
FORGIVENESS

Will God forgive my adultery?

Q *I grew up in a Christian family. When I was married to my first husband, we were both Christians who then strayed away from God, and I eventually committed adultery. When my husband found out, I left him. He attempted suicide, but after he recovered, he said he forgave me and wanted me back. Then he began to beat me, so I left again. He divorced me. I remarried, and after a few years we both cheated on each other. Now, years later, I have found my way back to church. I have repented, but I can't find any peace. Is it possible that God won't forgive me for committing adultery? I really want to serve God, but I just have so many questions and no answers.*

A Your question—your guilt and worry—is a great example of why the gospel of Jesus Christ is such incredibly good news. No matter what we have done, no matter how many low places we have occupied, God loves us, and He will take us back, without recrimination. As you note, those who accept Christ may fall into sins and behaviors that are the very opposite of Christian virtues and practices, and the sad fact is such a thing happens in the lives of many.

When we ask God to forgive us, it is not possible for Him to say, “I don't forgive you,” for that is not the way God is. You may

FORGIVENESS

not have forgiven yourself, and perhaps others may not forgive you. However, if you seek forgiveness from God, He will (and has, if you already have asked Him for forgiveness) forgive you. God does not forgive us if we don't wish to be forgiven. He doesn't forgive us against our will. He doesn't forgive us unless and until we seek His forgiveness. But when we do, His forgiveness is given, no questions asked—no stipulations and no conditions.

Forgiving racism

Q *I am having a problem with forgiveness. I am a member of a racial minority. Before my husband (of another race) and I were married, my father-in-law shared his racist views openly. I was caught off guard the first time he shared his views. I looked to my soon-to-be husband to “clear up” the situation, but he did not support me. Years have passed, but I am unable to forgive my father-in-law or my husband for not standing up for me. This family claims to be Christian, but of a different denomination than I am. I find myself frustrated and filled with anger as if the events happened yesterday. My question is, as a Christian, what is my obligation to respect my elders and hold my tongue when I find my father-in-law’s speech offensive? Do I hold my tongue for the sake of the relationship?*

A There is no need for you to suffer in silence, without telling your father-in-law and your husband about the hurt they have caused—and may continue to cause. There are several issues here, with racism apparently being a major part of your pain. Racism, of course, includes the thesis that those who are not part of our specific racial family are inferior to us.

There are times when many have felt that it's better to “leave

BETWEEN RELIGIOUS ROCKS AND LIFE'S HARD PLACES

well enough alone” in these kinds of painful circumstances that you describe, fearing that if we rock the boat, things will get worse. In such cases, many continue to suffer in silence, and beyond that, anger, hatred, and animosity builds and builds internally until it finally explodes in resentment. Nothing in the Bible suggests that we must allow ourselves to be a doormat for such treatment.

Sometimes, when something like this has been left unaddressed for so long, it has festered and become so painful that when we do bring it up it is hard for us to do so without lashing out in a vindictive way. It is hard to humbly, calmly, and lovingly let a loved one know that what they have done and, more importantly, what they continue to say and do, is hurting us. At such a time, it may be helpful for us to tell the other party that we know we should have said something earlier. On the other hand, the fact that we said nothing does not justify or excuse the painful things that they said or did.

You mention the topic of respecting our elders. Yes, we should, but Paul told us all as children to “obey your parents in the Lord . . .” (Ephesians 6:1). We are not under any obligation as Christians to stand by when elders say or do painful things that are inappropriate by any definition. We need not subject ourselves to such actions when there is another alternative.

Forgiveness for what has been said and done is the next step, but it is a step that is best formally undertaken once we have done our best to clear the air and to stop “suffering in silence.”

Must we divulge all our sins to our spouse?

Q *If a person who is married once was involved in activity that was not appropriate and did something very horrible, then realized it was wrong and honestly repented to God, does*

FORGIVENESS

that person need to tell his or her spouse? Will God still forgive that person if his or her repentance was sincere and they changed their behavior and got back in right standing with God?

A The situation you describe can be a complicated mixture between human and divine forgiveness, communication, responsibility, and relationship.

God does not forgive us based upon actions we take to remedy or fix situations. God forgives us based upon our acceptance of Christ as our Savior, based upon our request of His mercy and grace. Forgiveness is not based upon what we do; it is based upon what Christ has already done.

However, you describe a marital relationship and the dilemma of whether to tell a spouse about something that, at one point in time at least, they do not know. Such a situation is complex, and there is no easy answer. Some may say that honesty is always the best policy, but honesty does not necessarily involve telling everyone, including your spouse, about all of one's sins (or at least those sins we can remember). Some believe that if there is a chance of a spouse finding out about a sin, then the other spouse should confess and be the one to bring such a situation to their husband's or wife's attention. There is no easy solution nor is there a "one-size-fits-all" answer to give about such a situation. The reason there is no one perfect answer to your question is based on:

1. We humans are imperfect.
2. We humans differ in many ways.

God, on the other hand, is:

1. Perfect
2. The same yesterday, today, and forever.

BETWEEN RELIGIOUS ROCKS AND LIFE'S HARD PLACES

God does not forgive us based upon our good behavior, then throw our past in our face if we fall at some time in the future. We will never be able to perfectly please either God or another human based upon our impeccable moral behavior. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves—that is at the heart of the gospel.

Put another way, we know that our eternal forgiveness and our eternal relationship with God are secure, safe, protected, and sure. As for those human relationships (and we are all part of them and contribute to them, of course)—that's another thing!

Tolerating sin?

Q *I find myself in a dilemma when it comes to tolerating behavior from “Christians” who turn their backs on Christ. I am not talking about people who have never heard the gospel. I am talking about people who have heard and at one point accepted it. My mother-in-law is purchasing a home with her boyfriend—she is in her sixties, and he is in his thirties! She has asked her son (my husband) to help them move to the new residence. We have talked with her about her choices and the consequences when she decided to move in with her boyfriend six months ago. She attends church regularly. Now they are buying this house together. I believe by helping her move, we are providing the acceptance and tolerance she needs to continue in her sin. My husband totally disagrees. He says he loves his mom, and while he doesn't agree with what she is doing, she has asked him for help and he is going to help her.*

I agree with “hate the sin and love the sinner.” I love my mother-in-law enough to confront her. Tolerance is not love. Just

FORGIVENESS

as God disciplines us because He loves us, we also must hold each other accountable. What are your thoughts?

A Some points to ponder:

1. While you may disagree with your mother-in-law's claim to be a Christian, she is your mother-in-law. While you do not want to appear to condone certain activities, what will you accomplish by taking a stand? Doesn't your mother-in-law already know how you and your husband feel? How much more of a "stand" do you both need to take?

2. God does not withdraw His love from us when we do things that are wrong and sinful. He does not compromise His holiness and perfection, but there is never a time when we cannot access Him. A complete end of contact on your part may mean you or your husband would be unable to positively influence your mother-in-law.

3. You say that your mother-in-law attends church. But attendance at church does not mean that someone is a Christian. There are many people who have attended church all their lives but are not Christian. How do you know that your mother-in-law is truly a Christian? Perhaps the behavior you describe is one way of telling that she is not and never has been. You won't know unless you've talked extensively about this with her. She may need your friendship and contact now more than ever before.

4. You are correct, tolerance is not necessarily love. But it is also true that there are many times when we repel people when we think all we are doing is taking a stand. Above all, we want to be a tool, a vehicle that God can use to shine the light of Christ into other people's lives. And no, we do not want to compromise. But we want to be available, approachable and open—therein lies the tension in this situation and the balance you seek.

BETWEEN RELIGIOUS ROCKS AND LIFE'S HARD PLACES

*How can I show love and compassion
without condoning specific behavior?*

Q *My cousin had a child out of wedlock. Some time after the birth, my family had a baby shower for her. My father, who is Christian, did not feel it was right for him to attend due to the fact that the baby was born out of wedlock, and he believed his attendance would only show that he tolerated this behavior.*

However, at the same time, my father attended a funeral for a close friend of the family who committed suicide. I feel that he should have given the same support that he gave to a friend of the family to my cousin. I hate to compare and contrast sins, but isn't it rather hypocritical of him?

A Your question seems to be this: if we attend an event with or have any kind of social contact with someone, does our presence communicate our agreement with their lifestyle and all of their specific behaviors? When Jesus initiated a conversation with a sinful woman by the well (John 4), did He intend that His conversation with her be taken as His approval of her past (she had lived with many men) or her present lifestyle (she was at the time living with another man)? By attending dinners in the homes of self-righteous religious people, was Jesus supporting them? Jesus' actions in allowing people to "touch" Him, such as lepers and the woman who let down her hair and washed His feet with it, scandalized "good" people.

We will not change people. We will not change their minds by boycotting a social occasion, particularly the events you describe. In such cases, surely we should ask ourselves why our actions are at odds with what it would seem Jesus would do, according to the Bible.

FORGIVENESS

We cannot let the light of Jesus shine through us if we hide it, or in the words of Jesus, if we light our lamp and put it under a container of some kind (Matthew 5:15). We certainly can't help direct them to the glorious light of Christ if all they feel we do is condemn them.