

I'LL

FORGIVE

YOU



IF...

I'll Forgive You If...

When Everett Worthington's 78-year old mother was bludgeoned to death by a teenage burglar, Worthington was confronted by a dilemma.

Should he take the initiative and forgive the burglar, or should he wait until the burglar asked for forgiveness? Or should he forgive him at all?

Most of us would probably conclude that the first move belongs to the person who had wronged us. But matters were different for Worthington, who is a psychology professor, a Presbyterian elder and a leading author and researcher on the subject of forgiveness.

Worthington had long advocated unconditional forgiveness, and now his conviction was being tested. Could unconditional forgiveness be appropriate or even rational in the face of such evil?

Forgiveness is at the center of a swirling controversy in the Christian world, with pastors and teachers, theologians and authors lining up on opposing sides. It is a controversy none of us can escape because, like it or not, we must choose whether to forgive or not to forgive.

What Biblical Forgiveness Isn't

Much of the confusion over forgiveness arises because of how forgiveness is defined. Forgiveness is often confused with other actions, and it's important to understand the difference between these actions and forgiveness. First let's consider a few things forgiveness is not:

Forgiveness is not forgetting. The memory of a wound usually lives on, even though it may be healed.

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Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing. Rather, forgiving acknowledges that a wrong has been done.

Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Reconciliation means a restored relationship. One need not restore a relationship in order to forgive.

Forgiveness is not dismissing. Taking an offense seriously is prerequisite to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not weakness. Forgiveness is not passive. Nor does it imply “giving in” to

the person being forgiven. True forgiveness is a courageous labor of faith—and a risk.

Forgiveness is not a legal pardon. A pardon releases the offender from the consequences or penalty of his or her actions. Personal forgiveness usually doesn't erase penalties and consequences of crime.

Victims of crime who choose to forgive spiritually release the criminal. But the criminal still has an

obligation to society to pay the civil penalty—which may include death.

What is forgiveness? Having considered what is not involved in forgiveness, let's turn to the positive definition. Webster's Dictionary defines forgiveness as: (1) ceasing to feel resentment against an offender, and (2) giving up claim for requital or payment of a debt.

The Greek word most commonly translated as forgiveness in the New Testament conveys the basic idea of *release*.

In short, forgiveness is *releasing a person from an obligation*. In doing so, we release the offender from debt and ourselves from harboring resentment and bitterness.

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Human Versus Divine Forgiveness

There are big differences, however, between the way we forgive and the way God forgives. Human forgiveness involves simply releasing another human being from a debt, responsibility or obligation. We can decide to do that for various reasons.

We might forgive out of self-interest, based on how much we like the person, or based on whether there's something else in it for us. Or we could decide to forgive someone out of love—because God forgave us.

Divine forgiveness, on the other hand, is a life and death matter, involving the forgiveness of sin. Because God is perfectly just, he does not forgive arbitrarily or capriciously.

Yet, out of his love for us, God takes the initiative and offers us forgiveness—because he wants to. He came to us in the person of Jesus to satisfy the debt of sin for all humanity, for all time, and he offers unconditional forgiveness to his children.

Still, there is a great deal of controversy about what God requires of Christians and what we should require of each other before forgiveness can occur. Here are two views advanced by Christians:

1) Conditional forgiveness. Before the forgiver forgives, the forgivee must first apologize. If there is no apology, no forgiveness is required.

2) Unconditional forgiveness. The forgiver is required to forgive whether or not the forgivee apologizes.

David Augsburger, author of two books on forgiveness and professor of pastoral care at Fuller Theological Seminary, believes forgiveness should be conditional.

Cheap forgiveness—unaccompanied by repentance or justice—is a product of the age of individualism, according to Augsburger. Repentance and forgiveness must go hand in hand.

Other experts on forgiveness, such as Everett Worthington and the late Lewis Smedes,

Do We Have to Ask God's Forgiveness Every Time We Sin?

Some claim that we must ask God's forgiveness for each and every sin before he grants us forgiveness. This idea is based on scriptures such as 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Some believe that this passage is saying that God's forgiveness is conditional on our recognition and acknowledgement of each specific sin.

Psalms 32 seems to support this notion. In verse 3, we find David suffering and in denial about his sinful condition: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long."

But in verse 5 he comes to his senses: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'—and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

However, if it is true that God forgives only as we confess and ask his forgiveness for each individual sin, we have a serious problem: God's forgiveness is based on our human ability to be aware of and remember all our sins.

If this were the case, we could never be assured of salvation, as we are never able to see the true extent of our sinfulness, and therefore never able to fully confess all our sins.

There will always be some sin we have committed that we did not or have not identified as a sin—and thus we might fail to ask God to specifically forgive that sin.

Does that mean that our spiritual goose is cooked? The apostle Paul provides the answer to our dilemma. "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins" (Colossians 2:13).

God has already forgiven our sinful condition. "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

disagree. Reconciliation may be conditional, but not forgiveness—and forgiveness is never cheap. The Bible, they believe, calls Christians to forgive unconditionally.

Who is right?

Let's examine the major points and scriptures in favor of conditional forgiveness and see how they stack up against the arguments favoring unconditional forgiveness.

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The conditional forgiver says: *Forgiveness needs to be deserved or it has no value.* Conditional forgivers point out that in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-31), the son first had to repent before his father accepted him. In verse 21, the son says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Such an interpretation seems to conclude that the prodigal son's confession had to come before his father's forgiveness.

Like it or not, we must choose whether to forgive or not to forgive.

The unconditional forgiver says: *Forgiveness can never be deserved or earned,* because the offender always owes more than he or she is able to pay. And a mere confession (acknowledgement of the debt) does not pay the debt.

In Matthew 18:21, in answer to Peter's question about how many times he should forgive his brother, Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

This suggests that the offender has accumulated an obligation beyond his or her power to pay. In the following Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, both the servant and his debtor owed more than they were able to pay.

Of course, if a debtor were able to pay, he or she would not be in need of forgiveness.

This is why God's forgiveness and salvation comes "by grace...through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works" (Ephesians 2:8). We could never earn enough to pay our debt to God.

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The conditional forgiver says: *Forgiveness without repentance invites further abuse.*

Conditional forgivers warn that unless we require someone to repent before we forgive, we are opening ourselves up to exploitation, abuse and further hurt. Forgiveness without repentance merely reinforces the bad behavior.

The unconditional forgiver says: *That's right. Forgiveness without repentance does not prevent further abuse.*

Unconditional forgiveness is no guarantee that the forgiven person will not repeat the sin (but neither is conditional forgiveness such a guarantee).

In Romans 6:1, the apostle Paul echoes the objection some have to a gospel of unconditional forgiveness: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

Salvation by grace carries with it the risk of abuse, so it should come as no surprise that those who preach a message of grace often hear the objection that grace invites more sin.

By contrast, when legalists preach a message of salvation by works, rarely do they hear this objection raised, as legalism certainly does not invite an abuse of grace.

Romans 6:2 clearly answers the question as to whether we should abuse God's gift of unconditional forgiveness: "By no means!"

As *recipients* of forgiveness (human or divine), the pressure is on us to avoid repeating our offense or our sin.

As *grantors* of forgiveness, we should realize that we are taking a risk—that abuse may happen. After all, we are forgiving an imperfect human. Our act of forgiveness does not make that imperfect human perfect.

"Father, forgive them..."

As Jesus hung on the cross, he prayed "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Who was he talking about?

Was it the Roman soldiers, who were simply doing their duty?

They didn't know they were crucifying an innocent man—much less the Son of God.

Was it the Hebrew religious leaders? They knew Jesus was blameless because they had to bring false witnesses to testify against him.

What about Pontius Pilate?

He understood that Jesus was not guilty of any crime, yet he let the angry mob have its way.

And what about the common people? They let themselves be swayed in whatever direction their leaders wanted.

Could it have been the thieves on the cross?

They, too, insulted Jesus.

Lastly, the disciples—Jesus' closest friends—knew full well who Jesus was, yet they abandoned him.

All of these people had varying degrees of responsibility in Jesus' execution. Yet none of them was fully aware of what they were doing.

They had not confessed their sin, they had not apologized and they had not repented.

Jesus demonstrates through this statement from the cross that God's forgiveness does not depend on human actions, abilities or degrees of contrition.

Jesus' prayer of forgiveness includes not just these people—his executioners—but extends to all humanity, as all sinful humans share in the responsibility for his crucifixion.

On the cross, Jesus reaches out to all of us with unconditional forgiveness—no ifs, ands or buts.

Of course, the fact that we have forgiven someone does not prevent us from protecting ourselves from further abuse. You may forgive someone for running over your dog, but that will probably mean your next dog will be kept in a fenced-in yard.

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The conditional forgiver says:
Forgiveness without repentance is unscriptural.

Conditional forgivers point out that many passages in the Bible call for repentance. Some of these seem to teach that forgiveness is granted only in return for repentance, such as Luke 13:3; 1 John 1:9; Mark 6:12; Acts 2:37-38; James 5:16.

The unconditional forgiver says:
Forgiveness prior to repentance is indeed scriptural when the Scriptures are properly interpreted.

The scriptures cited above illustrate that repentance is necessary to receive or accept forgiveness—but not to grant forgiveness.

We do our part in forgiving someone. The decision and choice whether to repent is not ours—it is up to the person who is forgiven. Also, a change of heart may have taken place without us recognizing it.

Because we are not humanly capable of always making right judgments (John 7:24), we should not wait until we are convicted of the evidence of repentance before we forgive.

Further, we should not discount the fact that our act of forgiving someone can lead to repentance.

When you forgive, you are essentially saying, “You have wronged me, but I release you of your obligation to me.”

If it's true that we don't need to require someone to repent and apologize to us before we forgive them, that leads to the next big question:

Does God require us to forgive everyone unconditionally before he forgives us?

What? Forgive Terrorists?

Shortly after the September 11, 2001 horrific terrorist attacks, some advocated forgiveness of the terrorists and their organizations. This view was espoused in spite of the tragic loss of thousands of lives, in spite of injuries and disabilities, in spite of the enormous toll on the world economy and in spite of the continuing loss of life in the ongoing war against terrorism.

Some even went so far as to suggest that we should forgive other terrorists who are planning further atrocities and send them food and provisions in their hideouts in Afghanistan and other countries.

To retaliate against terrorism would be vengeful, an ungodly act, goes this argument. But those who advocate such a position are failing to discern between personal forgiveness and criminal justice.

Personal forgiveness of criminals by victims is one thing. But the criminal or terrorist has also incurred a debt to society that must be paid.

It's true—the apostle Paul decries personal revenge in Romans 12:19-20: “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. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’”

The question is, how will God take revenge? The answer is, in part, in the next chapter of Romans.

Speaking of civil authority, Paul writes, “He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing” (Romans 13:4-6). Governments exist to maintain order, execute justice and punish wrongdoers, including terrorists.

While we may or may not forgive terrorists on a personal level, governments still have the God-given responsibility of bringing them to justice.

Must God's Forgiveness Be Earned by Our Own?

Embedded in the Lord's Prayer is a frightening phrase for the conditional forgiver. Some advocates of unconditional forgiveness find it disturbing as well.

In Matthew 6:12, Jesus gives us a model prayer, one line of which reads, "Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Then, as if to make certain we understand the importance of forgiveness, Jesus makes a stronger statement in verse 14:

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

At first glance, this passage seems to be saying that God's forgiveness of our sins is conditional on our forgiving other human beings who have wronged us.

Of course, the problem with this view is that it makes God's forgiveness dependent on something we do. But God's perfect mercy can't be conditional on imperfect human behavior.

As flawed human beings we are incapable of perfectly and totally forgiving other people who have wronged us.

For example, I offend you and you forgive me. So far so good. But what if I continue to offend you in the same way I did before—as well as in ways I never have?

If I commit enough offenses, I submit that your ability to forgive me would wear extremely thin. Human forgiveness has limitations. If God's forgiveness were based on the weak and flawed *human* ability to forgive, then none of us could be forgiven.

Further, Ephesians 2:8 tells us that our salvation is "not by works, so that no one can boast." God's forgiveness cannot be based on our own efforts to forgive.

So, since Matthew 6:12-14 does not mean that God's forgiveness is conditional on ours, what does it mean?

God Makes it Possible For Us to Forgive Others

Based on the gospel, Matthew 6:12-14 means, among other things, that God makes it possible for us to forgive others.

There are many occasions when we are humanly incapable of forgiveness, and we forgive others only because God enables us to forgive.

He also helps us to forgive others by forgiving us—thereby convincing us that we cannot *not* forgive, since God's mercies have been extended to us.

God does not wait to see if we will forgive others before he forgives us (see the accompanying sidebar, "Father, forgive them...").

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

God's compassion and forgiveness toward us stand as the ultimate example for our own behavior toward each other.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Scriptural evidence falls on the side of unconditional forgiveness, especially when we are talking about divine forgiveness.

The conditions have already been met—at the price of the life of the Son of God.

Since we are offered unconditional forgiveness by God, should we not do the same for each other?

The conditions have already been met—at the price of the life of the Son of God. Since we are offered unconditional forgiveness by God, should we not do the same for each other?

FORGIVING THOSE WHO DON'T WANT IT

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5:44-47).

Last week I read about a student at an elementary school who was suspended from his school for 10 days. No, it wasn't drugs, a gun or even misbehavior. As I understand it, his teacher found a list in his desk, a list of people who frustrated him.

The teacher, figuring that it was a "hit list" and not wanting to have another Columbine, reported the list to the principal. The principal kicked him out.

I hope they don't find my list. If they did, they would kick me out of the universe forever.

I know, I know. Christians are supposed to love everyone, be nice, turn the other cheek. We are supposed to absorb every injustice, return good for evil and go the second mile. Jesus told us that we are to ask God to forgive us as we forgive others.

He said that when we are going to church and "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" (Matthew 5:23-24).

I know all of that. But can we talk? That's a hard thing to do. I could do it if the people who ticked me off would be just a little bit sorry for what they did. I could do it if they asked me to do it. But they won't. Not only that, they don't even know that I'm ticked.

A number of years ago, I was asked to teach a home Bible study on the subject of "loving the unlovely." That's not hard to do and, frankly, I was looking forward to the profound truth that would come out of my very spiritual and fertile mind.

As I drove to the Bible study, I was thinking of an incident that had happened that day. I had finally been able to see some justice and was quite pleased. A man with whom I had worked had almost destroyed a ministry with which I had been associated.

Because I was no longer involved, I felt that I was not supposed to get involved. But then that same man called me and, in a very arrogant way, asked for my advice. (And they say there is no God?)

I let him have it. I detailed the horrible things he had done to others, the people he had hurt and the God he had offended. I told him that God was going to "get him," and that I was glad. I told him that, if I were him, I wouldn't go out in a thunderstorm.

I told him that his arrogance was abhorrent, his actions sinful and his leadership spurious. It felt really good to be God's servant in the matter.

I figured that I had saved that ministry, and God would be grateful for my faithfulness.

Feel good, do you?

Yeah, and I'm sorry I haven't told you how thankful I am to you for giving me the opportunity to be your servant in this matter.

You weren't my servant in the matter. In fact, using my name when you talked to him was pretty arrogant on your part. Not only that, it wasn't true.

But he did do some really bad stuff and someone needed to tell him.

So have you.

I know I'm a sinner, but that isn't the issue here. We were talking about him.

Oh, but it is the issue. If I had treated you the way you treat him—and you deserved far more anger from me than you gave to him—where would you be right now?

Good point. But what about him?

He's my servant. He's responsible to me and not to you.

But what about our being responsible and accountable to one another? What about speaking the truth in love and all?

Love?

(continued)

Oh.

Speaking of love, what was it you were going to say to that Bible study?

You're probably wondering what I said at the Bible study that night.

Well, I confessed to the people what I had done, told them what God had told me and said that, when they wanted to have an "expert" teaching them how to deal with twits, they probably ought to ask someone else. And then, the next morning, I called the man I had yelled at and asked for his forgiveness.

Do you know what was really irritating? He acted like it was about time I had come to my senses and recognized the godly nature of his leadership.

Can you believe that? He said that he was glad I had finally understood the truth of the matter. I almost told him to stuff it...but, then, I remembered Jesus and the cross.

I decided I would tell him the truth some other time. I needed to fix some things in my own life first.

One of the most often asked questions we all have is this: Do I have to forgive people who don't want to be forgiven?

Yes, you do. I don't like it any more than you do, but I didn't say it. Jesus said it. And he didn't ask for our vote.

You see, he knows that forgiveness isn't about them. It's about us and our own health. He knows a "root of bitterness" (Hebrews 12:15, Deuteronomy 29:18, KJV) can destroy our peace and our walk with him.

I still have this long list I don't want anybody to see, but I've put those people on my prayer list.

Frankly, I'm getting better at this forgiveness thing. I've even managed to take some of the people off the list.

Now, if I can just get enough spiritual gasoline from God to forgive and love them all, I'm going to those turkeys and I'm going to say, "There are a few things I've been meaning to say to you..." I can hardly wait!

Uh...sorry about that, Lord.

—Steve Brown

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