

Series: "Forgiveness God's Way" Message: "How Do We Seek Forgiveness?" **

Main Idea: How do we seek forgiveness? The answer to that question is linked to two responsibilities we'll consider in our study of God's Word today.

I. Recognize some common misconceptions about forgiveness.

A. We must avoid using unbiblical terms.

1. "I'm sorry." (problem: that merely communicates an emotion)
2. "I apologize." (problem: that leaves the conflict unresolved)

B. We must avoid using unbiblical substitutes.

1. Some minimize the offense ("It's not a big deal.").
2. "I've asked God to forgive me. Why do I need to ask you?"
3. Some prefer to ignore or condone the sin rather than to seek and grant biblical forgiveness.
4. "I need to forgive myself first."
5. "I need to forgive God first."
6. "I can't seek forgiveness until I feel like it."

II. Resolve to be biblical when you need to seek forgiveness.

A. Why is forgiveness so important?

1. It's vital because of what Christ did for us (Matt. 18:22-35).
2. It's vital because it is commanded (Mk. 11:25-26).
3. It's vital because it prepares the way for restoration (Matt. 5:23-24).

B. How do I ask for forgiveness?

1. State clearly what you did wrong.

First, to God

Then, to the person
2. Request the person's forgiveness ("Will you forgive me?").
3. Use simple, factual terms (Prov. 10:19).
4. Be sure your attitude backs up your words (Prov. 25:11).
5. Don't confess accusingly.

Never forget this: It's possible to forgive and be forgiven because of Christ.

Last week I began by telling the true story of what God has done with the Waodani people group of Ecuador .

In 1956 the Waodani warriors, better known to us as the Auca, brutally killed five missionaries who were seeking to take the good news of Christ to them. There on the beach of the Amazon River they speared to death Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, and three other servants of Christ.

What happened afterwards is nothing short of the brilliant display of God's transforming grace. For starters, some of the martyred missionaries' family members *stayed* and continued to reach out to the Waodani. That took the grace of God. And then, also by the grace of God, several Waodani listened, became convicted of their sin, repented, and called upon Jesus Christ to save them. These warriors became devoted followers of Christ.

You can read about this display of God's mercy in the book, *End of the Spear*, written by Steve Saint, son of Nate Saint. One of the stories Steve shares concerns what happened to Mincaye, the man who killed his father...

“Shortly after she [Steve's aunt, Rachel Saint], Dayumae, Aunt Betty [Elizabeth Elliot], and Valerie had gone to live with the Waodani, Dayumae told her Mincaye was threatening to spear her. Then one night Aunt Rachel heard someone prowling around in the dark outside the little thatched hut...

Aunt Rachel was not scared, but she wanted to know who was prowling around her little shelter. She called, ‘Acano-imi?’—*Who are you?* Mincaye answered from the dark...A few minutes later, he came and squatted by her hammock next to the little fire.

He asked Aunt Rachel if it was true that *Waengongi* was strong enough to clean anyone's heart. Aunt Rachel confirmed that *Waengongi's* carvings said He could. Then he asked if even his heart could be made clean from hate and fear. Aunt Rachel confirmed it. Then he got up and left. The next morning he returned and announced that she had been right. ‘Talking to *Waengongi* and asking him,’ Mincaye said, ‘He has cleaned my heart.’ The incredible transformation had begun.”^[2]

There is an unusual epitaph on a large headstone in a cemetery outside of New York City . The name of the person in the grave is not on the headstone. There is no mention of when the person was born or when he died. It doesn't say anything about being a beloved mother, father, husband, wife, brother, sister, son, or daughter. Just one word stretches across the headstone: *Forgiven*.

Forgiveness is an amazing thing, isn't it? It's amazing to know the forgiveness of God. It's amazing to know that we can be right with God because of what Jesus did for us. It's amazing to know we can be right with each other, through forgiveness, even after we've blown it. And it's amazing, though sad, that forgiveness is so often so misunderstood.

That's why we're doing this series on “Forgiveness God's Way.” Our aim, through a deductive examination of the Scriptures, is to answer three questions about forgiveness based on what the Bible teaches.

#1: “What Is Forgiveness Really?” (last week)

#2: “How Do We Seek Forgiveness?” (today)

#3: “How Do We Grant Forgiveness?” (next week)

Since what we'll see this morning builds on our previous study, allow me to retrace our steps and quickly hit the highlights. Last week we sought to answer the question, *What is forgiveness really?*

A Brief Review from Last Week:

I. What Forgiveness is *Not*.

We identified a couple of misconceptions about forgiveness...

A. It is not feeling something.

According to God's Word, feeling is not a prerequisite to forgiving. If I wait for a feeling, I will wait in vain. In actuality, it is a decision to say something.

B. It is not forgetting something.

There is a difference between "forgetting" and "not remembering." Forgetting is passive. Not remembering is active, a choice I make.

II. What Forgiveness *Is*.

The following is true of biblical forgiveness...

A. Forgiveness is a declaration.

It is a promise to not remember something. It is a promise not to bring the issue back up as a basis for how I will treat you.

B. Forgiveness is a three-fold promise...

1. I will not bring it up so as to hurt you.
2. I will not talk about it with others so as to hurt you.
3. I will not dwell on it myself.

C. Forgiveness is a choice to do with others what God did with us.

It's not forgive and forget. It's forgive *in order to* forget.

I want to be very practical, for indeed, the Word of God is. There are two key aspects of forgiveness: **seeking** it, and **granting** it. How do you seek forgiveness? And, how do you grant forgiveness to someone who seeks it from you? We'll address the first question today, and the second our next time.[\[3\]](#)

So how do we seek forgiveness? The answer to that question is linked to two responsibilities we'll consider

next as we examine God's Word together.

I. Recognize some common misconceptions about forgiveness.

Allow me to mention two...

A. We must avoid using unbiblical terms. It's been observed that a problem well-defined is a problem that is well on its way to being solved. One of the reasons there are so many unresolved interpersonal conflicts is because we've adopted so many unbiblical notions about forgiveness. Here are two...

1. "I'm sorry." (problem: that merely communicates an emotion)

As parents, we often perpetuate this unbiblical approach. When our 5 year old comes running into the kitchen screaming, "Mom! Billy told me I'm stupid!", what are we prone to do? We take 5-year-old Sally, get her older brother Billy, sit them on the couch, and say to Billy, "Young man, did you tell Sally she's stupid?" To which he mumbles, knowing he's in trouble, "Yea." To which we reply, "We don't talk that way, do we? You need to make it right." So Billy mutters, "I'm sorry." And then we turn back to Sally and say, "Billy says he's sorry. What do you say?" And Sally is supposed to say? "That's okay," she whispers.

What's wrong with that scenario? Two things. One, we've made a liar out of Sally, haven't we? Was it "okay" that Billy called her stupid like we insisted she say? A second problem is that we've urged Billy to resolve a situation in a way the Bible never endorses. Saying "I'm sorry" is merely communicating an emotion, how you *feel*. It hasn't resolved anything. The sin is still on the table.

2. "I apologize." (problem: that leaves the conflict unresolved)

You will look in vain to find the practice of "apologizing" in the Bible. Actually, the English word "apologize" has roots in a Greek term *apologia* which means "a verbal defense."

Which is often what happens. For instance, take Billy again. Mom says, "Billy, you need to apologize for what you did to Sally." And Billy responds, "Okay, I apologize. But the reason I called Sally stupid is because she gets under my skin. She's always coming into my room when I want to be alone."

Question. Did Billy apologize? Yes. He gave a verbal defense of his actions ("I did what I did *because...*"). But did he seek forgiveness in a way the Bible endorses? Not at all. When we seek forgiveness biblically, we don't make excuses or seek to justify what we've done.

So we must avoid using unbiblical terms. Related to this...

B. We must avoid using unbiblical substitutes. Here are six examples...

1. Some minimize the offense ("It's not a big deal.").

Back to Billy again, "Oh, what's the big deal? Kids at school call other kids a whole lot worse things than 'stupid.' Maybe I shouldn't have said what I did, but it's not a big deal." That's minimizing the offense.

Listen, it's always a big deal if sin is involved. What does Ephesians 4:29 prohibit? "Do not let *any* unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs."

2. *"I've asked God to forgive me. Why do I need to ask you?"*

What's the answer to that? Because God says so. God commands us to go and seek forgiveness from the person we've sinned against (read Matt. 5:23-24).

3. *Some prefer to ignore or condone the sin rather than to seek and grant biblical forgiveness.*

This is related to the former unbiblical substitute.

Why would some people prefer to ignore sin rather than deal with it biblically? Because it's easier. "Oh, let's just forget it happened!" is their plea. And things settle down. For awhile. Until the next blow up.

Listen. Unresolved problems don't go away. They resurface in time. They're like the proverbial snowball that gets bigger and bigger as it goes downhill.

4. *"I need to forgive myself first."*

That notion certainly isn't in Scripture. Nor is this one...

5. *"I need to forgive God first."*

Like the man who refuses to seek forgiveness of his ex-boss with this rationalization, "I can't. I know I was wrong for what I did, but God put me in that job. I'm mad at God. You can't expect me to go to my ex-boss until I work things out with God, can you?" That's certainly not a Scriptural approach, and borders on the blasphemous, but it's not uncommon.

6. *"I can't seek forgiveness until I feel like it."*

Is that true? Can we not do something until we *feel* like it? Did you feel like getting out of bed this morning? If you didn't, why did you? Because you wanted to please God, right? And you knew that coming to church would please Him.

Jesus said this to His disciples in John 13:17, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

So, when it comes to seeking forgiveness, we first must recognize and reject the common misconceptions about forgiveness. Secondly, we must...

II. Resolve to be biblical when you need to seek forgiveness.

Ephesians 4:26 tells us, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” Or stated positively, “Keep current in resolving problems. Don't ignore them. Don't run from them. Deal with them.”

Hebrews 12:14 exhorts us, “Pursue peace with everybody.”

1 Corinthians 11:31 gives us this powerful incentive for working at reconciliation, “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.” That's a sober warning. God says that if we don't deal with our sins against another person, He will. He'll act in judgment. It's better, Paul says, not to wait until that happens. The thing to do is to judge ourselves.

A. Why is forgiveness so important? There are many reasons. Here are three.

1. It's vital because of what Christ did for us (Matt. 18:22-35).

Peter once asked Jesus (Matt 18:21), “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” To which Jesus responded, “No, until seventy-seven (or seventy times seven) times.” And then He told the story about the wicked servant who was forgiven a trillion dollar debt, but then refused to forgive his fellow-servant of a \$300 debt.

The point of the story is, “It's unthinkable!” In light of what Christ has done for us, how could we refuse to take forgiveness seriously in our relationships with each other?” We are to forgive as we have been forgiven by God in Christ. Remember our theme verse...

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

2. It's vital because it is commanded (Mk. 11:25).

Listen to Jesus' words in Mark 11:25, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

I must *be willing to forgive* those who have not asked me for forgiveness. The actual granting of forgiveness doesn't occur, however, until it is requested (which we'll develop next time).

3. It's vital because it prepares the way for restoration (Matt. 5:23-24).

Perhaps one of the most neglected commands of Jesus is this one found in Matthew 5:23-24, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

Let that sink in. If I am in the middle of a worship service and the thought comes to mind that I have sinned against a brother, God wants me to leave the worship service and go and be reconciled to my brother. Right there's a good reason NOT to come to church. Don't come to church if, while driving in the car to church, you remember an unresolved problem with a brother. Go to that brother's house, even if you need to miss church. Ask for forgiveness, make things right with your brother. Then head for church—maybe you'll catch the end of the worship service!

Seeking forgiveness is vital if we're going to have strong, God-honoring relationships in the church. A sin against another person is like a brick. If I sin against you and don't deal with it biblically, it's as if I lay a brick between us. Another sin, another brick. Unresolved sin creates a wall, a huge wall between us. We can have no true fellowship any longer, only a pseudo-peace at best. God's way is to much better!

B. How do I ask for forgiveness? Follow these five steps.

1. State clearly what you did wrong.

Proverbs 28:13 reveals, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." If I've sinned against you, I can't undo the deed. I can't rewind the clock and change the past. But I can make it right. How? By admitting and stating in clear, concise terms, "I was wrong." Who must we admit that to?

First, to God

Then, to the person

Someone might say, "But what about Psalm 51:4? There David writes, 'Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned and done what is evil in Thy sight.' David says that sin is against God *alone*, so why must there be confession to the person who was wronged?"

Several reasons could be cited. Remember Jesus' admonition to leave the altar and go to the person who has sinned against you. Then ponder the words Jesus put into the mouth of the prodigal son who after he sinned said this to his dad (Luke 15:18), "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you."

But what about David's words in Psalm 51? We can take them in two ways. One option is to translate it, "Before Thee, Thee only." That is, since the sin was done in secret, God and only God knew about it. That's what David is acknowledging here. Another option is this. David could be saying that though what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah was wrong, the real issue was what he did to God (he disobeyed God).

Which ever interpretation we take, the obvious point is this. When you sin against your brother, you have sinned against God as well. They go hand in hand. You can't make confession to an offended brother without first asking God for forgiveness. But neither can you seek God's forgiveness without intending to go to your brother.[\[4\]](#)

So the first step is this. State clearly what you did wrong.

2. Request the person's forgiveness ("Will you forgive me?").

If you are the offender, you must go, and go quickly. You must state clearly what you did that was wrong.

Don't go justifying your sin, "I've come to tell you I'm sorry about what I said after you pulled that rotten trick on me." No. Stick to your own sin. "I was wrong for _____. I've asked God to forgive me for this sin. I'm here to ask you the same. As God is my witness, I regret what I did and by His help will never do so again. Will you forgive me?"

3. *Use simple, factual terms.*

Proverbs 10:19 states, "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise." Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who was trying to ask you something, but they kept rambling on and on to the point that you were totally lost, unsure what their point was? That should happen when we ask someone for forgiveness. Keep to the point. Shedding tears is fine, but don't get sidetracked from the issue. Acknowledge your sin in plain language and ask your brother to forgive you.

4. *Be sure your attitude backs up your words.*

Proverbs 25:11 puts it this way, "A word *aptly* spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." There must be a genuine, heart-felt repentant spirit when we go. A good question to determine if you really mean what you're about to say is this, "If you could repeat the situation, would you do it differently?"

If your attitude is, "Well, maybe I did come on a little strong, but you had it coming!" then the request for forgiveness is deficient.

5. *Don't confess accusingly.*

Like the husband who says to his wife, "Well, dear, I was wrong for spending the \$250 for that new golf club without talking to you about it first, but of course the reason I didn't was because I knew you'd blow up at me. Will you forgive me?"

That's confessing *accusingly*, isn't it?

So, to summarize, what's the biblical way to seek forgiveness? It's to follow these five steps. One, state clearly what you've done, to God and to the other person, saying, "I was wrong." Two, ask the other person to forgive you. Ask the question, "Will you forgive me?" Three, use simple, factual terms. "I was wrong when I did _____. I'm heartbroken that I did. Will you forgive me?" Four, be sure your attitude backs up your words (if not, go back to your prayer closet until God grants you a truly repentant heart). Five, don't confess accusingly, but take full responsibility for what you did.

That's what it means to ask for forgiveness God's way. And once you have done that, the ball is in the other person's court. The question, "Will you forgive me?" requires an answer. What needs to happen after forgiveness is sought? It must be granted. How does that happen? We'll see what God's Word has to say about that important question next time.

A Story to Illustrate...

One of my favorite stories about forgiveness is the one Corrie Ten Boom tells about herself.^[5] "Corrie was liberated from a Nazi concentration camp a few days after the Allies conquered Germany . It took longer to be liberated from her simmering hate. But she set out on the forgiving journey through her remembered pain and kept traveling until she arrived at the place where she forgave even the Nazis who had dehumanized her life in the camps.

In forgiving, she believed she had discovered the only power that could heal the history of hurt and hate for the people of Europe . So she preached the possibilities of forgiveness. She preached it in Holland , in France , and then in Germany , too. In Munich one Sunday she preached forgiving, preached it to all those German people who were so eager to be forgiven.

Outside, after the service was over, a major drama of the human spirit unfolded. A man walked over to her; he reached out his hand to her, expecting her to take it. 'Ja, Fraulein Ten Boom, I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say.'

Corrie knew him. She remembered how she was forced to take showers, with other women prisoners, while this beast looked on, a leering, mocking 'superman,' guarding helpless naked women. Corrie remembered. He put his hand close to her. Her own hand froze at her side.

She could not forgive. She was stunned and terrified by her own weakness. What could she do, she who had been so sure that she had overcome the deep hurt and the desperate hate and had arrived at forgiving, what could she do now that she was confronted by a man she could not forgive?

She prayed. 'Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me.' At once, in some wonderful way that she was not prepared for, she felt forgiven. Forgiven for not forgiving.

At that moment—in the power of the fundamental feeling—her hand went up, took the hand of her enemy, and released him. In her heart she freed him from his terrible past. And she freed herself from hers."

Forgiveness is an amazing thing, isn't it? Jesus went to the cross to reconcile sinners like us to God. But His cross-work is also sufficient to reconcile us to each other. As sinners, we can hurt each other, sometimes deeply. Even then, God provides us with what we need. Through Christ we can ask for forgiveness. Through Christ we can grant forgiveness, all to the glory of God.

Never forget this... It's possible to forgive and be forgiven because of Christ.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

^[2] Steve Saint, *End of the Spear*, p, 289.

^[3]As mentioned in part one, I am indebted to Pastor Mark Dutton from Lafayette , IN , and a message I heard him preach in 1998 for some of the seed thoughts I have incorporated into this message.

^[4]as explained by Jay Adams in *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, p. 52.

^[5]As recounted by Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, pp. 119-20.