



Shaping the Heart

Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

Is there a difference between saying “I’m sorry” and “Will you forgive me?” What is involved in offering forgiveness? Does God forgive unconditionally? Must I forgive others even if they refuse to repent? How can I find peace when others have committed a grievous sin against me? Shouldn’t I unconditionally grant forgiveness to others so a “root of bitterness” does not well up inside me?

Consider: **We cannot extend to others what we do not already have.** As believers, all our sins are forgiven (Col 2:13) so the same forgiveness extended to us can be and must be offered to others (Eph 4:32). We can indeed extend to others what we have been given.

Forgiveness is the cancellation of a moral debt incurred due to an offense in a relationship caused by sin.

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, **having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us** with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2:13–15).

1. As a social discipline, **forgiveness involves a triangle of relationships.** Every sin committed against a person is also a sin against God in whose image we are made. God bears all our burdens, including the pain we experience when others sin against us and vice versa. **God** sees the offense committed by the **offender**, feels the pain of the **offended**, and provides the vehicle for forgiveness in the cross of Christ.
2. **Forgiveness entails vicarious suffering.** When an offense has taken place, then a loss or debt has been incurred because something rightfully owned (human dignity) has been compromised, marred or damaged. Once a moral debt has been incurred, then the only way a debtor can be released from that debt is when it has been paid in full. If justice is to be satisfied, the loss must be recovered and what has been taken must be restored to someone by someone.

In the biblical framework of forgiveness, the cancellation of debt entails not ignoring or denying the debt but *absorbing* it. When we extend the offer of forgiveness to our offender, we are in effect foregoing the restitution that we are entitled to; we are freeing the offender from their obligation to pay their debt. This can only be done because **the Son of God already paid the offender’s debt and suffered on behalf of the offended.** That is how we can extend the offer of forgiveness to our offender. The **offended** is released from exacting a penalty due to their loss; the **offender** is released from obligation to pay the debt because God’s Son already paid the debt in full and suffered on behalf of both. Christ has already stood in my place as the offended and paid the debt of my offender. No longer do I require punishment from my offender because Christ bore their punishment. By extending forgiveness, I am accepting the finished work of Christ on behalf of my offender. No longer must I suffer the pain of my loss because Christ bore the pain of my offense. I vicariously receive the suffering that Christ experienced on my behalf and accept the debt that Christ paid on behalf of my offender.

3. **Are there any conditions for granting forgiveness?** Yes. Two: **atonement** (God’s part; Lev 16; Matt 26:28; Heb 2:17; 9:22; 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10) and **repentance** (our part; Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; 17:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38). Sin must be atoned for and the offender must take responsibility for their offense. Both are necessary before forgiveness is granted. Atonement makes the way for reconciliation by settling the moral debt. Repentance takes the stain of guilt away by demonstrating responsibility for the moral debt.
4. The weight of Scripture intimates a distinction between **offering** forgiveness and **granting** forgiveness. These are not the same. The former is an attitude, mindset, or a disposition, the latter is an act or an extension of the disposition into the relationship. **We unconditionally offer forgiveness but conditionally grant it.** It is vital we remain in a ready-to-forgive state of **offering** forgiveness to all our offenders. How many times must we forgive? “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22). By constantly living in this ready-to-forgive state we are able to go the next step and grant forgiveness when the biblical condition of repentance has been met. “If a brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and **if they repent**, forgive



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them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (Lk 17:3-4). The only way for us to be in the place where we can grant forgiveness is by leaning forward in this ready-to-forgive posture while simultaneously leaning backward on our already-forgiven status received at the cross (Col 2:13). But we must carefully balance the two postures. Lean too far forward by granting forgiveness and we miss the justice God has demonstrated at the cross and we devalue the price of atonement. Lean too far backward by failing to offer forgiveness and we miss the healing love of God shown to us at the cross. Maintaining just the right position on the fulcrum is the only posture from which the offended will find peace and where offenders will find love. In so doing, resentment, bitterness, and evil will not have the final word. Love does.

5. **The offer of forgiveness must ever be in us and come from us.** We unconditionally offer forgiveness because our relationship with God does not rest on moral performance and therefore cannot be destroyed by immoral acts. So too must we extend this model into all our relationships. Knowing this sets the stage for and in fact makes possible confession and repentance. How?

Consider the story of the prodigal and padre (Lk 15:11-32). Although sin creates distance between us and God just as it had the prodigal and his father, our heavenly Father intently looks across that distance and runs to embrace us even before we confess and repent (Lk 15:20). Put differently, the compassion extended in an offer of forgiveness can be a catalyst for an offender's confession and repentance. Otherwise, where's the incentive for an offender to confess and repent? In the entire biblical scheme, it is God, not the sinner, who always takes the initiative in confession and repentance by maintaining a posture of embrace and not exclusion, mercy and not judgment (see Dan 9:18). In the story of the prodigal and the padre note that the sequence outlined by the son was broken by the father's embrace. The son planned to approach his father, confess, and hope for acceptance (vv 18-19). However, the father's response interrupted the son's strategy (v 20) and so "confession followed acceptance" (v 21). This is not to say that confession and repentance were unnecessary, but they were not required by the father before the embrace of forgiveness was extended. The son's transgression infected the relationship for sure, but it did not jeopardize it. Why? Because the relationship was not grounded in moral performance but in unconditional love. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32).

6. **Extending and receiving forgiveness turns hell on its head and frees us to love and be loved.** The act of offering forgiveness to an offender overcomes evil by empowering the offended with the requisite freedom necessary to love the offender. Love, therefore, has the final word, not the offense. Before forgiveness is offered, the offended is rightfully angry with the offender because of the offense. Yet the anger of the offended often becomes the controlling influence over the relationship when a breach is realized. Thus, there is a kind of psychological bondage whereby the relationship is held hostage to the evil committed. Offering forgiveness loosens the bonds of emotional slavery and opens the doorway to love the evildoer. "If I have named the evil and done my best to offer genuine forgiveness and reconciliation, I am free to love the person even if they don't want to respond." And so, "when we offer genuine forgiveness to someone else we are no longer conditioned by the evil that they have done—even if they refuse to accept this forgiveness" (N.T. Wright).
7. **Forgiveness is not only a healing power but the reigning power over evil.** Since "we are in fact called to be people of forgiveness in the present because that is the life we shall be living in the future," the master of evil can be conquered now by offering forgiveness, the same forgiveness that someday will characterize our future. Forgiveness, then, "releases not only the person who is being forgiven but the person who is doing the forgiving." Forgiveness is saying in effect "I release you from any burden of guilt, any sense that I might still be angry with you when we meet tomorrow, or that I will treat you differently in the future or try to get even with you. But I also release myself from having to go to bed cross, from having to toss and turn wondering how to gain my revenge." Consequently, "the continuing presence and power of evil in the present world



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cannot blackmail the new world and veto its creation because the power of forgiveness ... is precisely that it enables both God and God's people to avoid the imposition of other people's evil" (N.T. Wright).

8. **What if the conditions for granting forgiveness have been met but I'm unable to forgive?** This is the error of the elder son in the story of the prodigal and the padre (Lk 15:11-32). Jesus warns that relationships trump rules (Lk 15:28-30). Forgiveness upsets the balance sheet. Getting all and only what we deserve makes for good accounting and may satisfy our sense of justice, but there's no room for forgiveness on a balance sheet. Forgiveness offers more than what is deserved. If we find ourselves unable to grant forgiveness, then we must cast our eyes on the cross of Christ and realize anew how much we have been forgiven (see **Matt 6:14-15; 18:34-35** for a strong warning against unforgiving hearts.). Moreover, and most importantly, "the faculty we have for receiving forgiveness and the faculty we have for granting forgiveness are one and the same thing. If we open the one we shall open the other. If we slam the door on the one, we slam the door on the other" (N.T. Wright). God's people must be a forgiving people. Freely we have received forgiveness and freely we must offer it. Failing to do the later hinders the former.
10. **Forgiveness is less about saying something and more about doing something.** God did not just say "you are forgiven," he put forth his Son as a sacrifice of atonement in order that we might be forgiven. Offering and granting forgiveness to our offender should be no less obvious.
11. **We extend God's forgiveness to others because we recognize that we are also in need of it.** "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt 6:12). We cannot, in good conscience, pray this sincerely unless and until we are leaning forward in a ready-to-forgive posture and willing to embrace our offender.
12. **Granting forgiveness does not mean the consequences from the offense are removed** (Num 14:20-23). When forgiveness has been received, God may require that we experience the ongoing effects of our moral failure because it is somehow good and best for us to do so. We must believe there is something in the consequences that otherwise we will not learn. Our heavenly Father knows precisely what he is doing and only permits that which is only good and best for us.

[Note: I'm indebted to N. T. Wright, Miraslov Volf, Chris Brauns, and Terrance Tiessen for many of these insights.]

Further questions for consideration:

- What do we make of Christ's plea for forgiveness from the cross (Lk 23:34)?
- Given this model of forgiveness, are believers the only ones who can offer genuine forgiveness? Are unbelievers able to receive forgiveness in its fullest sense?
- What about the persistently unrepentant? Is there a point of no return where some cross a threshold and are unable to repent and find forgiveness? See **Heb 6:4-6**.
- How does my remaining impenitent and not seeking forgiveness hinder my relationship with God? Exactly how serious is it for me to fail to repent once I'm aware of my sin against another? See **Mt 5:23-26**.



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Excursus: Forgive and Forget? A Theological Musing

Does God forget my sins when he forgives my sins? Aren't we supposed to "forgive and forget?" After all, the Bible clearly states "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and **remembers your sins no more**" (Isaiah 43:25). And, Jeremiah exclaims "For I will forgive their wickedness and **will remember their sins no more**" (Jeremiah 31:34).

But wait a minute! I thought God was omniscient! How can a being who knows all things forget anything and remain all-knowing? **Perhaps the notion that God forgets our sins is not a cognitive act at all but a behavioral one.** For instance, consider 1 Samuel 1:19-20 where God "remembered" Hannah and opened her womb so she could conceive. It's not as though the Lord said, "Oops! Hannah, I'm so sorry I forgot about you. I've been so busy with other things, it just slipped my mind." Rather, based upon her prayer to bear children, God DID something on Hannah's behalf.

Or, consider how we use the word "remember" when I ask you to "remember someone in prayer." It's not as though I'm asking you to literally recall them to mind because you have forgotten them. I am, however, asking you to DO something on their behalf; in this instance pray for them. Likewise, God does not, and in fact cannot, forget our sins, but he graciously chooses not to hold them against us.

It may be psychologically attractive to believe that God "forgives and forgets," but it's not theologically accurate or biblically responsible. What *should* make me feel good is that **God can know my every sin for eternity and still choose to grant me forgiveness!** This is the God of Scripture and this is the God we love and worship. Only a God who is eternally gracious yet eternally mindful of my sin can eternally forgive but not forget.

"Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, Lord, are good." – Psalm 25:6-7