

When and How to Forgive

"Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. **For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.** For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because **Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps.** He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By **His wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep,** but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

~ [1 Peter 2:18-25](#)

There seem to be many who are of the opinion that forgiveness should only be given to those who have either asked for forgiveness or have somehow demonstrated true repentance. And how is it that some people have formulated this opinion about forgiveness? They say it is because the Bible says that without repentance, there is no forgiveness of sins, therefore no salvation. ([Luke 13:1-5](#))

Although this is true that if a person does not repent of their sins, ask **God** for forgiveness and entrust their lives to Jesus Christ, then, they will not be saved from the penalty of their sins and will not enter Heaven, but will be eternally damned to Hell.

But I am not discussing forgiving a person, for salvation's sake, because I am not God, only God is God and has the authority to save anyone's soul. Therefore, I am only discussing here, the gift of forgiveness from one sinner to another.

As Christians, we understand that before anyone sins against us, they **first** sin against **God**. Therefore, it would be proper that they ask God for forgiveness **BEFORE** they seek our forgiveness.

*"**Strive for peace with everyone**, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;"*

~ [Hebrews 12:14](#)
(emphasis added)

According to [Hebrews 12:14](#) and many, many other Scripture verses, when we choose to be unforgiving based on our own fallible judgment of another person's heart, we are guilty of committing the sin of arrogance and pride if we expect anyone to seek our forgiveness before they made restitution with God. But if those who have sinned against you, are hostile towards God, and will not repent and ask **God for forgiveness**, it makes no sense that they would ask *you* for such a thing, since it is obvious **you** are an **equal sinner** as they are.

Then there are those who say, *"I will forgive him/her when they ask for forgiveness for every specific sin they have committed against me. Before I forgive, I need to know that they recognize every sin they've committed; they take responsibility for it and completely repent, or I will not forgive them."*

To those who are in the camp that feel this way, here are some Scriptures I'd like to share with you:

"**Love** is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is **not arrogant or rude**. It **does not insist on its own way**; it is **not irritable or resentful**,"

~ [1 Corinthians 13:4-5](#)

(ESV, emphasis added)

"**Love** is patient and kind, not jealous, not boastful, not proud, rude or selfish, not easily angered, and it **keeps no record of wrongs**."

~ [1 Corinthians 13:4-5](#) (CJB)

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

~ [Matthew 6:14-15](#)

We also see that when Jesus told someone He forgave them, **He** did not even require that they list every sin before He forgave them. Therefore, if Jesus, who is God did not require for a person to recount every possible sin they've committed (because in reality, who can do that?), then why does it seem reasonable that **we** require such a thing? When we begin to "add" to God's law and His way of doing things, we are no longer loving and serving God, but we are arrogantly taking the seat of judge - and thereby contending for supremacy with God Himself.¹

"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, He who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

~ [James 4:11-12](#)

According to all the Scriptures referenced thus far, it is clear that anyone who is saved - is indwelt with the Holy Spirit; therefore, has understanding of God's Word.²

And what does God's word say? Our Lord and Majesty commands His children to forgive as they have been forgiven: with great compassion, mercy and grace.

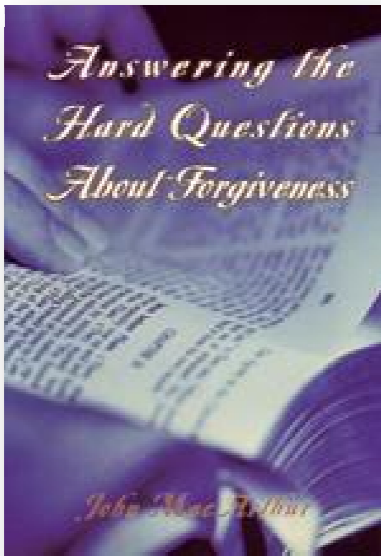
So then, *when* and *how* should children of the Most High God forgive?

"But I say to you who hear, **Love** your enemies, **do good** to those who hate you, **bless** those who curse you, **pray** for those who abuse you....But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, **expecting nothing in return**, and your reward will be great, and ***you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil***. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

~ [Luke 6:27-28](#) and [35-36](#)

(emphasis added)

According to God's word, we are not held in bondage to offer the gift of forgiveness by another person's unwillingness to repent, but we have been set free by Christ Jesus to freely offer forgiveness to *anyone* and *everyone* who sins against us, at **anytime**. What wonderful **freedom** and **joy** we have in Christ!



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

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

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

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

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

excerpt from, *Answering the Hard Questions About Forgiveness*

by John MacArthur

WHEN to forgive:

We should forgive as soon as we can, so no seed of bitterness can take root in our hearts, deceiving us to believe that somehow we are "better" than the offending party.

HOW to forgive:

Just as Christ our God has forgiven us, with great love, compassion and mercy; without keeping a record of the offending party's sins or expecting anything in return.

Therefore I implore you brothers and sisters to forgive as God has forgiven you in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is no sin one sinner can commit against another sinner that is so great that it should cause division amongst the Body of Christ, or even with unbelieving family members, friends or co-workers. Remember that our sins against God are far greater and more repulsive to our holy and pure Father in Heaven than our sins against one another could ever be.

Please do not be deceived into believing there is a twelve-step program or some other ordinance that must be performed prior to forgiving anyone. The only "process" necessary to forgive someone is the process of you dying to yourself and whatever it is you're holding on to that is keeping you in the bondage of unforgiveness.

I know dear ones in the Lord, that forgiving others for horrendous sins committed against you are hard. I know...I've been there, much more than I can express (in order to protect my parents & siblings). And this forgiveness I offered to my family, was only possible because Christ my God has set me free!

When I forgave my family, it was in an instant....the instant God revealed to me my bitterness, self-righteousness and false piety. I broke down in tears and asked **them** for forgiveness as I had become bitter and unkind (I didn't do anything "mean", but I also wasn't very loving either). I had convinced myself that doing "nice" things (that really I could pay someone else to do) was a "good" thing. I was fulfilling my duties. God revealed to me that if I ever do anything for anyone, only out of duty; things that I could pay a stranger to do, then I was not demonstrating **His** love. God's love is tender, it is gentle, it looks the offender in the eye and says, "I love you. I forgive you. Let us never bring this subject up again as I can see the pain it causes *you*. But let us instead move forward from here and never look back again." This is what I did, only through Christ's strength and holy love. And do you know what? Although they've tried to mention it again and tried to "make up" for it, I continue to reaffirm my love, God's love to them by saying, "Remember, we agreed never to bring this up again. The past is the past, let us not dwell in it, but live only in the present, for our future, in Christ's glory."

If you can't look your offender in the eye, tell them you love them, forgive them, then touch them gently, hold their hand, kiss them with a holy kiss and embrace them...then you have not forgiven them and you are still bound by the sin of unforgiveness.

"Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure -- not to put it too severely -- to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs."

~ 2 Corinthians 2:5-11
(emphasis added)

I pray that you too will be set free from the bondage of unforgiveness, so that others, who see your life, will see Christ and His majesty, and not self-righteousness that is of this world.

Footnotes:

1. ***contending for supremacy with God***- HUMILITY: True Greatness by C.J. Mahaney (copyright 2005 by Sovereign Grace Ministries) To purchase a copy of this book, click:

<http://www.amazon.com/Humility-Greatness-C-J-Mahaney/dp/1590523261> or pick one up at your local bookstore.

2. ***understanding of God's word***- [1 Corinthians 2:10-13](#)

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