

God's Faithful Are Forgiven and Forgiving

Dub McClish

Introduction

If asked to list ten of the most desirable and admirable human traits, likely even hardened sinners would list a willingness to forgive near the top. It is without dispute a mark of maturity and compassion at every level of society, including the home, the business world, the neighborhood, among nations, and certainly, in the church. It is one of three triplet traits that are far too seldom seen: *giving*, *thanksgiving*, and *forgiving*. Usually, where one is found the others are not far removed.

Two principal words in the Greek New Testament are translated "forgive" in the American Standard Version:

1. *Aphemi*, meaning literally to send away or to cancel a debt, and figuratively, to cancel the guilt and punishment due because of sin. Jesus used this word in addressing the man in Capernaum who was crippled with palsy: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven" (Mat. 9:2).
2. *Charizomai*, meaning literally to bestow a gift or favor. It is used in reference to God's forgiveness of us: "And you, being dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, you, I say, did he make alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses" (Col. 2:13). It is also used to refer to the forgiveness that we should have for each other: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

We may summarize these definitions by saying that forgiveness means that we cease trying to punish our offender because we have cancelled his or her guilt toward us. This is a gift we give to him or her.

God Leads the Way in Forgiveness

John wrote, "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). I understand John to be saying that God teaches us how to love others (both God and men) by His own generous love manifested toward us (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; et al.). We would not know the meaning of *love* apart from God's demonstration of it. His ultimate and incomprehensible love must ever be the standard by which all love is measured. So it is with forgiveness. We would not know the real meaning of forgiveness were it not for God's demonstration of it to sinful mankind.

God's forgiveness involves the **desire** to forgive, which relates to a merciful and gracious attitude toward rebellious men. We see this in the hint of hope in God's words to the

serpent just outside of Eden: “He [the seed of woman] shall bruise thy head” (Gen. 3:15). When God promised Abram, “...in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed...” (22:18), He was referring to His plan of forgiveness to be offered mankind through His Son, the Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). “Remission of sins” (i.e., forgiveness of sins [Luke 24:46–47; Acts 2:38]) is “the promise” of God to which Peter referred on Pentecost: “For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him” (v. 39). It is my judgment that this reaches all the way back to God’s promise to Abram to bless all the nations through his seed.

God not only possesses the desire, but also the **readiness** to forgive, a trait that His faithful servants have ever recognized in Him. Moses proclaimed of God and to God, upon the making of the second set of stone tablets in Sinai, “...Jehovah, Jehovah, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth; keeping lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” (Exo. 34:6–7). Nehemiah said of God, “But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness...” (Neh. 9:17). David extolled God, saying, “For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness unto all them that call upon thee” (Psa. 86:5).

God’s desire and willingness to forgive resulted in His plan for our forgiveness. Men, separated from God by sin (Isa. 59:1–2), could do nothing to effect their own forgiveness. There was not enough treasure in all the world to buy it. None could be good enough to earn it. Men had no means whereby they could place God under obligation to grant it. Yet men deserved to die and were under the condemnation of death without it (Rom. 6:23; 8:2). God sent the eternal Word in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son, into the world to die in the place of sinful men, offering His spotless and pure blood for them and in their stead (Heb. 9:11–14; 26). A function of the new covenant which Jeremiah prophesied, and which Christ ratified with His blood was that God would “...be merciful to their iniquities, and their sins will I remember no more” (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12).

But is God’s forgiveness bestowed unconditionally and “automatically” upon sinful men because of Christ’s atoning death? If so, all men are forgiven and will be saved at last in spite of what they believe and how they live—in fact, in spite of themselves. If so, the atheist who blasphemes God with his dying breath has the same everlasting spiritual hope as the most devoted believer. This is the philosophy of Universalism, which constitutes a *carte blanche* for sin. It is manifestly false on several grounds, but only one is sufficient to expose it: It is contrary

to the nature of God according to the teaching of Scripture. Many will be lost, compared to only a few who will be saved, and not even all believers will be saved (Mat. 7:13-14; 21-23). The entire gist of Scripture contradicts the philosophy of Universalism.

If men are not saved universally, then what distinguishes between those whom God will forgive and those whom He will not? Is He capricious, forgiving one and not forgiving another on some sort of unconditional impulse (per Calvinism's dogma of unconditional election)? The Scriptures answer with a strong negative: "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34; cf. Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Col. 3:25; et al.). If forgiveness/salvation is not universal and God is not capricious, we are left with but one conclusion: forgiveness of God is **conditional**. That is, there are certain conditions upon which God freely and graciously justifies men. He pardons and counts righteous those who comply with His conditions as though they had not sinned; those who fail to comply with His conditions will not (and cannot) be pardoned and will be eternally lost.

God grants forgiveness to the sinner who has never become God's child upon the fulfillment of various conditions, as specified in the New Testament. One must believe with the heart and confess that faith with the mouth in order to be saved/forgiven (Rom. 10:10). However, the believers in Jerusalem were told by the apostles on Pentecost to "repent...and be baptized...unto the remission..." of their sins (Acts 2:38). The apostles in Jerusalem did not give one set of conditions while Paul gave another in these two passages. Correct exegesis combines them to learn God's plan for man's forgiveness of "alien" sins. A grave, yea, a soul-damning, mistake is made by those who isolate only one or two of the Scriptural conditions for forgiveness and ignore the rest. It is manifest from these two passages and borne out in numerous others that God requires men to:

1. Believe in His Son and the saving efficacy of His blood,
2. Repent of (i.e., change his mind and his behavior concerning) his sins,
3. Verbally confess his faith in the crucified, resurrected Christ, and
4. Be baptized in water for the forgiveness of his sins.

God promises to forgive those who follow this Divinely-revealed and ordained prescription, not upon their merits or actions, but upon the merits of the blood of Christ, which He poured out on their behalf (Heb. 9:22; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; et al.). At the same time and upon the same conditions one is (1) spiritually born into the family of God (John 3:5) because He has become a

child of God and is (2) added to the Lord's church (Acts 2:41, 47), God's people who have been called out of the world by the Gospel (2 The. 2:14). Those who refuse or neglect these Gospel conditions remain in their sins, which will separate them from God eternally (2 The. 1:8-9).

However, one does not become sinlessly perfect, strive as he may for this goal, upon becoming a child of God. In fact, to claim sinlessness is to be guilty of the sin of lying (1 John 1:8-10). Therefore, as children of God, we stand in need of God's forgiveness from time to time. God in His grace has made provision for our forgiveness, also. We must repent of and confess our sins and pray that God will forgive us (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9), upon which, He has promised to do so.

There is no greater joy that one could have than to know that the Creator and Ruler of the universe whom we have offended has forgiven us. The words are neither meaningless nor merely incidental that tell us that the Pentecostians "gladly received the word" that they could be forgiven (Acts 2:39, KJV), that the Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing" upon obeying the Gospel in baptism (Acts 8:39), or that the jailor in Philippi "rejoiced greatly" upon their obedience to the Gospel plan of salvation (Acts 16:34).

As we often sing, it is a "blessed assurance" that we can be forgiven of God and that when we comply with His conditions of forgiveness, He bestows His gracious forgiveness upon us. Several statements of Scripture provide the basis of this assurance:

1. God loved us so much He gave His only begotten Son to save those who believe (John 3:16). He will not let the blood of His Son be wasted by failing in His promise to the faithful.
2. Concerning His promises and our redemption at last, Paul declared, "God is faithful" (1 Cor. 1:9).
3. Paul wrote: "Faithful is the saying: For if we died with him, we shall also live with him: if we endure, we shall also reign with him..." (2 Tim. 2:11-12).
4. God will not forget our work and the love, which we show toward His name (Heb. 6:10).
5. God has "sworn with an oath" that we may "lay hold of the hope set before us" and in this (as in all things) "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18).
6. Paul exhorted: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not; for he is faithful that promised" (Heb. 10:23).

Although God has given us every assurance in His Word that He forgives when we comply with His will, sometimes men and women still are reluctant to forgive themselves. While we should not be easier on ourselves than God is, neither should we be harder on

ourselves than He is! There is no reason whatsoever to allow a sin of which one has repented and been cleansed by the blood of Christ to continue to haunt one with guilt. Paul is a great teacher here. He obviously never completely forgot his sinful behavior of persecuting Christians; even years after he obeyed the Gospel he referred to himself as the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). However, he did not drown himself in feelings of guilt and remain preoccupied with those events, as terrible as they were. It is possible that he had such things at least partly in mind when he wrote that he forgot “the things which are behind” as he pressed on “toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phi. 3:13-14). He knew that he had done what God commanded in order to be forgiven, and he forgave himself. Thus he was able to apply all of his energies to the present and the future, rather than futilely worrying about the past. We see a similar pattern in David.

The Forgiven Must Forgive

Forgiveness is not only a beautiful and admirable trait; it is an obligatory trait for Christians. There are several reasons why we must practice forgiveness of others:

1. **Christ commanded it:** “And whensoever ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against anyone” (Mark 11:25a).
2. **Our continued forgiveness of God depends upon it.** In the last part of Mark 11:25, after telling us to forgive others, the Lord said, “that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” The pictures of full forgiveness and failure to forgive are placed side by side in stark contrast in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mat. 18:24-35). First a king forgave one of his servants an amount that he could never hope to pay, upon his plea for mercy. The servant then found a man who owed him an insignificant sum and who begged for pity of him as he had just begged of the king. However, the forgiven man proved himself an unforgiving man and had his debtor thrown into prison. When servants of the king reported these things to him, the king called the man he had forgiven and severely chastised him for showing no mercy so soon after receiving much mercy. He then reinstated his huge debt and delivered him to be tormented till he should pay it. The Christ then tells us that God will do as the king in the parable if we, who have been forgiven so much, refuse to forgive others. The same truth is taught at the conclusion of the Lord’s model prayer (Mat. 6:14-15). Someone has well said: “When we refuse to forgive, we destroy the bridge over which we must pass in order to be forgiven.”
3. **We have been forgiven.** First, as Christians, God has forgiven us. Paul argues from this very basis that we must forgive each other: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). Not only has God forgiven all of us, but also, others have forgiven us from time to time as we have committed blunders, sinned against others, and have stood in need of forgiveness.

4. **The “Golden Rule” demands it.** We all want others to be ready to forgive us when we stumble, offend, or sin in some way. This, therefore, is the way we should behave toward others, because Jesus taught: “All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them” (Mat. 7:12).

Some Questions and Answers About Forgiveness

How Often Are We to Forgive Each Other?

If someone sins against me, repents, and asks for – and receives – forgiveness, repeats the sin, and asks for forgiveness again, how many times should I forgive him? Peter once asked this question and suggested what he must have thought to be a generous answer: “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times” (Mat. 18:21). The Lord’s answer must have startled Peter: “I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven” (v. 22). It is rather obvious that He did not mean that 490 times was to be the literal limit and after that we could refuse to forgive. Rather, He was teaching that we should not keep count, but that we should keep on forgiving.

In a similar passage the Lord teaches: “And if he [thy brother] sin against thee seven times in the day, and seven times turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:4). The lesson should be clear beyond misunderstanding: We are not to be sparing or stingy with our forgiveness. Night or day, as long as we live, we must stand ready to forgive.

Must or Can We Forgive if the Offender Refuses to Repent?

God’s example of forgiveness answers, “No.” God’s Word constantly urges men in both the Old and the New Testament to repent so that they may be forgiven. I have not been able to find a single case anywhere in the Bible where God ever promised or extended forgiveness apart from repentance (which in its fullness includes recognition and confession of the sin, regretting the sin, doing all one can to correct the wrong done, and ceasing the practice of it). Men have only two alternatives: Repent or perish (Luke 13:3)! (This is not to imply that repentance is the only condition of forgiveness in every circumstance, but it is simply to illustrate that, at the very least, God has always required repentance). God does not forgive unconditionally, as we have already emphasized, and forgiveness has always required man’s repentance. Paul told the Athenians, “He [God] commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent” (Acts 17:30).

The teaching of our Lord also answers, “No.” Jesus said, “If thy brother sin, rebuke him; and **if he repent**, forgive him. And **if he sin against thee seven times in the day, and seven times turn again to thee, saying, I repent**; thou shalt forgive him [emph. DM] (Luke 17:3–4).

Twice in this passage Jesus emphasizes our duty to forgive offenders, but also, twice He emphasizes that our forgiveness is dependent upon the repentance of the offender.

There are those who have suggested that Christ implied that God bestowed forgiveness upon His impenitent crucifiers when He prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). However, this could not be so for at least three reasons:

1. It places Christ in the position of asking His Father to contradict His immutable will which requires repentance of the sinner.
2. It places Christ in the position of contradicting Himself (Luke 13:3; 17:3–4).
3. It makes the apostles’ words on Pentecost to the crucifiers of Christ superfluous at best and ridiculous at worst.

Clearly, the apostles were addressing those responsible for the Lord’s crucifixion (Acts 2:22–23). The apostles told them, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins” (v. 38). If God instantaneously granted the Lord’s prayer on the cross for the forgiveness of these people short of repentance, then they did not need to repent because they had already received the remission of sins some fifty days before! The fact that they were told to repent and be baptized in order to receive forgiveness on Pentecost is positive proof that they were not immediately forgiven when Jesus prayed for their forgiveness. What we are to understand from Jesus’ prayer on the cross, therefore, is that His crucifiers would be granted the opportunity to repent so that they could be forgiven, which is exactly what Pentecost provided. We are to understand the dying prayer of Stephen in the same way (Acts 7:60). At least one among those who encouraged his death (Saul of Tarsus) would subsequently hear and obey the Gospel and have his sins washed away in the blood of Christ (22:16).

It is manifestly impossible for God to forgive those who sin against Him before they repent. Surely, none would argue that mere men must do that which even God cannot do!

How Are We to Treat an Offender Who Will Not Repent?

How does God treat impenitent sinners? He is long-suffering, so much so that He delays the sending of His Son in the desire that none should perish, but that all should repent (2 Pet.

3:9). He goes on blessing with blessings of His physical universe, even those who curse Him: “He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust” (Mat. 5:45). God extends kindness and goodness in an effort to bring men to repentance (Rom. 2:4). It is evident that God goes on doing good to His enemies – those who are sinning against Him – in hopes that their hearts may be softened and that they will repent. Jesus evinced the same spirit through His trials so that Peter could write of Him, “When he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not” (1 Pet. 2:23). Even on the cross, as already discussed, He did not curse His crucifiers, but He prayed for them, seeking their good. God and His Son are ever seeking and hoping for repentance in men so that they can extend forgiveness.

We are likewise taught to love our enemies, to pray for our persecutors, and to bless those who curse us to be like our Heavenly Father (Mat. 5:44; Luke 6:27–28). The response of our fleshly lusts to those who offend us is usually far short of this. The reaction of most is one of revenge, seeking to inflict injury for injury, or, at the very least to stop speaking to the offender. However, such treatment of those who sin against us is not after the example of our Father in Heaven and of His Son. It is not our place to avenge ourselves of wrong done against us (Rom. 12:17, 19–20). With Paul, being reviled, we are to bless rather than revile in return (1 Cor. 4:12). It is one of the most difficult of all things for us to do, and it is far easier to preach it than to practice it, but we are to exercise a benevolent and helpful spirit toward those who sin against us, standing always ready to forgive when repentance has been manifested.

How Should We Forgive When Penitence Is Forthcoming?

Again, God is our example. How does He forgive? How is His forgiveness described? David wrote, “As far as the east is from the west, So far hath he removed our transgressions from us” (Psa. 103:12). Peter told the people in Jerusalem: “Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out....” (Acts 3:19). God completely forgives, forgives fully from the heart, nurturing no malice, holding no grudge that is quick to recall the wrong done and to seek vengeance for it. Likewise, when someone has sought our forgiveness upon due and genuine repentance, we must grant it fully and freely, just as we beseech God to forgive us when we sin.

Sometimes we hear the expression, “When God forgives, He forgets,” and this is used to indicate how God forgives and therefore how we should forgive. While there is a measure of truth in this statement, it is not altogether true. True, Jeremiah said that the new covenant God

would give would be characterized by the following from God: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more" (Jer. 31:34). However, the lack of remembrance here relates directly to the release from guilt once possessed by the sinner rather than to literal forgetfulness of the sinful act itself. Nathan told David concerning his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, "Jehovah also hath put away thy sin" (2 Sam. 12:13). However, several years later, in the reign of David's grandson Abijam, God still had not utterly forgotten those sinful acts of David. He had the writer of 1 Kings remind the reader of David's sin pertaining to Uriah (15:5). Obviously, the sin had been forgiven by God, but not completely forgotten. While Peter's denials of Christ were forgiven, years afterward the writers of the Gospel accounts were inspired to record them, showing that God had not erased those sad events from His memory.

Some people have been led to believe that unless they erase every memory of a wrong done to them, they have not forgiven it. However, even God does not utterly forget the deed itself when He forgives. The significance of forgiveness is not in whether or not we remember a wrong done for which the doer has repented, but whether or not we give the gift of canceling the guilt of the doer and cease to hold the feeling that he must be punished for his offense.

Blessings of Forgiveness

As in all other things God requires of us, there are blessings in practicing forgiveness.

1. We have already noticed that we are able to receive forgiveness of God only if we are willing to extend forgiveness to others.
2. Another blessing we receive when we forgive is the release of negative emotions and attitudes that can poison our souls. Such things as bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, railing, and malice possess the heart of one who is unwilling to forgive (Eph. 4:31-32).
3. It is a blessing to the offender when he knows that he has been genuinely forgiven. None of us enjoys living under a cloud of guilt, blame, and hostility, whether from God or men.
4. If all brethren would practice what God's Word teaches on forgiveness it would prevent the division of countless homes and congregations and would restore harmony and peace to countless others that have been sundered.

Conclusion

News reports are full of tragedies every day that never would have occurred had men and women possessed a willingness to forgive. Even this very day it is safe to announce that murders will be committed, crimes against property will be perpetrated, homes will be broken up, friendships will be severed, and churches will be divided all for lack of the practice of forgiveness. There are wonderful examples of this spirit in such men as Joseph toward his

brothers and of David toward Saul. However, the greatest example of all will forever remain the forgiveness God extends to our sin-cursed world through His Only Begotten Son.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Bellview Lectures, hosted by the Bellview Church of Christ, Pensacola, FL, May 8–12, 1993. It was published in the book of the lectures, *God's Pattern for Christian Living*, ed. Bobby Liddell (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ).]

Attribution: Printed from *TheScripturecache.com*, owned and administered by Dub McClish.