

Is Forgiveness Always Right and Required?



Posted By [Justin Taylor](#) On January 10, 2007 @ 2:25 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

I wrote and posted the following a couple of years ago. Since a lot of readers weren't around back then, I thought it might be worth re-posting. I'd be interested in your feedback.

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In the [above post](#) ^[1] I mentioned the provocative commentaries by Dennis Prager and Greg Koukl arguing that “to forgive” is not always right. This is my own inclination as well, but I’ve decided to study the issue in more depth and to see if this position is indeed biblical. To do so, I’ve had to widen the scope of the investigation and address some related issues.

What Is Divine Forgiveness?

Calvin explained that when God forgives us, he “remits all the punishment that we had deserved” ([Institutes](#) ^[2] 3.4.30). W.G.T. Shedd argues that divine forgiveness means that “the punishment due to sin is released or not inflicted upon the transgressor” ([Dogmatic Theology](#) ^[3], p. 698). In the application of our redemption, God first regenerates our heart, then grants us faith, and by means of that faith, gives us the forgiveness of sins (our debt is removed) and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (a perfect record is granted). The Christian life involves a lifelong process of confessing our sins and forgiving the sins of those who sin against us—and if we do, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins (1 John 1:9).

What Is Horizontal Forgiveness?

Horizontal forgiveness could mean a number of different things: (1) accepting someone who “asks for forgiveness”; (2) forgetting that an offense has occurred, i.e., not keeping “a record of wrongs”; (3) restoring a relationship back to its pre-offense condition; (4) treating the person as if the offense never occurred in the first place; (5) desiring that only good, and not punishment or consequences, would befall the offender. I’m sure that most people would argue for a combination of some of the above. Scripture does not explicitly define horizontal forgiveness. Therefore, to understand the concept behind the terms, we have to engage in an inductive approach (which is outlined, in part, below).

Ken Sande’s Definitions and Distinctions

Before doing so, I want to look at the work of Ken Sande, president of [Peacemaker Ministries](#) ^[4], who has thought about the biblical basis for and the practical ramifications of forgiveness as few others have. In his excellent book [The Peacemaker](#) ^[5], he defines forgiveness as follows: “To forgive someone means to release from liability to suffer punishment or penalty.” He explains:

We must release the person who has wronged us from the penalty of being separated from us. We must not hold wrongs against others, not think about them, and not punish others for them. Therefore, forgiveness may be described as a decision to make four promises:

[1] “I will not think about this incident.”

[2] “I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.”

[3] “I will not talk to others about this incident.”

[4] “I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.”

Sande goes on to suggest that ideally, repentance should precede forgiveness (Luke 17:3). But he also rightly points out that we should be quick to forgive minor offenses against us, not insisting on every case upon expressed repentance.

When repentance is not forthcoming, Sande suggests that we think of forgiveness as a two-stage process: (1) *positional forgiveness*, and (2) *transactional forgiveness*. *Positional forgiveness* entails an unconditional commitment to God that you strive not to dwell on the incident, that you have an attitude of mercy and love, and that you not seek vengeance. In other words, it seeks to fulfill promise #1 listed above. You are in a “position of forgiveness”—ready to reconcile upon repentance. *Transactional forgiveness* is a commitment to the offender to fulfill the other three promises, but it is conditioned upon their repentance.

For the most part, I think Sande gives wise, biblical advice that applies to the vast majority of situations where we have been wronged by another. I am unpersuaded, however, that Sande’s first promise—that I will not think about this incident—is biblically required. God *does* say that he will “remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:34b; cf. Isa. 43:25), but divine remembrance here is to be understood in analogical language. Just as God does not literally “remember” the rainbow (in the way that we “remember” where we left our coat), so in the same way I do not believe that God literally forgets our sin. The language is judicial and covenantal—God will not punish us on the basis of those sins. The same would be true for biblical statements that, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has [God] removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12) and statements that God does not “keep a record of sins” (Ps. 130:3-4—compare 1 Cor. 13:).

Furthermore, I don’t think that on the horizontal level we are required to abstain from thinking about offensive incidents. This might apply if I say a poorly-timed word to my wife and it makes her upset. But if a man murders my daughter, I will think about the incident everyday for the rest of my life—even if the murderer repents and is forgiven. I agree with Sande that we should have a merciful, loving, non-vengeful attitude. But I don’t see that that entails never again thinking about the incident.

As another example, think of church discipline—the process instituted by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20.

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound

in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

It is difficult for me to see how treating an unrepentant sinner as a Gentile and a tax collector is compatible with making an unconditional promise to God to “not think about this incident.” (Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1-9!)

The second critique of Sande’s otherwise helpful and wise approach is that it does not seem to adequately distinguish between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. Let’s return to the scenario of a man whose daughter has been murdered. Let’s suppose that the murderer repents of his sin and seeks reconciliation with the victim’s parents. Is it plausible, and is it biblically required, that the parents will make promises to the effect that they won’t bring up the incident, won’t use it against the perpetrator, and won’t talk to others about the incident? Such a promise would preclude any testimony in court. These promises would apply in the spiritual kingdom, but not in the context of human courts. I may desire that the murderer repents and is accepted into heaven, and yet also desire that he suffer the temporal consequences on earth. In other words, I think we have to make some further distinctions.

What Does the Bible Teach About Horizontal Forgiveness?

In our English Bibles, there are approximately 130 references to some form of the word “forgive.” The vast majority of occurrences reference God forgiving his people or an individual. Only about 12 passages deal with horizontal forgiveness (Matt. 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; 11:4; 17:3; John 20:23; 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 2 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

Here is my attempt to set forth the principles I see in the NT regarding forgiveness of one another:

Flying as a banner over all interaction with those have offended us is Jesus’s command, “Love your enemies.”

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you . . . for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35). “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Rom. 12:20=Prov. 25:21).

Negatively phrased, we are to be free from hatred, bitterness, and vengeance at all times.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31). “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15). “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

We are to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Forgive one another, “as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col. 3:13).

Conversely, we ask God to forgive us as we have forgiven others.

“[Father] forgive us our debts, as we also have been forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). “[Father] forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4).

If we forgive others, we will be forgiven; if we do not forgive others, we will not be forgiven.

“If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:12). “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). “Forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:12). “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you [punishment], if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matt. 18:35).

Horizontal forgiveness is not explicitly defined, though it is connected with vertical forgiveness (see above) and is connected with other commands.

We are to “be *kind* to one another, *tenderhearted*, forgiving each other” (Eph. 4:32). We are to *bear* with one another and, “if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other” (Col. 3:13). In Luke 6:37, “to forgive” is listed in the same category as *judge not* and *condemn not*.

The Remaining Question

Based upon all that we’ve seen, this question remains in my mind: Is it possible for a Christian to remain fully obedient to Scripture, with kindness and tenderheartedness, loving his enemy as himself, and yet at the same time *not* granting forgiveness to an unrepentant offender?

From what I can discern from the evidence in the Bible, and from what the [Westminster Confession of Faith](#) ^[6] calls “good and necessary consequence,” I’m persuaded that the answer is *yes*. “Love your enemies” is something that we should do at all times and in all places. It is modeled after God’s love for his enemies, whom he loves even when they are “unjust” and “evil” (Luke 6:35). At the same time, our forgiveness of others is likewise modeled upon God’s forgiveness of sinners, whom he forgives *conditioned* upon their repentance. God does not forgive apart from repentance; neither should we. In major offenses, we are not to forgive the unrepentant.

In the event of a tragedy that involves the loss of human life brought about by wanton human sin, it is therefore wrong for Christians to call upon immediate forgiveness in the absence of repentance. Such a call both cheapens and misunderstands the biblical doctrine of forgiveness.

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