

WHEN SHOULD I FORGIVE?

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An essay looking at the Bible's teaching on forgiveness: when and how it should be offered and whether it should be offered conditionally or unconditionally. All scripture passages are taken from the English Standard Version. 22.3.06 -1.0

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago I spoke on the Lord's Prayer at a church weekend away. After speaking of the need to forgive unconditionally from Matthew 6:12, 14-15, I was later challenged by a man who believed that Christians don't need to forgive a person unless that person has first of all apologized and sought forgiveness.

It was the first time I had ever heard this idea. Since that time I've discovered there are some Bible teachers who think the idea has merit. Could this be right? Could it be that until a person comes to me seeking forgiveness it's OK to stay angry with them? It seemed against all that I understood the New Testament to be telling me.

Various kinds of arguments have been offered to substantiate the view. From the Bible the most often cited passage is Luke 17:1-4 where Jesus speaks to his disciples:

"Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ **and if he sins** against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

It is argued that verse 3 establishes the condition of repentance necessary before forgiveness should take place. However, such a reading of Luke 17 creates a tension between the unequivocal teaching on forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer and other places. How do we resolve this?

Those who take such a conditional view have argued that God doesn't forgive a person until they repent so neither should we. But is this a right way to understand God's forgiveness? Or again, it is said that demanding that people 'must forgive' turns forgiveness into a *work* we perform that earns our salvation. Is forgiveness a question of obedience, an option or even a work?

During the years I have been teaching the Bible, no issue has provoked a greater response or touched more raw nerves than the issue of forgiveness. My experience is that so many Christians have cupboards in their minds where they nurse a major grievance or set of

grievances and what they do with this cupboard has a major effect on their lives.

Some defend its contents bitterly whilst others wish they could simply clean it and be free. Then there are those who are just confused as to why it's there at all since they're Christian and have the Holy Spirit!

So, must we forgive and does it depend on whether the offending party has asked for forgiveness? The short answers are 'Yes, we must' and "No, we needn't".

The heart of the confusion over when we must forgive lies in the difference between the need for forgiveness and the subsequent possibility of reconciliation. Confusing these two bible categories results in confusion over what we must do... and with the issue of forgiveness, that's a confusion we can do without.

The following article is an attempt to understand whether the New Testament expects people to forgive conditionally or unconditionally.

A. WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

1. We all know what it is

This is, at one level, an easy question. If I tell one of my children to forgive, they know instantly and straight away what I mean. It seems to be what some philosophers call a 'basic' 'belief' or 'idea', so fundamental, so intrinsic, so inbuilt, that we know about it almost from birth. This may be because as fallen creatures interacting with one another we know from the earliest age what it is to be sinned against and we also know that we do this to others.

If everyone in society were to hold every 'sin' or 'offense' against each other, then life would be impossible to live. Consequently, the need to 'let go' and 'move on' is basic to the living of life. If we're going to negotiate each day, then forgiveness is an essential tool. Even little children know this.

I know of a family where two brothers have not spoken civilly to each other since childhood. One of the brothers will not forgive a time when the elder brother picked on him. The lack of forgiveness is heartbreaking to the mother. It means that all sorts of family events are not possible or need to be carefully organized. Because of this, their lives have been greatly limited.

Yet even though forgiveness is basic and intuitively understood and necessary to living life, a definition of forgiveness is still a useful thing. The Bible is the place to look.

2. What does the Bible say?

The nature of God and our response

The Bible doesn't offer a neat definition of forgiveness yet it is not exaggerating to say that the whole Bible is about this topic. After the fall in Eden, our very lives depend on the mercy of God. All subsequent dealings with Him depend on this great characteristic. The Bible testifies to God as a forgiving, compassionate God:

... you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... (Nehemiah 9:17)

... The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

God's forgiveness is complete

The Bible tells us that the Lord washes away our sin completely and remembers 'no more' the sins of his people¹. God chooses to not count our sin against us, but how and why does he do this?

God is not obliged to forgive

God has promised that he will forgive all who turn to him in repentance.² But God is not obliged to forgive people. We cannot force God into forgiveness. Rather we can only appeal to the promise that he will. Indeed there are times when he chooses not to.³ We should be careful that we do not abuse the grace of God and try His patience.⁴

We can have assurance

When God forgives he does so because of his character (he is merciful) and because of his purpose to establish a blameless and holy church. God is able to achieve

this.⁵ However, the Bible shows us that he is only able to forgive because of the cross.⁶

At the cross, God not only deals with his anger, but he also exacts punishment for sins committed. Romans 5:8 and Hebrews 7:27; 9:12, 26 and 10:10 show us that, at the cross, there is a 'once for all' dealing with sin.

This is why, when a person becomes a Christian, they can have *assurance*. All sin - past, present and future, has been (past tense) dealt with at the cross. Yet again, this doesn't mean we can do what we like. We need to press on to make this our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. (Philippians 3:12). Earlier on in this letter Paul says:

... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹¹ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

I will talk more about this later, but it is important to briefly say at this stage that a person must respond to God's offer of salvation.

Connected and interrelated concepts

It is becoming clear that forgiveness is connected to a range of other separate concepts. Some have been mentioned already, but the list is extensive. They include such things as sin, repentance, culpability, justice, reconciliation, restitution, grace and so on.

A brief summary so far

In summary, we can say that our sin means we are culpable and justly deserve death. At the cross, Jesus' death reconciles God to us by turning away his anger and making satisfactory payment for sin so that when we repent, God forgives us.

By his Spirit, God works in us to produce repentance, which reconciles us to him. His forgiveness is an act of Grace or unmerited mercy towards us.

3. Consequences

All sin has consequences. So, whenever we sin, there will always be some consequences that we live with until we leave this life on earth. For example, sinning once may mean that we find it easier to do it again. Or if we sin, later on we may find it impossible to remove the memory of what we've done wrong. With regard to

¹ So Psalm 103:12 says:

... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us

God says in Jeremiah 31:34 that:

... I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

² So John 3:16.

³ For example see: 2Kings 24:3-4, Isaiah 22:14, Jeremiah 5:7, Lamentations 3:42, Hosea 1:6.

⁴ See Romans 2:4, Hebrews 6 and 10.

⁵ So it is God's plan to not only forgive us but to work in us to change us. Philippians 3:20-21 tells us that:

... our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

⁶ That most famous of all verses John 3:16 shows us that "God 'so loved' the world that he sent his one and only son to die ..." If there was another way then God would have taken it. Again we see in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus praying to God to take away the cup of suffering (Mark 14:35) but there was no other way. 2Corinthians 5:19ff again shows us that the way God is reconciling people to him is through the cross.

our sin, some of the consequences that involve our relations with others may include:

- I. *needing to make restitution to those we have sinned against.*
- II. *not expecting to hold or be restored to an office or perform a duty.*
- III. *losing the trust of those we've hurt.*
- IV. *finding it difficult to live in community or friendship with particular people.*

Because someone who hurts us may not be a Christian, they may choose never to fix up the relationship. So even though we may forgive, reconciliation is not always possible.

4. The mechanics of forgiveness

In order to keep thinking about a definition we need to see how forgiveness works. It is worth noting that forgiveness should only be sought from God on the basis of a genuine offence against him. The technical term in the Bible for such an offence is 'sin'. That is, God won't condemn us for having fair hair or a speech impediment but he will condemn us for rebellion to his commands.⁷ When God 'passes over' an offence he chooses to not count that sin against a person from that time on.

All sin is ultimately against God

When we consider offences committed against us by other people, we can never leave God out of the picture because, ultimately, all sin is primarily committed against God.

If I steal from my neighbour, then I break God's command to not steal. I also steal from a creature that God has lovingly made in His image and so treat God's possession with contempt. Notice that this means my forgiving will have a different dimension to God's forgiving. He is never at fault. He is always an offended party in any instance of sin and it is his standards or laws that are broken, not mine.

If someone breaks a human law, whilst it doesn't carry the same authority as God's laws or standards, a person will certainly still sin against both God and neighbour if they, for example, choose to break the speed limit.⁸

Three parties involved

All of this means that we are never in a position where we can say we are righteous, or we have rights, rather, we stand before God in as much need of grace as the

person who has hurt us.⁹ In summary, **when I am sinned against** there will always be at least three parties involved: the perpetrator, the victim and God.¹⁰ Working out how and when forgiveness is granted will always involve consideration of these three parties.¹¹

B. A DEFINITION

Based on what we've seen we can say that forgiveness is:

not counting a person's sin against them

This definition leaves open who is doing the forgiving. It could be God or man. It contains the term 'sin' which, as we've seen is the only legitimate offence. It also includes a victim (the one not counting the sin) and a perpetrator (the 'person'). As such this is probably the most basic and effective definition. The definition is more technical than 'to cease resenting' but we shall see that this is implied.

1. What the definition doesn't imply

Notice that the definition doesn't imply forgetting that it happened. Neither does it imply restoring the person to previous responsibilities if they have abused them. Neither does it imply that 'reconciliation' is an essential consequence.

2. To 'not count' sin?

However, we must examine what it means to 'not count sin against' and when this should happen. We have noted that God's forgiveness is available to the person who repents. So far we have seen that God is not only able to forgive, but to choose not to remember and then to treat with love and favour, **all** those he has forgiven. What about us? What does forgiveness look like for us?

A question of attitude

A definition is all very well, but definitions can be cold and technical. Forgiveness certainly shouldn't be cold and technical. In Matthew 18:35 teaches: "forgive your brother from your heart". This verse speaks of the

⁹ Hence Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:1-2:

Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

¹⁰ Of course there could be many more people involved. For example when people find out that their local councilor has cheated his business partner, they may lose trust in him. His action turns out to be not just an offence against his business partner, but also against those who have put faith in his honesty.

Although this is, in a sense, a secondary offence, we could say that any offence I commit against my neighbour is an offence against all mankind. We see this with Cain and Able. Cain's murder of Abel showed us all how to murder and led us into further curses from God.

¹¹ People have reached strange conclusions. There are some modern Jews who will argue that God will not grant forgiveness to a person until the person they've wronged forgives them. This leaves your salvation in the hands of another person – the person you've wronged!!

⁷ 1John 3:4 explains that "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." Whilst Romans 3:23 concludes that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,". Tragically, Romans 6:23 tells us that "the wages of sin is death".

⁸ The ethics of community standards and laws are a difficult area. As human laws they have an arbitrary quality, yet Romans 13 and 1Peter 2:13ff make it clear that opting out of community laws is not an option because God is behind the recognized authority.

importance of ‘releasing’ or ‘letting go’ the anger and resentment that lies in the heart. It shows us that to understand how ‘forgiveness’ works we need to look within the heart where our feelings reside. The Bible condemns bitterness and resentment as inappropriate to God’s people.¹²

Jesus’ conclusion about forgiveness ‘from your heart’ is preceded by the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35).¹³ The point of the parable is to highlight gross hypocrisy. It tells of a man who is forgiven much but won’t do likewise to others. The parable shows us why the heart is so important.

If we take what God has given to us without thankfulness that overflows into an attitude of grace to others, then we really haven’t understood what God has done for us. We haven’t understood that we would be dead but for God’s mercy. So forgiveness is fundamentally about a right ‘attitude’ to others because of what God has done for us.¹⁴

In speaking of Matthew 18:35, J. K. Grider hints at when forgiveness is appropriate by describing forgiveness as:

... an attitude of the mind even before the offending party requests forgiveness...¹⁵

In saying this he assumes the broad teaching of the New Testament about *unconditional forgiveness* when we are sinned against.

C. UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

The Bible teaches that we must forgive unconditionally. Jesus says in Mark 11:25:

... **whenever** you stand praying, forgive, if you have **anything** against **anyone**, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses”
emphasis mine

Jesus’ teaching provides no exceptions or qualifying clauses. He unambiguously declares that we must forgive ‘anything’ of ‘anyone’. Jesus doesn’t tell us to ready our hearts in order to forgive – he says ‘forgive’. He doesn’t excuse forgiveness if a person is not a believer or if they are unrepentant or if the scale of the offence is enormous.¹⁶ He says ‘whenever’ we pray.

That is, if there is a time when we pray (and the Bible tells us to pray continually¹⁷) then that is a time to forgive ‘anyone’. What Jesus says here agrees consistently with Luke 6:37 and his teaching in the Lord’s prayer as it’s found in Matthew 6 and Luke 11.¹⁸

When Jesus decides to teach on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, his focus is hypocrisy. This is the context for the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew’s gospel. The hypocrisy that he condemns is the willingness to receive God’s forgiveness whilst withholding it from others.

In Matthew 6, Jesus repeats verse 12 of the Lord’s Prayer in verse 14 and then puts it in the reverse in verse 15. He doesn’t want us to miss his point!

So, when Jesus provides extra information, rather than qualifying, he emphasizes the unilateral nature of the need to forgive. He doesn’t say, “If your brother has come to you in repentance, rather he just says forgive”. Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness is that it is unconditional.

These instances of the Bible’s teaching on forgiveness would seem to answer the ‘what’ and ‘when’ questions of above.

It is clear that we must forgive but questions remain. Questions about passages in the Bible that are possibly at odds about what happens to the sin of an offending party remain; such as: ‘Whose blood atones for the sin of those I forgive?’ or ‘Is it possible for me to forgive a person that God ultimately won’t?’ and so on.

We must remember that while these questions may hold a fascination for us, we cannot let them undo the simple command of the Lord Jesus to forgive.

Nevertheless it is worth examining in brief the above questions.

1. Whose blood?

If God required blood to be shed in order to forgive my sin, then whose blood pays for the sin of those who sin against me? The answer is that Jesus’ blood has already dealt with people’s sins.

Hebrews 9:22 tells us that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”. However Jesus has paid for the sin of the whole world. He is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1John 2:2). We shouldn’t

¹² For example Ephesians 4:31-32, Hebrews 12:15

¹³ A positive inversion of this story is seen in Luke 7:41ff.

¹⁴ If we want to forgive the following may be helpful: “Help me Lord to not be angry, to not bear this grudge, to treat with love and to wish good not evil for this person.”

¹⁵ J.K. Grider (‘Forgiveness’ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* Ed. W.A Elwell; Grand Rapids, Baker: 1984), 421

¹⁶ Matthias Media have released a book by Cathy Diosie titled ‘Forgiving Hitler’. As a Jew in a concentration camp she experienced the horrors of the holocaust, yet, with God’s help, she has brought herself to a point of forgiving the man behind it all.

¹⁷ See: Luke 18:1, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6 and 1Thessalonians 5:17.

¹⁸ In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus teaches ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us’. One can take the Lord’s Prayer two ways: A measure for measure – ie. a question of degree. So, “Extend to me in the future the same measure of forgiveness that I have (up to this point) measured to others”. Or, secondly, “In that I have forgiven others (this has a sense of completion), so now forgive me”. Both are daunting. There’s no comfort in preferring one over the other.

understand this sacrifice as being prospective only for those who repent. 2Peter 2:1-3 tells us that Jesus has 'bought' or 'purchased' people whose 'destruction' hangs over them. It is not our place to continue therefore to count sins against people when Jesus has already dealt with them?

2. Leave it to God

Some may be concerned that they forgive a person who ultimately won't be forgiven by God. However nowhere does the Bible take up this concern. Rather the Bible tells us to leave judgment to him. We've seen that God owns the standards that are broken and therefore rightly 'owns' the offense.

In addition we simply are not properly objective and our interests and loyalties are clouded. Deuteronomy 32:35 says: "Vengeance is mine". The time of reckoning is with God in the future.

3. We must forgive

Not only is forgiveness to be unconditional, we **must** forgive. If we choose not to, then Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37 and the teaching of the Lord's prayer indicate that God will not forgive us our sins. Forgiveness then becomes a very serious matter. Paul aptly notes in Romans 4:7:

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered

Imagine leaving myself out of the Kingdom of God because I'm not prepared to forgive.¹⁹ We must keep forgiving!

D. A WORD WITH TWO SENSES

1. From the heart

In the Bible (and in common language) there are two senses in which we use the word 'forgive'. As we've seen, the first and most important place is in my heart - where it must happen.

This must be the primary sense in which we understand 'not counting' or 'forgiving' because this is the forgiveness that depends on us alone. It is the forgiveness we must give if we are to expect God to forgive us.

2. Releasing my brother

However, there is another secondary sense. This is the sense in which we 'release' a person when they come to

us in repentance. We say to such a person 'I forgive you' and they know that they are released.

This is what Matthew 18:21-22 Luke 17:3-4 (and probably 6:37) and 2Corinthians 2:1ff are about. The repentant perpetrator who seeks forgiveness must not be held captive to their guilt. If they seek forgiveness, it must be given and they must be restored as far as possible to fellowship.

Jesus teaches that we must be prepared to keep on releasing up to 'seventy-seven times'. In other words, we must keep releasing.

Of course we cannot give this kind of 'forgiveness' unless it is sought. So John Stott writes about this second, 'conciliating' kind of forgiveness:

Although the followers of Jesus never have the right to refuse forgiveness, let alone to take revenge, we are not permitted to cheapen forgiveness by offering it prematurely when there has been no repentance. 'If your brother sins,' Jesus said, 'rebuke him', and only then, 'if he repents, forgive him' (Lk. 17:3).²⁰

This second sense of the word forgiveness is the chief tool of the Christian as he/she seeks reconciliation with others.

In commenting on Matthew 18:21 and with reference to Luke 17:3-4, Calvin writes of the injunction to forgive seven times and reaches the same conclusions:

But the words of Luke give rise to another question; for Christ does not order us to grant forgiveness, till the offender turn to us and give evidence of repentance.

I reply, there are two ways in which offenses are forgiven. If a man shall do me an injury, and I, laying aside the desire of revenge, do not cease to love him, but even repay kindness in place of injury, though I entertain an unfavorable opinion of him, as he deserves, still I am said to forgive him.

For when God commands us to wish well to our enemies, He does not therefore demand that we approve in them what He condemns, but only desires that our minds shall be purified from all hatred.

In this kind of pardon, so far are we from having any right to wait till he who has offended shall return of his own accord to be reconciled to us, that we ought to love those who deliberately provoke us, who spurn reconciliation, and add to the load of former offenses.

A second kind of forgiving is, when we receive a brother into favor, so as to think favorably respecting him, and to be convinced that the remembrance of his offense is blotted out in the sight of God.

¹⁹ Calvin writes:

...if there is anything in the whole of religion that we should most certainly know, we ought most closely to grasp by what reason, with what law, under what condition, with what ease or difficulty, forgiveness of sins may be obtained (*Institutes* III, iv. 2).

James writes:

... judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. (2:13)

²⁰ J. Stott *'The Cross of Christ'* – (Leicester, IVP, 1986), 296

And this is what I have formerly remarked, that in this passage Christ does not speak only of injuries which have been done to us, but of every kind of offenses; for he desires that, by our compassion, we shall raise up those who have fallen.

This doctrine is very necessary, because naturally almost all of us are peevish beyond measure; and Satan, under the pretense of severity, drives us to cruel rigor, so that wretched men, to whom pardon is refused, are swallowed up by grief and despair.²¹

3. Words used for forgiveness

At this point you may be wondering whether different Greek or Hebrew words support this twofold view of the meaning of forgiveness.²² Whilst words used for 'forgiveness' in the original Greek in the New Testament do vary, it is noteworthy that where we have examined forgiveness, in Matthew 6:12, 14; 18:21, 27, 35; Mark 11:25 and Luke 7:47-49, 17:3-4, the same Greek word 'afiemi' is used.²³

A noteworthy exception to the use of 'afiemi' is in Luke 6:37 where the word 'apolo' is used. This word means exactly 'release'. Here it is translated in the ASV:

And judge not, and ye shall not be judged: and condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: release, and ye shall be released²⁴

E. SOME OBJECTIONS

Certain objections have been raised to the Bible's teaching on unconditional forgiveness.

1. I can't remember everyone I've hurt!

What if I can't remember everyone I've hurt? Does this mean that God will not listen to my prayers? We should remember that the teaching on forgiveness is about attitude.²⁵ If I knowingly hold on to anger and resentment then that is the issue.

Our future state depends on what we do with Jesus' teaching. That is, do we forgive like Jesus forgave us? Apart from this, as we've seen above, Jesus death is a 'once for all' atoning sacrifice. So if I ignorantly and unintentionally hurt someone or have forgotten about a situation, then God doesn't hold this against me.

2. Isn't it right to be angry at what was done?

It is right to be angry at evil in the world. In fact it is right to be angry when we've been sinned against. It would be unnatural and inhuman not to be. After all, we have feelings and emotions that are hurt and wounded. We've been made with personhood and self-identity. Moreover, as people in the image of God, and especially as believers, we know what is right and what is wrong. It is natural to feel revulsion towards evil and to want to reject and reduce it.

However, after we've recovered from the anger we need to move on to think about the tragic position of the perpetrator. Where do they stand before God? John Bradford's words are so important: "There, but for the grace of God go I".²⁶

I may not have done more terrible things because God has kept me from greater tests and His Spirit has preserved me. I may also be insensitive to the seriousness of my sin. Because of this, we need to recognize that we are in no position to condemn. Where we condemn others, we also stand to be condemned.

Jesus wants us to love and pray for our enemies and those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). He says "for if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:46).

Jesus' calls his disciples to be radically different in the world. After all, we alone claim amongst people that we have God's Holy Spirit in us producing the fruit of the Spirit of God. We must ask ourselves do we have the transforming love of God in us by His Spirit?

3. Jesus' teaching is hyperbole

One objection made is that Jesus' teaching is hyperbolic, that is, it is intentionally extreme or exaggerated in order to make a point. Often this objection is reinforced by appealing to other clear instances of hyperbole in the Sermon on the Mount.²⁷

Robert Stein has made a careful study of this kind of problem in his book "Difficult Sayings in the Gospels – Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole".²⁸ He deals with this objection by contrasting Matthew 6:14-15:²⁹

²¹ Cited from Calvin's commentary on a gospel harmony Tr. from the original Latin and with Calvin's French version by Rev W. Pringle – see: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom32.html>

²² The *New Bible Dictionary* has excellent and accessible material on this in an article under the heading 'forgiveness'.

²³ The Greek word 'afiemi' has the sense of 'to cease' (of a state) - 'to cease, to stop, to leave, to let go'.

²⁴ It is not possible to say with certainty whether Jesus intends a 'letting go' in the primary sense of forgiveness or whether he is affirming 'release' forgiveness. The second seems likely.

²⁵ The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6 is in the context of Jesus' teaching against hypocrisy.

²⁶ John Bradford shared a prison cell with Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer before being burnt at the stake in 1555.

²⁷ However this doesn't help with Mark 11:25 or Luke 6:37 or Luke 11:1ff.

²⁸ R. H. Stein, 'Difficult Sayings in the Gospels – Jesus' Use of Overstatement and Hyperbole' (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

²⁹ Stein, 24ff

Passage 1

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

...with another passage from the 'Sermon on the Mount', Matthew 5:23-24:

Passage 2

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

With the second passage he argues that the Galileans who heard these words (and anyone else who hears them) understand that they cannot always be near the temple. He writes:

The listeners therefore understood that the intent of Jesus' words did not lie in their literal meaning but rather in the general principle that one should not come into the presence of God without a willingness to seek reconciliation with one's brother.³⁰

Notice however, that there is no lessening of the need for reconciliation. With Jesus' teaching on forgiveness he writes of the first passage:

... the statement in Matthew 6:14-15 is to be taken literally. Whoever would seek forgiveness of God must be willing to forgive others. Even as the experience of God's love causes the believer to love (1John 4:19), so the contrition and repentance necessary for forgiveness cause us to forgive others who may be indebted to us (Matt. 18:23-35; Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37).

One cannot reach out with open hands to God for forgiveness and at the same time have a closed fist toward one's brother or neighbor.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 6:14-15 are not an exaggeration. This teaching is literally true, and those who claim to take the teachings of Jesus seriously had best take these words at face value. Jesus intended that they be interpreted literally!³¹

The tone of Jesus' teaching in Matthew is unequivocal. There is great power in his black and white approach. It is true, Scripture says other, more nuanced things elsewhere.³² But scripture is pastoral in the way it teaches. It doesn't present itself as a legal contract with

every aspect of a matter touched upon and gathered together. Rather it *preaches* to us.³³

Matthew 6 is, in a sense, entirely 'unbalanced'. And that is the prerogative of Jesus. The question is: "Why is he unbalanced at this point?". Or at least, why doesn't he talk about the struggle to forgive, or the possibility that the anger may resurface at a later date?

It seems that Jesus wants to speak in such a way that no person, not one, can say I am the exception. No one can walk away from the 'Sermon on the Mount', with 'balanced' 'nuanced' modifications or 'fine print' in their heads. Rather all they hear is the clear directive 'Forgive'.

A closer look at Mark 11:25 – A plain reading

We have argued for a plain reading of the Lord's Prayer but what about Mark 11:25? The most important and striking thing to notice is the force of the teaching. Mark 11:25 is unilateral in its tone.

... **whenever** you stand praying, forgive, if you have **anything** against **anyone**, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" emphasis mine

A plain reading of this passage should lead to a concerted effort to forgive **anyone** on a daily basis. This is something Jesus wants us to take very seriously and to do. Are there reasons to ameliorate this teaching? Some may argue that the context and its seeming lack of any qualification demands that we do so:

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. ²¹ And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." ²² And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. ²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:20-25)

So how does Mark 11:25 relate to its context? The preceding verse seems to be just as unilateral in tone as verse 25 but impossible to apply. Can we really ask for anything? Should we ask for anything? Are there parameters for this? The answer is that the parameters for verse 24 are already provided.

³⁰ Stein, 25

³¹ Stein, 25-26

³² There are lots of places that acknowledge our struggle with sin and the 'old man' in this life. For example: Romans 7, Galatians 6:1ff. Paul still treats the Corinthians as brothers and sisters despite their gross immorality and factioneering.

³³ So Hebrews 4:12 says:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When Jesus curses the fig tree he evokes an Old Testament context. The Old Testament provides rich references to bearing fruit, good and bad figs, the withering of fruit and so forth that point us to the lesson intended about Kingdom priorities and living (for example: 1Kings 4:25, Job 18:16, 31:12, Ezekiel 17:3-9, Jeremiah 8:13, 24:1-8, Hosea 9:16, Psalm 90:6, 105:33, Joel 1:12.)

Coupled with this is the similar language of Mark 13:2. Jesus then moves quickly to declare in verses 22-23 that the disciples must have faith and that their prayer can achieve extraordinary things. It can move mountains. Once again an Old Testament allusion is intended. It is more than likely that Zechariah 14:4 is in the mind of Jesus:

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward.

The Old Testament contains continual and grand promises and allusions to earthworks that accompany the coming of the Kingdom and its messiah. For example a way will be made straight for Jesus – Isaiah 40:3ff:

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

When Jesus teaches in Mark 11 on faith, he is challenging the disciples to great faith. Faith that **desires** the coming Kingdom and faith that **believes** it will come. Faith that will bring in the Kingdom with it's accompanying metaphorical earthworks that clear the way for Jesus.

The twin parameters of the fig tree episode and the mountain allusion to Zechariah 14:4 indicate that Jesus' concern is the coming Kingdom (judgment implied with the fig) and the need to live lives in accord with it as well as the importance of praying for it's coming and believing that it will come.

Yet then there seems to be a strange and abrupt change. Jesus finishes teaching on 'faith' and turns to prayer. We get the feeling that assorted miscellaneous teaching is being provided, but there is a link. How can we pray for the coming kingdom when we harbour anger and

resentment in our hearts? If the coming Kingdom is about love and eternal peace with God and his people, it is incongruous to be praying Kingdom prayers when we haven't forgiven others.

So verse 25 cannot be dismissed as the last of a succession of unreasonable commands. If we read it as a kind of hyperbole (and I don't), it still teaches unconditional, universal forgiveness - though we may reduce the tone (as with the 'cutting off of hands', 'gauging out of eyes' etc – where the point of those passages still applies – that is 'avoid temptation').

It would be easy to confuse a 'plain' versus 'literal' reading. I have argued above for a plain reading but not a literal reading. That is, I don't think Jesus is concerned with literal mountains being tossed into oceans or wants us to literally ask for 'anything'. However, I do think that a plain reading of the passage means that we will pray for the Kingdom to come and should expect to see this answered (sometimes in small ways).

The purpose of verse 25 seems to be to qualify the preceding statements about faith and prayer. That is, we need to pray in a fit state and with the right attitude. As such, verse 25, as the qualification, must be taken literally and plainly. Not only this, but it is difficult to see how it can be read in anything other than a plain way. Once again, we must forgive.

4. But isn't my forgiveness then a 'work'

Some may feel that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness undermines the Bible's teaching on 'unconditional election' or grace. That is, because Jesus is teaching that we need to 'do' something, our salvation then becomes dependent upon 'Jesus death' plus 'my forgiveness of others'. As such, forgiveness is the 'work' I need to perform in order to earn salvation. However this confuses what the Bible clearly says about our need to 'respond' to the gospel with attempts to 'merit' salvation apart from the gospel.

Firstly let's take a brief look at what the Bible says about works. 2Timothy 1:9 tells us that God:

saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,

There is absolutely nothing we did before God visited salvation upon us that caused him to look with favour on us. Yet, to become a citizen of God's Kingdom, the Bible consistently tells us that we need to respond to the offer being made.

There are lots of things that the Bible says about this response. Fundamentally, the Bible tells people that

they must 'choose' God and leave their lives of sin.³⁴ Choosing God and leaving sin are not works that merit salvation. They are a response to the offer of salvation, an indication that the offer has been heard. To continue sinning is to say to God "I don't respect you, I don't fear you and I don't care what you want of me".³⁵

When we live lives that please God, the Bible teaches in Ephesians 2:10 that even the good works we 'walk in' have been prepared in advance for us by God. They cannot be things that earn salvation because we don't organize them. Rather, they are an obedient response of thankfulness to the grace of God.³⁶

5. We must do something!

As we've seen, the Bible teaches that 'unconditional forgiveness of others' is also part of the right *response* to God in his offer of salvation to us.

Whether a person chooses to 'hold on' to a hurt or wrong they've suffered or to 'let go' of it, they still have to 'do something'. They cannot avoid *doing* something. They cannot avoid either 'nursing the hurt' or 'letting go' of the hurt. The choice to make is what to *do* that pleases God as a *response* to his wonderful grace.

Jesus' insistence that a person forgive others in order to be in turn forgiven is akin to telling them to stop resisting the free gift of God. It is in no way connected with works.

6. Jesus teaching is too hard

Some may, understandably say: "But Jesus' teaching is too hard!". Again, attitude is key. If I am struggling to forgive someone then God knows this. He has given me his Holy Spirit to help me in this struggle and for some that struggle will be terrible and life long.

The prayer that we need to keep praying is "Lord help me to forgive this person." Thankfully we're told in 1Corinthians 10:13 that God will not let us be tested beyond what we can bear. So forgiving others is never impossible.

It is tempting to say that "If someone can forgive Hitler..." but by far the better example is, "If God can forgive me..." then surely I can find it in my heart to forgive this person who, like me, needs God?

A negative fatalism?

We have no hope of perfectly meeting God's standard - but he rightly sets himself and his perfection as the standard.³⁷ Therefore we mustn't be fatalistic about the imperfection of humanity in striving to forgive.

We could choose to reason that, because we are sinful and are never fully self aware, that human 'forgiveness' will always be a flawed and jaded business. We can talk ourselves into accepting ongoing bitterness in the heart. But this would be a denial of the power of the Spirit. Notice the logic in 1John 4:9-12 and particularly notice the last phrase:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Yes, there will come times when the old anger surfaces - anger that we thought we'd dealt with. But then all of life is a battlefield. And the evil one will seek to provoke old scores and test us where we're weak. We know this from Ephesians 6. We need to take hold of the radical approach of James 1:2:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

An opportunity to forgive someone is an opportunity to grow in Christ-likeness, an opportunity to be made 'complete in love'.

7. But God isn't listening because...

Some may feel that they are in a kind of Catch 22, they are struggling to forgive and know that they need God's help to do so, but don't believe that they can ask because they haven't yet forgiven.

It is helpful to notice that Mark says "*whenever* you stand praying - forgive" (11:25). Jesus anticipates a person already praying who needs to deal with forgiveness. In fact in the Lord's Prayer, we are well into it before Jesus speaks on our need to forgive others. God is not so miserly as to let us be bound by this Catch 22.

As we have seen above ('But isn't my forgiveness then a 'work?'), God works in us to produce faith, to produce the fruits of the Spirit. He is with us in our need and helps us when we ask.³⁸ If a person is really struggling

³⁴ For example Deuteronomy 31:11, Proverbs 28:13, Luke 15:7, John 5:14 and many other places.

³⁵ Even our faith has been worked in us by God through his Holy Spirit. John 16:8 tells of how this work is begun. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that God is the 'founder and perfecter' of our faith. This means we can't even claim as a work our 'choosing God'.

³⁶ Titus 2:11-12 tells us that:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

³⁷ He does this by demanding that we 'be Holy' (Leviticus 20:26),

³⁸ Luke 11:10 tells us:

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

to forgive then it may help to ask a trusted Christian brother or sister in Christ to pray with them and for them.

F. CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

Perhaps the most significant objection raised is that ‘unconditional forgiveness’ is not actually taught in scripture. It has been argued that because God forgives our sin only when we seek him in repentance, we in turn don’t need to forgive the sins of others unless they come to us in repentance. We could call such a view ‘conditional forgiveness’. Those who take this line ask, “Why would God ask us to do more than he does himself?”

There are significant flaws in this view. The main one being that we must do whatever God asks us to do regardless of whether we think it’s reasonable or even logical.

The question above is ungracious. God does so much more for us than we **could ever** do for ourselves? Who are we to balk at forgiving unconditionally in response to his grace? And could we ever match what he has done? Of course not!

The other major failing of this view is that it doesn’t fit ethically with the New Testament. Let’s look at how this view might be argued.

1. Supporting texts?

The Lord’s prayer misunderstood?

Those who believe that *conditional repentance* is legitimate or appropriate must revise the generally accepted, traditional reading of the Lord’s Prayer and other places where unconditional repentance is taught. They must argue that when Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

...that Jesus meant forgiveness only in the sense of ‘release’ or reconciliation. Sadly this undermines the entire ethical revision taking place in the Sermon on the Mount, so that instead of ‘an eye for an eye’ being substituted with a profound grace towards enemies and sinners, it is reinforced. Finally, ‘forgiveness’ as ‘release only’ will not work with Mark 11:25.

Colossians 3:13

A passage that seems to succinctly express *conditional repentance* is Colossians 3:13 where Paul says “forgive ... as the Lord has forgiven you.” At face value this could be construed as the kind of conditional forgiveness mentioned above, however we mustn’t pit

scripture against scripture.³⁹ Such an idea would contradict the Bible’s teaching we have seen elsewhere on ‘unconditional forgiveness’, which is unambiguous and didactic in nature.⁴⁰

On the contrary, the context of this passage teaches us that we are to forgive ‘as God forgives’, only in the sense that God forgives completely.⁴¹ In this sense, Paul repeats the teaching of the Lord’s prayer by appealing to our consciences to let go of the sins of others because ... after all, hasn’t God let go of ours? Such a reading of Colossians 3:13 reinforces rather than contradicts what we have already seen taught on forgiveness.

Luke 17:3-4

As we have seen already, in Luke 17:3-4, Jesus teaches on the secondary sense of the word forgiveness, namely the ‘release’ given to the repentant brother. He charges people to be prepared to ‘release’ seven times in a day.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

A necessary condition versus a sufficient condition

At first glance Luke 17:3-4 seems to support conditional forgiveness because we are told ‘if’ the brother ‘comes back’, then forgive. However when we consider the two senses of forgiveness outlined above, we can see that Jesus’ concern is that no person refuses ‘release’ to a brother who seeks it.

Remembering John Stott’s earlier observations, we could say repentance is a *necessary condition* for ‘release’ but is only a *sufficient condition* for the first sense of forgiveness – the forgiveness ‘of the heart’. We must forgive when repentance is present, however this doesn’t prevent forgiveness from taking place in our heart.

Interestingly, the parallel passage in Matthew (18:20-22) doesn’t mention the brother coming back in repentance:

³⁹ Wherever we find ambiguity or some point of confusion, our doctrine of scripture (unity, coherence, perspicuity and so on) should lead us to bring other parts of scripture to bear in such a way that they ‘harmonise with’ rather than ‘contradict’ the passage we are looking at.

⁴⁰ So the Lord’s prayer, Mark 11 and Luke 6:37

⁴¹ The Colossians are wrestling with their old un-renewed selves, so chapter 3 is all about putting to death what is evil and earthly. This negative struggle is contrasted in verse 10 with the goal of being in the image of our ‘creator’. All the qualities of God are brought together in ‘love’ in verse 14 which they are to ‘put on’. We see the same logic in a parallel passage in Ephesians 4:32:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

This must surely confirm to us that Jesus’ main concern is the readiness of people to ‘release’ or ‘forgive’ **repeatedly**. Clearly, the issue is reconciliation.

Matthew 18:21-35

It may still be argued *conditional repentance* is taught in Matthew 18, because Jesus follows his teaching on forgiveness with the parable of the ‘Unmerciful Servant’ (Matthew 18:21-35). In this parable the servant begs the King and, in turn, the servant’s fellow servant begs him. Therefore, it is argued, what is missing from verses 18-22 is there in the following parable.

However, parables generally have one main point. In this case it is hypocrisy (see ‘A question of attitude’ above). Jesus is condemning the same hypocrisy of Matthew 6:12&14 - the hypocrisy of asking God to spare us our sins while we won’t spare others their sins. The servant’s pleading for forgiveness only highlights his awful hypocrisy when he won’t grant it to his servant. The fact that the second servant also pleads completes the symmetry and reinforces the first servant’s dreadful hypocrisy.

Matthew 18:17 and 1Corinthians 5:1-5

As we’ve seen, Matthew 18 is a key chapter for understanding forgiveness towards others. A further objection to *unconditional forgiveness* may be Jesus teaching to the unrepentant brother in verses 15-17. Jesus teaches us to respond to such a person in this way:

...If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17)

The key question is “What does it mean to treat a ‘brother’ as a ‘pagan or a tax collector’? Does this mean we ought not to forgive? Given what we’ve seen taught on *unconditional forgiveness* it can’t mean this. It is far more likely to be about discipline. That is, a person who is unrepentant must not be allowed to enjoy the benefits of Christian fellowship.

Paul speaks of delivering to Satan such a person ‘...for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.’ (1Corinthians 5:5).

Paul’s concern in verse 5 is that the person be saved – it is an act of love. People who behave in the manner of 1Corinthians 5 cannot be allowed to attend church. They cannot ‘have their cake and eat it too’. The loving thing to do for them is to exclude them. This is the crisis Paul is dealing with.

Just because the church was not told to forgive the perpetrator in these passages, doesn’t mean that we can assume that it was alright or even proper for them not to. Such a conclusion would be an ‘argument from silence’.

Church discipline is an unpleasant activity, but even in the extreme situation that Paul speaks of above, the goal is the welfare of the unrepentant person. It would seem that a similar situation is on view in 2Corinthians 2:5ff.

2Corinthians 2:5-11.

2Corinthians 2:10 seems to speak of *conditional forgiveness*. The Greek word that Paul uses in this passage is ‘charizomai’ – to ‘give grace’.⁴² He is literally challenging the Corinthians to ‘give grace’ to the offender – that is ‘underserved mercy’. What is the mercy? It is the mercy of receiving the person back into the community of believers.

Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, ⁸ or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁹ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ² For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, ¹¹ has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. (2Corinthians 2:5-11)

Leon Morris comments:

The details of the incident that lies behind these words are not clear. But what is abundantly plain is that Paul sees it as very important that both he and the Corinthians should forgive the offender. It is the way of the world to nurture grudges against those they think have wronged them. It is the way of those forgiven by Christ to forgive freely the wrongs people do to them.⁴³

Given the broad teaching on forgiveness we’ve seen and the importance of church discipline, it is a more acceptable reading to assume that some kind of discipline has been exercised, perhaps even the ‘handing over to Satan’ mentioned in 1Corinthians 5. In verses 7-8 the teaching of Luke 17:3-4 about a readiness to continually forgive seems to be on view. It may well be that the trap of Satan is the temptation to let bitterness continue in the heart.

What we must not do is assume that the ‘give grace’ of verse 10 implies that previously, permission was given to not forgive from the heart. Rather, a plain reading of

⁴² To give grace; to forgive, cancel (a debt); to grant; to hand over into custody.

⁴³ L. Morris, (‘Forgiveness’ in *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*. Edited by G. F. Hawthorne & R. P. Martin. Leicester: IVP, 1993), 312

the passage would be that Paul is saying: "I will agree with your decision to relax your discipline on those you choose". This is a much more reasonable reading of the passage given that church discipline is what is being exercised.

Because this is a difficult passage it means it is an unsuitable place to construct a theology of conditional forgiveness that we apply universally. To do so, will be to pit an ambiguous, particular, pastoral solution, read unconventionally, against universal, clear teaching.

John 20:23

John 20:23 has also been cited as an instance where conditional forgiveness is implied:

If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

However we should acknowledge that this is well known as a difficult passage. It ought not to be pitted against clear teaching on *unconditional forgiveness*. It is important also to note that the permission from Jesus is given to the apostles.

Can we extrapolate out from this? Probably not, since the passage seems to be more about the unique mediatorial role of the apostles. A possible reading could be that, in so far as the apostles evangelise people, those people will have opportunity to have their sins forgiven.

2. The witness of the church

It is God's plan that Christian behaviour in the world and towards one another demonstrates a radical love.

If the Bible teaches that Christians do not need to forgive others unless the offender comes in repentance then what does this look like outside the church? Jesus tells me to pray for my enemies (Matt 5:44). Is he saying: "Pray for your enemies but don't forgive them"? Can I do that in my head?

What does conditional forgiveness look like in church? Is it acceptable that Christians in church do not forgive others if an offender hasn't come in repentance? If so, what does it mean for them to not forgive?

In practice, a doctrine of conditional forgiveness makes forgiveness a rare and unlikely event when it comes to forgiving non-Christians and quite possibly Christians also. What if they simply don't believe that they have committed wrong?

Apart from the problem of their heart, it requires communication with the offending party. What if they are dead? What if they are on the other side of the planet? Jesus teaching on forgiveness would then be a prison binding us to the offending party in the hope that one day they will ask us to forgive them.

It would leave us practically holding on to anger and resentment. The churches of God would be communities that forgive reluctantly or not at all.

Yet Jesus tells us that our love will be the thing that draws the attention of the world to us (so John 13:35) "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." And numerous other places).

3. A difference between God and us

Those who would argue conditional forgiveness want to equate our position vis-à-vis the perpetrator to God. Yet we have already seen that our positions are dissimilar. God is arbiter of right and wrong and alone is innocent. We are none of these.

God will forgive if a person seeks repentance, that is, he will forgive *conditionally*, whilst he demands that we forgive *unconditionally*. However God's conditional forgiveness mustn't be understood simplistically. Jesus said of his executioners on the cross in Luke 23:34:

... "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do..."

Although they were murdering him, Jesus still looked at these people with compassion and love and asked his father to forgive them. This is the compassion of Jesus. Of course, if they were not repentant we should expect that God still 'counted their sins against them'.⁴⁴ Yet, the love of God is noteworthy. Again in Mark 10:21, we are told that Jesus 'loved' the rich young ruler despite the fact that this man was rejecting the Kingdom of God.

As we've seen, while we were still enemies, Christ died for us (Romans 5). God worked in us to produce repentance (John 16). God was seeking us out while we were bitterly at war with him. This is the attitude of God to those who offended him.

Somehow God is able to treat with love and concern those who are his enemies, yet withhold himself from them until they come to Him in repentance.

Nowhere does he request this of us.

Some confusion

At this point there may be some justifiable confusion. If 1John 2:2 tells us that Jesus has died for the sins of the whole world, then in what sense does he not forgive those who haven't repented?

The answer is that Christ's death is available for **all** but effective for the **elect**. We need to make it effective by accepting the cheque that's been written for us. Salvation comes when we combine Jesus work with

⁴⁴ Perhaps Jesus' plea to the Father was a cry that He work in their lives and bring them to Him?

faith. At this point we are *justified* through faith in Christ (See Genesis 15:6, Rom 3:21ff).⁴⁵

Culpability and righteousness

There are critical differences between our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us in the two areas of culpability and righteousness. We, quite simply, are not righteous before God. We have sinned against others (possibly even against those who sin against us).

Consequently there is no 'innocent victim' or room to claim any sort of moral superiority – rather the person who has wronged me is just like me, wronging others and being wronged and I am just like them.

The righteousness that we have as Christians is imputed to us. It is the righteousness of Christ. So when God sees us, he sees the righteousness of Christ. Because of this, our standpoint is not one from which we can demand restitution.

To return to the triangle of sin and culpability, we must conclude that that if God has forgiven the sin of a person, it is ungracious for me to withhold forgiveness because the party who was offended most – God, has already dealt with the sin.

4. The psychology of conditional forgiveness

Those who would argue conditional forgiveness must still deal with the repeated teaching of the New Testament that forbids: 'enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions' (Galatians 5:19-20), 'bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor', 'along with all malice' (Ephesians 4:31) and that warns against missing the 'grace of God' through the 'root of bitterness' which can grow 'up to cause trouble and defile many' (Hebrews 12:15). (See also above on Colossians 3:13.)

One approach to obedience might be to separate emotions from the mental act of forgiveness.

⁴⁵ People may have their debt dealt with, but *justification* comes when we respond in *faith*. *Salvation* is essentially about '*union with Christ*' and this can't happen without our *response*.

Another way of seeing this, is that the significant 'sin' God will hold against us, is our sin of rejecting him. This is an ongoing activity not located in one place or time.

For those who continue in rejection, this sin continues into eternity. When we continue in this sin, we affirm the lifestyle of sin that Jesus so effectively dealt with. So in a sense, we reinstate the sin already dealt with. The following are worth pondering:

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 5:29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Romans 2:5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Yet it's questionable whether it's psychologically possible to maintain in our heads a refusal to forgive (without due repentance) and at the same time let go of our anger and resentment as the Bible clearly commands.

Can we separate or at least properly manage these things in the way that God does? It is highly unlikely and scripture doesn't prescribe it.

Similarly, sitting on the knife-edge of a 'readiness to forgive' is an unresolved state that leaves us lapsing into bitterness and frustration.

It is ironic that, while conditional forgiveness arises from an attempt to parallel human forgiveness with the forgiveness of God, the establishing of a dichotomy between our emotions and a dispassionate withholding of forgiveness, makes us most un-godlike!

The God who expiates also propitiates! That is, at the cross, he not only satisfies the requirements of his own justice, but he deals with his righteous anger. At the cross, both are dealt with simultaneously.

G. CONCLUSION

1. Confusing reconciliation with forgiveness

Ultimately, to insist on repentance from a person before forgiving them in your heart is to misunderstand what forgiveness is and to confuse it with mutual reconciliation. Reconciliation is always achieved through forgiveness and this is why we use 'forgiveness' to describe the reconciling process. But they are not the same thing.

It seems that most objections to the Bible's primary teaching on human forgiveness confuse these two areas. For example, although you now forgive a person, you may no longer trust them. You may no longer do business with them because if you did, you would only get burnt again. Nevertheless, you must forgive and if you lapse back into anger and bitterness, then forgive again.

2. What it means to not forgive

What is disturbing in this world is that people seem to want to fight for the right not to forgive. So many movies, novels or dramas revolve around 'conditional forgiveness'. Yet we are in no position to demand anything. We have no rights before God.

In speaking about those key passages we have looked at, Calvin writes of the need to forgive others unconditionally:

Here Christ only explains the reason why that condition was added, Forgive us, as we forgive. The reason is, that God will not be ready to hear us, unless we also show ourselves ready to grant forgiveness to those who have offended us.

If we are not harder than iron, this exhortation ought to soften us, and render us disposed to forgive offenses. Unless God pardon us every day many sins, we know that we are ruined in innumerable ways: and on no other condition does he admit us to pardon, but that we pardon our brethren whatever offenses they have committed against us.

Those who refuse to forget the injuries which have been done to them, devote themselves willingly and deliberately to destruction, and knowingly prevent God from forgiving them.⁴⁶

It saps our strength to harden our hearts 'harder than iron'. At its most extreme it will twist us to bitterness and leave us friendless and pitiful.

Medical professionals believe that holding on to anger is detrimental to our health. Yet people want to hold on to resentment. It doesn't make sense to let someone who's hurt us continue to hurt us by not forgiving them. We put our happiness in their hands. We only allow ourselves to be set free **if** they come to us and seek repentance or if something bad happens to them or they die or... This is not good.

So let us pray as Christ our Saviour taught us:

We are confident to say,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name.
Your Kingdom Come
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

A Poison Tree – William Blake

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole.
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning glad I see,
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

⁴⁶ John Calvin Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 1. With regard to Matthew 6:14-15 and with reference to Luke 11:4 and Mark 11:25 (in his commentary on a gospel harmony [Tr. From the original Latin and with Calvin's French version by Rev W. Pringle – see: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.all.html>)