

RESOURCE:

COMMON QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK ABOUT FORGIVENESS

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Forgiveness is central to our experience as Christians. It is at the heart of our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Jesus talks about forgiveness a lot and even inscribes it on the template for our prayers (Matt. 6:9-13). At the same time, forgiveness is hard. It's unnatural. This presents a lot of questions as we try to work out the implications of living faithfully as Christians.

This past Sunday, I preached a sermon from Matthew 18:21-35, where Jesus teaches his followers that God's forgiveness of us shows us why and how to forgive others. In conclusion, I attempted to answer some of the most common pastoral questions I receive. I share them here hoping they provide some help or at least provoke deeper consideration of the topic. (The rest of the sermon may be accessed [here](#).)

1. What if the person doesn't ask for forgiveness? Am I still obligated to forgive?

This is an important question, because it's tremendously practical. If you work to faithfully apply the words of Jesus then you will likely encounter people who do not repent, ask for your forgiveness, or even seem like they think they have done anything wrong. How does this change your responsibility to forgive? Does it?

I don't think it changes our responsibility. The answer to the question is, *we can and we must forgive them*.

Let's think about it this way. Forgiveness has two sides, there is the extension of forgiveness and the reception of it. The emphasis in this passage before us is the extension. Jesus is not here talking about receiving forgiveness, but extending it. Certainly to feel the full effect of forgiveness we desire to have both sides sync up, but it does not always happen.

Jesus other teaching supports this view. We have to do our part in the forgiveness. This is what Jesus meant, I think, when he said, "Love your enemies . . . bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28). They don't stop being our enemies when we bless them. And this is what makes this so powerful. They haven't asked for our forgiveness, and perhaps they don't think they have to. They are content being our enemy and making life difficult for us. One has said, "We are to bless them, and that blessing means that our part of the inward forgiveness has happened. The opposite of forgiveness is holding a grudge, but blessing is the opposite of holding a grudge, and so blessing is a kind of forgiving." (John Piper's whole answer is worth the read.)

I find it helpful to consider our Savior's words when he was on the cross. He said, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus was setting an example for us to follow. He prayed for those who did harm to him. He prayed for their forgiveness. "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" (1 Peter 2:23).

2. Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?

Yes. Remember, sin is messy, and cleaning it up is often a lengthy, nuanced process. It's possible for forgiveness to occur in our relationship with God apart from interaction with the person who sinned against

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us. There are many reasons why we might not be able to speak with the person and extend forgiveness.

Forgiveness is different from reconciliation. Our reconciliation with another often depends upon the attitude and actions of the one who sinned.

In many cases, even if an offender confessed his wrong to the one he hurt and appealed for forgiveness, the offended person could justifiably say, "I forgive you, but it might take some time for me to regain trust and restore our relationship." The evidence of genuine forgiveness is personal freedom from a vindictive or vengeful response (Rom. 12:17-21), but not always an automatic restoration of relationship.

Even when God forgives our sins, he does not promise to remove all consequences created by our actions. Yes, being forgiven, restored, and trusted is an amazing experience, but it's important for those who hurt others to understand that their attitude and actions will affect the process of rebuilding trust. Words alone are often not enough to restore trust. When someone has been significantly hurt and feels hesitant about restoration with her offender, it's both right and wise to look for changes in the offender before allowing reconciliation to begin.

We can and must forgive others of their sins against us. But there may be other factors that can prevent full reconciliation and restoration of the relationship.

3. How do I process through forgiving those who have hurt me deeply?

This is a big question that I cannot fully answer here. But, I want to put down a few markers.

First, I want to validate that sin is painful. Being sinned against hurts us. It hurts us because sin is wrong. The Bible validates the destructive effects of sin. You should not feel guilty or wrong about feeling this way.

Second, there is ample compassion, mercy, and grace in Christ for you. When you feel alone and hurt, the tendency is to retreat to yourself and shut off the world because of the pain and feeling that no one understands or can do anything about it. While we are smarting from the sting of sin, we need to remember that our Savior has scars. He has entered into the scrum of this world, and he has felt the deep affliction that comes from sin. In fact, he did this in order become a merciful and compassionate help to us.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of *grace*, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)

And finally, remember that in the end, God will judge and make everything right. This is our hope. There are limits to human justice. We know that all kinds of wrongs go unpunished in this world. But, we take comfort in knowing that in the end, God will deal with everything in accordance with his inflexible justice, perfect wisdom, and eternal goodness. We can rest in this comfort, because we can rest in God.

4. What are the dangers for a lack of forgiveness?

At the risk of stating the obvious, let's remember that Jesus commands us to forgive. This is what he tells us to do. So, failing to forgive is a sin. This is the chief danger. If we do not forgive others we are affecting our relationship with God, dishonoring him, and undermining our confidence before him. This cannot be overstated.

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Then there are other considerations. A lack of forgiveness will nurse bitterness. It grows with time and begins to affect many other areas of our lives. The Bible warns us against letting a root of bitterness spring up, noting that it causes trouble and by it, many become defiled (Heb. 12:15). We do not have the power to hold a grudge. We will become evil. If you try to repay evil for evil you will yourself be taken in by it. You will become embittered, angry, hardened, vengeful, and even full of self-pity. You will try your best to maintain separation from it, but this evil vortex will pull you in.

It also elevates us to a place of judgment and authority that is frankly above our pay grade. We do not have the right to withhold forgiveness from anyone. We cannot stand in this place of ultimate judgment.

We often buy the lie that holding a grudge will make us feel better. But this is not true. Holding a grudge will only suffocate us, and never liberate us. Choosing to hold a grudge is tremendously powerful, controlling others and you. Forgiving is even more powerful, liberating others and you.

5. How can I grow to be more forgiving?

First, grapple with the weight of personal sin. Remember that we have more in common with the one who did the sinning than we might like to admit. Cast everything in light of our relationship with God. Remember the servant who was forgiven much yet could not forgive others. We have been forgiven ten thousand talents. Certainly, we can grow to be more forgiving of offenses against us.

Second, marvel at the gift of total forgiveness. In Christ, every single sin has been washed away. Our certificate of debt has been completely canceled. Over the top of our bill there reads a divine declaration, signed in blood, "Paid in full." There remains now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We stand forgiven at the cross. Hallelujah! May this be the model and motivation for our forgiveness.

Oh, to see the pain, written on Your face,
Bearing the awesome weight of sin;
Every bitter thought, Every evil deed,
Crowning Your bloodstained brow.

Rest in the sovereignty of God. We don't understand why bad things happen, to us or others. But we do know that God promises to work all things together for good for those who love God and are called to his purpose (Rom. 8:30). Joseph was able to both call his brothers' scheming evil and God's purposes good (Gen. 50:16ff). Even though we don't have all of the answers for the "why" questions we do know the answer to the "who" question. God is in complete control, and we rest in his sovereign wisdom and power.

Finally, exult in the privilege of granting forgiveness. When we forgive others we are magnifying the power of the gospel. We are declaring that there is something more important than us in this world. We are declaring the worth of Christ and his commands. We are showing the power of a changed life in the Holy Spirit. How great is it to extend forgiveness to others out of the love that extended forgiveness to us? God's forgiveness of us shows how and why we forgive others.