

# WHAT IS TRUE FORGIVENESS?

by Gary Inrig

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Forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood subjects in the Bible. As pastor Gary Inrig points out in the following pages, forgiveness in our time has become little more than a therapeutic way of detaching ourselves from those who have harmed us. Yet the heart of true forgiveness is so much richer than many of us realize.

What about “forgiving God,” or “forgiving ourselves”? Do we wait for the one who has harmed us to say, “I’m sorry”? These are only some of the questions that pastor Inrig answers in the following pages. If you’re like me, you will find this booklet one of the most helpful perspectives on forgiveness you have ever read.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

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# WRESTLING WITH FORGIVENESS

**I**n 1944, young Simon Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a concentration camp located on the outskirts of the town in which he had been raised. One day his work detail was marched through the town where he had once lived. Along the way, his group passed a military cemetery with a sunflower planted on each grave. He could not help but contrast that careful remembrance with the mass grave that almost surely would be his destiny, with other corpses piled on top of him, unmarked and unknown.

They finally came to the high school Wiesenthal had attended, a building full of memories of anti-Semitic harassment now turned into a makeshift hospital for wounded German soldiers.

Wiesenthal's group carried cartons of rubbish out of the hospital. While working on this detail, he was approached by a Red Cross nurse. "Are you a Jew?" she asked. When he indicated yes, she summoned him to follow. She led him to the bedside of a young German officer covered with bandages, barely able to speak. He had asked her to find a Jew to whom he could speak, and Wiesenthal had arbitrarily become that person.

The officer said his name was Karl. He knew he was dying, and before he died he needed to talk about something that was torturing him. As he summarized the story of his life and military action, Wiesenthal tried to leave three times, but the man reached out to grab his arm each time. He needed to tell him his story. Finally he told of an atrocity he had

participated in while pursuing the retreating Russians. Thirty German soldiers had been killed in booby traps set by the Russians. In an irrational act of revenge against the innocent, he and his men rounded up a group of 300 Jews, herded them into a house, doused it with gasoline, and set it on fire with grenades. They then shot anyone who tried to escape.

He recounted with great emotion his memory of hearing the screams, of watching terrified women and children jump from the building, and of his own gunfire. One scene in particular haunted him: a desperate father and mother jumping with a child with black hair and dark eyes, only to be riddled with bullets.

The man kept talking, recounting a later battle, when he had been given

orders to shoot a similar group of unarmed Jews. That time he wouldn't or couldn't squeeze the trigger. As he froze in place, a shell exploded, giving him the wounds that were now taking his life.

His story told, he pleaded with Wiesenthal:

I cannot die . . . without coming clean. This must be my confession. . . . I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough. . . . I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left. . . . I know

what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.<sup>1</sup>

Wiesenthal stood there in silence, wrestling with what he should do. “At last I made up my mind, and without a word I left the room.”

The officer died, unforgiven by a Jew. But that was far from the end of the story for Wiesenthal. He anguished about his response. Had he made the right choice? He discussed it with his fellow prisoners in the death camp.

After the war he visited Karl’s mother in Germany, trying to judge the authenticity of the young officer’s remorse. Finally, 20 years after the end of the war, Wiesenthal, now an international figure as a Nazi hunter, felt compelled to write the story. He ended it with

two plaintive questions: “Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong?” and “What would you have done?”

Wiesenthal then sent the story to theologians, moral and political leaders, and writers for their answers to those questions. The story, with 32 responses, was published in 1969 in a book titled *The Sunflower*, which was then reissued years later with 32 new responses and 11 retained or revised from the first edition. The responses are fascinating. The vast majority of contributors agreed that Wiesenthal did the right thing. The Jewish respondents were unanimous; Wiesenthal did not have any obligation, or even any right, to forgive the man. Only the victims could forgive the perpetrator of such an atrocity, and the man did not display the marks of

true repentance as defined by Jewish tradition, which includes reparation.

Others contended that the entire notion of asking for and granting forgiveness was dangerous. Herbert Marcuse, a Marxist philosopher who was very influential in the troubled decades of the 60s and 70s, wrote:

One cannot, and should not, go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive, forgiveness. In my view, this perpetuates the crime. . . . I believe the easy forgiving of such crimes perpetuates the very evil it wants to alleviate.<sup>2</sup>

A few of those who identified themselves as Christians did suggest that the Christian ethic called for a person to forgive, even in such a situation.

A book such as *The Sunflower* takes the issue of forgiveness out of the realm of the idealistic and the sentimental and makes us face the ugly realities of life in a fallen world. At times, issues related to forgiveness become anything but theoretical. Anytime I stand before a congregation to proclaim God's Word, I know that in the congregation there are marriages that will disintegrate if some do not find a way to forgive, families that will unravel, friendships that will collapse, and groups that will split. I also know that some listeners have been done great evil by marriage partners, parents, employers or employees, supposed friends, or complete strangers. And I know that you may be reading this booklet because you feel a deep need to forgive or to be

forgiven. Others have watched sadly as a friend's life has unraveled over an inability or unwillingness to forgive or to admit the need of forgiveness.

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***Unforgiveness is  
deadly, in more  
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In recent years, researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to questions of forgiveness. Much of their work, done in purely secular terms, is extraordinarily helpful. It is not hard to see the escalating damage caused by unforgiveness on the large scale of international crises in the Middle East, the Balkans, Ireland, and the subcontinent of India-Pakistan. But researchers have also documented that unforgiven or unforgiving people have higher rates of

stress-related disorders, cardiovascular disease, and clinical depression, as well as lower immune system function and higher divorce rates. Unforgiveness is deadly, in more ways than one!

But what does forgiveness look like? Is it something we do automatically? Do we do it immediately? Is it a single act or a process? Do we wait until we feel ready to forgive? Do we require the other person to repent, or is forgiveness personal and internal, something we do for ourselves? If we forgive, does that mean we must immediately return to a persistently abusive relationship? These and a host of other practical questions require good answers. As always, the best answers begin to come when we listen carefully to the master Forgiver, our Lord Jesus.

# WHAT IS TRUE FORGIVENESS?

Perhaps the most compressed, succinct statement about forgiveness found on the lips of Jesus is recorded in Luke 17:3-4. His words deserve careful attention and need to be read in the larger context of verses 1-10:

*Jesus said to His disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. **If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day,***

*and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."* The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are

*unworthy servants;  
we have only done  
our duty.’”*

In Luke 17, Jesus was setting forth kingdom values for His followers. Strikingly, His message was built around a warning: “So

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watch yourselves” (v.3). On the one hand, we need to guard against causing others to sin. On the other hand, we need to resist the temptation to keep those who have sinned against

us in an emotional penalty box, making them serve endless hard time for their offenses.

The message is not especially hard to understand, but it is penetrating and convicting. In fact, the statement about forgiving seven times a day was so counterintuitive that it caused the Lord’s hearers to cry out: “Increase our faith!” (v.5). The disciples instinctively knew that they could obey the Lord’s directions only by depending on Him.

## **TRUE FORGIVENESS BEGINS BY DEALING WITH SIN HONESTLY**

The Lord’s initial words are deceptively simple: “If your brother sins, rebuke him” (v.3). But they are extremely important and communicate at least three foundational aspects to the

giving and receiving of forgiveness. Jesus was not giving us a simple recipe that we are to follow in rote fashion, but He was giving us the essentials that must be present.

### **Define The Offense Carefully**

First, we must define the offense carefully: “If your brother sins . . . .” The use of the term *brother* puts this in the context of kingdom relationships and reminds us that the primary place where forgiveness needs to be lived out is within the community of faith, the band of Christ-followers who are called to obey and imitate their Lord. This is not to suggest that the Lord’s words do not apply outside the church; it is to say that they are of first importance within the church. Christians, more than any others, are to forgive one another. That, of course, applies with

special force to Christian marriages, families, and churches.

Equally important is the obvious, but essential, recognition that the Lord Jesus was talking about sin, specifically about someone who “sins against you” (v.4). This must not be passed over quickly. Many things may irritate, annoy, or upset us about someone else. Those things may require enduring; they do not involve forgiving.

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***Many things may irritate, annoy, or upset us about someone else. Those things may require enduring; they do not involve forgiving.***

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Sometimes we feel that someone has wronged us. But the truth is that jealousy, insecurity, or ambition easily distort our perspective. In the Bible, Miriam was jealous of Moses, and Saul of David, but in neither case was the feeling justified. Someone disagreeing with us or hurting our feelings does not necessarily bring us into the realm of forgiveness. Not all wounds are created equal, which is why Proverbs 27:6 tells us that “wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Forgiveness operates in the realm of sin, when there is violation of God’s standards of behavior in my relation with another.

Forgiveness never minimizes the reality of sin. This means that forgiveness cannot mean ignoring the reality of evil. Forgiveness cannot be our first

response. John Ensor reminds us of the priority of wise love, as he vividly portrays the foolishness of some suggested responses to evil:

If I come across a man raping a woman, I cannot love both of them in the same way. . . .

Love is inherently moral in character and demands a moral force that is as much opposing as it is defending. I can’t go up to the struggling, terrorized woman and the overpowering assailant and say, “I love you both just the same, and so does God. He doesn’t want you to harm this girl, but please don’t think He is angry at you right now.

Because God is love, He doesn’t get mad. Isn’t such love amazing?” The woman would denounce my love as sick and worthless, even cowardly

and evil. She would know that love must have a passionate commitment to right over wrong. It must be willing to vindicate and disarm; to reward and to punish. To act in love in this situation I must hate what the attacker is doing and push him aside, scream my lungs out for help, grab the woman, and run.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, forgiveness doesn't involve excusing an act. If it can be excused, it needs to be understood, not forgiven. Forgiveness is about the inexcusable. Nor does forgiveness involve ignoring or denying sin, turning a blind eye to the misdeeds of another, or pretending it didn't happen. Such a response indulges sin, rather than dealing with it surgically by the hard work of forgiveness. By keeping it in the darkness, we allow the evil to remain

unchallenged, putting others at risk.

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Forgiveness is not trivializing sin, trying to put it in the best possible light.

C. S. Lewis said it well:

Real forgiveness means steadily looking at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice.<sup>4</sup>

The Lord was not talking about burying sin, under the naïve assumption that

“time heals all wounds.”  
Untended wounds do not automatically heal. As Mark McMinn says, “Time heals clean wounds. Soiled wounds fester and infect.”<sup>5</sup>

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**“Time heals  
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—Mark McMinn

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The same thing happens both in our inner being and in our relationships when we attempt to suppress the sins done to us. Those denied offenses have a way of continuing to pump their poison into the systems where they live.

Note that the Savior was not talking about simply forgetting sin, as is suggested by the naïve cliché “forgive and forget.” Often such an idea gains

credence by quoting the biblical idea that God “forgets” our sins. That language is certainly used, for example, in Hebrews 10:17,

*Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.*

But we must not misread that to mean that our sins are somehow erased from God’s memory. If so, He could hardly be the all-knowing God! He would know almost nothing of human history. How could He have inspired the Bible, which graphically records the failures of even the greatest of saints? He didn’t forget their sins; He recorded them so that all future generations would know about them and learn from them.

So when God says that He does not remember our sins, it means that He does not remember them against us, that He does not treat

us on the basis of our sins. Besides, our minds do not function like computers with their convenient “delete” function. We *do* remember the bad things others have done to us. The central issue is not that I forget, but what I do when I remember how the person has wronged me. Gregory Jones puts it well:

It is largely a mistake to say, “Forgive and forget.” Rather, the judgment of grace enables us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to remember well.

When God promises to “blot out [Israel’s] transgressions” and “not remember [Israel’s] sins” (Isa. 43:25; see also Jer. 31:34), God is not simply letting bygones be bygones. Rather, God is testifying to God’s own gracious faithfulness.<sup>6</sup>

It is possible that we genuinely do not remember

what someone has done against us. On the one hand, that may mean that the incident was relatively trivial, hardly amounting to the level of an act requiring forgiveness. On the other, the human mind can sometimes deal with profound pain by hiding it in some deep recess of one’s being.

About such “forgetting,” Lewis Smedes wisely writes:

The pains we dare not remember are the most dangerous of all. We fear to face some horrible things that once hurt us, and we stuff it into the black holes of our unconsciousness where we suppose it cannot hurt us. But it only comes back disguised; it is like a demon wearing an angel’s face. It lays low for a while only to slug us later, on the sly.<sup>7</sup>

In such a case, the only way to forgive is by

remembering. It is important that we do not make a simplistic connection between forgiving and forgetting. True forgiveness requires a careful look at what has actually happened to us.

Perhaps here, in this discussion of defining the offense, we should briefly note two things that are said about forgiveness: first, that we may need to forgive God; second, that we need to forgive ourselves.

I don't want to quibble about words, but it's extremely important that we think clearly about this first point. Forgiveness always involves sin. Because God can never sin, it is always wrong to speak about forgiving Him; He has not, cannot, and will not ever sin against us. I have met many people who blame God for what has happened to them, but the blame is misplaced. Behind it is the

sense that we are somehow entitled to some things from His hand. We may need to come to terms with what the sovereign God has permitted in our lives. We may even feel the need to vent our anger to God or our disappointment with how He is working.

The Psalms, the book of Job, and the writings of Jeremiah carry many illustrations of such outbursts. But in nearly every case the writer follows with an acknowledgment that his anger is misplaced. The language of forgiveness does not apply. Faith does not mean that we necessarily understand God's ways or purposes, but it does mean that we are to trust His goodness and submit to His purposes.

The concept of "forgiving myself" is somewhat different. Logically, if I have sinned, I am the offender, the perpetrator, not the

victim of my actions. Clearly I have no moral right to “forgive myself” for what I have done. On the other hand, my actions have harmed me, because sin always boomerangs. The harm may be severe, and I may feel a combination of guilt, shame, disappointment, and anger at myself. When people speak about forgiving themselves, they nearly always are talking about alleviating such feelings. Let me make a few observations about this.

First, such talk often carries the underlying assumption that I, somehow, am better than other people and should be above such behavior. There is a significant element of pride in this. (“I can see why others would do this, but not why I would.”)

Second, there is danger of turning forgiveness inward, so that my focus is

on how I feel rather than on what I have done. My goal should be deep repentance and character transformation more than emotional release.

Third, and most important, what I need to develop is a robust confidence in God’s forgiveness and a grateful reception of the forgiveness of the other person. I do not need to *forget* what I have done as much as I need to *face* what I have done,

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building a firewall of protection against recurrence and walking in self-doubt.

Thank God that genuine repentance and God's forgiveness *do* bring the restoration of joy! When David, in Psalm 32:1, writes, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven," his joy comes not from the fact that he has forgiven himself, but that God has forgiven him.

### **Confront The Sin Courageously**

The second implication of the Lord's words is that we must confront the sin courageously. When the Lord commands, "If your brother sins, rebuke him" (Lk. 17:3), He is clearly telling us that we must hold people accountable for their behavior. This obviously requires that we have carefully and prayerfully determined that the other person's behavior is truly sinful. In such a case, we are not called to ignore the behavior

or simply to endure it. The word the Lord uses calls us "to speak seriously, to warn, to challenge."

I don't think it's possible to overstate the importance of this step. It means that I am to speak to the person directly, not about him to others. We are not to criticize or to nurse grudges. Instead we are to confront honestly the offender with the sin involved in his behavior. This introduces a very important distinctive of biblical forgiveness. It's not simply an internal process that I engage in for my own sake; it is also an interpersonal process that I engage in for the larger good of both the other person and the community in which we participate. To forgive without confronting short-circuits the process.

The goal of such confrontation is not to express our anger or to get something off our

chests, but to bring about repentance, restoration, and reconciliation. It also is for the benefit of others who will be victimized if this behavior is not challenged for what it is.

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***The goal of confrontation is not to express our anger or to get something off our chests, but to bring about repentance, restoration, and reconciliation.***

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In calling us to this behavior, Jesus is reflecting the instructions of the Old Testament, such as those found in Leviticus 19:17-18,

*Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his*

*guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

Most of us will find the Lord's words tremendously challenging. When we have been mistreated, the last thing we want to do is to face the offender. It's much easier to complain about him to others or to bear the wrong in silence while we avoid and withdraw, or perhaps to put on a good public face, despite what we are feeling inside. We have an instinctive fear of the potential unpleasantness of confrontation, and we realize that going to the other person may resemble walking through a field strewn with landmines. But the Lord leaves us no option. He calls us to the risky business of challenging the person about his sin.

Honesty requires us to admit that some people enthusiastically jump on a command like this. They seem to relish the task of rebuking others for their sins and shortcomings. If we enjoy the prospect of rebuking people for their sin, we need to remember that the Lord Jesus condemns a judgmental, critical spirit. But do not miss the point: True forgiveness requires an honest confronting of sin. Anything less cheapens and short-circuits the process.

### **Confront The Sin Properly**

Although the Lord does not expand on the process of rebuking here in Luke 17, in the light of what He teaches elsewhere we need to understand a third foundational aspect: We must confront the sin properly. In a closely related passage in

Matthew 18:15, Jesus gave additional teaching:

*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

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***It has become common to emphasize the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness.***

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It has become common to emphasize the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness. Lewis Smedes writes of “our need to forgive for our own sakes. Every human soul has a right to be free from hate, and we claim our rightful inheritance when we forgive people who hurt us deeply.”<sup>8</sup> Another writer

goes so far as to say, “Make a commitment to yourself to do what you have to do to feel better. Forgiveness is for you and not for anyone else.”<sup>9</sup>

I do not want to deny the therapeutic benefits of forgiving another or miss the obvious point that, if the other person rejects my gift of forgiveness, I am the only one to benefit by the process. But we do need to decentralize it. Forgiveness must not be reduced to a simply internal and personal process. It’s not just about me. The Lord Jesus did not forgive us for His sake, but for ours! And I must remember, walking in the steps of His love, that forgiveness is not “for me and not for anyone else.” Although it certainly benefits me in a host of ways, it is not just about me and my healing. The hope is to gain my brother, the very one who wronged me,

to bring him back to spiritual health too. It is also about the larger good: the protection of others and the promotion of the community’s well-being.

Before we move on, we need to return to the word the Lord used, which is translated “rebuke.” The standard Greek lexicon defines it as follows: “express strong disapproval of someone, *rebuke, reprove, censure*; also *speak seriously, warn* in order to prevent an action or bring one to an end.”<sup>10</sup> It’s a strong word, but it reminds us that there are times when it is appropriate to inflict pain. This stands against the ideas of many. One writer suggests: “This then is total forgiveness: not wanting our offenders to feel guilty or upset with themselves for what they did and showing there is a reason God let it happen.”<sup>11</sup> He also suggests that because many

of the people who have hurt us will not believe that they have done anything wrong at all (an observation I'm sure is completely true), we should usually forgive them in our hearts and say nothing to them.

I think that his suggestion is sentimental, but not scriptural. It's clearly wrong to "confront" someone with a goal of hurting that person. That's revenge, not constructive confrontation. But the Lord insists that I am to confront him.

Furthermore, it strikes me as somewhat dangerous to give the reason "God may have let it happen." Although we occasionally may be able to discern this (as Joseph did in Genesis 50:20), such talk is significantly out of place before the person has repented (as the brothers had, in the Genesis passage).

Several passages do give us a handle on how we should approach a sinning brother and how best to go about "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

- ***We should do it privately, not publicly.*** "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Mt. 18:15).
- ***We should do it humbly and repentantly, not arrogantly and self-righteously.*** "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will

see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt. 7:3-5).

- ***We should do it spiritually, not carnally.*** "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Gal. 6:1).
- ***We should do it reluctantly, not gleefully.***
- ***We should do it restoratively, not punitively.***

## **TRUE FORGIVENESS REQUIRES THE OFFENDER TO OWN SIN REPENTANTLY**

The Lord's next phrase in Luke 17:3 tells me not only how I am to respond if I have been sinned against, but also how I am to

respond if I have been the offender. The simple words contain a wealth of significance: "and if he repents . . ."

The way I respond to the courageous confrontation of someone who cares enough to challenge the sinful behavior in which I have engaged is character-defining. In fact, the book of Proverbs makes it clear that my response to appropriate rebuke is an index of my wisdom. One of the best-known verses in Proverbs (9:10) is introduced by Solomon's description of the response to rebuke:

*Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man*

*and he will add to his learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (9:7-10).*

Genuine repentance goes deeper than apology or the expression of regret. The biblical words describe a change of mind that produces a change of direction. Repentance involves more than a feeling of wrongdoing or regret, and produces more than an apology.

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Suppose that on a visit to my home, you

accidentally spill something on my new carpet. Clearly you ought to apologize. But you would not need to repent. Or suppose you realize you should end a romantic relationship. You will almost certainly hurt the other person. This may cause regret. And you may need to apologize for the awkward way you handled the breakup. But the breakup itself does not require repentance (although wrong behavior in the relationship may!). As I pointed out earlier (pp.9-11), if someone has hurt me, that does not necessarily mean the person needs to repent. Repentance is the way we deal with sin. It is deeper than regret, because it involves a determination to change. But repentance can be genuine, even if it does not instantly produce complete change. After all, Luke 17:4 suggests

someone could repent seven times in a day! Also note that the repentance described here is not merely felt, it is expressed (if he “comes back to you and says, ‘I repent’ . . .”).

It’s important to recognize that without repentance, the process is broken. The Lord Jesus said, “If he repents, forgive him.” True forgiveness flows toward repentance. The ideal is clear: I am sinned against; I confront the offender; he sincerely declares his repentance; I declare my forgiveness. That is the way it’s supposed to work.

The fact is, however, that sin contaminates everything. Too many times, there is no repentance. Sometimes the offender will not admit the sin, no matter how clear the facts. (“I didn’t do anything wrong.”) Sometimes he has no regret for the sin. In fact, he may

celebrate the evil he has done. (“You had it coming.”) At other times, the person cannot repent because he has died or is too ill to respond. What do we do then? Do we forgive anyway, even when the offense sits there, like a huge elephant, in the middle of the relationship? We need to let go of the offense, even when the other person won’t. Romans 12:19 says, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is Mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” That process takes us beyond Luke 17:3-4. In this context, Jesus does not tell us to declare our forgiveness to an unrepentant offender. In fact, were we immediately to forgive this unrepentant person, we may well only harden his conscience and accelerate the repetition of the sin.

## **TRUE FORGIVENESS IS GIVEN GRACIOUSLY AND GENEROUSLY**

The Lord Jesus does not turn aside to discuss the case of the unrepentant. His command is clear: If he repents, forgive him. To forgive is to wipe the slate clean, graciously to cancel a debt. The word for *forgive* that Jesus uses has various meanings. It means “to set free, release” and in certain contexts “to wipe away, release.” A forgiven person has been set free from his past behavior and had his record wiped clean.

The Lord underlined the amazing nature of forgiveness by His words of clarification in Luke 17:4, “If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” We can stumble on this if we

dwell on puzzling over how a person could truly repent, not merely apologize, seven times a day.

Clearly the Lord was not encouraging cheap words of regret, but He was saying that His followers are to imitate the amazing grace of God, which pursues us in the midst of our determined sinfulness and waywardness. Forgiveness is not earned but given, and, in imitation of our Father, it is to be given generously and graciously.

Notice that only the wronged party can forgive. On more than one occasion I have had people confess to me a sin that was directed against another person or an organization and then ask for my forgiveness. But if I’m not a party to the offense, how can I forgive? I can assure them, if they have dealt with the matter biblically, that God has fully forgiven

them. If their actions in some way cast a shadow over me, I can forgive them for that. But in most cases the sin isn't mine to forgive, and I need to direct them to go to those who are the victims of their behavior. Forgiveness must come from those who have been wronged, and we must be careful that we do not short-circuit the process that God intends in a desire to alleviate the pain of the person who has come to us.

Jesus requires us to forgive the repentant. To forgive is to win one's brother, to reclaim him from the bondage of sin. It means to release the desire to get even or the "right" to require him to pay for what he has done. To forgive is to say, "You are free. Your debt is paid. I'll pay; not you."

Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting to remember, but remembering

to forget. That sounds like a paradox, but it isn't. We *do* remember what has happened, probably every time we meet the offender.

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When I declare, "I forgive you," I am not engaging in an act of willful amnesia. I am committing myself not to treat you on the basis of what you have done, even though I remember very well what it was. Time may dull the pain, but it is unlikely ever to be erased completely from memory.

Desmond Tutu, who led the nation of South Africa through a national process

of forgiveness and reconciliation, put it well:

Forgiveness and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are.

It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong.<sup>12</sup>

Forgiveness looks sin in the eye and nevertheless speaks the costly words: "I forgive you."

At the same time, we must recognize that forgiveness doesn't necessarily restore the status quo. Forgiveness isn't the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness clears the ledger; it does not necessarily instantly rebuild trust. Forgiveness is given; reconciliation is earned. Forgiveness cancels all debts, but it does not eliminate all consequences. This is extremely important. For example, a wife who has been abused by her husband

may forgive him, but she is very unwise to allow him to return to her home, unless there is clear evidence, over time, of deep change. A husband may genuinely

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forgive his adulterous wife, but that may not mean that the marriage can be restored. Reconciliation and forgiveness are related, but quite distinct.

In short, forgiveness involves both a choice and a process. True forgiveness

cannot be reduced to a simple formula, but it is useful to consider four steps.

## **Face The Facts**

As we have indicated, authentic forgiveness requires that we identify what has happened. Here are four diagnostic questions:

- How serious was the offense? All offenses are not created equal. Some things require forbearance more than forgiveness. If I turn every offense into a Luke 17 issue, I will devastate my relationships with my intensity and self-absorption.
- How raw is the wound? This is not an issue of time alone. It's possible that I am "picking the scab" to keep it open.
- How close is the person?
- How significant is the relationship to me?

## **Feel The Feelings**

There's a danger of "quick forgiveness," a hasty verbal declaration that keeps me from processing the violation involved. If we are in a period of emotional numbness or even denial, as we try to make sense of the violation we have experienced, we are in no condition to declare the work of forgiveness finished. Ironically, our desire for quick closure may actually prolong the process. The other extreme is the temptation to "slow forgiveness," an ongoing "I don't feel ready yet," which can be a disguised way of inflicting punishment on the offender, by consigning him to an emotional purgatory. Between these two extremes, there's an appropriate time to grieve the loss of what might have been. This will be a grief mixed with anger over the wrong done to us. But that

anger, justified as it may be, must be carefully monitored in view of the clear command: “In your anger do not sin.’ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Eph. 4:26).

### **Forgive By Making A Decision And A Declaration**

Forgiveness is ultimately an act of the will, not a stirring of the emotions. For a Christ-follower, it is a choice to obey God and let it go. This is an inward choice that produces a declaration given, a promise spoken: “I forgive you.” When I speak those words, I declare that the issue between us is dead and buried. I’m saying that I will not rehearse it, review it, or renew it. When it comes to my mind, I will take it to the Lord and to the foot of the cross, not to you.

There is an old story

of a man who complained to his counselor: “Every time we argue, my wife gets hysterical.” “Do you mean hysterical?” “No. I mean historical. She drags up everything I’ve ever done wrong!”

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---

No. Saying “I forgive you” means I shut the door on such behavior. Some of my saddest counseling experiences have come when someone who

declared, with apparent sincerity, “I forgive you,” later chose to go back and reopen the file on the wrongdoing. The violation of trust that occurred in such cases made all attempts at reconciliation virtually hopeless.

When I was 15 years old, I talked my dad into letting me drive the car home from church one Sunday. Unfortunately, I lost control of the car at a corner and hit a light pole, doing hundreds of dollars worth of damage to the car. I was both ashamed and afraid. As steam hissed out of the radiator, before we even left the car, my father turned to me and said, “It’s okay, Gary. I forgive you.” Never once, for the rest of my life, was that event ever mentioned by my father, even though it cost him a great deal of money. (I did remind him of it years later, to thank him.) And he

gladly let me use the car when I did get my license.

That fender-bender was truly an accident and not related to sinful behavior on my part. So technically speaking, my dad didn’t need to forgive me. But his words told me that he wouldn’t hold my failure against me. What a wonderful thing it is to be forgiven, and not to be constantly hit over the head with your past failure!

## **Refresh It**

Forgiveness may be a decision but it is not a one-time decision. I remember, when I had forgiven someone who had hurt me deeply, how much I struggled with my feelings over the following days and weeks. I had said, “I forgive you,” and had meant it. But I had to remind myself repeatedly that I needed to hold on to that commitment. The sin

certainly wasn't erased from my memory; in fact, I had a tendency to dwell on it, to ruminate on it over and over. So I fought an inward battle, and it was only by continually bringing it to the Lord and relying on His help that I could keep from bringing it out in the open again. Otherwise, it becomes what someone has called "hollow forgiveness," a statement without any substance, if we go on harboring our grudges.

C. S. Lewis wisely observed, "To forgive for the moment is not difficult, but to go on forgiving, to forgive the same offense every time it recurs to the memory—that's the real tussle."<sup>13</sup>

Clarissa Pinkola Estes rightly observed, "Forgiveness has many layers, many seasons. The important part of forgiveness is to begin and to continue. The finishing of it all is a life work."<sup>14</sup>

I have found encouragement in the story of Clara Barton, the nursing hero of the Civil War and the first president of the American Red Cross.

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**—C. S. Lewis**

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A friend mentioned something cruel that another person had done to her and asked her, "Don't you remember?" Barton's answer is classic: "I distinctly remember forgetting that."

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said well, “Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It is a permanent attitude.” That is why a declaration of forgiveness needs to be accompanied by a commitment to loving acts toward the forgiven person, regardless of how much we struggle with unloving feelings.

During World War II, Corrie ten Boom’s family had been caught hiding Jews. She and her sister were sent to Ravensbruck, one of the Nazi death camps, where Corrie watched her sister and many others die. In 1947, she went back to Germany to preach the gospel.

In one of her meetings, Corrie had spoken about the forgiveness of God. After the service, a long line of people waited to talk to her. She saw, standing in line, a terribly familiar face—a man who had been

one of the cruelest guards in the prison camp. As she saw him, a score of painful memories flooded her mind. The man came up to her, stuck his hand out, and said, “A fine message, Fraulein. How good it is to know that all our sins are at the bottom of the sea.” Corrie didn’t take his hand but fumbled in her purse. Her blood froze. She knew him, but he obviously didn’t recognize her. That was understandable. After all, she was only one faceless prisoner among tens of thousands. Then he said: “You mentioned Ravensbruck. I was a guard there. But since then, I have become a Christian. I know God has forgiven the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.” Again he stuck out his hand: “Fraulein, will you forgive me?”

How could she, after all

that had happened? Her hand wouldn't move, yet she knew that the Lord wanted her to forgive him. All she could do was cry inwardly: "Jesus, help me. I can lift my hand, but You'll have to do the rest." Woodenly, mechanically, she raised her hand to take his. She was acting out of obedience and faith, not out of love. However, even as she did, she experienced God's transforming grace. She writes:

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

- 1 Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1997), 53-54.  
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11 R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2002), 54.  
12 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 270. 13 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 1991), 27. 14 Cited in Una Kroll, *Forgive and Live* (London: Mowry, 2000), 111. 15 Corrie ten Boom with Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974), 57.



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