

THOUGHTS ON FORGIVENESS¹

Background: A believer was told that a Christian doesn't have to forgive someone who has hurt or offended them, until the offending person asks for forgiveness. That believer texted me, asking whether I thought what she had been told and had received via text was biblical. These notes were compiled in order to answer her questions. The material is framed around the statements made to her, and were subsequently shared with her, as well as at an evening church Bible study dealing with the subject of forgiveness.

Statement #1:

"Someone has recently brought it to my attention that 'we don't have to forgive unless that person asks for forgiveness and compared it to how we asked God for forgiveness before we are forgiven.'"

Response:

- **I understand your friend's point of view. However, there are some significant differences.** For instance, God knows everything and every person is going to have to stand before Him someday and be judged by Him, whereas our knowledge is very limited and people do not answer to us nor will we ever sit in judgment on them.
- That being said, **I agree that for real, "official" forgiveness to take place, a person needs to ask for it and have it granted to them by the person they've offended.** However, if we wait until those who have offended us come and ask us for forgiveness, we may be waiting "*until the cows come home.*" Meanwhile seeds of anger & bitterness can easily appear and grow (**Heb. 12:14-15**), if we're not willing to "*let go of the offense.*" Furthermore, Scripture instructs "***If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men***" (**Rom. 12:18**). The passage goes on to say that rather than seeking to respond "*tit for tat*" we should give it to God and leave it in His hands (**Rom. 12:19-21; Prov. 25:21-22**).
- "According to Luke 17:3 fellowship, forgiveness, and peace are conditional, dependent on the offender's repentance. This is also true of God's fellowship & forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9). **However, a spirit of forgiveness is maintained as the offended believer, through prayer, immediately releases the penalty of the offense (the desire to get even) to God (**Mk. 11:25; Rom. 12:19**).**" (Walter & Trudy Fremont, *Becoming an Effective Christian Counselor* (Bob Jones University Press: Greenville, SC, 1996), pp. 112-113)
- **So yes, "technically/officially" you can't forgive someone until they ask for forgiveness.** But if we want to avoid having anger & bitterness coming up in our hearts, if we will give that person & situation to God & let Him deal with it, we'll experience a freedom we won't otherwise possess. The offender will no longer control or affect us negatively whenever we see them or hear from them. "**A bitter person is the one who suffers the *unhappiness, frustration, and misery of his own unresolved anger.* The target of the bitterness usually is not aware of or has forgotten the incident that caused the hurt feelings. **Bitterness handcuffs one negatively to a perceived enemy.** Plotting & planning revenge keeps one from using the key of forgiveness, which would bring freedom." (Fremont, p. 122)**

(cont.)

¹ By Mike Edwards, Madison, Ohio, November, 2018

Statement #2:

“In order to be forgiven...the offender needs to repent and ask for forgiveness... that doesn't mean we cannot love or pray for that person but to forgive without the offender repenting and seeking forgiveness tells the offender it's ok to keep doing the offense. When we sin against God, we are to acknowledge our sin to him and ask for forgiveness... this is our example... and we should do the same with someone who has wronged us... 70 x 70.” (sic).

“When someone is toxic and repeats offenses it's ok to set boundaries or separate from this person... and again it doesn't mean we stop loving them or praying for them, but it's just a consequence of this person's actions... Unfortunately, sometimes mistakes carry life-long consequences... We as Christians are not doormats... I've learned this lesson the hard way...’ That's what the person said.”

Response:

- I don't believe that forgiving someone without their asking for it “*tells them it's ok to keep doing the offense.*” **Forgiveness is one thing, responsibility & accountability are another!** Forgiveness doesn't mean we're foolish and continue to make the same mistake over & over again. **Nor does it mean we let people abuse us and walk all over us.** Gary Anderson, BMM's former president one time commented to some of us missionaries, in reference to how to deal with colleagues that we might be having a hard time getting along with: “*Sometimes you just need to put a little geography between you!*”
- **Forgiveness does not preclude holding people responsible for their actions.** In fact the Bible from one end to the other opposes blame-shifting and teaches personal responsibility and that we are all accountable for our actions. Forgiveness is not some sort of mindless tolerance of & excusing of an individual's wrong, sinful, behavior!

Statement #3:

“When does the Lord forgive? He is our example... we are not to harbor hate in our hearts... that's why we pray and are always open to forgive an offense when the person repents.”

Response:

- Did **Joseph** wait until his brothers asked for forgiveness before forgiving them for selling him into slavery? (Gen. 50:14-21).
- Did **David** wait until King Saul asked forgiveness for trying to kill him, before forgiving Saul & sparing his life? (2 Sam. 19:10-18; 24:3-5; 26:8-22)
- Did **Jesus** wait until those who verbally & physically abused Him & crucified Him had asked forgiveness before forgiving them? (Lk. 23:34)
- Did **Stephen** wait until those stoning him had asked forgiveness before forgiving them? (Acts 7:58-60)

(cont.)

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Jesus in Luke 17:3-10 teaches some principles in regard to forgiveness:

- You “must grant forgiveness whenever a brother (or sister) says that he/she repents.”
- You “must do so as often as he/she says that he/she repents (7 times a day).
- “Jesus accepts no excuses for failing to forgive. Not ‘when he shows fruit appropriate to repentance.’
 - a) “...seven times a day precludes the idea.
 - b) You “must take him at his word...
 - c) You “can judge words and actions; not [his] heart. i.e. *Give the benefit of the doubt.*
- [It’s] “not ‘when I feel like it.’ ...[It’s] not hypocrisy to obey God against feeling (you do this when you get up in the morning!). [You forgive] ...against feeling, [in order] to please God.
- “Jesus says forgive because He commands it.
 - a) “Forgive out of love for Christ.
 - b) “Forgiveness is a promise that can be made & kept regardless of fruit, faith, or feeling.
[Note] the promise: ‘*I will remember your sins against you no more.*’ (Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34)
- “The promise involves three things:
 - a) “I won’t raise these matters with you again.
 - b) “I won’t tell others about them.
 - c) “I won’t dwell on them in my own mind.

(all of the above material taken from: Jay E. Adams, *Helps for Counselors: A Mini-Manual for Christian Counseling* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), p. 34)

“Although you may think the apology is insincere & the offense may occur again very soon, you still must forgive the person who asks for forgiveness. **Christians must forgive because they have been forgiven by God for extreme trespasses (Eph. 4:31-32) & because God will forgive them as they forgive others (Matt. 6:14-15).** Bitterness, fueled by an unforgiving spirit, *is the chain that binds one to the post of past unpleasantness & sin.* Every time someone rattles the chain by mentioning the person or situation, the imaginative memory adds to the chain. Forgiveness is the only way to break the chain & gain release.” (W & T Fremont, p. 123)

Review: If we hold onto wrongs committed against us until the person comes to us and asks for forgiveness, we may be waiting for a loooooong time. Holding onto wrongs done to us—*whether intentionally or unintentionally*—can easily lead to the development of grudges & bitterness coming up in our hearts (Heb. 12:14-15).