

MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Article 3

This is the third teaching article in the series on the subjects of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the first two articles, we addressed some of the most common misunderstandings about forgiving another of his sins.

<p>Misunderstanding #1</p>	<p>When I forgive, I must forget (remove the offense from memory)</p>	<p>Nowhere does Scripture require you to have a blank memory about your own sins or sins committed against you. In fact, the memory of certain sins (even though these sins have been forgiven by God) is important for your training in righteousness, to help you not repeat them (<i>for example, notice God's record and David's remembrance of his sins in II Samuel 12:13-23</i>). This is tremendous hope, because you can forgive, even though you may not be able to erase from memory that the other person sinned against you. (<i>Please read the first article in the series on forgiveness for a more complete explanation</i>)</p>
<p>Misunderstanding #2</p>	<p>When I forgive, I must release the guilty person from all the consequences of his sin</p>	<p>Receiving God's forgiveness does not guarantee that all the consequences of your wrongdoing will be removed. For example, the thief on the cross, although forgiven by Jesus, still died (<i>Luke 23:40-43</i>). Forgiveness is an act of grace that reestablishes a right relationship with the offender. In other words, there is no longer an estrangement between the offender and the one who has had the sin committed against him. On the other hand, consequences often serve as an encouragement and a reminder to the offender to change. (<i>Please read the second article in the series on forgiveness for a more complete explanation</i>)</p>

In this article, we will examine

Misunderstanding #3: *I am commanded to forgive only when someone comes to me to ask for my forgiveness.*

Forgiving others consists of two aspects: forgiveness in your heart before you are asked (or even if the other does not ask for your forgiveness), and outward granting of forgiveness when asked.

A. Forgiveness in your heart (whether or not the other asks forgiveness of you):

Sometimes, people will say, "I will forgive that person, but only if he comes to ask me. I am not required to forgive before then." This statement misses the point of forgiveness, the way in which the Lord commands us to forgive. Many times, people only make statements such as this to justify the fact that they are harboring bitterness against the other, and are unwilling to forgive.

Forgiveness of others requires that we stand ready to grant forgiveness when asked. In order to do this, it is important to already have dealt with the issue of forgiveness of the other within self first. Forgiveness in the heart is a much larger issue than just the relationship with the other person. It is a matter of maintaining a right relationship with our heavenly Father. When Jesus taught the disciples how to pray (*Matthew*

6:9-13), He stated only one condition: forgiveness of others. He said we should pray "... *forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" (verse 12). After the model prayer, Jesus explained *why* it is necessary for us to forgive others: "*For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*" (verses 14-15). In addition, Jesus stated in *Mark 11:25* that even while we are in prayer, and remember that we are holding something against another, we are to forgive "... *so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.*" (verses 25b-26 – verse 26 is not in some Bibles, since it was absent in some manuscripts). In both the Matthew and Mark passages, the issue of God's forgiveness of our sins is shown to be conditional upon our forgiveness of others. In both of these passages, moreover, God's forgiveness is not for salvation, because in both, He is still called our heavenly Father (implying that we are His children). Rather, His forgiveness here has to do with ongoing maintenance of unbroken fellowship, which is only possible when there is no barrier between us and the Lord. When we keep unforgiveness in our hearts, we sin against the Lord primarily; therefore we cannot have unhindered fellowship with Him. As a matter of fact, God tells us that when we harbor sin in our hearts, He will not even hear us (*Psalms 66:18*).

When you forgive someone in your heart, remember that this is a matter between you and the Lord, and it has to do with your change in focus toward the other person (see articles 1 and 2 of the forgiveness series). Forgiveness in your heart does not mean you then go about "pronouncing" your forgiveness upon the other. According to God's Word, you are to grant forgiveness (make an outward statement of forgiveness) when the other confesses sin to you in repentance.

B. Granting forgiveness when asked:

When someone confesses his/her sin against you, you are to forgive, without limit regarding the number of times (as a reminder from article 2, we are not talking here about eliminating the consequences of sin) (*Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4*). For those who have repented (even in the extreme case of those who previously have been removed from fellowship with the body of believers), forgiveness should include comforting them, as well as reaffirming your love to them, lest they be overwhelmed by sorrow (*II Corinthians 2:6-8*).

When you forgive another who has sinned against you, you are not to demand restitution; but, instead, you are to demonstrate mercy and love toward him with a goal of mutual reconciliation with him (*based on Matthew 18:21-35, esp. verses 32-33; Luke 6:27-38; I Corinthians 6:5-7, esp. verse 7; II Corinthians 2:5-7*). It is important to remember that even though you are not to demand restitution; restitution is part of the reconciliation process for the one who has sinned. This should be lovingly brought to his attention.

Because you are commanded to forgive others (*Ephesians 4:32*), you sin when you refuse to forgive, either in your heart, or in the outward expression (granting) of forgiveness (*James 4:17*). It is vital to remember that you are to forgive as soon as you remember that you have something against another, and not to wait for the other to confess.

*Portions of this article are excerpted from Lessons 12 and 13 of the **Self-Confrontation** manual.*