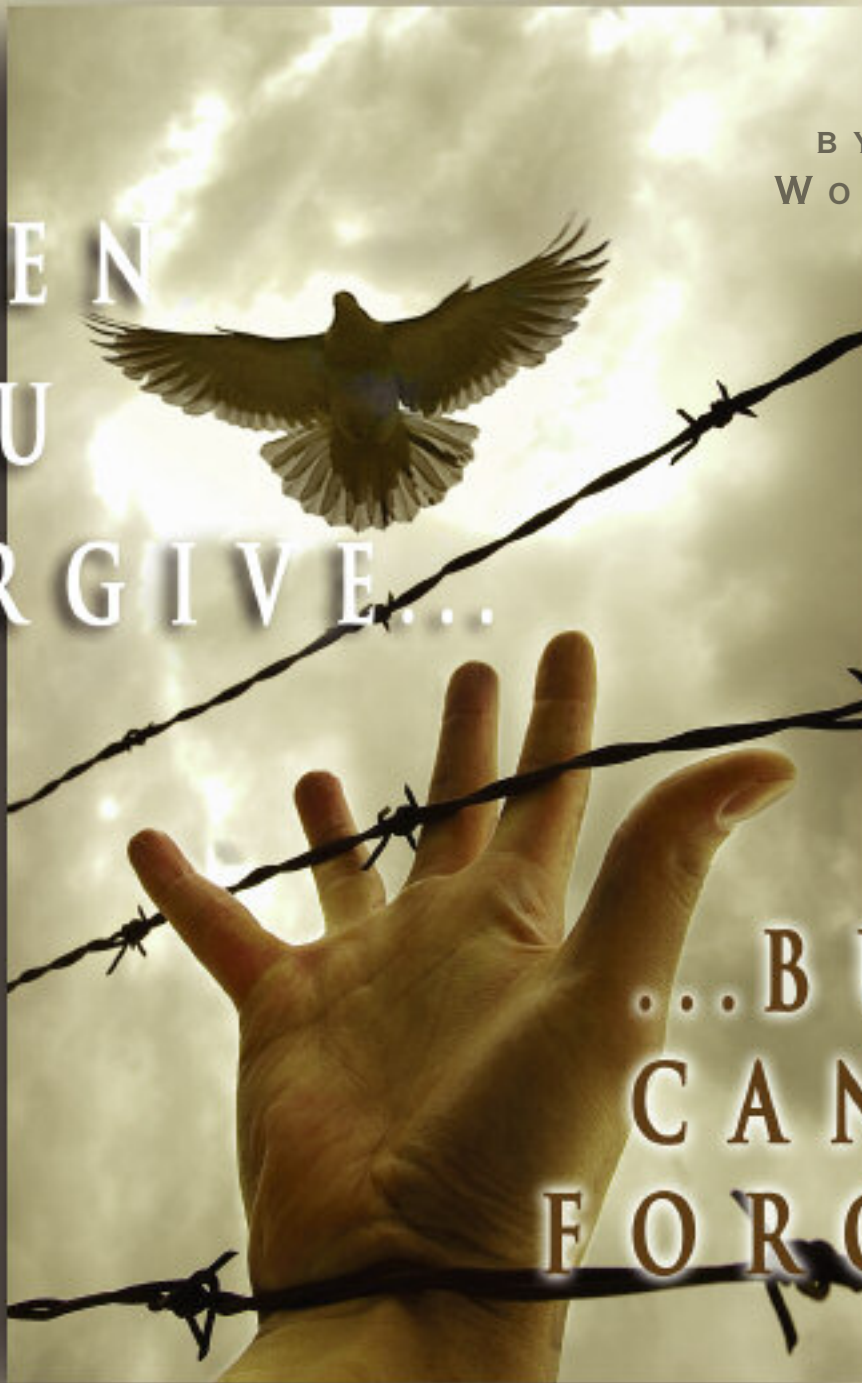


BY MONTE
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WHEN
YOU
FORGIVE....

...BUT
CAN'T
FORGET



Why can't all Christians just get along? Since Jesus died for all of us, since we've all been forgiven, since the ground is level at the foot of the cross—then we should all be able to live together in harmony. Right?

Well—not exactly. The reality is that even though Christians may agree on basics, there is still plenty of room for opinion. We have differing worldviews and goals, based on cultural background, family history and upbringing. And, we make mistakes. We disagree, we sin, we offend one another and we hurt one another. We try to forgive—but we can't forget.

The New Testament tells us we ought to forgive one another as Jesus forgave us. It encourages us to reconcile and live in peace. But it also recognizes that Christians cannot always do that. We can forgive, but we can't always forget—or reconcile.

Forgiveness simply releases another person from a spiritual, emotional, legal or financial debt or obligation. Reconciliation, by contrast, restores a friendly and harmonious relationship. Does reconciliation always follow forgiveness? When God forgives us, we are reconciled to him, and he gives us the ability to forgive others. But does it follow that we also are given the ability to be reconciled and to live in



FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is the releasing of another person

from any obligation he or she has to us.

God has forgiven us unconditionally through the work of his Son on the cross. Through Jesus living his life in us, we also have the ability to forgive others unconditionally. While this is difficult if not impossible for human beings—it is possible because of God living in us.

Forgiving other human beings is not a condition of salvation. God does not require us to forgive each other in order for us to be saved. If he did, salvation would be based on what we do—and it's not. It's based entirely on what God does for us. But our forgiving other human beings is a response to what God has done for us. It is something Christians are motivated to do out of gratitude. No question about it—the Bible teaches forgiveness. It's part of what being a Christian is all about, but what we are all about is what God has done, is doing and will do in and through us.

harmony with all fellow human beings?

Ironically, Christians disagree on this issue.

Some cite the apostle Paul, who tells us “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). That's a worthy goal and an ideal. But even that scripture qualifies itself with the words “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you.” And this passage encourages us to live at peace—not necessarily in friendship.

Christians often feel guilty because God has enabled them to forgive an offense, but they find it difficult to forget and restore a normal relationship. But is this a biblically legitimate cause for guilt? Can or should every relationship be restored?

Some pastors assume that it is their mission to bring full restoration of all human relationships, under the general heading of forgiveness, peace and friendship. They base this goal on 2 Corinthi-

Won't we be fellowshipping with everyone in heaven? Possibly. The Bible does not address that point specifically. We will however, be free of human nature and the “sin that so easily entangles us” (Hebrews 12:1).

ans 5:18-20, where Paul speaks of the “ministry of reconciliation.” However, Paul's point is found at the conclusion of that passage in verse 20: “Be reconciled to God.” Reconciliation with God is always possible. Reconciliation with human beings is not always possible—or even wise—in this life.

Unfortunately, that does not stop many Christian teachers, pastors and leaders from pressuring followers to conform with their utopian ideal of total reconciliation.

Perfect Reconciliation With Everyone?

One of the characteristics of authoritarian or cultic groups is controlled relationships. Religious leaders try to maintain an idyllic environment—to squelch conflicts and tensions among followers. Pastors and teachers will often insist that parties who have had disagreements “kiss and make up,” regardless of the details of the conflict.

Taking the apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6:7 (“Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?”) out of its historical and cultural context, some religious leaders insist that those who have been wronged accept fraud or mistreatment rather than work toward a just and equitable resolution to the conflict. Some religious teachings and practices see a veneer of peace and tranquility as the highest priority. Yet the same folks who say that all Christians always need to get along harmoniously will also turn around and shun sinners—those who have been excommunicated or those whom they consider to be just too sinful. Such rigorous legalistic and oppressive teaching requires others to bear a burden of reconciliation that they are not willing to bear themselves.

When people leave authoritarian religious legalism and begin to experience healthy Christianity,

they are often shocked by the ongoing discussion, disputes and open discourse. They discover that their former ideal of peace and tranquility was merely an illusion—that many conflicts were merely swept under the carpet, whereas in the real Christian world conflict is a fact of life.

Another oft-cited passage is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:23-24: “Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” Some interpret this to mean that God will not hear or answer our prayers unless we have cleared up all conflicts with other Christians. Yet, in the context of Jesus' other examples from the Sermon on the Mount (and in light of Paul's teaching in Galatians and elsewhere that salvation is not by human effort) Jesus' point is that our efforts to reconcile with others will always fall short of pleasing God. We can only be reconciled to others through Jesus—and even then we may not be reconciled to everyone—because it takes both parties to successfully reconcile.

Unrealistic Expectations

When we expect that we can reconcile with every person, or worse yet, believe that God requires us to do so, we set ourselves up for disillusionment and discouragement. We put ourselves through needless stress by thinking that we ought to—or that we even can—get along with everyone. We are reaching for an unattainable goal, when experience, common sense, Christian history and the Bible tell us that some people simply will not get along with each other in this life. A single interaction with another person you simply can't get along with, no matter how hard you try, can take you days to recover from, cause great stress and

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even illness—and sap your energy for weeks.

God doesn't require that you put yourself in harm's way. Because you have forgiven someone, and even if that person seems to be making an effort to overcome the behavior that caused you offense, hurt or loss, you might feel that the appropriate Christian response is to let down your guard and trust the offending person. But the Bible nowhere requires you to do this.

You have a choice. If you feel uncomfortable with a relationship, you can choose whether to continue it or not. God does not demand that you continue in a relationship that can put you at risk.

Let's consider a few examples where it might be unwise for Christians to continue a relationship.

▶ *Charlene's friend Hilda was looking for something she could do from her home to bring in extra income. When she watched one of those infomercials about a multi-level cosmetic company, it seemed like just the perfect opportunity. Now she can't talk about anything else. Hilda is constantly pressuring Charlene to get involved—but Charlene is just not interested. She feels guilty because she wants to support her friend's business, but, frankly, she doesn't like the product. And it seems like she has nothing in common with Hilda anymore.*



Charlene needs to level with Hilda. Either the sales pitches stop, or she can't be around her anymore. Some people become obsessive over things—even against the better advice of friends and family. But there is no biblical reason to be drawn into someone else's obsession.

▶ *Mike's longtime buddy Richard flies off the handle way too easily. A few months ago, they got into an argument and Richard slugged Mike in the jaw. It took six months before he could chew normally. Richard apologized and Mike forgave him. Now Richard constantly wants to come over and watch Mike's new HDTV. But Mike notices that Richard still gets very angry for inappropriate*



reasons. Mike, at about 150 pounds, feels a little nervous around Richard's powerful six-foot-five frame. Yet wouldn't it be the right thing for Mike to ignore the potential problems and be Richard's buddy again?

No—Richard needs professional help and counseling. Mike can choose whether or how to let him know that, and he can choose whether to continue their friendship. There is no reason for Mike to think that God expects him to stick around for Richard's next violent eruption—at the risk of his own personal safety.

▶ *Carol claims to be Christian but has a penchant for living on the wild side. She likes to go bar-hopping and sometimes doesn't remember what she did the night before. Her friend Renee knows Carol needs to settle down and start acting like the Christian she claims to be. But too often she has found herself joining in Carol's escapades. The relationship isn't good for Renee, but she feels she ought to*



hang out with Carol to keep her out of trouble.

Renee should remember Proverbs 14:7: "Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips." Renee's loyalty is misplaced. She may think she's a positive influence on her friend—but who's influencing whom more?

▶ *Wendel's cousin Bob seems to be a friendly fellow—but he always wants to hang out with children. While he's never done anything criminal so far as Wendel knows, he also knows that a few years ago Bob was in therapy for his inordinate desire to be around children. Yet Bob insists that he is all better now. After all, he seems to be a devout, church-going Christian.*



Should Wendel give him the benefit of the doubt and let Bob take his seven-year-old daughter to the park?

No. Wendel doesn't have to put his child at risk. He can choose not to let Bob near his family. Bob may be unhappy with Wendel's decision, and may complain that Wendel is judging him unfairly. But the decision is Wendel's.

In Christian circles, judgmentalism often begins as helpful concern. But it can rapidly morph into a negative interaction that serves the needs of the one doing the “helping.”



► Ken has known Matt for years, but lately Matt is getting on his nerves. He has become involved with a strict religion and is constantly on Ken's case. Yesterday it was Ken's choice of sandwich bread for lunch. “White bread really isn't good for you,” Matt had said, “and I don't think God is pleased with it either. Whole wheat is much better for your body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.” The day before, it had been Ken's cargo pants. “Wearing those pants with all the pockets and zippers really isn't the best example,” Matt had advised. Ken patiently listens to Matt's self-righteous commentary. Ken believes in Jesus and takes the Bible seriously. But Matt is starting to make him feel discouraged.

In Christian circles, judgmentalism often begins as helpful concern. But it can rapidly morph into a negative interaction that serves the needs of the one doing the “helping.” The Bible encourages us to listen to spiritual instruction, yet we can choose how and from what source to get that instruction. We are under no obligation to subject ourselves to legalism and condemnation.



► Sam has known Jason for years, but every time they get together they end up arguing over politics. Jason seems to thrive on it, but Sam goes away drained. Sam has other friends who are of the same political persuasion

as Jason, and he gets along with them just fine.

Sam needs to let Jason know that he can't be around him anymore if he continues to harp on that one issue. There's really no reason for Sam to subject himself to what will turn into a conflict every time.



► Earl and Joyce's church is a tight little group. In prior years it had been controlling and judgmental. Members watched each others' behavior like hawks. About three years ago a new pastor took over and made some big changes. Instead of legalism, he began preaching God's grace. Earl and Joyce are pleased with their church's progress, and have forgiven the church and specific individuals for wrongs that they suffered in the past. Yet old attitudes and worldviews linger among some of the members. Earl and Joyce long for a change, and a fresh start, but they would feel guilty if they abandoned their close-knit group.

Earl and Joyce don't need to feel guilty. They can decide where they want to be in the body of Christ.

► Shawna still has bruises from her fight with her husband Harry. That was a month ago, the latest in a long string of altercations in their turbulent two-year marriage. They have spent hours in counseling, but the problems—and Harry's anger—just won't go away. After this last incident, Shawna moved out and has been staying at her sister's place. Now

Harry wants to get back together. He says that God hates divorce, and that breaking up their marriage would be the wrong thing to do. Shawna simply doesn't trust Harry anymore, but she feels compelled to give the marriage another try.

Shawna does not have to let Harry back into her life. Harry is dangerous and has broken his vow to “love, honor and protect” his wife. Her decision may be difficult and will require much prayer and counseling, but it needs to be made.

These are just a few examples, and every real-life situation is different. Any decision to diminish or sever a longstanding relationship should not be made lightly. These are major decisions that ought to be approached with prayer and often with help from qualified counselors. But the decision is still up to you.

Won't we be fellowshiping with everyone in heaven? Possibly. The Bible does not address that point specifically. We will however, be free of human nature and the “sin that so easily entangles us” (Hebrews 12:1). We will be free of human limitations and we will see each other through completely different eyes—and we will interact with each other in a completely different way. But now, as human beings, we can't fly, and we can't see across the universe. We are subject to hunger, chemical imbalances and mental and emotional illnesses and defects. So we can't expect ourselves (nor does God expect us) to exercise the attributes he will give us in our glorified, eternal state, and that includes being reconciled to everyone.

Now—in this life—sometimes the best way to love someone can be to leave them alone. □

