

Forgiveness

The Command to Forgive¹

- ❑ The Bible commands Christians to forgive others. For example...
 - 📖 “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (*Colossians 3:13, NIV*)

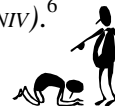
The Ground & Motivation for Forgiveness

- ❑ On one occasion Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”² Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’³ (*Matthew 18:21-22, NIV84*). Then Jesus shared a parable to make his point. Read Matthew 18:23-35.⁴



1. Based on this parable, why must the Christian forgive others?⁵

- ❑ Jesus told his disciples to pray in this way: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (*Matthew 6:12; cf. Luke 11:4*). Then Jesus said, “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (*Matt. 6:14-15, NIV*).⁶



The Cost of Forgiveness

- ❑ What does it mean to forgive? How can we do it? One author suggests the following:⁷
 - Isolate the facts and allow them to stand as history.⁸
 - Put away negative emotional responses.⁹
 - Cancel the debt while assuming the cost of repairs.¹⁰

¹ To ‘forgive’ (ἀφίημι, *aphiēmi*) means ‘to let go, send away; cancel, remit, pardon.’ Also, χαρίζομαι, (*charizomai*-Paul’s typical word) means ‘to deal graciously with,’ emphasizing the gracious nature of the pardon.

² According to a Jewish rabbinical teaching, the limit for a repeated sin was three, so Peter was thinking that seven times was ‘big-hearted’ or very generous.

³ Jesus’ response (an allusion to Genesis 4:24, where the Septuagint uses same wording) is not that forgiveness is limited to a literal 77 times, but that his followers are to forgive without keeping count.

⁴ ‘ten thousand talents’ – huge amount of money (in today’s terms, maybe 6 billion dollars [ESV Study Bible]); ‘a hundred denarii’ – one denarii was the daily wage for a worker or soldier (maybe 1/500,000 of first amount)

⁵ As Christians, we must forgive others because we have been forgiven by God far more than we will ever forgive. The ground and motivation for human forgiveness is God’s forgiveness through Christ. As Christians, we are to forgive “as the Lord forgave [us]” (Col. 3:13). We are to forgive “just as in Christ God forgave [us]” (Eph. 4:32).

⁶ ‘This certainly does not mean that our forgiveness of others earns us the right to be forgiven. It is rather that God forgives only the penitent (i.e. those who have repented or changed their minds toward God) and that one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit. Once our eyes have been opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us appear by comparison extremely [insignificant]. If, on the other hand, we have an exaggerated view of the offenses of others, it proves that we have minimized our own.’ (John Stott, *The Message of The Sermon on the Mount* [Leicester: IVP, 1978], 149-150).

⁷ The three points listed are taken from Dan Hamilton, *Forgiveness* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980), 4.

⁸ The offense or injury is made up of two parts: first, the act that caused the injury; second, the physical, emotional, spiritual, and judicial responses to that act. The act is history. We cannot change that fact.

⁹ We cannot change history, but we can change our responses to the past. Of course, emotions are powerful forces. Should we express these emotions? Or should we suppress them, knowing that suppressed resentment never dies? ‘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.’ (*Ephesians 4:31-32, NIV*)

2. What happens if the offender does not repent (change, apologize)? Must the Christian still “forgive?”¹¹ What about discipline and justice?

📖 Jesus said to his disciples, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (*Luke 17:3b-4, NIV84*).¹²

📖 On the cross, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (*Luke 23:34, NIV*).

📖 “While they were stoning him [to death], Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell to his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep (died)” (*Acts 7:59-60, NIV*).

📖 The apostle Paul wrote, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (*Romans 12:18-21, NIV*).¹³

The Cost of Unforgiveness

3. What happens when we do not forgive?¹⁴



Reflection/Application

- Is there someone you need to forgive? Does it seem too difficult? Once we have received the forgiveness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, we have the spiritual resources to forgive others. It may still be difficult, but the powerful love of God in Christ enables us to do extraordinary things! Have you trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior? As a Christian, you know what you need to do. Pray and ask God for the wisdom and strength to do what is right.

¹⁰ The ultimate example is Christ’s payment for our sins (on the cross) in order to cancel the punishment we deserve. The cost he paid was not only physical suffering and death, but subjection to God’s wrath toward the sins of the world, which he bore for us. Whenever we think we are mistreated, we should think about Christ. He suffered the ultimate cost in securing our forgiveness. (See 1 Peter 2:19-23; 4:13.) However, must a Christian always ‘cancel the punishment or debt?’ For example, what about the special responsibilities of parents, church officials, and civil authorities? Can they always treat the offender ‘as if it never happened?’ What if the offender does not repent (change or apologize)? Even God forgives only those who repent (*Luke 13:3*). See question 2 in the handout.

¹¹ Answering this question can be controversial. Some Christians teach ‘unconditional forgiveness’, but others say the answer to the question is complex. Robertson McQuilkin says that forgiveness has two basic meanings: 1) remission of guilt; and 2) relinquishment of resentment. While some say that love demands unconditional forgiveness, he says we must distinguish between the demands of love and the demands of forgiveness. ‘Does love cancel the debt? Sometimes. Does love let go of resentment? Always.’ Furthermore, love sometimes demands that the offender be held accountable (even if the offender repents). ‘Love strives to hold forgiveness and accountability in tension.’ See McQuilkin’s article *The Two Sides of Forgiveness* (http://mcquilkinlibrary.com/tglib_sessions/2sidesforg/).

¹² This verse is sometimes used to argue that we should forgive only if the offender repents. However, the primary teaching of this verse is unlimited forgiveness if the offender repents. It does not rule out unconditional forgiveness.

¹³ This passage helps answer the question ‘Should we forgive the unrepentant?’ Christians should send away (get rid of) all feelings of resentment, bitterness and revenge, and entrust everything to God who judges justly. Ultimately, forgiveness (and judgment) is from God, and the offender is accountable to Him.

¹⁴ Of course, the offender is not released. But neither are we. We stay in bondage. This may include bondage to the offender’s inaction (waiting for them to make things right), bondage to resentment and bitterness (which is destructive), bondage to the evil desire for revenge. Unforgiveness means a broken or damaged relationship with the offender, which also adversely affects other relationships, including our relationship with God. (Of course, reconciliation may not occur because of the offender’s unwillingness to respond appropriately.) A Christian’s unforgiveness also gives a false impression of what Christ is like, and denies the power of the gospel.