

# God's Power in Giving and Receiving Forgiveness

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Forgiveness is the spiritual mechanism that heals conflict within people, between people, and between people and God. Unforgiveness and bitterness are the cancerous blockages that infect and destroy people and relationships. Everyone, at one time or another, struggles with choosing to forgive others and with repenting and receiving forgiveness from God. Without a Biblical understanding of the necessity and process of forgiveness, we cannot experience the abundant life, which God makes possible through His Son, Jesus Christ.

The necessity of a Biblical concept of forgiveness is vitally important because of the multitude of incorrect beliefs that dominate most people's understanding of forgiveness. For example, the half-truth "Forgive and forget" (which is not in the Bible) implies that if we truly forgive a sin against us, we will forget that it even occurred. Therefore, remembering means we must not have truly forgiven. In contrast, the truth is as David prays in Psalm 79:8, "O remember not against us former iniquities..." This does not mean that "when" (as if there were any time to God) God forgives us that He suddenly develops a blank spot in His memory. Instead, that He erases the debt of our sin from our account because of the Blood of Jesus.

Another wrong belief that is thought to be Biblical is "You have to forgive yourself." This is incorrect because it is impossible to do. Since you cannot sin against yourself, you cannot forgive yourself. First Corinthians 6 explains that even though sexual sin is a sin against your own body, your body is not yours, but Christ's, since He bought it with His price of His death.

For example, using the Scriptural metaphors of money and debt, it is as impossible to forgive yourself as it is impossible to loan yourself money and then forgive yourself your own debt. You could pretend to do it, but nothing real transpires. In fact, when Christians say, "I believe God has forgiven me, I am just having a hard time forgiving myself," they are caught in an endless loop with no solution.

A parallel pseudobiblical myth of "forgiving yourself" is "loving yourself." God and Jesus' commands to "love your neighbor as yourself" have nothing to do with the modern self-esteem myth, but rather in demonstrating agape love for your neighbor by taking care of him as you would yourself (Leviticus 19:18 & Matthew 5:43). Not only do these misunderstandings of God's principles frustrate us, but they also blind us from how His deep wisdom about forgiveness and love can transform us.

Thus, the goal is not in forgiving yourself, but asking for and truly receiving (believing and absorbing into your conscience) forgiveness from God. There are two primary barriers that prevent this from happening, either you do not believe and accept God's forgiveness, or you cannot forgive others because of unrepentance in your own life.

First, as with all insecurity, conflict, and sin, the lowest common denominator (the root issue) is not believing what God tells us about Himself. This wrong thinking about God is not conscious, but rather is obtained from our childhood father-image and mother-image that our produced wrong thinking in our God-image. To employ a "root to fruit" tree analogy, from the roots of our wrong thinking about God you grow the trunk of wrong thinking about yourself and from there you grow the bad fruit of sin in your relationships.

The principle of our father-image and mother-image being the primary source of right and wrong thinking about God is both one of the most important to believe and difficult to understand principles in Christianity. Other articles address this issue in detail, but for this context it is significant to see how

we may have begun learning how to develop unforgiveness and bitterness in our relationships with our parents. While no one had or is a perfect parent, to begin to understand your sin and forgiveness struggles ask God to help you graciously discern how your parents sinned against you.

Parental sin (like all sins) falls into two categories. First, they may have committed sins of commission (doing something that was wrong which should not have been done, such as abuse, verbal rejection, harshness) or sins of omission (failing to do something right that they should have done, like godly discipline, protection, guidance, instruction about sex, and full acceptance). However it occurred, we were all to some degree neglected, hurt, or damaged. (Only God is a Perfect Parent, and even when His first children, Adam and Eve, had a perfect relationship with their Perfect Father--they still sinned!) Thus, unless we learn how to forgive our parents, we will continue to take the residual unforgiveness from our parent relationships into our God-image and self-image and keep on sabotaging our future relationships.

The second major barrier to full forgiveness is the unrepentant sin that exists in our lives. Similar to our study of what we think about God, we can start by looking for some childhood hurts that helped shape our individual sin weakness. For example, if your father was critical of you, the damage to your God-image and self-image might have caused you to become a critical person. It is easy to see how not only would a criticized child grow into a critical and unforgiving adult but also be quite unaware and defensive about his or her own unrepentant sin of criticism. This is seen most clearly when a critical person is critical about being rebuked by one person about being critical about a second critical person! Critical people hate other critical people. Romans 2:1-3 tells us that the very thing in which we judge another we are guilty of ourselves--that is, that our unforgiving heart is revealing our unrepentant sin. Specifically, we tend to be the most unforgiving in areas in which we are in some manner the most sinful.

Put another way, the cause of our unforgiveness is our own lack of repentance. Since a holy God chose to forgive us and has commanded that we forgive others, it is a sin for us to hold unforgiveness against someone. At the deepest and most specific level, the sin of unforgiveness is often based on our own unrepentant, self-sufficient self-righteousness. This judging mechanism occurs in an unrepentant person when another's sin reminds him of his own sin and causes him to feel his guilt. If he does not repent, the unrepentant person must do something with this emotion of guilt from a violated conscience. The only other outlet of pressure is to internally or externally judge, criticize and not forgive the offender.

We can conclude that we are unforgiving of others' sins because we are unrepentant of our own sins, and we are unrepentant because we are self-righteous. In contrast, one of the best proofs of the validity of this mechanism is that whenever we truly repent from and receive forgiveness for our own specific sins, we are not only able to forgive, but we want to be gracious and compassionate toward someone with similar sin struggles.

Now we turn and look at how God can turn all this complicated bad news into good news. To learn how to give and receive forgiveness, we need to look at three aspects of the word "forgive" that shed light on the true meaning and purpose of forgiveness. The different forms of "forgiveness" used in the Old Testament Hebrew mean to forgive, cancel, atone, cleanse, annul, pardon, purge, put off, reconcile, lift off, cast off, or take away. Likewise, in the New Testament Greek, "forgiveness" means to send forth, forsake, lay aside, leave, put away, omit, yield up, pardon, rescue, deliver, grant favor or kindness, give liberty, or remission. Lastly, transposing the compound word "forgive" into "give for" can reveal the basic meaning of the English word "forgive". Forgiveness is thus an undeserving gift that God gives to us, we give to others, and others give to us.

To heal from the past and to prevent future unforgiveness and unrepentant sin, we must follow Christ's example in learning how to initially not even pick up "offenses" (other people's real and imagined sins against us). This mature spiritual skill is not easily learned. The natural tendency is to pick up the offense and stab yourself with it while simultaneously blaming the other person. In reality, if we are offended, then we have "taken the bait," and the other person has successfully controlled us. The very function of sin is to feel powerful by controlling someone or something. Unless we see this truth and forgive others, we will continue to be a slave to their whims and wishes.

Put another way, the more we hate someone, the more that person controls us. The more we harbor unforgiveness against someone, the more we are setting them up as a feared idol that we bow down to, and therefore the more we become like them. Since God commands us to worship, fear, and be controlled by no one other than Him, our unforgiving hatred is sin. Therefore, to keep us pure, God commands us to forgive.

The second Beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted," (Matthew 5:4) is an excellent explanation of the process of forgiveness. Mourning has two sequential halves: first, mourning others' sins against us and in faith and obedience forgiving them; and second, mourning our own sins against God and others, repenting from them and asking for forgiveness.

This second half can be broken down further into a five-step process of clearing your conscience:

1. **Repentance** from a sin against God that is a wrong, ineffective, and self-destructive attempt to meet our own needs
2. **Confessing** and agreeing with God about our sin and asking for His forgiveness
3. Having already forgiven others, we are now able to **fully receive God's forgiveness** for our own sins
4. By **making restitution** (which is the fruit/proof of repentance) we are exercising and demonstrating our willingness to restore and make right the damaging consequences of our sin
5. New **life** can begin within and between us and other by giving forgiveness to others and receiving forgiveness from God.

In summary, it is our internal (a) lack of repentance and (b) unforgiveness of others that leaves no room inside us to fit in God's forgiveness. (This spiritual principle does not mean that if we died with any unforgiveness in us that we would go to hell. At salvation God forgave us the eternal penalty of sin, but on a day-to-day basis we must receive His grace to redeem over our lives.) We can become so filled with unforgiveness that until we begin emptying ourselves of it we do not have anywhere for God to put His love and forgiveness of our sins.

God deeply desires to forgive us so that we can have fellowship with Him. If He did not desire us, then He would not have sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on our behalf. Nevertheless we cannot delude ourselves into thinking that whatever we need can be "worked out" with God in the present while we continue to deny the sin, hurt, unforgiveness, and wrong thinking that we began accumulating in childhood. We must ask God to give us right thinking about Him and ourselves, a forgiving heart toward those who have wronged us, and a repentant heart toward Him and others that we have wronged. With this new right thinking about God, we will be able to receive both the Holy Spirit's conviction to forgive others and receive God's forgiveness for ourselves.

## Bible Verses

Great peace have they that love Thy law, and nothing shall offend them. *Psalms 119:165*  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ...For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. *Matthew 6:12, 14, 15*

Do not judge, lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged, and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. *Matthew 7:1, 2*

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive your transgressions. *Mark 11:25*

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things ... And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? *Romans 2:1, 3*

Be angry, and yet do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity ...And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you. *Ephesians 4:26,27, 32*

...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone: just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. *Colossians 3:12*

## Quotes

“Nothing in this lost and ruined world bears the meek impress of the Son of God so surely as forgiveness.” *Alice Cary*

“May I tell you why it seems to me a good thing for us to remember wrong that has been done to us? That we may forgive it.” *Charles Dickens*

“Forgiving presupposes remembering.” *Paul Tillich*

“It is vain for you to expect, it is impudent for you to ask of God forgiveness for yourself if you refuse to exercise this forgiving temper as to others.” *Benjamin Hoadly*

“A wise man will make haste to forgive because he knows the true value of time, and he will not suffer it to pass away in unnecessary pain.” *Samuel Johnson*

“Know all and you will pardon all.” *Thomas a Kempis: The Imitation of Christ*

“Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.” *Mark Twain*

“Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean.” *Dag Hammarskjöld*