

CONDITIONAL OR UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS?

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1. GOD'S FORGIVENESS / OUR FORGIVENESS

How can forgiveness between fellow sinners be compared to the forgiveness of an offended deity? There must be some similarities, because Scripture instructs us to forgive in the same manner as we have been forgiven. This idea occurs in two verses we have quoted repeatedly: Ephesians 4:32 (“forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”) and Colossians 3:13 (“even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye”).

Some take the position that this teaches forgiveness should always be conditional. Their rationale goes like this: God forgives only those who repent. Therefore, if we are going to forgive in the same manner as we have been forgiven, we should withhold forgiveness from all who are unrepentant. Some fine teachers hold this view. For example, [one author] writes: It should go without saying that since our forgiveness is modeled after God’s (Eph 4:32), it must be conditional.

Forgiveness by God rests on clear, unmistakable conditions. The apostles did not merely announce that God had forgiven men...Paul and the apostles turned away from those who refused to meet the conditions, just as John and Jesus did earlier when the scribes and the Pharisees would not repent.

There is some merit in [this author’s] position. There are times when forgiveness must be conditional. I have great respect for [this author] and have recommended his book on forgiveness as a helpful study of the subject. On this issue, however, I must disagree with the position he takes.

To make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving seems to miss the whole point of what Scripture is saying. When Scripture instructs us to forgive in the manner we have been forgiven, what is in view is not the idea of *withholding* forgiveness until the offender expresses repentance.

Listen carefully to what these verses are saying:

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.... For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

(Mat 6:12, 14-15)

“For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.” (Jam 2:13)

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.” (Mat 18:35)

“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: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.” (Luk 6:36-38)

The emphasis is on forgiving freely, generously, willingly, eagerly, speedily—and from the heart. The attitude of the forgiver is where the focus of Scripture lies, not the terms of forgiveness.

Most of those who hold that all forgiveness is conditional portray forgiveness as a formal transaction in which the forgiven one must repent and the offended party promises in return never to bring up the sin again. If this transaction has not occurred, they say, real forgiveness has not yet taken place. In some cases the offender may repent and ask forgiveness without prompting, and forgiveness should be granted on the spot. But in most cases, particularly when the offender is ignorant of having committed a wrong, the offended party must first confront the offender and formally solicit repentance before he or she can forgive. In short, no act of forgiveness can occur until the offender asks for forgiveness.

Sadly, I have seen people who hold this opinion become obsessive confronters and ultimately make themselves odious to friend and foe alike. Others nurse grudges, refuse to relinquish bitterness, and even sever friendships over relatively petty offenses, justifying such attitudes because they are convinced they have no duty to forgive until the offender repents.

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,¹ and there are other times when forgiveness must be withheld until the offender repents. The biblical principles governing these different kinds of forgiveness are clear.

2. CONDITIONAL / UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional. For example, in certain cases the offender is to be confronted and

¹ **unilateral** – performed by only one side.

ultimately even excommunicated from the church if he or she refuses to repent (Luk 17:3; Mat 18:15-17).

But does *every* offense call for confrontation, possibly leading to formal church discipline? Is there no place for simply granting unilateral forgiveness for petty offenses? Is there no time when the offended party should simply overlook a transgression, choosing to suffer wrong and forgive without being asked or without formally confronting the offender?

Obviously, these questions have important practical ramifications. If you had a friend who scrupulously tried to confront you every time you committed a petty offense, wouldn't the friendship grow tedious pretty quickly? And if marriage partners saw it as their solemn duty to confront each other for every offense, wouldn't such a mind-set make the marriage relationship practically impossible to endure?

It is a mistake to assume that verses like Luke 17:3 ("If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him") and Matthew 18:15 ("Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault") are absolute prescriptions for every kind of transgression. If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else.

Indeed, Scripture gives us another principle for dealing with the vast majority of petty infractions: overlook the offense. Forgive unilaterally, unconditionally. Grant pardon freely and unceremoniously. Love demands this. "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1Pe 4:8). "Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins." (Pro 10:12). "He that covereth a transgression seeketh love" (Pro 17:9). Love "thinketh no evil...[but] beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1Co 13:5-7).

[One author] recognizes the Christian's duty to overlook petty offenses, citing some of these same texts. "But," he writes, "it is not...forgiveness." Having defined forgiveness as a two-way transaction, he has no room in his system for unilateral or unconditional forgiveness. So he draws a distinction between forgiveness and overlooking another's transgression. If true, that would mean all the petty offenses we choose to overlook (or "cover," in biblical terminology) are not really to be regarded as forgiven.

But the Bible itself makes no such distinction. Covering another's transgression is the very essence of forgiveness. Speaking of God's forgiveness, Psalm 32:1 equates the concepts of forgiveness and the covering of sin:

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." This is a Hebrew parallelism, employing two different expressions to

designate the same concept. To cover someone else's sin is the very essence of forgiveness.

Psalms 85:2 draws the same parallel: "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin. Selah."

James 5:20 also equates forgiveness with the covering of sin: "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide [cover] a multitude of sins."

So when 1 Peter 4:8 says, "For charity shall cover the multitude of sins," it is describing forgiveness.

Furthermore, Scripture also teaches that forgiveness can be unilateral and unconditional. Mark 11:25-26 clearly speaks of this kind of forgiveness and even makes it a condition for receiving God's forgiveness:

"And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought² against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses."

That describes an immediate forgiveness granted to the offender with no formal meeting or transaction required. It necessarily refers to a pardon that is wholly unilateral, because this forgiveness takes place *while the forgiver stands praying*. "Forgive" is the clear command of that verse, and it is to take place on the spot. There is no mention of confrontation. There is no command to seek the offender's repentance. The forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is therefore different from the forgiveness of Luke 17:3. This forgiveness is to be granted unconditionally and unilaterally.

3. UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

What does unilateral forgiveness entail? If there's no transaction, no seeking of forgiveness, no formal granting of pardon, no words exchanged between the two parties, then what exactly is accomplished by this sort of forgiveness?

Its chief effects are wrought in the heart of the forgiver. This kind of forgiveness involves a deliberate decision to cover the other person's offense. "Forgive" in Mark 11:25 is an imperative, a command. The forgiveness called for here is necessarily a volitional matter. In other words, it is a choice, not a feeling or an involuntary response.

It is, as Matthew 18:35 suggests, *from the heart*; but even that does not place forgiveness primarily in the realm of feeling. "Heart" in Scripture normally designates the seat of the intellect (cf. Pro 23:7; Luk 9:47). So this speaks of a deliberate and rational decision. It is a choice made by the offended party to set aside the other person's transgression and not permit the offense to cause a breach in the relationship or fester in bitterness.

² **ought** – anything.

In effect, the person who chooses to forgive resolves not to remember the offense, refuses to hold a grudge, relinquishes any claim on recompense, and resists the temptation to brood or retaliate. The offended party simply bears the insult. The offense is set aside, lovingly covered for Christ's sake. For petty and unintentional offenses, this is the proper and loving way to forgive—unilaterally, without confrontation and without stirring any strife.

This, I believe, is what Scripture refers to most often when it calls us to forgive one another. The heavy emphasis on forgiveness in Scripture is not meant to make us more confrontational, but quite the opposite. When Scripture calls us to have an attitude of forgiveness, the emphasis is always on long-suffering, patience, benevolence, forbearance, kindness, and mercy—not confrontation.

To deny that forgiveness can ever be unilateral is in my view a potentially serious mistake. It places too much stress on confrontation. And that tends to produce more conflict than it avoids. People who insist on confronting every wrong often simply stir strife—the antithesis of what Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was intended to produce. Real love should *cover* the vast majority of transgressions, not constantly haul them out in the open for dissection (1Pe 4:8).

4. TO CONFRONT OR NOT TO CONFRONT?

All of this calls for some careful distinctions. Obviously there are times when confrontation is essential. How do we identify those situations? Are there clear biblical principles that teach us when to confront and when to forgive unilaterally?

I believe there are. Here are some guidelines to help you in drawing the distinction:

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:

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

That calls for a gracious tolerance (*forbearing*) of others' faults. This is necessary for the sake of maintaining peace.

In other words, believers are supposed to have a sort of mutual immunity to petty offenses. Love “is not easily provoked” (1Co 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.

This, then, is the governing rule: Unless an offense *requires* confrontation, unconditional, unilateral forgiveness should cover the transgression. The offended party, in suffering the offense, is following in the footsteps of Christ (1Pe 2:21-25). This is the very attitude Christ called for in Matthew 5:39-40: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.”

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, for example, was the victim of a grievous wrong at the hands of his brothers. They plotted to kill him, then sold him into slavery.

But he held no grudge. Years later, when famine drove the wicked brothers to Egypt in search of food, Joseph recognized them and freely forgave them, without any expression of repentance on their part. Before they even realized who he was, he was moved to tears with compassion for them. Finally revealing his true identity to them, he said, “I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.” (Gen 45:4-5). His forgiveness was unconditional, unilateral, not predicated on any expression of remorse from them.

In fact, as far as we know from Scripture, the closest these brothers ever came to formally declaring their repentance was after Jacob died. Once their father was no longer there to stay Joseph’s hand, they imagined their offended brother might unleash vengeance against them. The brothers, knowing the gravity of their sin, were evidently unable to believe that his charity toward them was well-meant. They feared he might still secretly harbor a wish for vengeance. So they told Joseph that it was *their father’s* wish that he grant them forgiveness (Gen 50:16-17). They did not formally admit their wrong and express repentance, though it is quite clear that they were humbled men by now.

But all their pleading was wholly unnecessary. Joseph had forgiven them long before. Having seen undeniable evidence that the hand of Divine Providence was working good in his life through the evil that was done to him, Joseph had long since forgiven his brothers fully, freely, and unconditionally. His perspective? “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good” (Gen 50:20). The knowledge that God had a good purpose for his sufferings made it impossible for Joseph to harbor a grudge.

There are also other examples of unilateral forgiveness in Scripture, even when the offense was public and pronounced. For example, on at

least one significant occasion David unilaterally and unconditionally forgave the most humiliating kind of public insult.

It occurred during Absalom's rebellion against David. David was forced to flee Jerusalem so that his defiant son would not destroy the city in his zeal to overthrow David's throne. During that agonizing and painful exodus from Jerusalem, a worthless character named Shimei publicly taunted the already heartbroken David, trying to humiliate him further. Second Samuel 16:5-8 records what happened:

"[Shimei] came forth, and cursed still as he came. And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of king David: and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And thus said Shimei when he cursed, Come out, come out, thou bloody man, and thou man of Belial: The LORD hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose stead thou hast reigned; and the LORD hath delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom thy son: and, behold, thou art taken in thy mischief, because thou art a bloody man."

Abishai, one of David's companions, wanted justice on the spot: "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head" (v. 9).

But David's response was a godly forbearance:

"So let him curse, because the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so? And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD hath bidden him. It may be that the LORD will look on mine affliction, and that the LORD will requite³ me good for his cursing this day."

Shimei continued to run along the hillside next to David, cursing and throwing rocks and dirt at the king, but David bore the insults with grace and forbearance—though under the circumstances it would have been perfectly appropriate for David, a sitting king, to demand that the mocker be punished.

Later, after David was victorious over the rebels, Shimei made a show of remorse, begging David's mercy. David, still over the protest of his men, reaffirmed his forgiveness to Shimei (2Sa 19:18-23). Having already forgiven the initial offense unilaterally, David now forgave Shimei formally.

Stephen's prayers for those who stoned him are another example of unilateral, unconditional forgiveness. The fact that Stephen prayed for God's mercy for his murderers shows that he had already forgiven them. It is true that *God's* forgiveness was not to be granted apart from their repentance; but Stephen himself had already made a deliberate, con-

³ **requite** – repay; reward.

scious choice to relinquish the right to retribution. He had forgiven them in his heart.

This brings up an important point. Even after we have forgiven offenders for their transgressions against us, God Himself may exact justice for their sins against Him. We can forgive an offense against us. But we cannot grant forgiveness for sin against God. “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (Luk 5:21). To forgive someone does not convey some priestly absolution, clearing them of sin before God. Those whom we forgive must still give account to God.

For example, Stephen’s forgiving his killers did not assure that their sins would go unpunished if they did not also seek *God’s* forgiveness. In the case of Saul of Tarsus (who stood by the garments of Stephen’s killers, consenting to the martyr’s death, Act 7:58; 8:1), his offense was completely blotted out when he fully repented. We are never told what became of those who threw the stones, but if they never embraced Christ as Lord and Savior, they will suffer the wrath of God for the sin of killing Stephen. Stephen forgave the offense against him; the sin against God still had to be reckoned with.

Shimei is another case in point. David kept his promise not to kill Shimei, but Shimei remained an unregenerate and worthless man to the end of his life. Knowing this, on his deathbed David instructed Solomon how to deal with Shimei: “Now therefore hold him not guiltless: for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him; but his hoar⁴ head bring thou down to the grave with blood” (1Ki 2:9).

This is a difficult command to explain, until we realize that David, as the divinely appointed king, was responsible to see that God’s glory was not besmirched in Israel. He had kept his promise to Shimei: he did not kill him for his insult. As far as David was concerned, the personal offense against him was forgiven. But Shimei’s act also involved the most wretched kind of blasphemy against God. And since Shimei remained in wanton rebellion against God, divine justice still had a claim on him. For the sake of the nation’s purity, this needed to be dealt with. It was now time for the account to be settled—for the sake of *God’s* glory, not David’s. David could overlook a personal transgression against him; he could not ultimately overlook a public act of overt hostility to God. As Puritan commentator Matthew Henry wrote, David’s instructions to Solomon “proceeded not from personal revenge, but a prudent zeal for the honour of the government and the covenant God had made with his family, the contempt of which ought not to go unpunished.” Surely that is why David waited until he was on his deathbed to order that Shimei be punished. This way, no one could say that David did it to preserve his own honor.

⁴ hoar – white with age

And Solomon wisely honored David's forgiveness of Shimei's insult. Instead of summarily executing him for that past offense, Solomon imposed a restriction on Shimei, forbidding him ever to set foot outside the city of Jerusalem. As long as he stayed in the city, under the king's supervision, he could move about freely in perfect safety. But the day he set foot across the Kidron Valley, he would be killed. Shimei agreed to the terms, which were gracious (1Ki 2:36-38). But because he was a wicked man, Shimei broke his word. He left the city in search of some runaway slaves, and when Solomon found out, he summoned him and said:

*"Did I not make thee to swear by the LORD, and protested unto thee, saying, Know for a certain, on the day thou goest out, and walkest abroad any whither, that thou shalt surely die? and thou saidst unto me, The word that I have heard is good. Why then hast thou not kept the oath of the LORD, and the commandment that I have charged thee with? The king said moreover to Shimei, Thou knowest all the wickedness which thine heart is privy to, that thou didst to David my father: **therefore the LORD shall return thy wickedness upon thine own head**"* —vv. 42-44, *emphasis added*.

In other words, Shimei's death was the Lord's, not David's, reprisal for Shimei's sin. David forgave the man and kept his promise not to retaliate. But in the end, given Shimei's refusal to repent, God Himself demanded justice.

Our forgiving an offense does not guarantee that the offender will receive judicial forgiveness from God. God, who knows the heart, always judges righteously. Our part is to be gracious, bear the wrong, and pray for the offender's full repentance. God Himself will see to it that justice is done if the offender fails to seek divine forgiveness.

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