I got home, told me what offense had been committed, and then let me punish her appropriately. But in his anger and frustration he did it himself, causing a rift in their relationship.

Romans 12:17–21 instructs us to step aside and let God deal with the perpetrator. He doesn't want rifts in our relationships, so He wisely tells us to not repay evil for evil. Many times when I've spoken to a group of women on forgiveness, someone will say to me privately afterward, "But Paula, you don't know what I've been through!" I usually reply, "Well, you don't know what I've been through!"

You see, everyone's been through something. Like many of you, I've had to forgive some tough things in my life too. What the ladies see before them as I'm speaking on forgiveness is the *by-product* of forgiveness. They see the joyful countenance of a person who has forgiven others, and knows the freedom of being forgiven.

Oh, the marvelous joy and liberation of forgiveness! If you have been living in the penitentiary of unforgiveness—trust me that there is nothing better than the sweet freedom and glorious relief of surrendering your hurts to Christ.

On conditional forgiveness (<http://gotpreaching.wordpress.com/2008/02/18/others-on-conditional-forgiveness/>):

Jay Adams

Jay Adams argues without qualification that forgiveness is conditional. Notice Adams' balance in stressing that Christians *are* obligated to try and bring an offender to repentance.

What shall we say then? It is clear that forgiveness-promising another never to bring up his offense again to use it against him -- is conditioned on the offenders willingness to confess it as sin and to seek forgiveness. You are not obligated to forgive an unrepentant sinner, but you are obligated to try to bring him to repentance. All the while you must entertain a genuine hope and willingness to forgive the other and a desire to be reconciled to him or her. Because this biblical teaching runs counter to much teaching in the modern church, it is important to understand it. Such forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably conditioned on repentance and faith. [1]

Ligon Duncan

This is a question that many Christians have never thought through. I think that Christians who have themselves harbored unjustified bitternesses and have been unforgiving in places and in ways that they should have been forgiving, often when they are confronted with and gripped by the radical teaching of Christ on forgiveness, out of sorrow for their own sin, read Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in such a way that they understand it to mean that forgiveness is an automatic obligation in every circumstance,

irrespective of the repentance of the other party. And, again, I think that that is a mistake. I believe that forgiveness always has in view reconciliation, and reconciliation is always two-sided. So if there is not a repentance corresponding to a forgiveness, then very often there is an impossibility of reconciliation. I think that whatever we think about forgiveness, forgiveness is a component to what is a larger picture, and the larger picture is reconciliation. And reconciliation is necessarily two-sided. Consequently, I think it is important for us to talk about both forgiveness and readiness to forgive. There may be circumstances where a reconciliation is impossible, but a readiness to reconcile can still be present with a believer. Consequently, I would want to make that distinction when I was counseling a believer who was in a circumstance where there was not a present possibility of reconciliation of the relationship. Instead of telling them that they need to forgive or they will become bitter, I think I would rather say that you need to be ready to forgive and not to be captured by your bitterness.[\[2\]](#)

John MacArthur

John MacArthur argues that for small matters there are times when forgiveness is unilaterally and unconditionally granted.[\[3\]](#) But, MacArthur also clearly states: It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional . . . There are times when it is necessary to confront an offender. In such cases, unconditional forgiveness is not an option. These generally involve more serious sins- – not petty or picayune complaints, but soul-threatening sins or transgressions that endanger the fellowship of saints.[\[4\]](#)

Ken Sande

Ken Sande agrees that there are times when a matter should be overlooked.[\[5\]](#) And, he also agrees that in most ideally forgiveness should follow repentance. Sande pictures forgiveness as a two stage process. In his words: When an offense is too serious to overlook and the offender has not yet repented, you may need to approach forgiveness as a two-stage process. The first stage requires *having an attitude of forgiveness*, and the second, *granting forgiveness*. Having an attitude of forgiveness is unconditional and is a commitment you make to God . . . By his grace you seek to maintain a loving and merciful attitude toward someone who has offended you... Granting forgiveness is conditional on the repentance of the offender and takes place between you and that person . . . When there has been a serious offense, it would not be appropriate to [make the promises of forgiveness] until the offender has repented.[\[6\]](#)

Justin Taylor

“Love your enemies” is something that we should do at all times and in all places. It is modeled after God’s love for his enemies, whom he loves even when they are “unjust” and “evil” (Luke 6:35). At the same time, our forgiveness of others is likewise modeled upon God’s forgiveness of sinners, whom he forgives *conditioned* upon their repentance. God does not forgive apart from repentance; neither should we. In major offenses, we are not to forgive the unrepentant.

In the event of a tragedy that involves the loss of human life brought about by wanton human sin, it is therefore wrong for Christians to call upon immediate forgiveness in the absence of repentance. Such a call both cheapens and misunderstands the biblical doctrine of forgiveness.[\[7\]](#)

John Piper

In a sermon, John Piper pointed to the conditional nature of forgiveness.[\[8\]](#) While Piper allowed that at points Christians should forgive unconditionally he also added:

One last observation remains: forgiveness of an unrepentant person doesn't look the same as forgiveness of a repentant person.

In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person. Jesus said in Luke 17:3-4 "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." So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Matt. 18:17) we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27).

The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.

Peacemakers Ministries on forgiveness

(http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIpH/b.958153/k.7417/Seven_As_of_Confession.htm):

As God opens your eyes to see how you have sinned against others, he simultaneously offers you a way to find freedom from your past wrongs. It is called confession. Many people have never experienced this freedom because they have never learned how to confess their wrongs honestly and unconditionally. Instead, they use words like these: "I'm sorry if I hurt you." "Let's just forget the past." "I suppose I could have done a better job." "I guess it's not all your fault." These token statements rarely trigger genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. If you really want to make peace, ask God to help you breathe grace by humbly and thoroughly admitting your wrongs. One way to do this is to use the Seven A's.

1. Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
3. Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
4. Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
5. Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
6. Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
7. Ask for forgiveness

See Matthew 7:3-5; 1 John 1:8-9; Proverbs 28:13.

Doug Heck on forgiveness (http://www.grace4u.org/Topical/Christian%20Forgiveness_DH.htm):

The Question of Christian Forgiveness

cf. Matthew 6:14-15 and Selected Scripture

Today we come to explore the *Question of Christian Forgiveness*. Being as broad as it is, containing many statements in various contexts and each adding to the whole, we approach this seeking the Spirit of God to give us clarity. This morning my task is to set

the stage for this evening's position papers by Dennis Gundersen, Kevin Johnson and John Bower, along with time we might have for a Q/A session tonight. There are some minor difference in how we view this doctrine, most of which in my opinion, relates to how we are selecting to word things or how much emphasis we might give to one point. Obviously I respect Dennis, Kevin and John with immense love. I will come tonight as their student, as I hope you will, to listen with careful attention to their ideas on this subject. I'm not in the least interested in winning some kind of sword drill or theological debate but I am interested that I would glean from the day a better understanding - junking ideas I might have that are not in harmony with the teaching of Scripture and revising opinions to lend better clarity. This is not a debate but position statements, given for the purpose of giving clarity to the teaching of the Bible on this subject. So my text this morning is where we left off when last we met. Jesus in teaching us how to pray, reminded us to make the petition, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (cf. Matt. 6:12), and then He explained it...

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (cf. Matt. 6:12, 14-15)

It is interesting that the only one of the six petitions in the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gives a footnote on is His fifth, i.e., "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This gives us a hint that this doctrine of Christian forgiveness is extensive and complicated, needs careful consideration and special explanation. It is not an easy teaching, either practically or conceptually.

As matter of fact, although the concept of God's forgiveness is obviously a major doctrine in OT Jewish thinking, it might be surprising to learn that the phrase "as we forgive those who are indebted to us," was almost completely foreign to both heathen religions and OT Jewish practice. Hence, Jesus' explanation.

The fact that this alone of all the topics of the prayer is taken up a second time, and amplified by stating it both positively and negatively, ought to impress upon us very deeply the importance of forgiving if we wish to be forgiven. (Broadus, p. 139)

The primary Greek term "forgive" (i.e., aphiamei) occurs 142 times in the NT and it means to send [sin] away from; to acquit to let go; to remove guilt or obligation of punishment. As mentioned, it originally came from the figure of a prisoner being released from prison or a debtor being released from his debt. It could refer to an eternal forgiveness or to a temporal forgiveness, i.e., the withholding of immediate judgment (e.g., Jesus' prayer, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," was a request for God not to immediately destroy them. cf. Luke 23:34). This forgiveness is a temporary suspension of punishment.

By the way, this is basically how I view Christ's death on behalf of the whole world, i.e., that He died to make possible that God would not call the sinner into immediate judgment when he sinned. Without the death of Christ, the justice of God and the holiness of God would have demanded the immediate execution of judgment upon the sinner. The issue is not eternal forgiveness but a temporal postponement or suspension of judgment.

Jay Adams defines Christian forgiveness a little broader, adding an element that is not actually contained in the concept. He writes...

...when you forgive another, you declare that you are canceling his debt, removing his guilt, [then he adds an element not inherent in the concept of forgiveness] and promising

that you will never bring up his guilt, and promising that you will never again bring up his offenses to use against him. (Adams, p. 82)

Unfortunately today the English word offers a wrong sense, i.e. to ignore sin, to overlook sin or to have good feelings about the person who sins. This is not forgiveness but compromising tolerance; it is the fear of man that brings a snare; and it has made many of the present generation of professing Christians cowards and turncoats to the cause of Christ's banner against evil. They think when they ignore sin or overlook it, that they are being loving, when in reality they are unloving. To tolerate or ignore sin is not forgiveness and many times results in the ending of relationships or the shifting a close friendships to surface friendships. Worse it allows a professing believer to continue in sin, with all the destructive elements of that pursuit, introduces leaven into the local church, which begins to grow and weakens the resolve of the whole congregation. That is not to say there isn't a sense of truth here, as Christian love does "cover a multitude of sins," in the sense that many sins are simply minor issues of human weakness. This truth is supported by various Biblical examples, illustrating a series of direct statements...

Prov 10:12 Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins. [Obviously this passage doesn't tell us how love does this. It doesn't explain the basis of which love covers all sins or the conditions, but like the passages I'm reading next - sets forth the ministry of love, i.e., a desire to conceal all sins, as far as one is righteously able to do that]

Prov 12:16 A fool's wrath is presently known: but a prudent man covereth shame.

Prov 17:9 He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth friends. [by the way each of these three passages commend *covering* for sins, which goes back to a literal act of two of the sons of Noah, who covered the nakedness of their drunken father, in contrast to the act of Ham, who *repeated* the sins of Noah in the sense that he shared with his brothers the physical condition of his father. cf. Genesis 9]

1 Cor. 13:5, 7 [love] thinketh no evil [i.e., doesn't keep records of evil]...Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

James 5:20 Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide [this is similar to the covering metaphor] a multitude of sins.

1 Pet 4:8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins."

Yes, a multitude of sins are indeed covered by love but that doesn't mean that they are just ignored or tolerated. No, love seeks the good of the sinner enough to rescue them from their sin by confrontation or admonition. In the Church of Christ, we have a clear unequivocal command to love others enough to boldly appeal to them to leave their sin. Jesus taught this, the Apostle Paul repeated it and the New Testament church practiced it. As matter of fact the very same Gospel (i.e, Matthew) records our Lord's command and also His Sermon on the Mount explanation of the fifth petition.

Matt 18:15-20 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. [the "hearing" would imply that he confessed and asked forgiveness of his/her sins, in agreement with God that he was wrong] But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye [the pronoun refers to the Apostles and perhaps by extension

leaders in the local church, involved in the third and fourth stages of church discipline] shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Broadly speaking there are three main views on the *Question of Christian Forgiveness ...*

Christian Forgiveness is

Always Conditional

Jay Adams teaches that Christian forgiveness is always conditional, i.e., that we are only to forgive when confession and repentance has been clearly expressed by the offending person. If repentance doesn't take place (and confession) then we are not to forgive. This is a minority view, which has more followers than Jay Adams, John Bower, and Kevin Johnson. As a matter of fact for much of my own ministry I held to this position, at least up until the late '80's, so I have great respect for those who hold this view and consider it certainly a Biblically tenable position, i.e., a view that is possible and has much to commend by way of rational argument and reclaiming of much neglected truth, but there is an even better view.

By the way, I wish I could tell you I changed my mind completely due to the closer study of Scripture but actually, a haunting question would often break through my reasoning - that regardless of the fact that I viewed Christian forgiveness as conditional, I myself forgave everyone who wronged me and or wronged others, in my heart. That didn't mean I didn't try to bring the offenders to repentance of their sins but I just found myself truly forgiving of all others in my heart. And I didn't find this a difficulty at all but a normal reaction, as I meditated on my own sins forgiven graciously by God.

This view is built primarily on Jesus' command: "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and *if he repents*, forgive him." (cf. Luke 17:3) Clearly, this passage suggests a conditional forgiveness.

But whatever else you do, remember: forgiveness is an important condition to fellowship with the Heavenly Father. It is not an option. God commands it. Nor may we guess about how to forgive, whom to forgive, when to forgive, how often to forgive. God has not left us without explicit information. (Adams, p. 4)

Refusal to forgive is a decision for vengeance. It is taking vengeance into your own hands. (Adams, p. 25)

Jay Adams does make an outstanding statement, which I think is valuable in our discussion.

Yes, there is a truth that is greatly misunderstood and misrepresented. It is found in one passage that (rightly) deals with the problem of forgiving when the one to be forgiven is either not present or unwilling to confess sin. It is found in Mark 11:25, "And when you stand praying, if you have something against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven also may forgive you your trespasses." [Adams then explains this passage]...in this verse Jesus is concerned about the attitude of the believer as he stands before God in prayer. If he is inwardly unwilling to forgive his brother or sister, he cannot expect forgiveness from the Father [i.e., relational]. This preceding the promise (or granting) of forgiveness to another, one must prepare to lift that guilt so that the promise he makes, even if against his feelings, will be sincerely meant and kept. He may not simply repeat a formula; he must forgive from his heart. Like his Heavenly Father, by prayer, the believer

seeks to become "ready to forgive" (Ps. 86:5 MLB). That is the meaning of Mark 11:25. (Adams. P. 30)

Jay Adams mentions his fear about a believer ignoring a conditional forgiveness. And I think he has a point.

If forgiveness were unconditional, then this entire process of [church] discipline would be impossible. It is my contention that the very existence of such a program as this requires us to believe that forgiveness is conditional. (Adams, p. 33)

Here is really the crux of the question. Adams is clearly correct, for the NT especially, clearly commands believers to confront sin and break fellowship with anyone who professes to be a Christian but retains their sins. Its not only Jesus' teaching as we read from Matthew 18 but as Paul commanded...

And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish [Greek, noutheteo] him as a brother. (cf. 2 Thess. 3:14-15)

But does this demand that all Christian forgiveness is conditioned or waits until confession and repentance take place. No, in my humble opinion, that goes too far. The only way to make this view work is to set up Luke 17:3 as a *governing verse* and interpret all other NT passages that speak of Christian forgiveness in light of this passage. But this violates a basic principle of interpretation or hermeneutics, i.e., that no one passage can govern another, which is given in a different context, let alone a number of passages. The Gospel writers recorded the actual words of Jesus, working independent of each other. For example, the Church of Christ takes Acts 2:38 as their *governing passage* for teaching that water baptism is a condition of salvation. "And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ *for* (Greek, eis) the forgiveness of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." They consider eis a purpose clause. They fail to notice, that in Peter's next sermon he doesn't mention water baptism as a condition at all (cf. Acts 3:19) or Paul (cf. Rom. 10:9-10) or John (cf. John 3:14-18) or Luke (cf. Acts 16:31). Forgiveness is

Always Unconditional

This is also a minority view as far as historical Christianity is concerned, although it could be argued that it is becoming the majority view in our pluralistic and tolerant culture. This view fails to deal with Jesus' command in Matthew 18:15-20 that demands that we confront the offender and pursue his/her repentance through means of discipline; and this view reasons away Luke 17:3, suggesting that because it is the only verse in the OT or NT that directly mentions a condition for Christian forgiveness, that it must be understood in light of the majority of texts that don't mention a condition. This also is a hermeneutics error. Just like taking one verse and forcing all other passages that speak to that issue, to conform to that single verse; neither is it correct to take a series of passages on a topic and press into one verse, meaning not there.

Usually this view is built on an overemphasis of Jesus' gracious forgiveness with the woman caught in adultery.

Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. "Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a

stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (cf. John 8:1-11)

Here is a sin, worthy in Scripture of the sentence of death but it is unconditionally forgiven by Jesus, so it is argued that this is how all Christians should unconditionally forgive.

Because I know of too few who hold this view and none who are not either liberal in their theology or actually secular in psychology, I'll not take the time to explain or refute this view. I think everyone here understand that a complicated doctrine like Christian forgiveness cannot be gleaned from one such passage, where Christ Himself remitted the guilt of an adulterous woman. This is to say nothing of the fact that this paragraph has questionable textual authenticity.

Forgiveness is

Both Unconditional and Conditional

I argue that this has been the majority view, not only in the history of Christianity but among Bible scholars today. I suggest this is the view of the vast majority of conservative Pastors and theologians, who hold to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The Reformers (with the possible exception of John Calvin) and the Puritans, all taught this, as well as I can determine. The view recognizes the truth that Luke 17:3 does indeed suggest a *conditional* forgiveness but also recognizes a series of other passages where no such condition is stated or implied.

Mark 11:25-26 And whenever you stand praying, if you have *anything* [i.e., this includes all kinds of sin] against *anyone* [i.e., this includes all kinds of people], forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." [this passage is very close to our Matthew 6:14-15 passage, which we will explain in a few minutes.]

Luke 6:36-37 Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.

Eph 4:31-32 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Col 3:12-15 Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.

Pastor John MacArthur supports this view, in his book, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, rebutting his friend Jay Adams conditional view. He writes...

While it is often true that forgiveness involves a two-way transaction, it is not true of all forgiveness. There are times when forgiveness should be unconditional and unilateral, and there are other times when forgiveness must be withheld until the offender repents. (MacArthur, p. 119)

My position on the complicated doctrine of Christian forgiveness, that when taking the whole of Scripture into account and letting each passage speak in its own context can be reduced to five statements:

1. Christian Forgiveness at Times is Unconditional, as the above passages teach. In this sense the believer actually personally forgives from the heart all sins. As far as I can determine, this is more than being *willing* to forgive. It is an actual *personal forgiveness*. [Jay Adams himself comes close to this view when he writes in his excellent booklet *Ready to Restore: the Layman's Guide to Christian Counseling* (1981)... "Forgiveness is granted to another only when he seeks it, but internally one forgives (i.e., he no longer holds on to the offense as something that could turn to bitterness) in his heart in prayer (Mark 11:25)." (p. 84)

Actually I'm convinced that Jesus here was building upon one of the more central commands in the OT...

"Do not go about spreading slander among your people. "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD. "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (cf. Lev. 19:16-18; NIV)

Not only the passage I've already read but examples, such as Joseph's gracious forgiveness of his brethren, long before they confessed and repented of their sins. Joseph understood that although they "meant it for evil, God meant it for good." (cf. Gen. 50:4-5) Or David's wise long-suffering forgiveness of Shimei in 2 Samuel 16, where again he recognized that God was using the taunting hatred of Shimei for his own good. The definitive passage on this point, beyond Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and Mark 11:25, is Paul's teaching to the Ephesian believers...

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving* [i.e., charizomai] one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (cf. Eph. 4:31-5:2)

As I've mentioned on several occasions, the term translated as "forgive" comes from the same word we get "grace" which is unmerited favor. Charizomai is a gratuitous, underserved and completely unconditional forgiveness, which is how God forgives. To try to read the idea that the term contains a condition or that the condition is presupposed, is to turn the passage on its end and suggest an opposite meaning that the intended meaning of the human author. The whole *Epistle to the Ephesians* is especially unique as it sets for the profound gracious work of the Triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christ didn't love us or give Himself for us as an offering and sacrifice to God, because He foresaw that we would confess our sins and repent - no, we confess our sins and repent because He sovereignly and graciously regenerated and redeemed us. The fact is, you and I are not smart enough to realize our sins and confess them to the Lord - it is the Spirit of God who germinates faith within us, following His sovereign and gracious act of regeneration. Note: the term charizomai is used 11 times in the NT, mostly by Paul as a synonym of aphiamai, when he wants to emphasize its gracious nature.

2. Christian Forgiveness at Times is Conditional, as Luke 17:3 and Matthew 18:15-32 clearly teach. cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-13. That is, some sins demand confrontation by other believers privately or in a small group of 3-4, where repeated attempts are made in humility to restore the professing believer and bring him/her to confession and repentance. When

confession and repentance happen, there is a full relational forgiveness along with the inner personal forgiveness that hopefully has taken place.

3. Christian Forgiveness is Patterned after God's Gracious Forgiveness, which is both judicially gracious and relationally contingent. As a free act of grace He saves us, not due to human merit of any kind - including our confession and repentance of specific acts of sin. The initial bath of regeneration, which includes a thorough judicial cleansing, is a sovereign and gracious work of God.

But when the kindness of God our Savior and [His] love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to [the] hope of eternal life. (cf. Titus 3:4-7; NAU)

One of the deans of *The Master's Seminary*, Irv Busenitz, in his *Divine Forgiveness: Conditions and Limitations*, (ThD thesis for Grace Theological Seminary, 1980) help summarize a careful theological distinction.

It must be concluded therefore, that confession is not a condition for the obtaining of judicial forgiveness. It is not a condition which must be fulfilled in order to be saved. (p. 165) Confession and repentance will accompany genuine belief and forgiveness, but they are not conditions of forgiveness. Likewise, a spirit of forgiveness and baptism are not conditions of forgiveness but evidences of it. (p. 1) While repentance and confession will accompany genuine faith, this writer understands the Scriptures to teach that they are not conditions which must be met in order to obtain forgiveness. Rather, they are aspects which accompany the reception of Christ through faith and which continue to exhibit the genuineness of that faith, playing an important role in the believer's sanctification. A forgiving spirit toward others likewise reflects and evidences the reality of a transformed life. An unforgiving spirit, on the other hand, is indicative of a heart that has not been forgiven by God. (p. 175)

There are a number of examples in the OT and NT where forgiveness or pardon of sins is without any hint of confession and repentance. I simply limit our discussion to...

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? "For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"-- then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." And he arose and departed to his house. (cf. Matt. 9:1-7)

The ongoing cleansing of sanctification, is contingent on human confession and repentance, to restore the person in full relational forgiveness.

4. Christian Forgiveness Most Often is Extended by Forbearing Love, dealing with issues that don't cause scandal or strain the ongoing fellowship of God's people. As MacArthur teaches, "This, then, is the governing rule: unless an offense requires confrontation, unconditional, unilateral forgiveness should cover the transgression." On this point MacArthur and Adams agrees...

God has provided a means for handling the multitude of offenses that we commit against one another. But it is not forgiveness. In 1 Peter 4:8, quoting Proverbs 17:9, Peter points out that those who love one another "cover a multitude of sins" in love. It is only those

sins which throw the covers off that must be dealt with by the Luke 17 and Matthew 18 processes: those offenses that break the fellowship and lead to an unreconciled condition require forgiveness. Otherwise, we simply learn to overlook a multitude of offenses against ourselves, recognizing that we are all sinners and that we must gratefully thank others for covering our sins as well. (Adams, p. 34)

5. Christian Forgiveness is a Mark of Genuine Faith, in the sense that Christ's forgiven ones will themselves be forgiving ones. To refuse to forgive personally from the heart every offense or sin, gives proof ultimately that the professing believer's faith is spurious. This is how I see Matthew 6:14-15 and Mark 11:25, i.e., that if we forgive, God forgives us; if we do not forgive, God does not forgive us. I realize my interpretation departs from many excellent opinions but the two Gospel passages cannot refer only to a *relational* forgiveness, although it does contain that also, for the simply reason that the original audience listening to Jesus making these statements would not have a context to distinguish between a *judicial* and *relational* forgiveness. Those are theological distinctions developed further in the progress of revelation and not during the days Christ taught. The original listeners would receive these words without those theological distinctions that are implied later in redemptive development; they would receive them at face value, i.e., that a citizen of Christ's kingdom, because he has been forgiven will forgive and not to do so will mean they have never been loosed from their own sins.

So I take the passage in its clear, normal sense, without reading theological implications or development into it, just like those listening to Jesus give His Sermon on the Mount would. Our forgiveness of others is just that imperative. It is a mark of genuine faith, for those who are actually graciously forgiven by God will themselves graciously forgive others; those who profess Christ but cannot forgive others in their heart, manifest that they have never had true saving faith.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (cf. Matt. 6:14-15)

This is how Alfred Plummer in his work *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, views this passage.

The "as" must not be pressed to mean that the fullness of the Father's forgiveness is to be measured by the extent to which we forgive our fellow-men. No such hard bargaining is to be understood. What is meant is that we ourselves must cultivate a spirit of forgiveness toward those who seem to have wronged us, before we venture to claim forgiveness for ourselves. (p. 107)

As a side note, could it be that we have misread Jesus' parable of the unjust steward? I'm unsure here and I think we need more careful study of Jesus' parable. Indeed, unfortunately we might have interpreted it through our pre-un derstanding of eternal security, but the conclusion of it might speak rather to the situation of a warning about hell.

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. "Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. "And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. "But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. "The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' "Then the master of that

servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' "And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. "So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. "Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 'Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." (cf. Matt. 18:21-35; NKJ)

Nowhere else are true believers said to be handed over to torturers. And notice that the forgiveness is from the heart. And by the way, notice that neither of the servants confessed their sins, let alone repented for their indebtedness - they ask for mercy and claim they will repay but don't confess or repent of a delinquent debt!

To summarize, Christian personal forgiveness is always to take place in the heart regardless of the sin or a lack of confession and repentance. This protects us in a practical way of allowing a grudge, bitterness and resentment to grow, which will become a form of hatred or anger; it also will demand that we reflect first on our own sins and the gracious forgiveness of God toward us, as undeserving sinners. But a Christian's love for the sinning believer will move him to pursue his/her repentance, securing a full relational forgiveness -either through the process of confrontation known as discipline (cf. Matthew 18:15-20) or after that, when confession and repentance take place.

As I mentioned, I welcome correction here and I'm looking forward to my three friends sharing this evening. I hope as a local church we can help each other clarify what the Bible teaches, as this subject has profound implications. As a church we want to be known as a forgiving people, long-suffering, forbearing, merciful and loving, within the Biblical parameters; and we also want to be known as a church standing in the trenches fighting against sin, through humble confrontation and discipline.

Nancy Wilson:

Another one of those basic things about the Christian life is how to put things right. If we do not know how to seek forgiveness from one another, we can get ourselves into unnecessary tangles. And the devil loves to fish in troubled water, so if you are not putting things right regularly with one another, more troubles are guaranteed to come. When my husband and I were first married, we were surprised to find out that we occasionally bumped into one another. We called them bumps, but you may call them offenses or collisions, or whatever. No matter what you call them, they create a break in the fellowship. We had not had a single bump during our engagement, so it was a new experience. We learned that it was essential that we get back into fellowship as soon as possible, so we established a few household rules for ourselves. After applying these rules diligently, we found that eventually they came to be second-nature for us. Here they are.

First we agreed that if we had a bump, we would put it right as soon as possible. For example, if we had collided over the checkbook, we agreed that we could get back into fellowship even if we had not sorted out the checkbook mistake. It does not take long to say, "I was wrong. Please forgive me for being annoyed" and "You are forgiven." Then we could be back in fellowship with one another while we sorted things out. And the fellowship cannot wait, though the checkbook can.

We also agreed that we would not let people into our house if we were not in fellowship, which meant leaving them on the front doorstep if necessary. We would not go into someone else's home, or even get out of the car, unless we had restored any broken fellowship. We would not go to bed out of fellowship, and Doug would not leave for work if we were not in fellowship. We were pretty stringent about these things, and I cannot begin to tell you the tremendous blessing this has been for our marriage. We learned we could get back into fellowship quickly, and we also learned that being out of fellowship with one another is intolerable, even for a few minutes.

When our children were growing up, we insisted on the same thing with them. If we spoke harshly to them, we put it right, now. Sometimes people feel hypocritical putting things right just after the sin. But think of it this way. If you fell on your face out in front of a crowd, would you just lie there hoping they didn't notice? No. Would you say you were too embarrassed to get up? No. You would hop up as fast as you physically were able. So sin should be taken care of the same way.

The apology should always be as public as the sin. If we sinned at the dinner table, we put it right at the dinner table. If we sinned in front of one kid, we put it right with that one kid. This kind of policy affects how often you want to sin, let me tell you. It just is not worth it. If you put things right, it has the same effect as discipline. It is not fun. So you watch your step more and you keep things picked up.

To illustrate this principle, my husband uses the example of a home where things are picked up compared to a home where things are knee deep. In both homes people drop things on the floor. But in the one home they are picked up right away. In the other home, things accumulate until you just can't even see the floor and you have no idea where or how to begin. In the first home, having a pick-up policy not only keeps the house clean, but it acts as a deterrent on how much stuff is dropped. Of course no home will be perfect. Things get dropped and can be picked up every day. But if you let things pile up, you can hit the point where you just don't care anymore. And many people just walk away rather than face the consequences of picking up years of junk.

The Bible says that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us of all our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we step out and begin to seek forgiveness for specific offenses, God will bring more to mind. As we keep confessing, He scrubs off the layers of dirt, we experience real cleansing, and our hearts are washed. We are restored, put right with God and put right with one another.

One of the important things to remember when you are seeking forgiveness is to name the sin the way the Bible names it. Don't say, "I'm sorry if I did anything to hurt you." Rather say, "Please forgive me for my rude comment. That was unkind." Don't say, "I'm sorry for saying those things. I didn't mean it." Rather say, "Please forgive me for saying you're a jerk. I was the one being a jerk." Don't say, "Sorry for getting into your purse, Mom. I meant to ask but I forgot." Rather say, "Mom, I stole ten bucks from your purse. Please forgive me."

One of my all-time favorite article on forgiveness, by Paul Buckley (http://paulrbuckley.blogspot.com/2007_02_01_archive.html):

Today is Forgiveness Sunday, which marks the beginning of Great Lent in the Orthodox Church. Here's a piece I wrote for the newspaper a few years ago.

The man who just prostrated himself before me and confessed himself a sinner is back on his feet and embracing me. He has squatted and bowed before dozens of other sinners in this little candlelit cathedral, as have I, and both of us have worked up a sweat. Tomorrow our legs will ache. This is one strenuous way to get ready for Easter.

The "Forgiveness Vespers" service is how Orthodox churches embark upon Lent. Western Christians begin with ashes on their foreheads. Orthodox Christians begin with their foreheads on the floor.

The service marks a high point on the Orthodox calendar. Worshippers step reverently into the cathedral, knowing that tonight their church will "change keys" and enter a period whose mood they often describe as bright sadness. Prayers are rising before dusk, but sunlight has left the church by the time the old archbishop invites his people to draw near for a heart-to-heart. He begins to talk of forgiveness.

Their Lord, he tells them, pursued their reconciliation unto death. His sacrifice should move them to go about forgiving with urgency, outside the church as well as within. The archbishop's counsel: If you aren't willing to forgive, don't bother with Lenten fasting. It would be pointless.

Finally, he makes a general confession himself. He admits, for example, that he has often been guilty of impatience. For that and other failings, he is sorry. "My brothers and sisters," he says before prostrating himself, "forgive me."

And so begins the rite of forgiveness. Starting with the archbishop, the people form a receiving line that slowly winds around the church. Everyone prostrates himself or herself before every other person present, even strangers.

"Forgive me, a sinner," each one says, and then bends low. The person opposite makes the same confession, the same gesture. Rising, they embrace and kiss. "God forgives, and I forgive," each one says, or other words to that effect.

Because everyone participates, all inevitably stand face to face with those who know them best. Young fathers bow before their young children. Boyfriends and girlfriends ask one another's forgiveness. A mother seeks pardon from her son. Husbands prostrate themselves before their wives, and vice versa. A few people, choked by emotion, cannot get the words out every time. Tears say what their tongues cannot.

Cynics may doubt the genuineness of all this; some doubt its necessity. One visitor a few years ago was bemused to see all those faces down and bottoms up. Keeping her seat, and her distance, at the back of the church, she quietly wondered aloud, "Do they really

need that much forgiveness?"

A Christian answers yes, they really do – and not just for more or less public offenses in word and deed, but even for offenses committed in secret or in the heart. No sin, in Orthodox and other Christian thought, is absolutely private. Each represents a breaking of faith with the whole church, the whole human race. No one who believes such a thing means to deny that sin offends God above all. The idea is simply to affirm that sin also offends those made in the image of that God.

But shouldn't people who think that way seek and extend forgiveness all the time, and not just one Sunday night in late winter? Any church that prays "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," week in and week out, knows the unanimous Christian answer. In the words of St. Paul, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German theologian martyred by the Nazis, envisioned Saturday as a time when laypeople might regularly pursue reconciliation with one another before sharing Holy Communion the next day. "Nobody who avoids this approach to his brother," he wrote, "can go rightly prepared to the table of the Lord."

The Orthodox are exhorted, just before they sing the creed, "Let us love one another, that with one accord we may confess: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Right thinking without right relating, to paraphrase St. James, is dead. As the Orthodox see it, a simple rite of forgiveness at the end of evening prayer underlines that point and puts it in boldface. "Let us embrace one another," they will sing in the wee hours of Easter morning. "Let us speak also, O brethren, to those that hate us, and in the resurrection let us forgive all things, and so let us cry: Christ is risen from the dead!"

A resurrection gospel puts those who believe it on their knees before God. Sooner or later, it puts them on their knees before one another.

More helpful links:

http://www.grace4u.org/Topical/Christian%20Forgiveness_DH.htm

<http://www.peacemakers.net/unity/abasisforforgiveness.htm>

<http://www.peacemakers.net/peace/eight.htm>

http://commongroundsonline.typepad.com/common_grounds_online/2009/02/excerpt-from-as-we-forgive-stories-of-reconciliation-from-rwanda-pt-2.html

<http://trevinwax.com/2009/08/06/is-forgiveness-conditional/>

Christopher Wright:

This is our great hope and joyful expectation. In the midst of all our struggles now, as we confront evils we cannot understand and as we cry out to the God we cannot fully understand, we are urged by Jesus himself to pray, "deliver us from evil". More than merely a prayer for daily protection, that is a cosmic request that will one day be cosmically answered. God will answer that prayer! It will be fully answered at the moment when God answers two other phrases in the Lord's Prayer: "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

When the reign of God extends over every corner of the universe, when the earth is filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, when the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, when heaven and earth are renewed and united under the righteous rule of Christ, when the dwelling place of God is again with humanity, when the city of God is the center of all redeemed reality - then we will have been delivered from all evil forever.

The cross and the resurrection of Christ accomplished it in history and guarantee it for all eternity. In such hope we can rejoice with incomparable joy and total confidence.

J.C. Ryle:

It takes two to make a quarrel, but let us purpose ourselves as Christians that we will not be the one.

Ardel Caneday on the sin of unconditional forgiveness (<http://trsbu.blogspot.com/2009/02/sin-of-unconditional-forgiveness.html>):

A presumed truism that invariably seems to attach to every human conflict especially within the church, within Christian institutions, and generally within Christian relationships is the notion that we are obligated to administer "unconditional forgiveness" to anyone who has sinned, even if the sin was not against us.

Among popular writings concerning forgiveness, one of the most provocative pieces I have read was, "**When Forgiveness Is a Sin**," written not by a Christian but by a Jew, Dennis Prager, and published in the *Wall Street Journal*, of all places.

In 1997, Michael Carneal, a teenager in Kentucky, went on a rampage at his high school in West Paducah, Kentucky, shooting and killing three fellow students and wounding five others, all who were in a group prayer meeting in the lobby of the building. Prager notes, "The bodies of the three teen-age girls shot dead last December by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., were not yet cold before some of their schoolmates hung a sign announcing, 'We forgive you, Mike!'"

Prager observes, "This immediate and automatic forgiveness is not surprising. Over the past generation, many Christians have adopted the idea that they should forgive

everyone who commits evil against anyone, no matter how great and cruel and whether or not the evildoer repents." Then he states what many Christians presume to be unthinkable, "You and I have no right, religiously or morally, to forgive Timothy McVeigh or Michael Carneal; only those they sinned against have that right. If we are automatically forgiven no matter what we do, why repent? In fact, if we forgive everyone for all the evil they do, God and his forgiveness are unnecessary. We have substituted ourselves for God."

Is Dennis Prager correct? Is he right that humans have no moral or religious ground to forgive sins not committed against themselves? Is Prager's point on target when he contends that if we receive forgiveness without repenting that we then have no need to repent? Is he correct that if we forgive sins not committed against us that we have usurped God's place?

Though the presumption that forgiveness should be administered unconditionally is hardly new with the current generation, it seems to have taken up permanent residence wherever evangelicals reside, work, or live among one another. Indeed, the presumption that we should even forgive sins not committed against ourselves has also taken up residence among Christians, yes, even evangelicals. And this is not good at all. Indeed, not one of us has any authority to intrude to administer forgiveness of sins that were not committed against us but against another. If we intrude we presume to take the right and authority to forgive sins that belongs to God (Mark 2:1-12).

The designation, "unconditional forgiveness," communicates the message plainly. Its advocates and preachers insist that Christians need to forgive wrongdoings even when the one who has committed the sins refuses to acknowledge the sins and remains unrepentant. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us to become like God and is the power of God by which we in fact do become like God. Becoming like God means that we must act as God with regard to sin and forgiveness. Therefore, I ask that you follow with me as I take you on a brief excursion through the Scriptures lest we commit sin by administering forgiveness.

Forgive Sins Not People

Undoubtedly these words—forgive sins not people—strike the ear and the eye oddly, even wrongly. Why is this? It is partly because our English idiomatic expression truncates what we ought to say. Instead of saying, "Forgive me my sinful deed," we tend to clip the statement to, "Forgive me." It is not difficult to understand why we clip the idiom. Is it? The clipped English idiom makes the request far more bearable for us by eliminating any mention of sin, of doing wrong, of our failure. Is it not much easier to mouth the words "Forgive me" than to say, "Forgive my sinful deed"?

The English idiom does not translate well the Greek idiomatic expression used concerning forgiveness throughout the New Testament. Reflect upon the differences between the Greek and the English idioms. Consider two well-known significant passages from the New Testament.

Jesus instructs us to pray this way, "And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). A fuller translation that would more effectively preserve the Greek idiom might read, "And grant to us forgiveness of our *debts* as we also grant forgiveness to our debtors." The Greek idiom makes it clear that the direct object that is to be forgiven is our "debts," not us. That which is front and center which needs forgiveness, then, is our sinful deed or deeds—"Grant forgiveness of our debts to us." Likewise, the Greek idiom makes it clear that the human is the indirect object. Oh, indeed, we are involved, but we are the indirect object in our prayer that requests God's

forgiveness—“Grant forgiveness of our debts to us.” The grammar of prayer as we request God’s forgiveness is not inconsequential. Forgiveness always has as its direct object the deeds of the person and always has as its indirect object the person who commits the deeds.

Of course, the way that Jesus formulates this prayer petition is also instructive for us because he uses the imagery of indebtedness to stand in for sins. If you borrow \$100.00 from a friend, you have incurred a debt of \$100.00. If you find yourself in a terrible plight that makes it impossible to pay your debt, you might petition your friend, “Please, forgive my debt.” If your friend is merciful to forgive, he may forgive the debt of \$100.00. Your debt, not you, is the direct object of the forgiveness. You are only the indirect object. Someone, of course, still has to pay your debt. If your friend forgives your debt of \$100.00, to balance his ledger book he cannot simply erase the -\$100.00. He has to balance his books by paying off the debt from another fund. Thus, in effect, he has incurred your debt of \$100.00 by going into debt on your behalf from another account.

Jesus teaches us to confess our indebtedness, due to our sins, and to plead our Heavenly Father’s forgiveness of our indebtedness. Out of his great wealth of mercy secured by Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death on behalf of our sins our Heavenly Father forgives our indebtedness each and every time we plead, “Grant to us forgiveness of our debts as we also grant forgiveness to our debtors” (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Matthew 6:12). Likewise, another familiar and instructive passage concerning forgiveness is 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Again, a fuller translation that would more effectively conserve the Greek idiom might read, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to grant to us forgiveness of these sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We need to observe that God forgives our sins, and that we are the recipients of the forgiven debt. As in Matthew 6:12 and everywhere else in the Greek New Testament, the grammatical construction makes it clear that God forgives sin and that the person who confesses the sin is the recipient of the forgiven indebtedness. Our sin is the debt incurred. Forgiveness of the sinful debt is what God grants. Forgiveness always addresses the debt incurred by sin.

God Forgives Confessed Sins

What else does 1 John 1:9 make clear to us concerning forgiveness of our sins? Is it not obvious that the passage clearly states God’s mandated order for receiving forgiveness of our sins? God’s justice follows an order. We must confess our sins; God grants to us forgiveness of our sins and cleansing from all unrighteousness conditioned upon our confession of our sins.

When God forgives the debt incurred by our sins he does not wink at sin. God took upon himself the debt incurred by our sins. God placed the debt of our sins upon Christ Jesus whose bloody sacrificial death constituted God’s punishment due unto us for our debt of sin (1 John 1:7). God is faithful and righteous to forgive the debt incurred by our sins whenever we confess our sins only because he absorbed our debt of sin through the death of his Son. God does not mock his Son; he gives forgiveness of sins only to those who acknowledge their sins.

Always Forgive Sins As God Forgives Sins

Jesus teaches us to petition our Heavenly Father by saying, “Grant to us forgiveness of our debts as we also grant forgiveness to our debtors.” Catch the remarkable analogical reference point. What function does this analogical reference point have? It renders our

petition for forgiveness of our sins completely empty and hypocritical if we do not grant forgiveness of sin to our fellow humans who have requested the same from us that we ask of God. Jesus expounds upon this analogical reference point when he says, "For if you grant to men forgiveness of their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will grant to you forgiveness. But if you do not grant to men forgiveness, neither will your Father grant to you forgiveness of your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14-15). Again, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, when Peter asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?", Jesus instructs us that God does not receive petitions for forgiveness of our own debts of sin if we refuse to grant to others forgiveness of their debts incurred by sins against us (Matthew 18:21-35).

God requires that we imitate him. Thus, we are obligated to be like God whenever we forgive one another. The apostle Paul underscores this in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians. To the Ephesians, he says, "But be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving to each other, *just as* also God in Christ granted forgiveness to you" (Ephesians 4:32). Likewise, he calls upon the Colossians to be "forbearing with one another and granting forgiveness to each other, if someone has a complaint with another, *just as* the Lord has granted forgiveness to you, so also you must grant forgiveness" (Colossians 3:13).

God's giving to us forgiveness of our sins is the standard by which we are to grant to others forgiveness of their sins. This is the function of the words *just as*. Therefore, in order for us to know how to extend forgiveness to others concerning their sins against us, first we must understand how God grants forgiveness to us concerning our sins. Of course, proper attention to this would require far more space than this brief study permits. How does God grant forgiveness to us? We who confess our sins and repent of our sinful deeds find that God faithfully and righteously absolves us of the debt we incur by our sins. He faithfully and righteously absolves us of our debt because he has exacted full payment for our debt from his own Son, Jesus Christ, who died on behalf of our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3). God is gracious to pardon our debt of sin, but this does not mean that God eliminates all the consequences that sin may bring. So, for example, even though both God and the human victim of an act of rape grant forgiveness to the repentant man who committed the rape, which is both a sinful and a criminal act, the just consequences for the sinful deed remain. Imprisonment for the convicted rapist is fully just and right, even for the man who repents in brokenness and contrition.

God's Forgiveness of Sin Is Conditional

When anyone grants forgiveness of sin to people who refuse to repent of their sins, they are doing what not even God will do. God does not bestow forgiveness to humans who do not acknowledge their sinful deeds and repent. Forgiveness invariably concerns sins acknowledged and confessed. If there is no repentance, turning from sin, there can be no forgiveness of sin.

We are to offer God's forgiveness of sin freely and universally wherever we may have opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The free offer of the gospel, however, does not mean that God bestows forgiveness to all humans unconditionally. That would mock the gospel of the cross. The call of the gospel to receive God's forgiveness of sins entails a condition. Thus, despite popular opinion, *God's forgiveness of sin is not unconditional.*

Any reasonable reading of the New Testament readily constrains us to acknowledge that the gospel of Jesus Christ makes it abundantly plain that God's forgiveness of sin is conditional. This is plainly obvious from 1 John 1:7-9.

But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we claim, "We have no sin," we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Repentant belief is necessary for all who would receive God's forgiveness of their sins. God's forgiveness of sins and his cleansing from sin's corruption is received upon the condition of confession of our sins which is the invariable posture that Christian belief takes.

Many Christians seem to think that they have found New Testament proof to support their popular doctrine of "unconditional forgiveness" in Matthew 18:21-35. As cited above, Peter asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus responds, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (18:22). Because Matthew's account of the episode does not specify that the person must repent to receive forgiveness of sin, advocates of "unconditional forgiveness" cite this passage to support their case.

Just a little consideration of what immediately precedes Peter's question that prompts Jesus to tell the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35) should alert us that inferring "unconditional forgiveness" from the parable entails a serious fallacy. Peter's question follows immediately upon Jesus' familiar instruction that grounds procedures of church discipline. Any reasonable reading of Matthew 18:15-20 must conclude that Jesus is teaching the necessity of repentance for forgiveness of sins under the imagery of "hearing." For what else could Jesus mean when he says, "If your brother sins against you, go, tell him his fault when you are alone with him. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15)? Thus, when Peter asks his question, he understands that repentance is the necessary condition for receiving forgiveness of sins. So, as Matthew narrates Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant he does not need to reiterate what is already obvious within the preceding context from Jesus' instruction concerning the order of addressing sins within the church body. Jesus' parable cheapens neither repentance nor forgiveness. Jesus' parable does not render forgiveness "unconditional."

As the presence of Jesus' instruction concerning disciplinary procedures in the church explain why Matthew has no need to mention repentance in his account of Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, so also the placement and compression of Jesus' saying in Luke's Gospel explain why Luke explicitly mentions the necessity of repentance when he reports Jesus' saying, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and turns back to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must grant forgiveness to him" (Luke 17:3-4). Far from being a singular passage that poses a problem for those who advocate "unconditional forgiveness," Luke 17:3-4 is in full harmony with the whole of the New Testament's instruction concerning the indispensable condition for receiving forgiveness of sins, namely, repentance of sin.

Forgiving As God Forgives Is Not The Same As Being Unforgiving

We must not confuse two matters that are fundamentally different. We must not allow anyone to confuse us to think that as we imitate God by not administering forgiveness of

sins to an unrepentant person that we are unforgiving, bearing a grudge, and harboring bitterness. Regularly, individuals who advocate and practice “unconditional forgiveness” easily presume to judge us as bitter and unforgiving because we do not grant forgiveness of sins to unrepentant individuals. Bearing a grudge of bitterness and being unforgiving is not at all the same as withholding forgiveness of sins from individuals who refuse to repent of their sins.

We always must stand ready to forgive, eager to forgive, praying that the Lord would grant repentance to the unrepentant person in order that both he and we may grant forgiveness of sins. Indeed, we must always be bearing a *forgiving posture* while we also restrain our tongues from administering forgiveness of sin, preempting repentance which is God’s work of grace that must precede our bestowing forgiveness of sins. If we are always being ready, eager, and earnestly desiring to be able to administer forgiveness of sins, we can hardly hold such a posture and hold bitter resentment in our hearts at the same time.

Earlier, for another purpose, I cited Matthew 6:14-15. This passage clearly expresses what our posture must be. Upon completion of the prayer our Lord teaches us, he says, “For if you grant to men forgiveness of their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will grant to you forgiveness. *But if you do not grant to men forgiveness, neither will your Father grant to you forgiveness of your transgressions.*” Jesus’ unstated assumption, of course, is that the person has repented which obligates the one sinned against to grant forgiveness of sin. Refusing to grant forgiveness to an individual who has repented is a deadly sin, so deadly that, according to Jesus, the consequence will be eternal perdition—“neither will your Father grant to you forgiveness of your transgressions.” This is what Jesus says. How we behave with one another has eternal consequences. Therefore, let us repent when we sin, let us forgive those who sin against us when they repent, let us withhold forgiveness of sin from those who refuse to repent, but let us hold a *forgiving posture*, always eager and ready to forgive. A forgiving posture, of course, is a character trait of the Christian.

Forgiving as God forgives is not the same as being unforgiving, bitter, and holding a grudge. Not administering forgiveness of sins until the person who sinned repents is godliness and right. Holding a grudge by refusing to grant forgiveness of sins to a person who repents is always sinful and ungodly.

Unconditional Forgiveness of Sin Subverts the Cross of Christ

God requires that we become godly, which means to be like God. He does not require us to be godlier than God. Therefore, God does not call upon us to do what he himself does not do. God does not call on us to grant forgiveness to anyone who refuses to repent of their sins. On the contrary, God calls us to behave in keeping with the gospel message through which we have received his forgiveness of our sins and the message we proclaim. God requires that we conduct ourselves like God does by insisting that no follower of Jesus Christ ever grant forgiveness of sins to those who do not repent of their sins.

The popular notion that we should “unconditionally forgive” the sins of people who do not repent of their sins subverts the gospel of Jesus Christ and mocks God who does not forgive people who do not repent of their sins. Those who advocate and practice “unconditional forgiveness” do so out of ignorance of the gospel. Nevertheless, while thinking that they embrace the magnanimity of God’s mercy and grace, they actually sabotage the magnanimous grace of God in the gospel.

Their teaching and practice diminish the heinousness of sin, for God's forgiveness of sins hangs upon this reality, that God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). To teach and to practice "unconditional forgiveness" is to sabotage the justice of God, for God remains just when he justifies us only because God punished his Son, Jesus Christ, with his wrath due to us for our sins (Romans 3:23-26). Teaching and practicing "unconditional forgiveness" is mocking the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ who did not forgive the sins of those who carried out the greatest sin and crime ever perpetrated by humans, the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Contrary to popular belief, while hanging upon the cross Jesus does not bestow forgiveness of their sins. Instead, from the cross and on the basis of his sacrificial death upon the cross, Jesus cries out to God, "Father, grant forgiveness to them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Does God circumvent the order of his own good news by bestowing "unconditional forgiveness" to all who were participating in the crucifixion of Jesus? What a monstrous notion! Does God the Father, who was inflicting upon his own Son his wrath for human sins, mock his Son and cheapen his sacrificial death by granting "unconditional forgiveness" to those whose act of crucifying the Son of God formed the basis of freely proclaiming God's forgiveness of sins to all who will repent of their sins? No. The author of the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. He shows how Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost makes this obvious, for when people who participated in the crucifixion (Acts 2:23) hear their own indictment for their part and hear the good news, they ask, "Men, brothers, what shall we do?" (2:37). Peter does not say, "Have you not heard that your sins are already unconditionally forgiven?" No. Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). Jesus' prayer from the cross was becoming effectual through the proclamation of the gospel that requires repentance in order to receive forgiveness of sins. Thus, when Luke narrates Peter's report concerning the Gentile Pentecost (Acts 10:24-48), he tells how the believing Jews in Jerusalem respond: "They praised God saying, 'Even to the Gentiles God has granted repentance unto life'" (11:18). For Luke, to say that God grants "repentance unto life" is another way of saying that God grants "forgiveness of sins." Forgiveness of sins is inseparably bound to its condition, repentance of sins.

Conclusions

A non-Christian Jew gives better expression to a theology of forgiveness of sins than many Christians do. Dennis Prager correctly observes that when we bestow forgiveness unconditionally, we commit sin. The sin, as any Christian should expect, is much greater and far more offensive than the sin he identifies, given his non-Christian perspective. Yet, his understanding rebukes the misunderstanding of Christians who practice and preach "unconditional forgiveness."

Christians should never be guilty of sinning by granting forgiveness of sins to those who refuse to repent of their sins. Forgiveness of sins joyfully responds to repentance of sin. Forgiveness of sins meets repentance of sins to restore a disrupted and severed relationship. Forgiveness relieves the repentant one of the debt incurred by sin. The one sinned against must eagerly anticipate the opportunity to grant forgiveness of sins in order to restore the severed relationship, but the relationship can be restored only when the one who sinned repents. Both the one who sinned and the one sinned against must be willing to restore the relationship in keeping with the gospel. If one repents but the other

holds a grudge and refuses to grant forgiveness to the repentant one, the relationship will remain severed. If one pleads for the other to repent with the desire to grant forgiveness of sins, but the one remains recalcitrant and unrepentant, again, the relationship will remain severed. No communion exists between the two as long as one wants to restore the relationship and the other persists in arrogance, one refusing to repent or the other to forgive. In such a case, to pretend that repentance and forgiveness have taken place is to mock the gospel and biblical instruction concerning forgiveness of sins.

When a group of Christians refuses to follow the procedures of Matthew 18:15-17, what must the Christian do, that is, the one against whom the unrepentant one has sinned?

The Christian must never grow impatient to grant forgiveness without repentance.

Likewise, the Christian must never relent and give in to the chiding of others who grow uncomfortable with the tension created because repentance is not forthcoming. The Christian must never yield to their complaints that to withhold forgiveness of sins from the unrepentant one is to engage in sin, even a sin greater than the sins of the unrepentant one. The Christian must never surrender to demands to administer “unconditional forgiveness” so that everyone can simply move on from the stalemate.

One thing is needed in order for forgiveness to be given—repentance of sin. If there is no repentance, one thing is needed—excommunication from the church. How simple is the resolution of the hostility and tension created by an unrepentant person. Yet, how inventive are the minds of those who will not submit to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ but instead forge the false doctrine of “unconditional forgiveness.” Repent and receive forgiveness of sins. Refuse to repent and be excommunicated from the church. Until the one who sinned repents, no matter how long the one sinned against is obligated by the gospel to persevere in forbearance, forgiveness of sins must not be administered. To forgive the sins of one who refuses to repent of those sins is to sin against God and against the one who needs to repent. To administer forgiveness without the presence of repentance is to cut short the work of God in the gospel designed to bring forth repentance. It eliminates the sinner’s need to repent. By such action we also supplant God. God’s order is firmly established by the gospel. Repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. We have no authority to bestow forgiveness of sins done against us to anyone who remains unrepentant so that we can make either ourselves or others feel more comfortable around the unrepentant individual. The only proper response to anyone in the church who refuses to repent is to excommunicate the unrepentant person after following the procedures Jesus delineates (Matthew 18:15-17).

Steve Cornell distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation

(<http://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2007/07/28/forgiveness-is-one-thing-reconciliation-is-another/>):

“He said I am sorry but this is at least the tenth time! I don’t know what to do. I am told that it’s my Christian duty to forgive so I try to do it. But each time I forgive him, he changes for a little while and then returns to the same behavior. I have a gut feeling that I am handling things the wrong way. He never really changes and I just get angry. What should I do?”

Sound familiar? People facing circumstances like this must learn to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Forgiveness is always required by God. Jesus clearly

warned that God will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who sin against us (see: Matthew 6:14-15; Mark 11:25).

It's not that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others; instead, God expects forgiven people to forgive (See: Matthew 18:21-35). Yet forgiveness is different from reconciliation. It's possible to forgive someone without offering immediate reconciliation. It's possible for forgiveness to occur in the context of one's relationship with God apart from contact with an offender.

An excellent example of this is found in the Old Testament character Joseph. After being betrayed and sold as a slave by his brothers, Joseph was separated from his father for many years. We can be certain that Joseph struggled in prayer over his hardships. "How could my brothers do such an evil thing against me?" "Why did God allow all of it to happen?" Joseph probably worked through several dark nights of the soul. But he arrived at the right conclusion.

Whenever faced with mistreatment, we also have options about how we respond to it. Our choices (bitterness or forgiveness) will then have generational affects! (See: Genesis 50:20). Since Joseph did not have access to his brothers, evidently he had forgiven them long before they confessed their wrongs. If he had not forgiven them, he would have allowed bitterness to destroy his effectiveness for God (Hebrews 12:15).

So Joseph forgave his brothers *in the context of his relationship with God* based on two things:

1) God's authority as the Judge: "God is judge, not me."

Joseph's brothers were fearful that he would seek retaliation for the wrong they had done to him. But Joseph said to them: "Do not be afraid, am I in the place of God?" This truth is stated in Romans 12:19, "Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord." (See also: Genesis 45:1-7;50:15-20).

2) God's control of His life: "God is in control, not my offender."

Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). Here Joseph confessed that God (not his offenders) is the Lord of his circumstances. This truth is echoed in Romans 8:28, " And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose. " Joseph accepted the mystery of God's providence by faith. A third basis for forgiveness emphasized repeatedly in the New Testament is:

3) God's forgiveness of our sins: "God has forgiven me, I must forgive"

"Forgive each other just as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). When offended, forgiveness means I surrender attitudes of revenge to God in recognition of his authority, providential purpose and forgiveness of my sins. But this can take place in the context of my relationship with God apart from my offender. Forgiveness can occur apart from the confession and repentance of the offender.

Reconciliation:

Differing from forgiveness, reconciliation is a process that *is* conditioned on the attitude and actions of the offender. Its aim is restoration of a broken relationship—which *is often* a process. Those who commit *significant and repeated* offenses must be willing to recognize that reconciliation is a process. In many cases, even if the offender confessed his wrong to the one he hurt, and appealed for forgiveness, the offended person could justifiably say, "I forgive you, but it might take some time for me to regain trust and

restore our relationship.” The evidence of genuine forgiveness is freedom from a vindictive or vengeful response (see: Romans 12:17-21).

But such forgiveness does not always automatically grant the same level of relationship back—especially when trust has been deeply betrayed. Even when God forgives our sins, He does not promise to remove all consequences created by our actions. Being forgiven, restored, and trusted again is a great experience. Yet it is important for those who hurt others to understand that their attitude and actions *will* affect the process of rebuilding trust. Words alone are not enough.

When someone has been *significantly* hurt, and feels hesitant about restoration with her offender, it is right and wise to look for changes in the offender *before* allowing reconciliation to begin. This is especially true when the offense has been repeated. Reconciliation requires us to offer a repentant person an opportunity to demonstrate repentance and to regain trust. However, when a person has consistently behaved in a harmful and irresponsible manner, he must accept the fact that reconciliation will be a slow and difficult process. Three main considerations affect the timing of the process of restoration:

1. The attitude of the offender
2. The depth of the betrayal or violation
3. The pattern of the offense (e.g. often repeated offenses)

When an offended party works toward reconciliation, the first and most important step is the confirmation of genuine repentance on the part of the offender (Luke 17:3). A disingenuous and unrepentant offender will resent your desire to confirm the genuineness of his confession and repentance. He may resort to lines of manipulation. “I guess you can’t find it in yourself to be forgiving.” “You just want to rub it in my face.” “I guess I should expect that you want your revenge.” “Some Christian you are, I thought Christians believed in love and compassion.”

These lines reveal an unrepentant attitude. Don’t be manipulated into avoiding the step of confirming the authenticity of your offender’s confession and repentance. Carefully and prayerfully use the seven signs of true repentance listed below. It is advisable (in difficult cases) to seek the help of a wise counselor (only one who understands the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation).

You must be as certain as you can of your offender’s repentance—especially in cases involving repeated offences. It is hard to genuinely restore a broken relationship when the offender is unclear about his confession and repentance. Even God will not grant forgiveness to one who is insincere about his confession and repentance. The person who is unwilling to forsake his sin will not find forgiveness with God (Proverbs 28:13).

Of course, only God can read hearts— we must evaluate actions. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:16a). We must not allow superficial appearances of repentance to control our responses. Displays of tears or appearing to be sorry must not become substitutes for clear changes in attitude and behavior. Carefully consider the seven signs of genuine repentance:

The offender:

1. Accepts full responsibility for his or her actions. (Instead of: “Since you think I’ve done something wrong...” or “If have done anything to offend you...”).
2. Accepts accountability from others.
3. Does not continue in the hurtful behavior or anything associated with it.
4. Does not have a defensive attitude about his or her being in the wrong.
5. Does not have a light attitude toward his or her hurtful behavior.

6. Does not resent doubts about his or her sincerity- nor the need to demonstrate sincerity. (Especially in cases involving repeated offenses)

7. Makes restitution wherever necessary.

For those who are hesitant to reconcile: Ten Guidelines to consider

It is common for those who have been seriously hurt to feel hesitant about reconciling with their offenders. When your offender is genuinely repentant, however, it is important to open yourself to the possibility of restoration. Remember, Jesus spoke about reconciliation with a sense of urgency (see Matthew 5:23-24). If you are hesitant to reconcile, work through the ten guidelines on the next pages.

1. **Be honest about your motives** -Make sure that your desire is to do what pleases God and not to get revenge. Settle the matter of forgiveness (as Joseph did) in the context of your relationship with God. Guidelines for reconciliation should not be retaliatory.

2. **Be humble in your attitude** -Do not let pride ruin everything. Renounce all vengeful attitudes toward your offender. We are not, for example, to demand that a person earn our forgiveness. The issue is not earning forgiveness, but working toward true reconciliation. This demands humility. Those who focus on retaliation and revenge have allowed self-serving pride to control them.

3. **Be prayerful about the situation** -Jesus taught his disciples to pray for those who mistreat them (Luke 6:28). It is amazing how our attitude toward another person can change when we pray for him. Pray also for strength to follow through with reconciliation (see: Hebrews 4:16).

4. **Be willing to admit ways you might have contributed to the problem** –“Even if you did not start the dispute, your lack of understanding, careless words, impatience, or failure to respond in a loving manner may have aggravated the situation. When this happens, it is easy to behave as though the other person’s sins more than cancel yours, which leaves you with a self- righteous attitude that can retard forgiveness (*i.e. relational forgiveness*). The best way to overcome this tendency is to prayerfully examine your role in the conflict and then write down everything you have done or failed to do that may have been a factor.” (Ken Sande, p. 168). Such a step, however, is not suggested to promote the idea of equal blame for all situations. (See: Matthew 7:1-6) (Italicized words added).

5. **Be honest with the offender** -If you need time to absorb the reality of what was said or done, express this honestly to the one who hurt you. Yet we must not use time as a means of manipulation and punishment.

6. **Be objective about your hesitancy** –Perhaps you have good reasons for being hesitant to reconcile, but they must be objectively stated. Sometimes, for example, repeated confessions and offenses of the same nature make it understandably hard for trust to be rebuilt. This is an objective concern. Clearly define your reasons for doubting your offender’s sincerity.

7. **Be clear about the guidelines for restoration** -Establish clear guidelines for restoration. Requirements like restitution can be clearly understood. Others include financial accountability, holding down a job, and putting away substances.

8. **Be realistic about the process** -Change often requires time and hard work. Periodic failure by an offender does not always indicate an unrepentant heart. Behavior patterns often run in deep channels. They can place a powerful grip on a person’s life. A key indicator for change is the attitude of the offender. While you may proceed with some caution, be careful about demanding guarantees from a person who has truly expressed repentance. If the person stumbles, the process of loving confrontation, confession, and

forgiveness may need to be repeated . Setbacks and disappointments are often part of the process of change. Don't give up too easily on process of reconciliation. Keep the goal of a fully restored relationship open.

9. **Be mindful of God's control** –“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, *that you may be able to endure it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13). “We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). “When you are having a hard time forgiving someone (*i.e. being restored*), take time to note how God may be using that offense for good. Is this an unusual opportunity to glorify God? How can you serve others and help them grow in their faith? What sins and weaknesses of yours are being exposed? What character qualities are you being challenged to exercise? When you perceive that the person who has wronged you is being used as an instrument in God's hand to help you mature, serve others, and glorify him, it may be easier for you to move ahead with forgiveness (*i.e. restoration*)” (Ken Sande, p.165;cf. Hebrews 12:7;I Pet.2:23b; 4:19). (Italicized words added).

10. **Be alert to Satan's schemes** -In Ephesians 4:27, the apostle warns about the possibility of giving Satan an opportunity in our lives. Significantly, this warning is given in the context of unchecked anger. A few verses later, the Apostle wrote, “ 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. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 4:29-5:2). Meditate on these words and put them into practice! (See also: II Corinthians 2:14; Hebrews 12:15).

See also: <http://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2008/07/03/restoring-broken-relationships/>.

Steve Cornell on what the Joseph narrative has to teach us about forgiveness

(<http://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2009/08/23/what-does-joseph-teach-us-about-forgiveness/>):

What does Joseph teach us about forgiveness?

As a ruler in Egypt, Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers. After fifteen years of suffering and separation from his family because of his brothers evil treatment of him, “Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, ‘Have everyone leave my presence!’ So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’ But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one *you sold* into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that *God sent* me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives

by a great deliverance. 'So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.'" (Genesis 45:1-8a).

These words reveal the stronger and deeper understanding that held Joseph through all his confusing and painful years. By faith, Joseph embraced a deep commitment to the providential goodness of God over the evil intentions of people. We see the same emphasis again after Jacob died.

"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, *Joseph wept*. His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:15-21, emphasis mine).

Lessons on forgiveness:

Joseph had forgiven his brothers long before they confessed their wrongs. Joseph forgave his brothers in the context of his relationship with God apart from his offenders. If he had not forgiven them, he would have allowed bitterness to poison his heart and destroy his effectiveness for God (cf. Hebrews 12:15). Joseph's forgiveness was based on three truths:

1) God's authority as the Judge

Joseph's brothers were fearful that he would want retaliation for the wrong they had done to him. But Joseph said to them: "Do not be afraid, am I in the place of God?" Again, Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord." (See also: Gen. 45). Those who forgive must relinquish their desire to play judge and executioner toward their offenders. They do this— not by inducing themselves into a state of moral neutrality about the wrong committed— but by releasing the wrongs (and the ones who did them) to the Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25).

2) God's control of His life

Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Here Joseph confessed that God (not his offenders) is Lord of his circumstances. His brothers were clearly responsible for their evil deeds (and he directly acknowledged this truth) but he recognized that God was sovereign *over* their evil actions (see Acts 2:22-24; 4:27-28). Life is lived between two intentions: You intended....God intended.... Joseph learned to trace the hand (and presence) of God through the painful twists of a life that seemed to be controlled by the intentions of others.

In Romans 8:28 we are reminded that, "...in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose." Those who forgive must confess that God is Lord of their circumstances, not their offenders (Relate: Hebrews 12:7).

3) God's forgiveness of our sins

An added motive for forgiveness emphasized explicitly in the New Testament is God's forgiveness of our sins. "Forgive each other just as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). When offended, we must surrender attitudes of revenge in recognition

of God's authority, control and forgiveness of our sins. As with Joseph, all of this must take place in the context of our relationship with God. Forgiveness can occur apart from the confession and repentance of an offender. Reconciliation, however, must occur in the context of our relationship with our offender. But reconciliation will not begin apart from forgiveness.

Two primary questions related to forgiveness:

1. Who has been in control? God? or My offender?
2. Who will take control? God? or Me?

Yielding to God's control:

For many years, Joseph's life seemed to be defined by the passions of others. It began with the misguided parental favoritism of his father. This fostered sibling jealousy and hatred which encouraged his brothers evil actions of selling Joseph as a slave. He later became the object of sexual lust, harassment and false accusation by the wife of the Captain of the Egyptian guard. This brought on life as a prisoner in Egypt. It is not easy to understand God's control when evil people seem to be in charge and our lives are profoundly affected by their desires and actions. The Lord Jesus, our faithful and merciful High Priest, understands this by experience (see: Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28). When we yield to God's sovereign control (Daniel 3:16-18; 4:34-35; Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:5-7,11-12), it liberates us. It frees us to follow Jesus in radical kingdom obedience: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). Like Joseph, we are free *under God* from being poisoned with bitterness and consumed with revenge. We are also free from participating in the multiplication of evil. We can choose to absorb the loss and return a blessing instead (see: I Peter 3:9). If we do choose to require restitution or other measures of accountability, we are free to do this without a vindictive or vengeful motive. Most importantly, we are *free* to open the door to reconciliation with our offender.

Bonhoeffer:

Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community, the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse. Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own laws, and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.

Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by his call, by his forgiveness, and his promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of his grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Christ Jesus? Thus, the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and Deed which really binds us together--the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.