

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HOW CAN I EVER FORGIVE?

Ephesians 4:32

By

Steven J. Cole

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Ephesians Lesson 38

How Can I Ever Forgive? Ephesians 4:32

The Spanish have a story about a father and son who had become estranged. The son left home and the father set out to find him. He searched for many months with no success. Finally, in desperation, the father took out a newspaper ad that read, "Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." On Saturday, 800 men named Paco showed up looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.

In a fallen world, forgiveness is essential to maintain close relationships. We all need forgiveness and we all need to grant forgiveness, because we all sin and we all have been sinned against.

But asking for and granting forgiveness are not easy tasks! It's not an easy subject to understand, as seen by the fact that different writers say conflicting things about forgiveness. It's not an easy subject to practice, especially on the emotional level. The deeper you have been hurt, the more difficult it is truly to forgive. Some of you were abused emotionally, physically, or sexually as children by your parents or by trusted family members. Some of you have children who were abused by your mate or by a family member. Some have been betrayed by an unfaithful spouse whom you loved and cared for deeply. These kinds of wrongs are not easy to forgive.

But if you're a Christian, seeking and granting forgiveness are not optional. Jesus said that if you do not forgive others, the heavenly Father will not forgive you (Matt. 6:15; Mark 11:25). Scholars are divided over whether that refers to being under God's eternal judgment or to your relationship with the Father as His child. I favor the second option. But either way, you don't want to miss out on the Father's forgiveness! Jesus said that forgiving others is so important that if you are worshiping God when you remember that your brother has something against you, you should first go be reconciled to your brother and then come back to worship God (Matt. 5:23-24). So it is vital for you as a Christian to grapple with

understanding and practicing forgiveness. Since many books have been written on this topic, I can only touch on some of the issues.

In the context, Paul is showing specific ways that we are to put on the new man, “which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (4:24). In our last study, we saw how we are to put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander (4:31). We are to replace these sins with kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (4:32). Now we want to focus on what it means to forgive and how we can practically apply it.

To forgive others, we must understand the nature of forgiveness and the perspective needed for it, and we must take action to demonstrate forgiveness.

1. To forgive others, we must understand the nature of forgiveness.

What does it mean to ask forgiveness or to forgive someone? There is a lot of misunderstanding here. Jay Adams (*From Forgiven to Forgiving* [Calvary Press], pp. 58-60) argues that apologizing is the world’s substitute for forgiving. He points out that there is not a single reference in the Bible to apologizing. It is an unbiblical concept. It allows the wrongdoer to tell you how he feels (“I’m sorry”) without acknowledging his sin and it does not ask the one sinned against to grant forgiveness.

Adams also points out (pp. 112, 135) that biblical forgiveness does not mean accepting the other person in his sin, which often amounts to condoning sin. Again, this is often the world’s way. The world brushes aside the concept of sin by saying, “Hey, no problem! Don’t worry about it, we all make mistakes!” But there is no acknowledgement or confession of sin.

In biblical forgiveness, the wrongdoer admits, “I sinned against you,” and asks, “Will you forgive me?” The one wronged must respond by promising, “I forgive you.” This is very different than just saying you’re sorry or saying to the one who wronged you, “Hey, don’t worry about it!”

Paul says that we are to forgive each other “just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” God didn’t say, “Hey, don’t worry about it, we all make mistakes!” He didn’t just brush our sin aside.

Rather, our sin renders us truly guilty before God's holy justice. We have violated His holy law. He requires that the penalty be paid. But in love, He sent His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserved. When the guilty sinner repents of his sin and lays hold of Christ by faith, God graciously and totally forgives the debt of sin. He releases the sinner from the guilt of his sin. He promises not to remember those sins against him, in the sense of not bringing them up again for judgment. And, He is reconciled to the sinner through the blood of Christ. Extrapolating from God's forgiveness of us, we can say the following about our forgiveness of others:

A. Biblical forgiveness is the decision...

Before I tell you what this decision involves, let me underscore that it is *a deliberate decision* you must make. A friend of Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, once reminded her of an especially cruel thing that someone had done to her years before. But Miss Barton did not seem to recall it. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No," said Miss Barton, "I distinctly remember forgetting it." Forgiveness is the decision to drop the offense, to let it go. It involves at least five aspects:

- To release the offender from the guilt of his sin.

When God forgives us, He brings down the gavel in His courtroom and declares, "Not guilty! Case dismissed." And the guilty sinner bears his guilt no longer! When you choose to forgive someone, you let the matter drop, releasing him from his guilt.

- To refuse to bring up the offense to use against the offender.

When God says that He will not remember our sins any more (Heb. 8:12; 10:17), He does not forget them in the sense of amnesia. Rather, He means that He will not bring up any of our offenses against us in the future. We do not have to fear standing before Him someday, because there is now no condemnation for us in Christ (Rom. 8:1). To forgive someone is to promise not to bring the matter up again to use against him. Sometimes it is necessary to bring up a forgiven sin for the purpose of teaching or restoration. Sometimes it is proper to impose consequences to teach the seriousness of sin, as God did with David after his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:9-14). It may be proper for a forgiven offender to be

required to make restitution. If he committed a crime, he may need to be prosecuted and spend time in prison. But when we forgive him, we should not bring up his sin to accuse or condemn him or to win an argument.

- To refuse to think about the offense.

Thankfully, God is not in heaven rehearsing our forgiven sins every day! For us, this is one of the most difficult aspects of forgiveness, especially when the wrong was serious. But, like Clara Barton, we must distinctly remember to forget past wrongs that we have chosen to forgive. You must deliberately direct your thoughts to other things, such as how much God has forgiven you. To dwell on an offense that you have forgiven is to break your promise to forgive.

- To refuse to talk to others about the offense.

If you say that you forgive someone and then tell others about the offense, you are trying to make the offender pay, which is not forgiveness. Or, you're trying to evoke sympathy or admiration from others at the offender's expense. When you forgive, you choose to drop the matter. The only exception would be if you fear that the offender may be trying to repeat his sin toward another person, who needs to be warned of the danger. For example, if someone has molested your child and you see him hanging out with another family with young children, it is appropriate to warn them to be on guard.

- To be reconciled with the offender as far as is biblically possible.

God forgives us so that we may be reconciled to Him and enjoy a close relationship with Him. When we forgive others, we should also seek to restore the broken relationship. This does not always mean becoming best of friends, but it should at least mean that we are cordial and friendly towards the person. To say, "I forgive you, but I never want to see your ugly face again," is not to forgive as God forgives! Of course, if the offender does not truly repent of his sin, we cannot be truly reconciled or in a close relationship. But even then, we are still commanded to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-28).

So, biblical forgiveness is a decision to release the offender from the guilt of his sin, to refuse to bring up the offense to use against him, to refuse to think about the offense, to refuse to talk to others about the offense, and to be reconciled to the offender if possible. Also, to understand forgiveness we must realize that...

B. Biblical forgiveness is costly.

It cost God the death of His beloved Son. It will not usually cost us that much, but it still may be very costly. I have read stories of parents who have forgiven the murderer or molester of their child. That is costly! At the very least, it costs us the time and effort to go to the offender and try to work on reconciliation. It does not happen automatically or when you are passive.

C. Biblical forgiveness is undeserved.

God forgives us by grace alone, which is undeserved favor. If someone has to earn it, it's not forgiveness. If you make him pay or do penance, it's not forgiveness.

D. Biblical forgiveness is total.

God doesn't forgive just some of our sins, saving some others to bring up later when He needs some leverage against us! He forgives them all (1 John 1:9). So we can't say, "I forgive you for this, but I'm not going to forgive you for that!" It must be total.

E. Biblical forgiveness is final.

God doesn't say, "If you do that again, I'm revoking your previous forgiveness!" He says (Heb. 10:17), "Their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more." To forgive someone is to dismiss the case against him. You can't bring it up again.

Much more could be said, but that gives us some understanding of the nature of biblical forgiveness. But, how do we put it into practice? We need the right perspective or mindset:

2. To forgive others, we must understand the perspective needed for forgiveness.

Many Christian authors emphasize the benefits that forgiving others will bring to you. It's true, you will benefit by forgiving others. You will get rid of your bitterness, which eats at your soul. You will enjoy restored relationships with others, along with many other

blessings. But, the benefits for you are really the by-products of forgiveness. Your focus should not be on what's in it for you, but rather on glorifying God and loving others.

- A. The motive in forgiving others should be to glorify God, who has forgiven you.

As we saw in Ephesians 1:7, the forgiveness of our sins is according to the riches of His grace, so that we will be to the praise of His glory (1:12). If someone sees how much you have forgiven someone else and praises you for it, be quick to divert the praise to God, who has forgiven you so much.

- B. Remember how and how *much* God has forgiven you in Christ.

As we have seen, He forgave you by grace alone. You didn't deserve anything but His judgment, but He still forgave you out of His great love. And He has forgiven you far more than you can ever forgive anyone else. Jay Adams (pp. 5-6) illustrates how much God has forgiven us by imagining sitting in a movie theater. The theater is packed and the show is about to begin. Then you discover that this movie is the unedited, undeleted story of your entire life! The sound track will contain everything that you have ever said. In fact, the movie will project everything you have ever thought, including all of the things you would have liked to have done if you thought you could have gotten away with it.

Every one of us is relieved that such a movie of us does not exist! But, God has that movie! His forgiveness means that He tosses it in the depths of the sea. Having been forgiven that much, He commands us to forgive others for their lesser sins against us (Matt. 18:21-35).

- C. Remember that God is the sovereign over all that happens and He is the righteous Judge of all.

When someone wrongs you, it helps to control your anger, root out bitterness, and make you ready to forgive if you remember that God has allowed this to happen for His purpose and your ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, he could have become a very bitter young man. Instead, he chose to forgive his brothers. After their father died, they feared that now he would use his position of power to get revenge. But

Joseph acknowledged God's sovereignty and goodness when he said to them (Gen. 50:19-20), "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." By the way, it is blasphemous to say that we must sometimes forgive God. We only must forgive those who wrong us, and the Judge of the earth *always* does what is right!

Also, while we should not wish for or pray for God to judge our enemies, but rather to save them, we can take comfort in the fact that if they do not repent, they will face God's justice someday (1 Pet. 4:17-19; Rev. 18:20; 19:1-3). Vengeance belongs to the Lord and He will repay; so we are free to forgive (Rom. 12:19).

D. Have compassion on the other person as a fellow sinner needing God's grace.

Paul tells us to be kind and tenderhearted toward those who wrong us, rather than bitter and angry. One way to do that is to realize that you don't know all that the other person has gone through in his life. Perhaps his parents abused him. That isn't an excuse for his sin, but realizing that he may have had a difficult life may mitigate your anger and put you in the frame of mind to forgive. Also, it helps to realize that if I had been born in the ghetto to a drug-using mother who didn't even know who my father was, I could be committing horrible sins today. In other words, the person who has wronged me is just like me, a sinner in need of God's grace. So I need to be kind and forgiving towards him. That leads to the final step towards implementing forgiveness:

3. To forgive others, we must take action to demonstrate forgiveness.

Before I discuss this point, I need to make two distinctions, which are vital for understanding and implementing biblical forgiveness. Then I need to give a brief warning before we look at the action of forgiveness.

A. First distinction: There is a difference between granting forgiveness and re-establishing trust.

When someone sins against you, he destroys trust in the relationship. Forgiveness is granted freely and graciously, but trust is earned over time. If a husband is unfaithful to his wife, she may

forgive him freely, but she doesn't trust him. That is *not* a contradiction! He must demonstrate repentance and integrity to earn back her trust and it will take time.

- B. Second distinction: There is a difference between forgiving someone in your heart and extending that forgiveness to him verbally.

We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Question: Does God forgive sinners apart from their repentance and confession of sin? Answer: No. God is ready to forgive sinners the instant they repent. He has made provision so that any sinner that repents is promised mercy and abundant forgiveness (Isa. 55:6-7). He shows kindness towards sinners to lead them to repentance. But God does not forgive sinners unless they repent.

Thus I conclude that as imitators of God (Eph. 5:1), we must forgive in our hearts those who have wronged us. We must be praying for their repentance and be ready to forgive the instant that they do repent. Like the father of the prodigal son, we should be looking for their repentant return and when we see them on the horizon, we run joyously to welcome them back. But, we should not extend forgiveness verbally until they actually do repent.

- C. Warning: Be careful not to reflect pride in showing forgiveness.

If someone has wronged you but has not yet come and asked forgiveness and you go to him and say, "I forgive you for what you did to me," it may come across as pride. It puts you in the high place of saying, "I am such a kindhearted, benevolent soul that I'm going to forgive you, you undeserving wretch!"

I have heard amazing stories of those who have gone to a killer in prison and forgiven him for murdering their loved one. In some cases, it has led to his repentance and conversion. But in those cases, there wasn't any doubt about the man's guilt and so it didn't come across as self-righteous pride on the part of the ones extending forgiveness. So be careful in how you go about extending forgiveness to the offender, that you don't reflect pride.

- D. Action: Be kind, tenderhearted, and ready joyously to extend forgiveness the instant the offender repents.

If you're thinking, "I hope that dirty rat gets what he has coming to him and that his life is ruined," you haven't forgiven him in your heart. If you're seething with anger, you haven't forgiven him. You have forgiven him when you pray for his repentance, when you cheerfully do kind deeds for him, and when you well up with joy at the thought of his repentance and the restoration of the relationship.

You may be thinking, "But I don't *feel* like doing something kind for him. Wouldn't I be a hypocrite to act against my feelings?" The answer is, no, you would be obeying God! Often we must act in obedience and pray for God to change our feelings. If you can't treat the other person with kindness out of a desire to please him, then do it out of a desire to please God. If you wait for good feelings towards the offender, you may never show him kindness. Remember, it is God's kindness towards evil and ungrateful men that leads them to repentance (Luke 6:35; Rom. 2:4). Your kindness toward the offender for Christ's sake may be what God uses to bring him to repentance.

Josephine Ligon ("Your Daffodils are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/1979], p. 18) related an incident from her childhood that she never forgot. There was a family named Parsons in her hometown that preached and practiced forgiveness. On one occasion, Josephine and some of her third-grade friends put a handful of pencil shavings into the Parsons girl's sandwich, just to be mean and to make her mad. But she didn't get mad. Instead, the next day, without any sign of repentance from her persecutors, the Parsons girl brought everyone in the class a large, beautiful, hand-decorated cookie that said, "Jesus loves you." That little girl demonstrated the action of forgiveness and those third graders remembered it for the rest of their lives!

Conclusion

If God has used this message to put on your heart relationships where you need to ask forgiveness or grant forgiveness, I urge you not to procrastinate. Maybe you cannot grant forgiveness because the other person has not repented, but you can pray for his repentance. You can ask God for ways to show kindness to the offender. You can be ready to forgive and restore the relationship.

General Oglethorpe once said to John Wesley, "I never forgive and I never forget," to which Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin." Because we all sin, we all need forgiveness and we all need to forgive, just as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Application Questions

1. Some argue that forgiveness should be unconditional. Do you agree? Give biblical support for your answer.
2. If a family member molests your child, does forgiveness require seeking a reconciled relationship with him? Can trust ever be totally restored in such cases?
3. Do you agree that apologizing is the world's substitute for forgiveness? How does an apology differ from seeking forgiveness? How should we ask for forgiveness when we've sinned?
4. Do you agree with the distinction between forgiving someone in your heart before he repents, but not extending forgiveness to him until after he repents? Give biblical support.

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