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## Two Sides of Forgiveness

Written by Bob Stone


**Matt. 6:12, 14-15; Luke 7:36-50**

Forgiveness—it's a word we love and loathe. We love it when we can be forgiven for our sins against God and others—what a tremendous relief! On the other hand, we loathe forgiveness when we must grant it to others who have grievously hurt us, even sinned against us. How difficult that can be!

Dan Harrison tells of an incident during a spiritual retreat. "One simple biblical principle gripped my heart: the importance of forgiveness. The fact that Jesus died to see people reconciled to God and to one another. It was the Christian's responsibility to at least attempt to keep all relationships reconciled. It had nothing to do with who hit whom. Broken relationships are destructive to all parties involved. I was reminded that if we had an offense against a brother or sister, it would make my prayers ineffective. If I had an offense against a neighbor, the Lord really didn't want to receive my offerings. Perhaps our service was even unacceptable. I knew there were people I hadn't forgiven, and at the top of my list were my brothers and my sister, and some of their spouses.

"I didn't want to do it at all. I had been offended by my brothers and sister. I felt they were responsible to make it right with me. I argued with God; I thought up lots of reasons why I shouldn't have to do it. But I knew I must, and I began to take steps to meet with each of them. Each situation was extremely painful for me. I found it incredibly difficult to be obedient to God. In the process, the Lord brought to my mind some things for which I was definitely responsible: for my attitudes, words, and gossip had been wrong. I had to forgive them too. As an act of will, I decided to forgive in advance, whether or not they would be willing to forgive me. I did talk to my siblings, and in each case, there were tears and hugs, acceptance, and forgiveness. It was an incredibly healing experience, and the beginning of a new way of dealing with the angry vestiges of my dysfunctional past" (*Strongest in the Broken Places—A Story of Spiritual Recovery*, pp. 66—67).

This is a marvelous book, letting us walk with a person in ministry, doing radical things for the Lord, but who still had some interior places in his heart that needed to be healed. Those broken places, in fact, became the strongest places in his life.

By answering a few simple questions, it's easy to see how you are doing on the love/loathe forgiveness scale.

- Have you been forgiven by God for all your sins?
- Have you experienced joy and intimacy with God stemming from daily forgiveness as you confess sin to Him?
- Are you able to forgive others openly and fully?
- Are you struggling to forgiving someone?
- Are you experiencing guilt for past misdeeds that incapacitates you?

Your answers to these questions may give you a preliminary reason to listen to this teaching. But even if you don't see the connection between these questions and your life, you will definitely benefit from a review of the forgiveness God has granted you.

At the heart of the Lord's Prayer and the verses immediately following, we find a far-reaching prayer and instruction concerning forgiveness:

*Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"—"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" (vv 12, 14—15).*

This appeal and addendum to the prayer shows us that forgiveness has two sides:

***We need to be forgiven.***

***We need to grant forgiveness to others who have sinned against us.***

▶ Men

▶ Women

▶ Christmas

The first thing to realize about forgiveness is simply this:

## We need to be forgiven.

The statement "forgive us our debts..." sparks a couple of questions:

What is our debt? "Debt" as used here by Jesus is a Jewish metaphor for sin. It addresses sins of omission as well as those of commission: things we should have done but didn't; those we shouldn't have done but did. We have failed to pay that which is due for our sin, and therefore, we owe a debt to God. "Transgression" represents missing the mark, failing to hit the target. So both are metaphors of the same thing—sin.

That brings up an obvious but profound question: What will forgiveness do for us? Why do we need it?

**Forgiveness cancels the debts we owe.** Without it, we are sentenced to a debtor's prison (hell) for eternity. It isn't God's intention that any of us would experience that, but if we choose to go our own way and turn our back on God's grace, it's clear that, as Romans 3:23 reminds us, "... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Psalms 58:3 teaches that "even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies." And Jeremiah 13:23 confirms it: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil."

So we must acknowledge before God our need for His forgiveness. It's our only chance to be free. It's clear we deserve to be punished, but when God forgives sin, He remits the penalty and drops the charges against us! Praise the Lord!

**It adjusts our course** (Heb. 12:1—2). Sin is expert at veering us off the course the Lord has set before us; because it takes our eyes off Jesus, we lose our bearing. If during a race you put your face in the dirt too many times, eventually your nose gets sore! We need daily forgiveness so we can refocus on Jesus and thereby adjust that course.

**Forgiveness also rekindles our joy** (Ps. 51:8,12). Think about your present relationship with God. Are you lacking the joy you ought to have? If so, then it's possible you need forgiveness. In David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, he asks for the restoration of joy lost because of his sin. Twice he mentions the need for it: "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation...let me hear joy and gladness." If you are not living in joy after repentance, it's possible you need to re-examine this whole area of forgiveness.

**Forgiveness not only rekindles our joy, it also softens our hearts toward others** (Lk. 7:36—50). Thomas Martin said, "There is none so tender to others as they which have received mercy themselves; for they know how gently God hath dealt with them." Daily confession of our sins to God is a constant reminder of how sinful we are and how much we need Christ's forgiveness. This sensitivity softens our hearts, so we recognize our need to forgive others just as we have been forgiven.

**Forgiveness also removes the guilt** (Ps. 32:5). We'll come back to this in a moment.

**Finally, forgiveness releases us from the grip of history**—i.e., our past and its effect on us. We may learn from our history, but we cannot escape from it. We may forget it, but we cannot undo it. We may try to avoid its negative effects, but more often than not, we will repeat it. We must understand that our history is an inevitable component of our being, the negative components of which can be released only by one thing—forgiveness!

Some of our lives have been defined by our failures, by our past history. We need to be released from the continuing effects of those sins! We must come to understand and put into practice the implications and benefits of forgiveness.

What a privilege to be forgiven! How blessed we are.

Now, this discussion on the benefits of forgiveness brings up another logical question: how are we forgiven by God? The primary way we're forgiven is by virtue of Christ's work on the cross.

Here is what He has done. As we memorize and reflect upon these principles, it keeps our love for the Savior alive.

- He took our sins on Himself (He took our place)—Is. 53:6. God wants to forgive our sins, but because He is just, righteous and holy, He cannot forgive sin unless its penalty is paid. So Christ took our place. First Peter 2:24 tells us He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and those of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2). He made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).
- He covered our sins (Ps. 85:2) with His blood. He blotted out our sins (Is. 43:25a); to Him, it is as if we had never sinned. He forgets our sins "...and remembers your sins no more..." (Is. 43:25b; Jer. 31:34). When it comes to our forgiven sins, God is absent-minded.
- He cleanses us from **all** unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9). There is no sin too big. He removes our sins as far as the east is from the west. He buries them in the depths of the sea (Ps. 103:12; Micah 7:18—19). Forgiveness is offered by God on the grounds of Christ's death. This is Christ's role in our forgiveness; what a thing to rejoice in!

Here is how our forgiveness is realized: confession of sin to God. But we have the option of approaching confession in one of two ways: one appropriate, one not so appropriate. Second Corinthians 7:10 speaks of both a worldly sorrow, which brings regret and death; and godly sorrow which, on the other hand, produces repentance.

Two case studies in the Scripture illustrate the heart attitude and change of mind required for true repentance. The woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11 is asked by Jesus just who has condemned her. "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." He forgives, but requires a change of direction for her life.

The second case study is that of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-14). Note the progression: His sin in an enjoyable season caused him to suppress the truth about his action—v. 17a (see Rom. 1:18). The logical consequences of his sin brought him to his senses—vv. 14-17. Instruction from the Word can also bring a person to his senses (2 Tim. 2:24-26). He recognized he had sinned against God and his father (vv. 18,21,25-32). True repentance always recognizes that sin has been committed against God, but also involves confession of sin to others whom we have offended, injured, or angered.

He recognized he was unworthy of total restoration—v. 19. He took steps to leave his life of sin and return to his father—v. 20. Sometimes it seems like a long way back to God. Is it? He encountered the father's loving arms and received His forgiveness and restoration of relationship—vv. 20—24. When we repent, God runs to us.

How do we restore relationship with others against whom we have sinned? Restoration between believers involves many characteristics, according to 2 Corinthians 7:8-13: earnestness, eagerness to clear oneself, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, and readiness to see justice done. How do you know when you need to seek forgiveness from someone?

**First**, ask these questions:

- Have I stolen from anyone (Eph. 4:28)?
- Have I damaged another's reputation?
- Have I gossiped about another?
- Have I been ungrateful?
- Have I had a bitter spirit toward another?
- Have I rebelled against authority?
- Have I had a prideful spirit with others?
- Have I failed to show genuine love to someone?
- Have I been morally impure with someone?

**Second**, list them in order of importance, with those causing you the most guilt at the top. Guilt is a biblical word, but remember there is a kind of guilt that does not come from God, but from Satan, characterized by lingering accusations. You can tell the difference. Guilt hammers, demeans, belittles, destroys faith and personhood, has an inaccurate theology. On the other hand, conviction from God is a call, a reminder of the promises of God, a humbling thing that gives strength and opens your eyes. It's a loving call from a loving Savior.

**Third**, go through the list and make restitution as the Holy Spirit prompts you, and do it quickly (Matt. 5:23-26). The biblical basis for restitution is broad; see Num. 5:5-7; Ex. 21:18-19; Eccl. 5:4-5; Lev. 6:2-7; Ezek. 33:14-16; Eph. 4:28. A prime example is found in the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19:1-10.

The result of restitution, repentance, and forgiveness is valuable indeed; it is a clear conscience (see 1 Pet. 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:18—19; 2 Cor. 1:12; Prov. 28:13b; Ps. 32:1-2), one that is free. But what if we fail to repent and receive God's forgiveness? Psalm 32:3-4 records David's plight: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah." Proverbs 28:13 lays out the principle. "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

We have covered the first side of forgiveness—you and I being forgiven by God and others. But there is another side that must accompany it.

## We need to forgive others.

Our key passage goes on to say, "Forgive us our debts, **as we also have forgiven our debtors.**" This is another element of revival.

**Our forgiveness of others is a necessary prerequisite to our continued forgiveness.** J. Oswald Sanders put it this way: "He deals with us as we deal with others. He measures us by the yardstick we use on others."

Notice this second phrase is not saying, "Forgive us because we forgive others," but "Forgive us even as we have forgiven others." In other words, the channel of God's forgiveness is blocked until we forgive our brother. We are seriously in error if we offer the first part of this appeal to God before we have forgiven others. In fact, of all the petitions offered in the Lord's Prayer, it is the only one with a condition attached" (*For Believers Only*, p. 113).

Jesus is so concerned that we not misunderstand His statement that as we finish the prayer He adds what could be called an addendum. "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" (vv 14-15). Jesus, reflecting His perfect justice, will deal with us in the same way we deal with others. We find this principle consistently throughout Scripture (Matthew 5:7, 21-24; Ps 66:18; Js. 2:13; Mk 11:25). Not only can we not worship God until we are right with others, but if we have unrepentant sin in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us.

The story is told that General Oglethorpe said to John Wesley, "I never forgive." Wesley replied: "Then I hope, sir, you never sin."

Often we are like the unmerciful servant of Matthew 18:21-35. Read it slowly and carefully. The difference between the two debts is the main point of this parable. The conclusion is: "I cancelled all the debt of yours, which was huge...shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" (vv. 32-33). What does the king do? He judges the man in the same way he judged his fellow servant who owed him a debt.

I would like to offer a few summary observations about this parable:

1. It is amazing how awful my sin looks when I see others doing the same thing. We project our sins on others, and then get angry

at them. This parable opens our eyes to the enormity of our offense against God. Once we compare ourselves to Him rather than others, the injuries of others seem small indeed.

2. If we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others against us, **it proves that we have minimized our own.**
3. Forgiving is not "smoothing things over." Some people make careers out of smoothing things over. Mothers shush us and smother our conflicts. Managers earn fat salaries by smoothing things over, manipulating people into working together even when they hate each other. Both mothers and managers prevent forgiveness because they stifle hurt. Forgiveness happens only when we first admit our hurt and/or hate and anger.
4. Forgiveness does not mean we give a person a license to continue sinning. There is action to be taken, so we are not to be passive. If the other person is a believer, we are to grant forgiveness in the framework of Matthew 18:15-17. If he is breaking the law, we are to appeal to the courts. If someone seeks to harm us physically, sexually, or emotionally, we should retreat to safety and get the help we and the offender need.

In all cases, we are to confront, not condone or overlook sin—and yet, regardless of their response, we are to forgive. We will come back to that concept, but I want you to see it now because it is vital to our understanding of forgiveness.

There are other reasons we need to forgive others, besides the need for our own forgiveness.

**We need to forgive because it releases the other person to grow and be free from guilt.** Dan Harrison says, "When you don't forgive someone, in some way that person is in jail and you are the warden. You're incarcerated too, because you have to make sure the other person stays there." There may be some guilt destroying another's life, and if you can by God's grace forgive him/her, it may be the one restoring element. We dare not try to inflict guilt on people in retaliation for their sin against us. It is God who repays; we have no right to add to the judgment, unless of course we think we can handle it better than God!

In his book, *Confess Your Sin* (p. 73), John Stott quotes the head of a large British mental hospital as having said, "I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they would be reassured of forgiveness." I wonder how many people are in hospitals tonight because Christians have not forgiven them.

Think of how Joseph's brothers felt when they knew the sin against them was forgiven. For years they had carried the weight of guilt, causing them to be paranoid about their younger brother and to interpret every negative event that took place in their lives as judgment upon them. What a relief and release to know they were forgiven. Reread Genesis 42 at your leisure.

How about it? Can you release others by your forgiveness? The beauty of it is that you will also release yourself, because while you have held your grudge, God has measured your forgiveness back to you in the same way.

**Forgiveness also rids us of the roots of bitterness.** The smallest seed of bitterness always grows, and eventually becomes a tree! If we choose not to forgive, we are not only unforgiven, we begin to destroy ourselves with a form of internal suicide. Listen to Hebrews 12:14-15—"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Bitterness causes trouble for us, but often innocent people are caught in the crossfire of our bitterness as well. Our children or friends may have the same seed of bitterness planted in them. The cost of bitterness is simply too high.

So there are two sides to forgiveness. We not only pray for our own forgiveness, but we must put feet to our prayers and forgive others their sins against us.

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Let's get practical. Here are some things to keep in mind as we forgive others. This list isn't necessarily in the sequence you should take, even though I will present them that way.

### Take an inventory of your life.

Here are some questions to ask yourself if you need help, or are unsure whether you need to forgive anyone.

- What do you see in the mirror? James 1:22—27 (i.e., are you looking into the Word, and then doing what it says?)
- What does your spiritual image look like?
- Have you committed your life fully to Christ? If you haven't, your sins are not forgiven. Are you in the faith?—2 Cor. 13:5.
- Has your past been dealt with?
- Are you free from guilt? (Ps. 32:5; 38:4; Heb. 10:22; John 15:22—24)
- Have you taken the following steps yourself?
  1. Confess your sins—1 John 1:9
  2. Repent: turn from your sins—Luke 24:46—47
  3. Receive God's forgiveness—by faith.
  4. Ask others to forgive you—Luke 15:21
  5. Make restitution as needed/necessary—Luke 19:1—10 (It makes no sense for us to demand something from others that we have not done, or are unwilling to do.)

**Take an inventory to see if you have any 2x4s in your eye.** Matt. 7:3—5 asks, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

We are often blind to our own mistakes. My sins look horrible in someone else's life, but I tend to justify them in mine! My guilt over the past often colors the actions of others who have the same problems I once had. Counselors call this projection, or transference.



For instance, do you have a loose mouth now, or did you have in the past? Have you been immoral in your past? Do you covet and desire things in this life? Do you fight with pride? In each case, that flaw is the first thing you will spot in others. Whatever your "2x4" is, remove it before you attempt to take care of the speck (or even another 2x4) in someone else's eye. Also, as you go to seek reconciliation, remember you are dust, too!

**Take an inventory of the people who bother or "bug" you.** Ask yourself these questions to reveal who they are.

- Whose case are you on a lot? Your children, fellow employees, fellow staff workers, your boss, your neighbor, friends, mate, former mate, pastors?
- Who are you suspicious of? Who do you think you cannot trust?
- Do you often see this person at the center of your problems?

The basis of all relational dysfunction among believers is sin and lack of forgiveness. There is plenty of sin to go around, but very little forgiveness. If you know of a believer you cannot seem to love as a spiritual brother or sister, it is most likely you have an unforgiving spirit and a misunderstanding of the grace and judgment of God.

The same spirit of forgiveness, by the way, must be extended to unbelievers. Forgiveness is not granted because someone agrees with you and confesses his sin, or after he asks for it, or because he wants it or even deserves it. We are to offer forgiveness purely on the basis of grace, just because the person is alive! (Even if he/she is dead, we are to forgive.)

So, who haven't you forgiven? Who is on your list? When you have some names, ask God to forgive you because you have not forgiven others. Acknowledge it as sin; repent of it and forsake it! When you finish your confession, you may feel no different, but don't let that trouble you. Take one step at a time.

Now before you go to that person (which you must do), begin to pray for him/her. "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . ." (Matt. 5:44). I know of nothing that will change the heart more quickly. Obviously, at this point it may be difficult to find something to pray about, because you are so hurt and maybe angry. Be honest with God in prayer; however, it will help your heart if you find something positive to pray about for this person or persons. Ask God to handle the situation and to work in their life and your own.

If you are still angry, you should acknowledge your feelings to God as well. In your prayers, or in your journal writing to God, get those feelings out. Look at some of David's psalms, e.g., Ps. 10:5. He, the "man after God's heart," felt the freedom to express a whole range of emotions to God. Notice how he resolves His feelings with faith statements to his God.

As you are going to seek reconciliation, be sure that the hurt really needs forgiveness. Sometimes we can just shrug off hurts, or chalk them up as a result of being alive in a crowded world. In short, some hurts are just not the kind that need forgiving. Lewis B. Smedes, in an article entitled "Forgiveness: The Power to Change the Past," lists the kind of hurts that do not need forgiveness but what he calls "a little spiritual generosity."

*"Annoyances. People annoy us by being late for appointments, by telling boring stories at dinner, and by cutting in front of us at the checkout stand (or in traffic).*

*Defeats. Some succeed when we fail; get promotions when we are ignored; get the prize we want; always seem to be there ahead of us—and to make things worse, these people who beat us are our friends.*

*Slights. People we want to notice us ignore us; professors we adore forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not invite us to his daughter's wedding."*

*Smedes continues, "These are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving. Such bits and pieces of suffering require tolerance... indulgence, humility—but not forgiving!" He continues: "The sorts of hurts that need forgiving are the ones that tend, in the nature of the case, to build a wall between the wrongdoer and the person he/she wrongfully hurts—There are two kinds of hurts that must be answered by the miracle of forgiving. They are acts of disloyalty and acts of betrayal—i.e., a husband has an affair with his wife's friend . . . your neighbor spurns you when you, a Jew, need a place to hide from the Gestapo . . . you betray a friend when you promised to keep a secret, but whisper [it] to another."*

Once we determine the kind of hurt, that it really needs to be forgiven and cannot be overlooked, the next thing we need to do is put away wrong attitudes and statements about the one who has hurt us. For instance, we need to replace the following statements:

*"I am not able to forgive this person."* If you come to the end of your grace and desire to forgive, draw upon God's grace. That is sufficient for your needs. You might pray: "Lord, I cannot forgive them, but I know you do. So love and forgive them through me." The grace to forgive is from God, but the decision to do it is our own.

*"If I act forgiving toward them, they will think I endorse their sin, or they will use that to take advantage of me."* Remember, our granting of forgiveness has nothing to do with a person's deserving it. Nor does it depend on his/her repentance and change of heart! It is granted because we are forgiven by grace!

*"I am responsible to put as much pressure on them as I can, so they will come to repentance. To forgive them would let them off the hook and take off the heat."* Did you say your name was God? If it isn't, then don't mess with His business. God has heat that is beyond our

comprehension.

"I'll forgive him, but I'll never speak to him again." Didn't God speak to you again after granting you forgiveness?

"Well, I'll forgive him/her, but I won't forget." What do we usually do with memories we can't forget? Everyone knows we can't just hit the delete key and erase our memories. In fact, many times a day the painful memories of the past may invade even our peaceful moments. What is the answer? Maybe I can't forget, at least initially, but I can choose to disregard my memories. I do not have to let them linger in my thoughts. I do not have to act on them, and I can choose to set them aside quickly, knowing they are seeds of revenge Satan would love to tend and water in my heart.

Lewis Smedes suggests a solution that takes place in the mind and heart of the forgiver:

*"Here the forgiver performs spiritual surgery within his or her own memory. When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it, you disengage that person from his hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him as the person who did the wrong; the next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory. You think of him now, not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now, not as a person who alienated you, but as a person who belongs to you.. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs. You re-created your past by re-creating the person whose wrong made your past painful.*

*You did not change him, out there, in his being. What he did sticks to what he is. His wrong is glued to him. But when you re-create him in your own memory, there, within you, he has been altered by spiritual surgery. God does it this way, too. He releases us from sin as a mother washes dirt from a child's face, or as a person takes a burden off your back, lays it on a goat, and sends the goat scampering into the wilderness. The Bible's metaphors point to a surgery within God's memory of what we are.*

*So therefore, in the creative violence of love, you reach into the unchangeable past and cut away the wrong from the person who wronged you, you erase the hurt from the archives of your heart. When you pull it off, you do the one thing, the only thing, that can remedy the inevitability of painful history. The grace to do it is from God, the decision to do it is our own"—Forgiveness, the Power of the Past, pp. 32—33.*

Here's another statement we must disallow: "I know I should forgive, but he/she does not know how much he hurt me, and I cannot forgive the hurt. I want them to suffer like I have." Didn't God forgive us completely, even though it cost Him His life? Most often, the reason we have the above attitudes is because forgiveness sounds like outrageous injustice. We want to be bitter; we want to be vengeful; we want to see the other person squirm; we want them to crawl back to us and ask for forgiveness...we want to be proven **right**... we want the guilty to pay their dues... we want revenge. Smedes continues, "Sometimes our hate is the ace we have left in our deck. Our contempt is our only weapon. Our plan to get even is our only consolation. Why should we forgive?"

But what will really be best and fair for us? Forgiving releases us from a past that was unfair to us. If we choose, we can stay with that unfair past and multiply the wrongness by getting our revenge. But that revenge glues us to the past, and dooms us to repeat it! Revenge never ends the score, for people who are at odds with each other never keep score of wrongs by the same mathematics. In other words, enemies never agree on the score because each feels the wounds he receives differently from the wounds he/she gives.

In reality, we can never really get even. Sadly, we even may become like the person we despise. What an awful truth! If we think about someone's awful actions long enough, we may repeat them ourselves. "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." Forgiveness takes us off the treadmill of revenge so we can stop the continuous chain of hurt.

Forgiveness also brings fairness to the forgiver, for it is the hurting person who feels the burden of unfairness, not the one who inflicted the pain. That one may be unaware of the hurt or doesn't care that he/she hurt/injured us!

Smedes says: "Unforgiveness/vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays. And each time it replays, you feel the clap of pain again. Is this fair?" Forgiveness turns off the videotape of painful memories and sets us free. It is the only way to stop the unfair cycle of pain turning in our memory. It is the only back to fairness.

So what should be our stance? Ephesians 4:31-32 commands us, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

What is Scripture saying? We are to forgive because the sin has already been paid for. No matter what anyone has done to me, I must forgive because Christ has paid the penalty for that sin...for all sins. Therefore, when we say, "I'm going to make him suffer for that," we'd better think twice. Christ has already paid for his sin, bore it in His body, and satisfied a holy and righteous God.. Who are we to demand further payment and suffering beyond Christ's? What more do we want?

That leads to the next step. We are to forgive as Christ forgave. Colossians 2:13—14 sums it up: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."

Remember, He forgave while we were dead in our sins. All we had to do was receive it. Likewise, our forgiveness comes to our enemy before reconciliation. What did Jesus say on the cross? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." All our enemies must do to benefit from our forgiveness is to receive it. Let me reiterate, that does not mean we justify their actions or condone what they have

done. It just means we eliminate all possibility of roots of bitterness by forgiving even if they do not ask for it! We refuse to take vengeance into our own hands—we leave them to God to judge!

In an article from *Christianity Today* entitled "A Severe Forgiveness," Duane Elmer gives an example of how a group of Christians was able to come to forgiveness after a horrendous civil war in Liberia. The author and others were asked to bring together 500 people from across denominations, government bodies, tribal groups, and religious sectors, to facilitate the beginning steps in the process of reconciliation. What a task!

He writes:

*The stories I heard underlined the grotesqueness of war. A husband and wife trying to flee from enemy soldiers are caught. The soldiers cut off the husband's head and, while it is hemorrhaging on the ground, severed from the body, the wife is told to pick it up and kiss it. Then she is told to spit on the head and laugh at it in scorn and throw it down. Today she will be confronted with the severity of forgiveness.*

*Then there were the stories of rape, killings of sons and daughters while parents watched, betrayals costing one his job and often his home, tortures, and virtually every form of inhumanity. Unlike many wars where the enemy leaves your land, in this war the 'enemy' may well be someone you will see regularly on the street, in the store, work place, even at church.*

*A...turning point came during a lengthy session on the meaning of forgiveness. It seems rather straightforward to most of us. You either forgive or you don't. I realized, for the first time, that my ability to forgive had never been tested—not compared to what these people faced. Hearing some of their heart-wrenching stories, I could offer them nothing from my experience with forgiveness. Their suffering was too close to that of Christ's to be reduced to a recipe created in someone's air-conditioned study. It had to be something born deeply from within their Christian faith, and the midwife had to be the Holy Spirit.*

*I quickly realized that they longed for someone to stand before them who would know their suffering, identify with their struggle to forgive, and be a worthy pioneer for them to follow. Their longing began to be satisfied when the discussion turned to Christ's crucifixion. I asked them, "What did Jesus experience? How did He respond?" They sensed that Jesus had been in the place of their suffering and He understood. But even more important, He was with them in the place of their suffering now, asking that they draw upon His grace and strength.*

*Next their thoughts turned to the heavenly Father who loved His own Son. Most of them identified with the Father's loss since they had lost close friends and family members. But here again they were confronted with the severity of forgiveness. The Father forgave His Son's tormentors, and not just with a few spoken words. Forgiveness meant offering His enemies eternal life, all the benefits of sonship, and hope in this world and the next.*

*The group staggered at the implications of their discoveries. But the last discovery would cut to the marrow of their beings and violate deeply ingrained assumptions. God's forgiveness was free. It required no exacting of penalty, no vengeance, no withholding of favor, no seeking of an eye for an eye. It was as though the Father had forgotten their enemy status. Forgiveness is treating enemies like friends. 'But I say to you...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you'—Luke 6:27—28.*

*Would the demands of forgiveness be too severe, causing them to faint? 'Forgive and forget,' said one member. 'I am sorry,' said another, 'I cannot forget.' Everyone knew they could not just hit the 'delete' key and erase their memories. Every day, hundreds of times a day, the painful memories invade the rare peaceful moment.*

*Group silence suggested the answer would not be easy. Finally, one person said, 'I cannot forget, but I can choose to disregard my memories. I do not have to let them linger in my thoughts. I do not have to act on my memories. I can choose to set them aside quickly, knowing that they are seeds of revenge Satan wishes to grow in my heart.'"*

With that in mind: if possible, seek to be reconciled to the one who has offended you. "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:22—26)."

Prayerfully consider what to say and what steps are necessary. Take those steps, and then pray for the offender. That's a good measuring stick for your forgiveness. Then, continue to forgive—as many times as you are offended. The classic example of this is what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 18:21-22: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" Now, in case all of that has gone over your head and you still can't forgive, let me close with a biblical illustration and a response to it.

36 Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, 38 and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. 41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. 44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." 48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 7:36—50.

One of the greatest hindrances to complete confession and forgiveness is our self-righteousness. Inevitably, the people who have the greatest sense of forgiveness in their lives are those who grant the greatest forgiveness. It is the smug and self-righteous person who has difficulty forgiving another. The self-righteous says, "Get that riff-raff out of the church, or out of my life." If you are struggling to love anyone, it may be your self-righteousness is showing. It is the greatest hindrance to complete confession and forgiveness.

The person who is forgiven much, loves much. He says, "God has done so much for me, and He'll do the same for you if you ask Him."

In the biography of Robert Falconer is a story which beautifully illustrates forgiveness. Falconer was sitting in a group of poor, destitute people, telling them this story from Luke 7:36-50. He was trying to show them that Jesus would forgive them. As he was reading the story, someone began to cry out loud. It was a slender girl, whose face had been disfigured by smallpox. Falconer calmed her down and then she asked: "Will He ever come again?" Falconer said, "Who?" The girl replied, "Oh, this Christ, the One who forgave the woman. I have heard that He will come again."

Falconer replied, "Why do you ask?" At that she cried so hard he couldn't understand her reply at first, but finally through her tears she put her hand up to her poor, colorless hair and said, "Sir, can't He wait a little while? My hair isn't long enough to wash His feet." She saw herself as needing much forgiveness. But, as she received forgiveness, she in turn would also love much and forgive much.

1. Are you walking in the forgiveness of God? i.e., Do you know your sins are forgiven?
2. Has anyone hurt you who you have not forgiven? Have you hurt anyone and not asked for forgiveness? (Possible ways to hurt or offend: stealing, lying, temper, damaged reputation, ungratefulness, bitterness, rebellion, pride, moral impurity, failure to show love)
3. Are you willing to make a plan of restitution in order to gain a clear conscience? What will it be?

## Small Group Questions:

1. Describe the impact of forgiveness or lack of forgiveness from sin in your life, e.g., emotions, physical ailments, etc.
2. If you have participated in restitution, or sought the forgiveness of another, what was the result?
3. What would be some general steps that a person should take if they feel they are to make restitution for some sin? Would you be willing to take such steps yourself? What would motivate you the most to follow through?
4. What is one thing that stands out in each of the following incidents that is the most important or interesting to you personally?—John 8:1—11; Lk. 15:11—24; 19:1—10; 7:36—50.
5. What hinders or helps you/others the most when it comes to forgiving a person who has sinned against you?

## Appendix and Footnotes:

John MacArthur expressed distinctly the problem we have with sin:

*Sin is the problem of every man, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Sin disturbs every relationship in the human realm. Sin waits to attack every baby born into the world (Ps. 58:3). The virus of sin has contaminated*



*every living being. Sin is the degenerative power in the human stream that makes man susceptible to disease, illness, death and hell. Sin is the culprit in every broken marriage, every disrupted home, every shattered friendship, every argument, every pain, every sorrow, every anguish, and every death. No wonder Scripture calls sin 'that accursed thing' (Josh. 7:13)! It is compared to the venom of snakes and the stench of death. Anything so powerful, so sinister, must be dealt with—but from the viewpoint of human resources it is incurable" (Jer. 13:23). The Disciples' Prayer, John MacArthur.*

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