

The Purpose of Forgiveness

Christians know that forgiving others is important because Christ says, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15) and since we are all sinners we *need* God’s forgiveness. However, some Christians seem to simply forgive those who wrong them as though there was nothing to it. Before any resolution has been made or any attempts at reconciliation, they claim to forgive and believe that this makes everything right.

First, there are two definitions for the word “forgive” which I think are often confused and yet are distinct from each other. One is “to excuse for a fault or an offense; pardon” and the second is “to renounce anger or resentment against”¹. The first means the offense is no longer recognized and it’s as though they are not guilty, and the second means you’re not angry or resentful, but says nothing about whether you still hold them guilty or not. So they cannot be used interchangeably because one is talking about absolving guilt and the other about holding anger.

There are verses concerning anger apart from forgiveness. Matt 5:22 says, “But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” Eph 4:26-27 says, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” Eph 4:31-32 says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Col 3:8 says, “But now put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth.” 1 Tim 2:8 says, “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.” James 1:19-20 says, “Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.”

In the passages concerning anger, it’s clear that anger is dangerous. It leads to people saying things they shouldn’t, and also into straying from loving not only your brother but also your enemy. So it is right to “forgive” in terms of removing anger from your heart to improve proper discernment, however there’s a reason why the word “anger” is used apart from the word “forgive” in the Bible. The Bible distinctly uses the first definition meant to absolve guilt, not the second to remove anger.

Imagine you cause someone wrong and you don’t realize it. You believe it is right, but had it been brought to your attention with instruction, you would have seen you were wrong and would make an effort not to repeat the wrong, sparing others. However, instead of telling you, your Christian brother decides to save you the trouble and forgives you automatically. Now you’re left to commit more wrongs until someone else hopefully corrects you! Is your brother loving you and others by doing this?

Now imagine that you do something right, but your Christian brother thinks it is wrong and you don’t realize it. However, once again he decides to save you the trouble and forgives you automatically, just as he imagines God will forgive him. Hasn’t he already passed judgment on you by necessitating forgiveness? You can’t pardon

¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992

something that doesn't exist to be pardoned. Does he show love by not taking the time to understand why you may be right and he may be wrong?

Think about Matt 18:12-17 where Christ says, "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. 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. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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." If the command is meant to be understood in light of the sheep metaphor, then the reconciliation is meant for the salvation of the lost brother. Not following the steps Jesus describes is like letting a lost sheep continue away from the fold.

Not much further in Matt 18, you have Peter asking about how many times he should forgive a brother's sin, v.21. Jesus says seventy times seven (v.22), and follows it with the following parable, "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt 18:23-35). What can be gleaned from this is that an act towards forgiveness is initiated by the accuser trying to reconcile an owed debt. The accused is allowed to repent, and *following* the repentance the debt is removed. Forgiveness happens *after* repentance.

Another example out of Christ's teachings is Luke 17:3-4 where He says, "Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents*, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I *repent*,' you must forgive him." Notice that Christ doesn't just say to forgive, he says to rebuke your brother for your brother's sake and forgive him after he repents. Also, repentance is an important part of why Christ did come into this world, Christ said to the Apostles, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

There are also two instances where Christ explicitly tells those whom He forgives to not sin anymore, implying repentance. John 5:14 says, "Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.'" And John 8:10-11 says, "Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.'"

When Peter confronted Simon the magician about his impure heart, he also indicated repentance had to come before forgiveness. Acts 8:18-23 says, "Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.'"

In 2 Cor 2:5-8 Paul writes, "But if any one has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to you all. For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough; so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." In this Paul mentions someone who is quite remorseful for whatever he has done; he is repentant. Paul does not say that the punishment should never have been carried out and that forgiveness should have been immediate, instead he says because the punished person now understands the gravity of his wrongdoing he should be forgiven.

In 2 Cor 12:20-21 Paul writes, "For I fear that perhaps I may come and find you not what I wish, and that you may find me not what you wish; that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned before and have not yet repented of the impurity, immorality, and licentiousness which they have practiced." From this it is also clear that Paul is not considering the forgiveness (pardon of the wrongdoing) of those who have not repented, rather he's afraid he'll be led to mourn over them and their state. Although he may not be acting out of anger, he still understands that resolution by repentance is still required for *their* sake.

2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." This says that in order for us not to perish we must repent. If to forgive is to pardon, then once someone is forgiven it should be as though they had not sinned. But this says that God works with us so that we may all reach repentance, which suggests He isn't yet responding to us as though we had not sinned until we do repent.

To some, this may sound as though if we do not repent before we die then we all perish, but that's not the case. Paul writes in Phil 1:6, "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." God will finish what he started in us because He has specially chosen each one of us. In Romans

8:24-30 Paul writes, “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

In Proverbs, there are verses that describe the necessity of repentance before forgiveness. Proverbs 28:13 says, “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” Notice that more than just confession is required for mercy, the transgressions must also be *forsaken*. Also, Proverbs 22:10 says, “Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease.” If no one is ever confronted about their abuses, how can you drive out the scoffer? If you forgive the scoffer each time he causes trouble without his repentance, he will continue his abuse indefinitely. Proverbs 21:7 says, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” Although sacrifice probably refers to animal sacrifices, if you extend it to mean giving up something precious (like your comfort), then by ignoring a transgressor and not seeking his repentance, you discard righteousness and justice in place of your own sacrifice, which is less acceptable to God!

In conclusion, not holding a grudge and dealing with your anger are different than the forgiveness described in the Bible. They are extremely necessary actions in order to continue in a loving manner towards others, but they do not pardon a wrongdoer of an offense. That can only be done by seeking repentance from the wrongdoer. This process is called reconciliation which can also lead to an understanding which finds the apparent wrongdoer at no fault. However, forgiveness can only be given to those who recognize their sin completely for what it is, so that they also turn away from continuing in that sin. In other words, forgiveness requires repentance.

Now, does accepting the truth about forgiveness requiring repentance mean that if people don't repent that they should then be treated without love? Does this mean that we can never fulfill God's requirement that we should forgive others as we wish Him to forgive us? Certainly there are people within whom we've never had an opportunity to find a repentant heart. Does this mean we abandon them by not forgiving them? On the contrary, by not forgiving them we are forced to work with them through patience and perseverance – a tremendous benefit to them if they should repent. Wouldn't you wish God to do the same for you?

The great and first commandment is “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37). If we strive to love God with everything, then what we should want from Him most is whatever will allow us to love Him better. If God gave us a blanket forgiveness and pardoned us so that He didn't hold anything against us anymore, and didn't care about whether or not we

did what was right in His sight, would that help us do what we ought to want to do? What I want most from God is for Him to teach me my sin so that I may be able to always love Him better, not for Him to ignore my sin in my sinful state so that I can continue to do what He does not love. As Proverbs 3:11-12 says, "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." And Proverbs 10:17 says, "He who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray."

So, I want God to rebuke me in a gentle way with all patience and long-suffering so that I may be able to love Him better, and repent (turn away) from what does not please Him. Likewise, when I forgive others, I forgive them as I desire God to forgive me. I will seek their repentance with the same gentle and patient long-suffering so that they may also be able to love God better.

A difference between God and us is that we don't currently see all things clearly, whereas God does see clearly. So, maybe we could be wishing repentance from someone who has not really done wrong! Yet, if we are seeking their repentance with love, and are also seeking guidance from God, then we will also be humbly aware that we are still imperfect and could be wrong, and we will continuously weigh not only what knowledge God gives us that may lead to their repentance, but also that which may reveal no need for repentance.

There's also an issue about being able to tell whether someone is repentant or not. Since we are not omniscient like God, we can't always tell if someone is being sincere. However, I believe there are hints in scripture concerning how to discern the depth of repentance.

Along with prayer and asking God for His discernment, there are visual hints that indicate true repentance. In the parable of the unforgiving servant of Matt 18, the servant didn't just plead with the lord to be generous and exonerate him from his debt, but he fell on his knees and eagerly promised he would repay it all! He showed a willingness to do whatever it would take and make whatever sacrifices he could make to clear up his debt and not be thrown into prison. These are signs of a true repentant, that they wish to make things right.

Also there is the parable of the prodigal son, where the son realizes the gravity of his error and reveals what he knows he deserves before his father by saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). With all sadness and pain, the son showed his repentance by revealing what he expected and deserved. His son was quite willing to accept not being treated as a son, and his father knew this. But his father accepted his repentance and, with grace, forgave him saying, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24).

In 2 Cor 7, Paul mentions a person who is becoming "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow," so he advises that they "forgive and comfort" him. Repentance is like the faith described in James 2:17. James writes "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Likewise, repentance without works is nothing. Someone who repents will have the visible works of repentance – the fruit of repentance.

If for some reason we never see our transgressor's repentance before we or they die, does it matter as long as we are always vigilant for it? In Heaven we'll be able to see

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April 5th, 2004

more clearly those things which were unclear here on earth, so I'd imagine we'd have the opportunity to forgive even then, if it is necessary.