

Forgiveness: Does Forgiving Mean Forgetting?

Straight Talk – Part VI

Selected Scripture

Introduction

Today, we will dive into a biblical word study on forgiveness. One of the most wonderful things that I believe God has given us, within the dynamic of our personal relationships, is not only an example of forgiveness, but principles on how to forgive one another. The question is not, “Will we offend one another?” – which is answered, “Yes, we will.” – the question is, “How do we get over the fact that we have been offended and we are offenders?”

Now Satan knows, obviously, that the way to conquer our fellowship is to divide and conquer. If there is an individual who is at odds with another, there is alienation. This eventually, spreads to another and then, to another. It continues to compound and, like interest, soon outweighs the anticipation, the excitement, the joy that comes from worshipping and fellowshiping together. It thwarts love.

Some False Evasions of Forgiveness

We have times when we have offended or are offended; we have times when we are at odds with one another, and because of this, Satan has created some false evasions of forgiveness. We have all fought these. So today, let us be real honest with ourselves first, and then, before the Lord, as we look at ways we have gotten around and circumvented this whole arena of forgiveness.

1. The first evasion of forgiveness is the thought, “Well, they’ll just do it again.”

This is a somewhat fatalistic view towards humanity. A really optimistic person might say something like, “Since they will offend again, or since they have in the past, and there is a pattern, why should I forgive?”

This was the issue with Peter, when he said,
... *“Lord, how often shall ... I forgive ...? Up to seven times?”* (Matthew 18:21)

Peter was probably thinking, “That sounds like a great number to me. It’s two times plus one what the rabbis teach us to do.”

Jesus Christ answered,

... *seventy times seven.* (Matthew 18:22)

In other words, a limitless number of times.

The principle is that no matter how many times; no matter how often someone offends, we forgive. We will look at this in more detail today.

2. The second false evasion of forgiveness is the attitude, “Well, I’ll just take it to the Lord.”

God is not part of the problem, He is the solution. Yet, He waits, as we will see in two passages of scripture today, for us to take the responsibility. He is not waiting for us to take it to Him, although we have the attitude before the Lord of prayer as we approach, but we go to the individuals. This involves at least three people – ourselves, the person we have offended or the person who has offended us, and God, who observes all.

3. The third false evasion of forgiveness is the idea, “I just won’t think about it.”

This is something we have all told ourselves, is it not? We think, “Well, they’ve offended me, but I’m going to be strong and just won’t think about it.”

I think we get caught up in the attitude that if we do not think about it, then somehow, we are fulfilling what God wants us to do because we are strong. So we just will not think about it.

4. The fourth false evasion of forgiveness is the thought, “Oh, it’s nothing, really.”

When we were kids, we played a game, “Liar, liar, pants on fire”. Do you remember that? It fits today. We say, “Oh, it’s nothing, really,” but it really is something.

5. The fifth false evasion of forgiveness is the attitude, “They already know I’m sorry,” or “Everything is okay because we’re talking now.”

Two people who do not like each other can talk to each other. They can talk about politics, or the weather, or business. In fact, we can talk to good friends that we are offended with. We can even still communicate to a spouse, when there is something between us at that particular moment. We do not have to like somebody in order to communicate with them; we can still talk. So we should not assume that everything is okay because when we walk past them in the hallway, they say, "Good morning," and we say, "Good morning," when everything is not okay.

Some "Fruit" From These Evasions

What happens then, as a result of these false evasions of forgiveness? Let me give several "fruits" that result.

1. The first result is anger.

When we are offended by someone or we offend someone ourselves, there is the creation of anger. If that anger is not dealt with quickly, in this first stage, it will lead to hurt.

2. The second result is hurt.

We all respond in different ways to hurt, don't we? Some husbands become real quiet; some husbands leave. Some wives – most wives, from what I hear – become quiet, as well. At first, husbands may think this is a gift from God, but when she slams the plate down in front of them, they know this is no gift from God.

Has this ever happened to you? Me either, so let us go to the next one!

3. The third result is apathy.

Hurt then, leads to apathy.

Apathy could be defined as "indifference". This is a dangerous step because it causes the one who is hurt to come to the point where they really do not care if things are right.

If there are enough relationships like this in a church fellowship, then that church is in trouble. In fact, let me read the words of one commentator concerning this. These are frightening words, and yet, so true.

When there are relationships in the body that are not resolved, the greatest damage is intangible. It destroys enthusiasm; it destroys morale, so necessary for church health. People no longer feel good about

inviting friends. The air is tense. The church is depressed. And everyone is aware of "us" and "them". In addition, there is no planning because of this – no thinking for the future, no vision. Everyone is just trying to survive. Spontaneity and creativity are lost. Change is stifled and growth is stunted. The first casualty is vision and initiative; the next is outreach.

This is an interesting result of relationships with unresolved conflict.

4. The fourth result is alienation.

Apathy will then lead to alienation. Finally, the wall is up. No speaking is taking place. There is apathy; there is no desire to go through this wall. Then, the relationship is in trouble.

Some False Conceptions of Forgiveness

Let me give, before we go any further, some false conceptions that people have of true forgiveness.

1. The first false conception is to allow time to heal all wounds.

Allow time to heal all wounds – as if this is really going to work. I am convinced of something I read even this past week, that relationships do not usually explode, they usually erode. They erode by things being built one upon another, until finally, after stepping away from anger and hurt and apathy, there is alienation.

Time will not heal. In fact, God is going to be so persistent in the scripture we will look at today, that He says, "Get on your horse, go over to that person, and start reconciling – get it right."

2. A second false conception of forgiveness is to ignore the real issue.

Couples may kiss and make up, but never deal with the issue. Some may say something nice to the offender to get enough communication going to exist, but yet, never deal with the issue. This is false forgiveness.

3. A third false conception is to forget it ever occurred.

This misconception of forgiveness is where we usually land.

I read, and we will have to take this by faith, that the brain is capable of recording eight hundred memories a second for the entire life span of an

individual. I also read, in fact, that the brain, even though we only use two percent of it, never forgets anything. The issue then, is whether or not we can recall something.

When we put this information into application with what we are talking about today, we realize that individuals have the capability of remembering every offense. We, in fact, because we are human, cannot forget.

We could say, “Well, God forgets.”

So let me define what God does. Does He suddenly have a lapse of memory that we have sinned? Does He decide, somewhere along the way, that He is going to erase His sovereign mind and forget that we have ever committed sin against Him?

This is not what God does. God remembers and chooses not to impute the sin to our account. He remembers everything and chooses to deal with us as people He has forgiven.

This is the example for us. We can never forget, but we can put steps in motion so that we can treat each other like Jesus Christ and not hold on to each other’s account.

What Does the Bible Say to Do When We Are the Offender?

Now, two questions arise concerning forgiveness. These include:

- What happens if we are the offender?
- What happens if we are the offended?

What does the Bible say to do in answer to these questions? We will look at some passages today that are very specific and clear.

Let us begin by looking at what happens if we are the offender. Turn to Matthew 5:23-24. According to this passage of scripture, if we are the offender, we are to do three things.

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

1. The first step we are to take, as the offender, is to stop worshipping.

Let us get a picture of what is happening in this passage. Matthew is probably referring to the day of atonement. On that day, as an orthodox Jew, you brought a sacrifice and handed it to the priest. There was a ceremony involved in the handling of this sacrificial animal. You would place your hand on the animal to signify, by the placing of your hand, that the animal represents you and that the sins you have committed in the past, are now on that animal.

It is at this point that I think Matthew is really kind of exaggerating. He is creating a scenario where you are bringing this offering to the priest. This is the point at which you would think that God is least interested in someone else’s problem. Yet, at the very time you are handing your offering to the priest, Matthew says, “If you remember, at that moment, that you’ve offended someone, stop.”

So, the first step is to stop worshipping.

2. The second step to take, as the offender, is to start reconciling.

Look at Matthew 5:24 again.

leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

I cannot imagine this scene. You put the animal down and ask the priest, “Would you watch this for me?” – and then leave it there and take off to start the process of reconciliation.

Now reconciling means, “to make concession; to seek forgiveness of the one we have wounded”. In other words, start the process of communicating – go to the person offended and say, “I have sinned against you.”

It is not at this point, men and women, that we are to try to discern whether or not the person really has a reason to be offended. We are good at this. When we find that someone has something against us, what do we do? We think, “Well, there are three reasons they shouldn’t feel that way,” and then, we do nothing.

Matthew does not say, “Stop at the altar and decide if you’re really to blame.”

He says, “Stop right there and go to that individual.”

Matthew uses the word “brother”. I think that is essential. We are to, “Go to that brother, or that sister, and start the process of concession.”

Questions concerning reconciliation

Let me ask and answer some questions about this reconciliation process before we go to the third step.

- First, “What if they won’t forgive me?”

We have asked ourselves that question, haven’t we? We think, “Should I go to that person? What if I go and knock on their door and they slam it in my face? Or worse yet, what if they hear my apology, as I humble myself and ask them to forgive me, and they look at me and say, ‘You must be crazy, if you think I’m going to forgive you for that.’? What happens if they don’t forgive?”

Let us stop and take note of the fact that the essential thing is not their response; the essential thing is our responsibility. God does not guarantee that they are going to open their arms to welcome us and say, “I’ve been thinking about the very same thing. You just happened to beat me to the doorstep. I was on my way.”

The issue is our responsibility, not their response.

- Secondly, “What if I only make things worse?”

Have you ever done this? I have really done this. You try to go and ask forgiveness and you find that hole is just getting deeper and deeper and deeper – you are just making things worse.

So make a realistic note in this – during your absence; during the span of time between your offense to someone and your coming to ask their forgiveness, what has happened? They have really come to hate you. They have imagined a mental dart board – and your face is on it. They are hurt and they have stuff that they are going through in their minds concerning you. The longer you wait, the worse it gets. By the time you get to them, something has happened during the process of time, and they have really deepened their offense.

The imperative issue is to *stop right now* and get going. It may take time for God to work in their hearts. At least, however, you have done what God wants you to do. Now God is, in a sense, free to work in their lives. So patiently wait and pray.

- Thirdly, as we have already briefly mentioned and will mention again, “Can’t I just make it right before God?”

We are so clever, but this does not work.

A few weeks ago, a church member ran into my car in the church parking lot. They kind of banged

into the back end by the tire. This did not bother me, but that individual was just mortified. They came to see me after church and told me what they had done. I said, “No problem, let’s go look at it.”

We went out and looked at it. Since then, it has been corrected by opening the trunk and popping it back out – that is all it took.

It would have been something, however, if I had left the church building, walked out to my car, and about the time I saw the dent, the individual drives by and hollers out at me, “Stephen, I ran into your car, but I took it to the Lord and everything is okay now. Isn’t grace wonderful!”

This is taking it to the Lord and it does not work. We have to go to the individual to reconcile. We are not reconciling God. We are reconciling that offended brother or sister, so we go to them.

- Let us ask one more, fourthly, “What if the person I have offended has died?”

This is a tough question. Perhaps, however, you have experienced this.

I used to sit under the preaching of a man who had this happen between himself and his father. He came to Christ after his father’s death and went through the agony of this kind of scenario.

Having read and studied in relation to this question, the advice that I have received from others and that I think would match the teaching in the scriptures, is to go to a close friend who is a believer, or perhaps a counselor, a pastor, or a spouse, and openly, in confidence share with them and then, pray and ask the Lord’s forgiveness. Therein lies the healing.

We could look to David. Do you remember that he murdered Uriah? Uriah is dead. David could never make it right with Uriah. Nathan comes to David and exposes what he has done. The result is fascinating. David, in a sense, spills it all to Nathan. He begins with the words,

. . . I have sinned against the Lord . . . (II Samuel 12:13)

David could never go to Uriah, but he went to that priest; to that good friend. Perhaps, if this is your situation, this is what is needed.

3. The third step to take, as the offender, is to return to worship.

Look at Matthew 5:24 again.

leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Reconciliation precedes worship. This text is saying that God is as interested in our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ as He is in our relationship with Him. We tend to think that as long as everything is right between God and ourselves, then who cares about our relationship with our brothers and sisters. God says, "I am not interested in your worship, until you take care of this on the horizontal plain."

Do you know what makes good worship? It is not necessarily better music. It is not necessarily better preaching, better architecture, or better praying. According to this scripture, it is better relationships with those who come to worship.

What Does the Bible Say to Do When We Are the Offended?

Now we will look at the scriptures to answer the question, "What happens when we are the offended party?" Turn to Matthew chapter 18.

1. First, let us look at a question from Peter.

Read Matthew 18:21.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Note that he also uses the term "brother". In other words, Peter says, "If I am offended seven times, shall I forgive?"

2. Secondly, let us look at the response from Jesus.

Notice Matthew 18:22.

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Perhaps, after that phrase, there is a pause while Peter faints, along with all the other disciples.

3. Thirdly, let us look at the explanation from Jesus.

Jesus then says to the disciples, "Okay, while you are down, just have a seat and let Me tell a story."

A classic teacher, while Jesus has their attention, He is going to tell them a story. Let us begin in Matthew 18:23-24.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle

accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

Now stop for a moment and let us put this in a mathematical equation so we can better understand what is happening. A day's wage was worth one denarius. Six thousand denarii equaled one talent. This man owed ten thousand talents. In terms of the minimum wage today, this gentleman owes the king 1.2 billion dollars!

Obviously, the Lord is exaggerating to make a point. This guy is in debt and there is no possible way he will ever get out of debt.

Look at Matthew 18:25-27.

But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will repay you everything." And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

Did the king say, "Pay me later."? No, he forgave him the debt; he totally wiped the books clean.

Continue to Matthew 18:28-29.

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, "Pay back what you owe." So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will repay you."

Note this second slave, who owes only around 1,200 dollars, uses the same words as the first slave. Look at Matthew 18:30-31.

But he was unwilling and went and threw him in [debtor's] prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

Timeless truths concerning forgiveness

Now the Lord will, in effect, give two principles that can be applied today.

- Principle number one, refusing to forgive is grossly inconsistent with the fact that we have been forgiven.

Look at Jesus' words in Matthew 18:32-33.

Then summoning him, his lord said to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?"

Have you ever read this story on your own and felt the hair on the back of your neck get ruffled at the actions of this ungrateful, unforgiving servant? He owed 1.2 billion dollars and was forgiven, yet he goes to another servant and throws him in debtor's prison because of a 1,200 dollar debt. It is infuriating. Why? Because the first servant has been forgiven such a great debt, yet he cannot forgive such a little one.

The point, ladies and gentlemen, is the answer to the question, "Why should we forgive other people?" The answer is, because Jesus Christ has forgiven *all*; the *entire* load of our sin. All of the heinous, gross sins against His character, He has wiped clean in a judicial act of forgiveness. So when someone commits one sin against us and we cannot forgive them, it is grossly inconsistent with the way Jesus Christ has forgiven us.

- Principle number two, refusing to forgive creates inner torment.

Look at Matthew 18:34.

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

We usually draw a line at the end of this verse and think, "Well, isn't that terrible? That would never happen to us." However, read the next verse, Matthew 18:35.

My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

Uh-oh. He is knocking on our door now. We cannot toss this one out and read explanations where it does not apply to us. This verse says,

My heavenly Father will also do the same to you . . .

So we had better go back and take a look at the word "torturer". It is the same word that appears in II

Peter 2:8. This verse talks about Lot, who was surrounded by immorality. We read that he,

. . . felt his . . . soul tormented . . .

Note, in Matthew 18:34, the word is not a verb, but a noun. The servant will be handed over to "torturers" – those who torment.

What is the point? When we carry unresolved conflict; when we carry bitterness; when we carry anger toward others, God, in a sense, says, "You will be handed over to all the torments of your soul."

"In bitterness we become," as one man wrote, "victims of our own venom."

So if we refuse to forgive when we are offended, who is the victim? We are.

Application – How Can I Know I Have Really Forgiven?

How do we know that we have really forgiven someone? Let me give some points that may be helpful.

1. Number one, we will know that we have truly forgiven someone who has offended when we can accept God's plan of pain in our lives.

Genesis chapter 50 is a beautiful illustration of this. You may remember this story, even though we do not understand all of the agony.

Joseph had been forsaken by his brothers, who sold him to slave traders. He was taken into another country and never thought he would see his family again. If there was ever a guy who had a grudge to carry, it was him. If there was anyone who could have licked his wounds in Babylon, it was Joseph. If there was anyone who could have been angry, it was him. He had every right!

Finally, his brothers came to him. They were afraid that Joseph would retaliate. However, in Genesis 50:20, he said,

. . . you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . .

Joseph had come to the point in his life where he could accept God's sovereign plan, even though it involved pain.

One of the points to recognize when people offend us, is that God has allowed that pain to sift through His sovereign hand and touch our lives. He has us in mind because He wants to reshape us; He wants to

sand the rough corners of our character. He will even use people for that purpose. If we refuse to forgive, we have lost the benefit of what God wants to do in our lives.

2. Number two, having forgiven someone who has offended, make a commitment to never bring up the offense again.

This is harder, perhaps. You have talked to the offending individual and have reached a state of reconciliation, but this point is one which you can know whether or not you have really forgiven.

In your own mind, not just to someone else, are you still replaying that old offense? When you see that person, do you put that thing on automatic pilot and view the whole scenario again? If so, you have not forgiven.

If we can come to the point where we make a commitment never to replay the offense again, more than likely we are in the process of truly forgiving.

Webster defines “forget” as, “to intentionally overlook”. He hit the nail on the head. He says, “to intentionally overlook; to refuse to remember”. That is the point.

3. Number three, we will know we have really forgiven when we can practice kindness to the offender.

If I can find myself motivated by the grace of God to practice kindness to the offending individual; if I can put into process the steps by which I can be gracious to them, and I am practicing these other points as well, then perhaps I have reached a state of forgiveness; perhaps I have really forgiven them.

4. Number four, we will know we have truly forgiven an offender when we remember that we ourselves have been forgiven.

The beautiful thing about forgiveness, ladies and gentlemen, is that, although we are the forgiver, we are not the source of forgiveness.

In Jesus’ parable that we read, we are so irritated with the first servant because he should have found the energy and the power in the fact that he had been forgiven to forgive someone else.

When we come to a point at which we do not want to forgive, we are missing this fourth ingredient – we are forgetting that we have been forgiven.

So, we forgive. And what is the source of our forgiveness? The fact that Jesus Christ has forgiven us.