

# **FORGIVENESS**

## **The sign of grace**

### **Key question**

What does it mean to forgive and be forgiven?

### **Key text**

## **Ephesians 4:32**

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

### **Introduction**

1. Definition of Forgiveness
  - a. What forgiveness is not
    - 1) Denying my hurt – suppressing my pain
      - a) Pretending I was not really wronged; hoping I was not really hurt as badly as I think I was
      - b) If there is no sense of deep wrong, severe injustice then we have nothing to forgive.
      - c) Sometimes we don't want to admit that we are so vulnerable as to be just deeply.
    - 2) Excusing the other's behavior – saying, “It's O.K.”
      - a) To excuse is not to forgive but to tolerate (or even condone).
      - b) To excuse is to say that person is not really responsible for their attitudes / actions.
      - c) Many things are done which simply are inexcusable.
    - 3) Forgetting the trauma
      - a) If we could forget something then it really didn't need forgiveness in the truest sense of the word.
      - b) Pretending all is well is not forgiveness.
      - c) Trying to erase the pain by rewriting history is not forgiveness.
  - b. What forgiveness is (three factors)
    - 1) A conscious, deliberate choice of the offended . . .

- a) This is something the one who has been wounded decides to do . . . it is an act of their will.
- b) The offender cannot “earn” it.
- 2) . . . to release the offender from the requirements of justice . . .
  - a) No matter how costly
  - b) The offender is released from the penalty which justice demands though the offensive behavior is condemned.
- 3) . . . and absorb the loss instead of seeking revenge.
- 2. Forgiveness is an unnatural, illogical, and uncommon response to someone who has harmed me which says, “You are more important to me than the pain you’ve caused me.”
  - a. Our instincts are to focus on our pain, to nurse our hurts, to evoke the sympathy of others.
  - b. Forgiveness starts in the will, spends time in the intellect, and winds up in the emotions.

**A. Three Crucial Factors concerning God’s forgiveness of sinners.**

- 1. Unconditional
  - a. God the Father determined ahead of time to give us the chance of reconciliation through the cross work of Christ . . . he made the choice.
    - 1) I Pet.1:18-21 “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for our sake. Through him you believed in God . . .”
    - 2) God decided long ago to forgive us of our sin.
  - b. There is nothing we can “do” to bring about God’s forgiveness.
- 2. Complete
  - a. Jesus died in order to release us from the debt we had incurred before God.
    - 1) For all who are “In Christ” (i.e. believe that He did what He said He would do) there is no debt to face.
    - 2) To see the release from our debt from sin as anything except total in an affront to the One who died on the cross saying, “IT is finished.”
  - b. There is no fine print to God’s comprehensive forgiveness.
    - 1) Rom.8:1-2 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”
    - 2) It takes time and nurture to emotionally embrace God’s forgiveness . . . it is a hard thing to believe in the total, complete forgiveness of sin.
- 3. Costly
  - a. God absorbed a tremendous debt when He gave His Son as the payment for my sin.
    - 1) Someone has to absorb the cost, which accompanies the injustice of sin.

- 2) God made the supreme sacrifice . . . He gave His only begotten Son as the penalty.
- b. There is no such thing as a free ride.
  - 1) God could not deny His holiness (which demands perfection).
  - 2) God could not deny His justice (which demands payment for imperfection).

### **B. Myths concerning Forgiveness.**

1. For the Christian forgiveness of sins is based on “confession” of sins.
  - a. There are two Greek verbs and one Greek noun used in the New Testament for “confess” / “confession.”
    - 1) All three terms are a compound of two Greek words (“speak” and “the same thing”).
    - 2) When these two ideas are combined we find the basic meaning to “assent, agree / agreement with.”
    - 3) The words are paraphrased well with a phrase such as ‘to express openly one’s allegiance to a proposition or person.’
    - 4) There is no implication of wrong in the terms.
  - b. Most of the 40 occurrences of these Greek words are related to our “confession” of the Christian faith of Christ . . . for example:
    - 1) I Tim.6:12 “fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”
    - 2) I Jn.4:15 “If anyone acknowledges (i.e. confesses) that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.”
  - c. Only two places in the entire New Testament link “confession” and “sin” and these are not talking about our on-gong relationship with God.
    - 1) I Jn.1:9 “If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” This is not addressing the issue of what a Christian must do to “keep the slate clean” but rather of what must be done in order to become a Christian in the first place (i.e. a confession of our sinfulness before a holy God who through the death of His Son, purifies us from all sin (vs.7,9).
    - 2) Jas.5:16 “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” This text addresses our need for humility and transparency with each other so that we keep from getting proud.
    - 3) Paul never speaks of a Christian’s relationship with God as dependent on “confession” of sin.
      - a) Rom.10:9-10 links confession to Christ, which is typical of Paul.
      - b) A “condition” of confession for all our sins would be impossible to meet because we don’t honestly know how bad off we are!
  - d. The proverb “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (28:13) is giving sound advice.
    - 1) The first step toward wholeness is admitting what and where we are.

- 2) This is not a theological statement to be applied to Christians and their position before God.
2. If I have really forgiven someone I will forget what they have done and not have any negative emotions toward them.
  - a. Forgetting the offense is not necessarily a proof of forgiveness.
    - 1) It may well be a defense mechanism trying to ease my pain or hoping to create a less distressing past.
    - 2) Forgiveness should be thought of more as a change agent, which is in a process of transforming my soul.
      - a) It often strengthens my inner passion.
      - b) It often deepens my inner sorrow.
  - b. Hurt and anger are not conclusive proof that I have failed to forgive.
    - 1) It is quite possible that I have forgiven someone even if I feel pain, disgust, hurt over the injustice.
      - a) Holy anger is legitimate, in that it desires to destroy that which is compromising to what God intended for mankind.
      - b) Forgiveness is more of a process than a point in time event . . . I cannot always keep bad feelings at bay.
    - 2) It is almost impossible to conclude that I have forgiven if I still feel bitterness, hated, and vengeance.
  - c. How can I know that I truly have forgiven someone who has hurt me?
    - 1) If I have a relaxed attitude toward them, I probably have forgiven them.
      - a) My attitude toward them does not get in the way of me loving or serving others. EXAMPLE: I won't avoid a party that I should attend to encourage a friend just because I might run into the person who has hurt me.
      - b) I can care for them as I would any other person. EXAMPLE: If there is a need for their financial or emotional support, I am emotionally free to participate.
    - 2) If I no longer keep replaying the past offense in my mind in ways that stir up anger, I probably have forgiven them.
    - 3) If I can empathize with the one who has hurt me in ways that enable me to understand their behavior and see God's hand in using them to enable me to develop or demonstrate Godly character, I probably have forgiven them.
3. Forgiveness automatically results in restoration and reconciliation (i.e. we become "friends" again).
  - a. In order for "reconciliation" to take place two factors must come into play.
    - 1) Release – what the offended must do.
      - regardless of their response
      - I let go of the righteous demand of justice
    - 2) Repentance – what the offender must do.
      - An acknowledgment of wrong
      - A change of mind about my actions / attitudes.

- b. Both the offended and the offender must respond well in order for restoration to take place
    - 1) Often we find one without the other.
    - 2) If the offended offers forgiveness (i.e. release to the offender from the debt owed) there will not be fellowship without the offender receiving the offer.
  - d. There is never to be “peace at any price” . . . this is co-dependency.
    - 1) Peace comes when both parties have acted responsibly.
    - 2) We must recognize that even when we forgive we may never be at peace with the offender because of their refusal to face up to the facts.
4. Forgiveness means that I must continually “turn the other cheek.”
- a. Jesus’ statement (Matt.5:39) is very easily misunderstood.
    - 1) He is not saying that we should always let ourselves be run over by the evil actions of another.
    - 2) He is saying that we should never let another’s injustice dominate or imprison us (by being caught up in the mental game of focusing on the injustice and the revenge I want because of it).
  - b. There will may be very difficult situations in life where we must exercise “tough love.”
    - 1) A fool must face the reality of what they are doing . . . but we must not do so with a better spirit.
    - 2) To make sure we have the right spirit we do well to get counsel from someone who has insight into our lives and the Bible.
5. If I don’t forgive I won’t go to heaven.
- a. Some passages, on first glance, seem to indicate that heaven is only for people who are successfully forgiving those who have wronged them.
    - 1) The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt.18:21-35) concludes with the statement, “*this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*”
    - 2) The Lord’s Prayer (Matt.6:9-13) says, “*forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.*”
  - b. But our justification before God (i.e. our family relationship which involves no guilt or shame) is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)
    - 1) There is no “fine print.”
    - 2) We are secure because of God’s grace, not our goodness.
  - c. Forgiveness, while exhorted by Jesus and the Apostles, is never linked with a warning of eternal death if we don’t do it.
    - 1) Christians are not always forgiving people.
    - 2) Forgiveness is not a condition for getting to heaven.
- c. An unforgiving attitude will have no bearing on my emotional life.
- a. People are blessed when they both experience and express the grace of forgiveness.
    - 1) God has designed human beings in such a way that we function much better when we live in a way, which reflect His grace.

- 2) Blessedness in this life is directly tied to our ability to live with grace as the controlling factor in our lives.
- b. To receive the grace of forgiveness without giving the grace of forgiveness is a tormenting experience.
  - 1) One reason people are so uptight, miserable and unhappy is because they have failed to forgive.
  - 2) The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is an illustration of this principle (Matt.18:21-35).
- c. The chief victim of an unforgiving spirit is the one who needs to forgive, not the one who needs to be forgiven.
  - 1) Forgiveness always works for the good of both the transgressed and transgressor.
  - 2) To live with an unforgiving spirit is to be consigned to a hell on earth.
7. It is unwise to continually forgive people for what they do because they will use it a blank check for further transgression against me (i.e. they need a threat of else!).
  - a. Jesus talked in terms of unlimited forgiveness . . . that it is never exhausted.
    - 1) Matt.18:21-22 “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”
    - 2) Jesus used a figure of speech to say that forgiveness was not something we keep score on.
  - b. Forgiveness is not a blank check but God’s paradoxical change agent.
    - 3) Les Miserables is a story of the power of forgiveness for change in a human being.
    - 4) It is a fundamental distinction between the Old covenant (“eye for an eye”) and the New covenant (“grace and truth”).
8. When I know the facts concerning God’s forgiveness I will automatically have the appropriate feelings that come from such forgiveness.
  - a. It usually takes a great deal of time and tenderness to come to emotionally own forgiveness.
    - 1) We are not naturally good at processing the reality of God’s forgiveness.
    - 2) Humans have a universal appetite for doing something to atone for their sins.
  - b. Because it is difficult to be really touched by forgiveness we often find ourselves NOT living in light of its implications . . . instead we are into:
    - 1) Discipline – to get forgiveness we are determined to show God we are serious about it and we try to jump through some religious hoops to demonstrate our resolve.
    - 2) Denial – thinking I don’t need much forgiveness because I don’t see myself as being so bad a person (or at least not as bad as some I know).
9. It is easy to forgive.
  - a. Forgiveness begins with honestly facing the trauma, the wrong, the injustice, the sin that was or is being leveled against me . . . this is NOT easy.
    - 1) Facing how bad things really are is frightening.

- 2) We are often too proud to admit how vulnerable we really are to another human being.
  - b. Forgiveness continues with an act of the will which goes directly against the feelings of vengeance in the soul.
    - 1) It is NOT easy to do what is right when we really don't feel like doing it.
    - 2) Often this involves a very difficult, heart-breaking journey . . . if you can forgive quickly you may be ignoring the cost involved in forgiveness.
  - c. Forgiveness hopes for reconciliation and restoration BUT IT MAY NEVER HAPPEN.
    - 1) It is a terrifying thing to embrace a hunger which may never be satisfied this side of heaven.
    - 2) Forgiveness keeps hope alive . . . hope that keeps us constantly "stirred up" . . . this is why we would often rather deaden our passion by not forgiving or demand our payment by not forgiving.
10. It is easy to be forgiven.
- a. Accepting another's forgiveness is one of the most humbling of all human activities.
    - 1) The offender has to honestly face what has been done.
    - 2) The offender has to "repent" of excuses, denial, and all other destructive ways of relating.
  - b. Such humility will generally not come without traumatic circumstances, which break the heart.
    - 1) The offender must somehow see in a very vivid way their foolishness.
    - 2) This picture is often accomplished through great personal failure.

## **B. Conclusion**

1. God offers unconditional, complete, costly forgiveness freely to all based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
  - a. Heb.10:12-14 (paraphrase) "As a priest, Christ made a single sacrifice for sins, and that was it! Then he sat down right beside God . . . It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. By that a single offering , he did everything that needed to be done for everyone who takes part in the purifying process . . . Once sins are taken care of for good, there's no longer any need to offer sacrifices for them."
  - b. There is nothing more that can be done with the issue of the forgiveness of sin . . . the release from the debt was accomplished by Christ.
2. Those who repent are reconciled with God and restored to a parent-child relationship with Him.
  - a. To repent is to have a change of mind about ourselves and our sin so that we trust ourselves to Christ.
  - b. With God's forgiveness (i.e. release from the debt) and our faith (i.e. repentance of our self sufficiency) we are placed into the family of believers (i.e. reconciled with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well as the whole church).

3. Because we have experienced the grace of forgiveness from God we can begin to express the grace of forgiveness to ourselves and others.

## ***A SPECIFIC CASE - SEXUAL SIN***

### **I. CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS APPROPRIATE FOR SOME FORMS OF IMMORALITY.**

A. **I Cor.5:1-13** “*It is actually reported that there is **immorality** among you, and **immorality** of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife.*”

#### 1. **The sin -- vs. 1**

The immorality described here was **incest** which was especially forbidden in the Law (Lev. 18:6). The fact that the guilty person and the congregation had no shame is also a significant issue here.

#### 2. **The Corinthian response -- vs. 2**

a. **WHAT THEY DID.** “*you have become arrogant.*” They felt:

- 1) “This will not effect us.”
- 2) “God is a God of grace and love, therefore we need not worry too much about the law. What really matters is mutual consent and loving intent, not marriage covenant and obedience to the Scripture.”

b. **WHAT THEY SHOULD HAVE DONE.** “*you have not mourned instead*”

- 1) This should have caused great concern, grief, and shame.
- 2) One of the grave characteristics of our age and Paul’s is the disobedient soul that does not blush with shame.

c. **WHAT SHOULD HAVE RESULTED.** “*in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.*”

- 1) A healthy church exercises church discipline.
- 2) A healthy church does not withdraw from the world, however. vs. 9-11

#### 3. **Paul’s response -- vs. 3-13**

##### a. **His action -- vs. 3-5**

“*I have already judged him*” - As an authority in the church, Paul had the responsibility of passing judgment on improper conduct in the church. He expected the Corinthians to judge such a person’s conduct (vs. 12) but not his motives (4:5).

“*when you are assembled*” - The disciplining of this person was to be public.

“*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh*” - This is a euphemism for being excommunicated or put out into the world so that he would experience the natural consequences of his actions - perhaps even physical death.

“*that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*” - This suggests that the person in question who is a “*so called brother*” (vs. 11) might indeed be in need of saving faith which, given his conduct, he appears not to have. A Christian is not expected to act this way without deep shame. In Matt. 18:17 Jesus instructs His disciples to treat a brother like an unbeliever if he persists in resisting church discipline.

##### b. **The Principle behind it -- vs. 6**

“*a little leaven leavens the whole lump*” - It is the effect upon the church that concerns Paul as much as the state of the sinner’s spirit.



**c. The Principle illustrated -- vs. 7-8**

Just as the children of Israel at the first Passover were to clean all the leaven out of their homes in order to celebrate the feast properly, so these Christians were to cleanse the church of malice and wickedness as they came to worship. Moral hypocrisy was not to be tolerated.

**d. The Principle qualified -- vs. 9-13**

This principle is not to be misunderstood as referring to our witness to the outside world. We should expect to run into such conduct in the world.

## **II. GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST OFFERS TOTAL FORGIVENESS FOR SEXUAL SIN.**

### **A. Jesus repeatedly showed grace toward sexual sinners.**

1. **Jn.4** - the Samaritan woman
2. **Jn.8** - the woman taken in adultery
3. **Lk.7** - the immoral woman
4. **Matt.21:31** - speaking to the chief priests and elders - *"the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you"*

### **B. God's promises to forgive are greater than any sin.**

1. **Ps.103:8-14** *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."*
2. **Rom.8:31-39** *"Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?"*
3. **I Cor.6:9-11** *"but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,"*

### **C. A model of penitent prayer -- Ps. 51**

1. **Vs. 1-4** I have sinned and deserve punishment but flee for refuge to your grace.
2. **Vs. 5-9** My sin problem is deeper than this incident.
3. **Vs. 10-13** Help me change from the inside out.
4. **Vs. 14-17** Let my broken heart be overpowered by your grace.

### **D. Instruction in forgiveness -- II Cor.2:5-11**

1. **Vs. 5** When one person in the fellowship suffers, the whole fellowship is to share that pain.
2. **Vs. 6** The majority have the responsibility of disciplining wayward members. **Matt.18:15-20**
3. **Vs. 7-10** The church also has the responsibility of forgiving and comforting.
4. **Vs. 11** Satan can use guilt, shame, and sorrow to keep us from God's grace and love.

## **III. WHAT CAN BE SAID TO HELP CHRISTIANS LIVE PURE LIVES?**

### **A. TEN STEPS TO PRACTICAL PURITY.**

1. Keep innocent expressions special.
2. Pace your passion.
3. Don't feed your fantasies.
4. Remember whose property you're touching.
5. Make a promise to God, and daily renew your commitment.
6. Acknowledge Jesus' presence on every date.

7. Agree on your standards.
8. Don't always go it alone.
9. Put real love first.
10. Declare a new beginning.

**B. SIX STEPS TO STARTING OVER AGAIN.**

1. Come to Jesus and ask for forgiveness.
2. Go to your partner(s) and apologize.
3. If you are going to continue a relationship with that individual, then both of you need to agree to stop the sexual involvement.
4. If you decide to maintain your relationship, it's important that the two of you set standards.
5. Make sure that God is number one in your life.
6. Plan your date.

**IV. HUMAN SEXUALITY -- FIVE BASIC POINTS AS A SUMMARY**

**A. Heterosexual desire is created by God and is good.**

1. Sexual desire is nothing to be ashamed of.
2. Sexual activity is natural, but not necessary, for a full and healthy life.
3. Sexuality and spirituality are related.

**B. Sexual relations are to be an expression of vulnerable intimacy in the security of a covenant commitment.**

1. This commitment is PERSONAL, PUBLIC, and PERMANENT.
2. Sex without security is sin (Eph.5:31).

**C. The expression of our sexual drives is affected by the Fall and constitutes a spiritual battlefield in our lives.**

1. Most of us struggle with this area of life because we desire a level of intimacy that we do not yet experience.
2. Sexual freedom is not the right to do what we want, but the power to do what we ought (I Cor.6:12).

**D. Sexual thoughts, as well as actions, are to be brought under the control of the spirit, not the flesh.**

**E. Sexual sin can be forgiven, just as any other sin.**