

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

Main Idea: This morning we're going to examine the Scriptures to find out how to grant forgiveness God's way.

I. There is an unconditional side to granting forgiveness.

A. God commands us to forgive. (Eph. 4:31-32)

1. I must have a forgiving spirit.
2. I must be willing to forgive anyone.
3. I must be ready at a moment's notice to forgive the person who sinned against me.

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.

II. At times, there is a conditional side to granting forgiveness.

We must follow Jesus' instruction in Luke 17.

A. There's a warning (3a).

B. The situation involves a clear sin issue (3b; also Gal. 6:1).

1. The issue isn't personal preferences.
2. The issue is that a brother has sinned against you.

C. Here's what we are *not* supposed to do.

1. We're not to have a pity party.
2. We're not to blow up or gossip.

D. Here's what we are supposed to do (3).

1. Rebuke him, but do it tentatively.
2. Give him opportunity to repent.
3. If he repents, forgive him.
4. If he doesn't repent, remain willing to forgive.

E. Here are some reasons for believing forgiveness is at times conditional.

1. Jesus said it is based on the person's response (3).
2. God's forgiveness is conditional (Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30).

3. God commanded us to deal with each other conditionally.

4. What about Jesus' words in Luke 23:33-34?

F. We must reject common excuses for not forgiving.

1. "I'm not sure I see the fruits of repentance." (Luke 17:4)

2. "I don't have enough faith." (Luke 17:5)

3. "I don't feel like forgiving him." (Luke 17:7-10)

The Bottom Line: We don't need to feel like granting forgiveness to do so. The issue is obedience.

In our living room is a special clock. It was a gift from the young men in Quincer Dorm where Sherry and I served as dorm parents while I was in seminary. The clock has a chime, a swinging pendulum, and a loud tick-tock.

There's something else about the clock. It keeps decent time, but it loses a minute or so every so often, so we have to open the door and move the hands of the clock to correct the time. You can do that with clocks. You can't with the time of life.

Have you ever wished you could turn back the hands on the clock of life? Right after you let slip that cutting word that hurt your spouse, do you wish you could turn back the clock and choose a different word? Perhaps you have an event in mind that happened years ago and it gnaws at you to this day, a deed you wish you could undo. But you can't.

Is there hope? Yes, praise God because of Jesus Christ and His crosswork, there is! Though we can't turn back the hands of time and change the past, we can deal with the past and make things right. That's what we're learning how to do in our current series, "Forgiveness God's Way."

Simply put, there are two sides to forgiveness, *seeking* it and *granting* it. Last time we looked at the biblical teaching on how to seek forgiveness. Let's review briefly...

We identified some common misconceptions about forgiveness. One is merely saying, "I'm sorry." There's nothing wrong with the words "I'm sorry," but the problem is they're not enough. Saying "I'm sorry" is merely telling another person how you feel. Asking for forgiveness requires just that, *asking* the person you've wronged to forgive you.

Another unbiblical way to deal with a sin issue is to say, "I apologize." The Greek word *apologia* literally means "a speech in defense of." That's what apologies often are, self-defense. "If what I did hurt you, I apologize, but..." The problem with apologizing, as with saying "I'm sorry," is that it leaves the conflict unresolved. To ask for forgiveness requires that you do just that, *ask for forgiveness*.

Other unbiblical substitutes include saying:

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

"I need to forgive myself first."

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

Each of these is unacceptable because each ignores the clear command of Scripture. If I have sinned against someone, I need to go and ask for forgiveness.

How? How do I ask for forgiveness God's way? By doing the following:

1. *State clearly what you did wrong, first to God, then to the person.*
2. *Request the person's forgiveness (Ask: "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.*

So that's how forgiveness is to be sought. Today we'll address the related, follow-up question. "*How do we grant forgiveness?*" There are two sides to granting forgiveness.

I. There is an unconditional side to granting forgiveness.

It's an amazing thing to be forgiven. In Psalm 103 David praises God, "Bless the LORD, O my soul...who forgives *all* your sins." He continues in verses 10-12, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities...As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

We don't earn forgiveness, do we? "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)." Is there any sin the Lord continues to hold against you? No, not one, not if you are in Christ. All our sins, past, present, and future, He laid on Christ. He forgave us because of Christ. His forgiveness deals with all our sin. In that sense, it is unconditional.

Consider three elements that flow out of this.

A. God commands us to forgive. Back to our series' theme verse, Ephesians 4:31-32: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander...Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." This passage implies three things.

1. *I must have a forgiving spirit.* That's the appropriate response for one who has been forgiven so great a debt.
2. *I must be willing to forgive anyone.* Could anyone ever commit a sin against me more treacherous than what I've done to the Lord? If you're prone to answer that question "yes," then you don't understand the holiness of God and the utter atrocity of the cosmic treason you've committed against Him. MacArthur shares the following illustration:

"It was Monday, December 1, 1997.^[2] About a dozen students were huddled to pray—as they did every morning—in the hallway outside the administration office at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky...

Suddenly the sound of gunshots shattered the peace of the moment. A fourteen-year-old freshman had walked up to the group with a .22 caliber automatic pistol and was firing into the prayer circle, calmly shooting the students one at a time.

When it was over, three students were dead and five others seriously wounded. The story made

headlines for weeks. What was so astounding was that by all accounts, the students in the prayer circle had done nothing to provoke the boy who did the shooting. In fact, several of them had previously befriended him...

Many relatives of the victims were interviewed by the press in the days and weeks following the shooting. Despite the utter seriousness of the crime, no one spoke with bitterness or a desire for vengeance. Churches in Paducah, while ministering to the victims and their loved ones, also reached out to the shooter and his family. One of the injured girls was fifteen-year-old Melissa Jenkins. As she lay in the hospital less than a week after the shootings, fully aware that the damage to her spinal cord was so severe she would be a paraplegic for the rest of her life, she sent a message through a friend to the boy who had deliberately shot her: "Tell him I forgive him."

How can you forgive someone who has hurt you so badly? It's impossible by human strength. But if you've experienced God's forgiveness in Christ, you have the power to forgive. I'll take it a step further. As one whose been forgiven by Almighty God, I must be willing to forgive anyone. To elaborate...

3. *I must be ready at a moment's notice to forgive the person who sinned against me.* In my heart, I must choose to treat the offender the same way God has treated me for my offenses.

That raises this question. What specifically is involved in granting forgiveness? As we learned in week one, forgiveness is not a feeling. It's a declaration, a promise...

B. Forgiveness is a three-fold promise... When you ask me, "Will you forgive me?" and I respond, "Yes, I forgive you," I am making a three-fold promise to you about your sin against me.

1. *I will not bring it up so as to hurt you.* Never. It's a closed chapter.

2. *I will not talk about it with others so as to hurt you.* That would be gossip, and I refuse to respond sinfully to your sin.

3. *I will not dwell on it myself.* I haven't turned the clock back (I can't do that). But I have chosen to bury the hatchet, to refuse to return to the scene of the crime in my memory archive.

Or to look at forgiveness from another slant...

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

In the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." What does that mean? It means that instead of holding our sins against us, God looks at the Cross of His Son, and says, "It is enough. The penalty for your sin has been paid."

That's what we must do with those who've sinned against us. We must choose to do with them what God did with us, to look to the Cross and let go of the offense.

As we choose to treat the other person as God has treated us, as we choose to forgive and no longer hold the deed against the person we've released from the offense, guess what happens? No, we don't "forget" the event, but we think less and less of it. It no longer paralyzes us and holds us in bondage.

God's way is so good. We can't turn back the hands of the clock and undo the past. But we can deal with the past and experience His joy.

The truth is, when we fail to forgive, we actually are hurting ourselves more than the other person. We may think, "Well, I'll show that person! I'll never forgive him for how he hurt me!" But the result is, we hurt ourselves.

I remember when one of our children was about a year-old she developed a most unusual pattern (thankfully it was short-lived). When we told her "No" about something, she would get mad at us and show her displeasure by banging her head on the ground, or by hitting her palm against her forehead. I wondered what in the world she was doing, but then it hit me. She thought that by inflicting pain on herself, she was hurting us!

That's the way it is when we refuse to grant forgiveness. We may irrationally think we're helping our cause, but indeed, all we're doing is hurting ourselves.

So there is an unconditional side to forgiveness. Would you ponder a question, "Is there someone in your life that you are refusing to forgive? Will you choose today to forgive that person the same way God has forgiven you, for Christ's sake? It begins right now, with a heart decision to release the offender.

I say *begins* because it doesn't end there. There's another side to forgiveness...

II. At times, there is a conditional side to granting forgiveness.

Please follow carefully, for this aspect of forgiveness is greatly misunderstood in our day. Much of the contemporary teaching on the subject of forgiveness (even by Christians) fails to consider this key dimension of granting forgiveness. A key text is Luke 17. We must follow Jesus' instruction in Luke 17:3-4:

"So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

I'm indebted to Jay Adams' book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, for the following. As we ponder Jesus' words carefully, we can make six observations.

A. There's a warning (3a). "So watch yourselves," Jesus says. That's an unusual way to introduce teaching on the subject of forgiveness, yet that's the way Jesus did it. He obviously had good reason. What He was about to say goes against the grain of sinful people like us. It's not easy to do.

B. The situation involves a clear sin issue (3b; also Gal. 6:1). "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." In the KJV we read, "If thy brother trespass against thee." Stop there, and notice the situation carefully.

1. *The issue isn't personal preferences.* It's not a case of someone doing something I don't like. "You

sat in my seat. I rebuke you!" Or, "You wore that tie I don't like. I rebuke you!" No.

2. *The issue is that a brother has sinned against you.* It's a clear matter of sin. Galatians 6:1 exhorts us, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." The issue is a brother in sin.

But Luke 17 is even more specific. The sin about which Jesus is speaking is a sin *against you*. How do you handle sins against you? Let's use a hypothetical scenario, one adapted from an illustration given in Jay Adams' helpful book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*:[13](#)

Suppose here you are, minding your own business, when all of the sudden, literally or figuratively your brother comes along, stomps all over your toes, and disappears over the hill. There you stand, through no fault of your own, with ten toes flattened out like silver dollar pancakes. You are hurting! Now what do you do next?

C. Here's what we are *not* supposed to do. Two common responses...

1. *We're not to have a pity party.* We're not to whine and feel sorry for ourselves, "Why me?!" Some people do. They look for the syrup and pour it all over their feet (as Adams puts it). But that isn't what Jesus said to do. Nor this...

2. *We're not to blow up or gossip.* Some do that. They get furious. They go after their brother to tell him off, or they go home and take out their hurt on innocent family members.

Others are more pious. They choose to go show their flattened toes to other people, to as many as will look, saying, "You know I hate gossip. What I'm about to tell you about so-and-so isn't gossip. I'm just warning you so you can protect yourself from getting your toes stomped on in the future. And oh, by the way, please pray for so-and-so." That's not what Jesus said to do either.

D. Here's what we are supposed to do (3). Our responsibility involves potentially four steps.

1. *Rebuke him, but do it tentatively.* Luke 17:3 again, "If your brother sins, rebuke him." Jesus wants us to go to our brother, and say to him, "Brother, look at my toes!" He doesn't permit us to tell others about it (yet), nor give us the option of sitting at home feeling sorry for ourselves. He doesn't even tell us to call the elders or deacons (that's not needed yet). What's needed is for me to go to my brother.

"But why should I go?" you ask. "I didn't do anything. I was minding my own business when he flattened my toes. Shouldn't he come to me?" The answer is, yes, he should. According to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:23-24, he's supposed to come.

"Well, then, if he's supposed to come, why can't I just wait for him. Why do I need to go, too?" Because Jesus said to go. Ideally, he should go, and you should go, and the two of you should meet on the way!

But there's a very practical reason you should go. Case in point. Steve was walking to his

locker at school when he turned the corner in the hall and saw Billy closing *his* locker door. He waited until Billy was gone, then approached and opened his locker. He could tell things had been rearranged.

Steve was furious. He always thought of Billy as a good guy. They went to church together and everything. How could he do a mean trick like that and invade the privacy of his personal property?

Steve could have erupted, gone to the principal, or shared his frustration with some other buddies, but he thought of Jesus' words, and decided to go to Billy.

"Billy, we need to talk. I saw you closing my locker a little while ago. I can tell some things have been moved around. What's up?"

To which Billy responded, "Oh, I tried to put everything back as neatly as I could. When I came down the hallway, I saw your locker door open and your stuff scattered all over the floor. I don't know if it fell out, or someone deliberately trashed your locker, but I didn't think you'd want your stuff all over the floor. So I picked it up."

Crazy illustration? Maybe. But we all know that friendships have disintegrated over misunderstandings crazier than this one.

Do you see? You are obligated to go because your brother may not know he stepped on your toes. It may be a misunderstanding. Jay Adams offers this rule, **"The one with the sore toes goes because he's the one who always knows."**

What are we supposed to do when we go? Verse 3 uses an important word. *Rebuke* him. There are two words for "rebuking" in the NT. One means "to so prosecute a case against another that he is convicted of the crime of which he is accused." That's *not* the word used here.

The word in verse 3 means "to rebuke tentatively." That is to say you go with caution. You go with the facts as you see them. You present the facts, and then you wait for the possible explanations of the facts. Your desire is to restore the relationship, not to make someone pay. Don't assume you're right. Give the person the benefit of the doubt.

A word of caution: Should we rebuke every time? Proverbs 19:11 says, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." If you can overlook an offense and still have a positive, loving, God-honoring relationship with your brother, fine. Then overlook it. But if the deed creates a barrier, a hindrance to your relationship, then go to him. Rebuke him tentatively. Then what?

2. *Give him opportunity to repent.* Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he *repents*." That's the goal when there's sin, *repentance*. To hear our brother say, "I'm so sorry. I was wrong for stepping on your toes. Will you forgive me?"

3. *If he repents, forgive him.* If it was hard to go and rebuke, here's where it gets even harder.

Suppose you forgive your brother for stepping on your toes. But suppose 45 minutes later, he steps on them again. And again he repents and asks for your forgiveness, and you forgive him. And 45 minutes later, he does it again, and again comes in brokenness, saying, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I have such a problem with my temper. I was wrong again. Will you forgive me?" Here's the question: How often are you supposed to forgive your brother?

Notice Jesus' answer in verses 3-4, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive

him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

The world doesn't buy that. Hurt me once, it's your fault. Hurt me twice, it's my fault. But we're called to a higher standard, a divine standard, a standard we cannot attain on our own strength. More about that in a moment.

4. *If he doesn't repent, remain willing to forgive.* Don't miss this. According to Jesus, at times forgiveness is conditional, not conditional in terms of willingness to forgive (that must be there), not conditional in terms of a choice I've made in my heart to forgive (that too must take place). The condition for granting forgiveness is that it must be sought by the offender through repentance *for his sake and the sake of the church.*

What if the person doesn't repent? Then what? We must stand willing to forgive and choose to treat the person graciously, as Christ would. But to forgive is to release, to refuse to bring a matter up again. And as we'll see, according to Matthew 18, if the person refuses to repent, the matter *must* be brought up again.

You say, "Why is forgiveness conditional at times?" Good question...

E. Here are some reasons for believing forgiveness is at times conditional.

1. *Jesus said it is based on the person's response (3).* "If he repents, forgive him." Jesus said the person's response is the condition.

2. *God's forgiveness is conditional (Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30).* Has God forgiven the whole world unconditionally? If you answer yes, how do you explain hell? No, that's universalism. God's forgiveness is conditional, and Luke 24:47 shows the condition, "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and *repentance and forgiveness of sins* will be preached in his name."

What must a person do to experience God's forgiveness? Repent. Acts 17:30 elaborates, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." If you want to experience God's forgiveness, you can, but you must repent.

3. *God commanded us to deal with each other conditionally.* Where? In Matthew 18. Matthew 18 picks up where Luke 17 leaves off. Listen to Matt. 18:15-17: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over [that's Luke 17:3; but then what?]. But if he will not listen [forgive him? No...], take one or two others along...If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan."

4. *What about Jesus' words in Luke 23:33-34?* That's where while on the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Doesn't that show that we should forgive

even if we're not asked? I don't think so.

If Jesus unconditionally forgave those who crucified Him, that would mean their sins were pardoned apart from believing the gospel. But no person's sins can be removed apart from embracing the gospel.

Keep this in mind. On the cross Jesus was praying, not granting people forgiveness. Must we be willing to forgive our offenders? Absolutely. As Jesus was. Was Jesus' prayer answered? Indeed. Many standing at the Cross that day later did repent and were forgiven, as we see in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost.

F. We must reject common excuses for not forgiving. Such as...

1. *"I'm not sure I see the fruits of repentance." (Luke 17:4)* Again, Luke 17 4 indicates if your brother comes to you seven times in a day *saying*, "I repent," forgive him.

"But what if I have reason to believe the person's 'repentance' is a sham?" you ask. Jesus isn't telling us to throw out discernment. The Scriptures elsewhere talk about the "fruit of repentance (Matt. 3:8)." If repentance is real, there will be fruit. If it's phony there will be the absence of fruit. For the good of the other person, you may need to say, "I hear your words, in fact I've heard them six times already today. You keep saying, 'I repent,' but I don't see any fruit. I want to forgive you. I'm *eager* to forgive you. But help me understand why what you say doesn't match what you do?" Even then, my motive is for the other person's good, not mine.

2. *"I don't have enough faith." (Luke 17:5)* It's interesting that's exactly what the apostles said next to Jesus (5), "Increase our faith." It's too hard! To which Jesus said, "No, a little faith will do. Obedience is the issue. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed...you can do it."

3. *"I don't feel like forgiving him." (Luke 17:7-10)* Which is the objection Jesus addresses in the parable that follows. It's a story about a master and a servant. Does the master reward his servant for doing what he was told to do? No. And Jesus says (10), "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do [like forgiving!], should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Chuck Colson took a team of Prison Fellowship workers to the Indiana Penitentiary. While there they had services with the inmates, but it was as they prepared to leave that God worked in a very amazing way. Colson recounts:

"My schedule was extremely tight, so after we finished 'Amazing Grace' we said our good-byes and began filing out. We were crowded into the caged area between the two massive gates when we noticed one volunteer had stayed back and was with James Brewer [a death row inmate] in his cell. I went to get the man because the warden could not operate the gates until we had all cleared out.

'I'm sorry, we have to leave,' I said, looking nervously at my watch, knowing a plane stood waiting at a nearby airstrip to fly me to Indianapolis to meet with Governor Orr. The volunteer, a short

white man in his early fifties, was standing shoulder to shoulder with Brewer. The prisoner was holding his Bible open while the older man appeared to be reading a verse.

‘Oh, yes,’ the volunteer looked up. ‘Give us a minute, please. This is important,’ he added softly.

‘No, I’m sorry,’ I snapped. ‘I can’t keep the governor waiting. We must go.’

‘I understand,’ the man said, still speaking softly, ‘but this is important. You see, I’m Judge Clement. I’m the man who sentenced James here to die. But now he’s my brother and we want a minute to pray together.’

I stood frozen in the cell doorway. It didn’t matter who I kept waiting. Before me were two men: one was powerless, the other powerful; one was black, the other white; one had sentenced the other to death. Anywhere other than the kingdom of God, that inmate might have killed that judge with his bare hands—or wanted to anyway. Now they were one, their faces reflecting an indescribable expression of love as they prayed together.

Though he could hardly speak, on the way out of the prison Judge Clement told me he had been praying for Brewer every day since he had sentenced him four years earlier.”^[4]

If you've been hurt by someone, it's not easy to forgive. But what you need isn't more faith or a special feeling...

The Bottom Line: We don't need to feel like granting forgiveness to do so. It's our duty. The issue is *obedience*.

**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] Story taken from John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, pp. 113-14.

^[3]Adapted from Jay Adams helpful material in *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, p. 15.

^[4] Chuck Colson, *Loving God*, pp. 193-4.