

The Biblical View on Forgiveness

The Greek word for forgiveness is pronounced *Óapse a miÓ*. The word means to send away, to dismiss, to depart.

To forgive is to send away that for which there was a breach in the relationship.

When a person confesses their sin to us, we are to remove the offense from the relationship and receive the person back into our society. Clearly then, only the one who was offended can extend forgiveness and reinstate the offender in the relationship.

The Bible makes it clear that forgiveness is a possibility and is to be extended when the party who has committed the offense has repented.

In 1 John 1:9, it tells us that when we confess our sins the Lord will forgive us. We, in like manner are told to forgive those who sin against us when they repent.

Luke 17:3 says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." The sequence then is fourfold. 1. An offense is committed. 2. A rebuke is given by the offended party. 3. The offender repents. 4. The offended person extends forgiveness.

In modern thought there is the teaching by many that we are to forgive even when the offender is impenitent. Usually no Scripture is offered for this teaching, but a lot of rhetoric has been dispensed around the subject.

It is uttered as axiomatic that we are to quickly forgive the offender regardless of the offender's view of the situation. Dire warnings of psychological dysfunction are given if the offended party withholds forgiveness to an impenitent offender.

So pervasive is this teaching that people accept it as Gospel. If the truth were known, this teaching is the antithesis of the Gospel.

We are told that we will not be forgiven by God unless we forgive others unconditionally. The one Scripture that is often quoted is, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." (Matt. 6:12)

But what this passage is teaching is that just as we forgive the offender when they repent, so we ask God to forgive us when we repent. It is not saying forgive us because we forgive others, it's asking that God forgive us on the same basis as we forgive others. It says, "Lord, just as we forgive others when they repent, please forgive us as we now repent."

The passage goes on to indicate that if we withhold forgiveness when people repent, God will withhold His forgiveness when we confess to Him.

Some confusion seems to be in people's minds because they equate a lack of forgiveness with a bitter spirit. However, that is simply sloppy thinking when we muddle such clearly different

concepts. No one would accuse God of being bitter towards those whose sins are not forgiven, so why do we accuse those who have waited for the biblical order to be followed of being bitter?

If a person sees the clear teaching about rebuking an offender and waiting to forgive until the repentance is shown there is no reason to accuse them of being bitter. They may indeed be bitter and harbour sinful thoughts and attitudes, but that is a distinct matter.

The Bible is clear on how to proceed and the Lord gives us His pattern to follow. He does not forgive until the sinner repents and confesses the sin. Neither should we. It's just that simple. Let's not try to be better than God in this matter. In our cleverness and our efforts to be racy and upbeat in our views of human relationships we muddle the plain teaching of Scripture and lead people astray.

Can you imagine the church at Corinth accepting this current teaching about forgiveness as regards the man who was sinning by living with his mother-in-law (1Cor.5)? The modern counselor comes to the elders of the church and tells them to ignore Paul's teaching to cast the person from them. Forgive the person they are told, and pretend the offense has not been committed.

Do you not see how sinful it is to distort the teaching of the Scriptures where it is plainly taught that offenders are to be removed from our fellowship until the situation is sorted out?

Of course, when the sin is confessed we must forgive, we must restore the person to our fellowship, we must again treat them as a fellow Christian and give them full rights and privileges in the church and our society. This is not negotiable, it is absolutely essential.

But many Christians who talk much about forgiving when no repentance is evident are themselves the most unforgiving people in the world. Let a reformed rapist come into the church and see how welcome they are, let a divorced person come into the church and try to gain office among the saints. We quickly see that forgiveness is not only partial, it is sometimes not even given to those with a certain history.

Consider how we would have to rewrite the story of David and Bathsheba if this modern teaching on forgiveness is true. Nathan would then have to come to David and say, "Well David, God wanted me to tell you that even though you have clearly sinned against His law by committing adultery, and even though you have not confessed it, God wants you to know that He has forgiven you. God is not holding it against you and you are still in good standing with Him."

Can you imagine that being the message of the prophet to David? That's exactly what he should have said if we are to forgive impenitent people.

Take another situation in the Bible. Can we imagine Jesus on the cross, turning to the unrepentant thief and saying, "My son, I forgive you also even though you have not confessed your sins. And, because I forgive you your unconfessed sins, you

too will be with me in Paradise today."

Is it not clear that to forgive when no repentance is evident is ungodly? Can we not see that Satan wishes us to be lulled into thinking that we should pretend everything is all right, and behave as though nothing is wrong, when in fact sin has been committed and needs rebuke?

Satan wants the world to believe the lie that God forgives everybody and does not "hold grudges". After all, nobody is perfect, we are only human. How convenient to think that God will let everybody through on Judgment day and will not be so unkind as to not forgive people.

This teaching about forgiving when there is no repentance is exactly what godless people are banking on when it comes to answering to God for their evil ways.

The hard way is the godly way. When you are sinned against, it is difficult to confront and point out to the person that their behaviour is unacceptable. Such an action takes moral courage and it's just simpler to keep quiet and let the offense slip away unnoticed and unaddressed.

Many people abdicate their responsibility to confront because of the unpleasant fallout that may come from such an action. They fear the wrath of the offender and so keep quiet. "Why cause more problems?" they ask. "Isn't the situation bad enough as it is?"

Such reasoning tugs at sympathetic hearts and we recognize the additional grief that may come as a result of doing it God's way. We sympathize with the offended person, but in the back of our minds there is the nagging thought that Jesus confronted sinners, He did not back away from further conflict simply to try and make peace.

A very dramatic example of confronting the offenders is seen in the life of John the Baptist, Matt. 3:7-10. Some of those who came to be baptized were clearly suspect and John sent them away unbaptized telling them to get a track record of repentance, then consider baptism. It was not just some words of repentance that John demanded before accepting them, he wanted some action commensurate with the confession to back it up.

In our day and age, we are so shallow in these things, we simply get some quick nod of the head about repentance and baptize them immediately. We would never do what John did, and I venture to say that many Christians are extremely uncomfortable with the fact such action on John's part is even included in Scripture. It is an embarrassment to many fine Christian people that John did such a thing, and they secretly wish that it had not been recorded.

God expects us to take the right course of action even though it is difficult.