

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 5/3/98 PM

A Biblical Understanding of Forgiveness: Part 2, How Do we Seek Forgiveness?"<sup>1</sup>

Week #2: **"How Do We Seek Forgiveness?"**

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.

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 "A Biblical Understanding of Forgiveness." Our aim, through a deductive examination of the Scriptures, is to answer three questions about forgiveness based on what the Bible teaches.

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<sup>1</sup>Some of this material has been adapted from an outline by Pastor Mark Dutton.

Week #1: "What Is Forgiveness?"

Week #2: "How Do We Seek Forgiveness?"

Week #3: "How Do We Grant Forgiveness?"

Since what we'll see tonight builds on our previous study, allow me to retrace our steps quickly.

## Review from Week #1: **What Is Forgiveness?**

### I. What Forgiveness is *Not*.

#### A. It is not feeling something.

1. Feeling is not a prerequisite to forgiving.
2. It is a decision to say something.

#### B. It is not forgetting something.

1. There is a difference between "forgetting" and "not remembering."
2. Forgetting is passive. Not remembering is active.

### II. What Forgiveness *Is*.

#### A. Forgiveness is a declaration.

1. It is a promise to not remember something.
2. 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.

1. It's not forgive and forget.
2. It's forgive in order to forget.
  - I must choose to give up my "right" to remember a hurt or to get revenge for it (Rom. 12:17-21).
  - When I choose to give up this "right" and keep the promise, I will have fulfilled the necessary requirements for forgetting the event.

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 tonight, and the second our next time.

If we are to be biblical when it comes to seeking forgiveness, we need to consider two things...

### 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."

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. 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's not in Scripture.

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, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath." 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, "If we carefully judged ourselves, we wouldn't be judged."

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 (Eph. 4:32).

2. *It's vital because it is commanded (Mk. 11:25).* Listen to Jesus' words, "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).* "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."

Seeking forgiveness is vital if restoration is to occur. 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 so 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. Jesus' admonition to leave the altar and go to the person who has ought against you. 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? Two options. One, 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). A second 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.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 (Prov. 10:19).* "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

4. *Be sure your attitude backs up your words (Prov. 25:11).* "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 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. 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). Five, don't confess accusingly, but take full responsibility for what you did.

Now the ball is in the other person's court. What needs to happen after forgiveness is sought? It must be granted. How does that happen? We'll see next time.

One of my favorite stories about forgiveness is the one Corrie Ten Boom tells about herself.<sup>3</sup> "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.

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<sup>2</sup>as explained by Jay Adams in *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>As recounted by Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, pp. 119-20.

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? It's possible to forgive and be forgiven because of Christ.