

FORGIVENESS

[Note: The following verses have been selected from the many passages that use words such as "forgive" and "forgiveness." Add others to the outline as you see fit. The verse references given in parentheses provide the context in which the words are found.]

- What Can or Cannot Be Forgiven?
- God / Jesus and Forgiveness
- Forgiveness Is Associated With...
- How Important Is It for Us to Forgive Others?
- Conclusion
- What About "Forgiving Oneself"?

What Can or Cannot Be Forgiven?

Certain things CANNOT be forgiven.

1. CANNOT (not ever): "Blasphemy of the Spirit" (claiming - and truly believing - that the Holy Spirit's power is actually from the Devil) - Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10 (v. 8-10).
2. CANNOT (at least until the person's attitude changes): A persistent attitude of rebellion and sin - Joshua 24:19 (v.19-28). [But if the attitude changes, then forgiveness can take place.]

Certain things CAN be forgiven.

1. CAN: All sins other than blasphemy of the Spirit - Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10 (v. 8-10).
2. CAN: Even hidden faults/sins need forgiven - Psalm 19:12 (v. 12-13).

Things to think about:

- Some people worry about whether or not they have committed the "unforgivable sin." They are fearful that they may have done so, and as a result, won't be able to be forgiven, no matter how much they may want it. These passages, however, refer to a situation in which the people (the religious leaders of Jesus' day) had become so hardened against the truth, that they were totally convinced that the work of the Holy Spirit was actually the work of *Satan himself*. These people had become so hard-hearted, that it was impossible for them to ever *want* to turn to Christ (who they considered to be "demon-possessed"), in order to be forgiven.

Note, however, that they *thought* they were devoted to the way of truth. (Look at what Paul was like, before God saved him - Philippians 3:4-6. See also Romans 10:2, and the end of John 8:41.) They *claimed* that they believed the Bible... it's just that their "Bible" was actually commentaries and people's opinions *about* the Bible. (See Mark 7:6-8.) *They did not submit to the Bible itself.*

Are you willing to search the Scriptures, and to submit to what it says? Are you willing to let it *change* the way you think and act? Or do you blindly follow what the religious leaders tell you to believe and do? If you fail to let the Scriptures change you, you are in danger of being deceived into seeing things "backwards." If this happens, and you continue to remain unchanged, you could be in danger of becoming guilty of this sin.

(False teachers can seem like wonderful people. Their sermons can be quite impressive; they can sound quite "positive" and "powerful" - that is why they sometimes get so many converts. They can quote the Bible - like the devil did - with just "minor" omissions, and they can create spine-tingling excitement among their followers. But they are still false teachers, and those who follow them will be led astray. Matthew 23:13-15.)

- What is meant by "all sins" being forgivable (other than blasphemy of the Spirit)? Have you committed sins that you think are too great for God to forgive? What do these Scripture passages tell you about your sins? If you have committed sins you have been unwilling to confess, because you thought they were "too big," you need to do something about them right now.
 - How serious are rebellion and sin? Can they be forgiven? In what ways can they be described as "unforgivable"? In what ways are these sins different from the "unforgivable sin" mentioned in a previous section? What conditions must be met before forgiveness is possible? How does the attitude of one's heart influence whether or not he will be forgiven?
 - What if we don't realize we are sinning - are we still guilty of sin? Do we still need forgiveness? The "hidden faults," mentioned in Psalm 19:12, refer to unintentional sins, which we commit without realizing it. They are contrasted with "willful sins," mentioned in verse 13. Do you consider "hidden sins" (sins you don't realize you commit) to be unimportant? What does this passage tell us about the seriousness of such sins? When we discover we have committed such a sin, what must we do?
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God / Jesus and Forgiveness

The source of our forgiveness (for our sins against God)

1. God is the source of forgiveness.
 - a. He pardons sin and forgives transgression - Micah 7:18 (v. 14-20).
 - b. This is why we should fear him - Psalm 130:4 (v. 3-4).
2. Jesus' "blood of the covenant."
 - a. His blood makes forgiveness possible - Matthew 26:28 (v. 26-28).
 - b. Note that the shedding of blood is necessary for forgiveness - Hebrews 9:22. [This is the reason for many of the Old Testament sacrifices. (See more about this below.)]

The example for our forgiveness (of other's sins against us)

1. Commands to follow God's example.
 - a. "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" - Colossians 3:13 (v. 12-14).
 - b. "Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" - Ephesians 4:32 (4:31-5:2 and the surrounding verses).
2. An Example.
 - a. "Forgive them because they do not know what they are doing" - Luke 23:34. [Jesus on the cross.]
 - b. [This verse shows Jesus' attitude, his willingness to forgive. However, the people themselves would not experience the forgiveness he desired them to have, unless they repented of their sins. (See the section about things associated with forgiveness.)]

Things to think about:

- How sinful was the nation of Israel (according to the book of Micah)? Did they deserve forgiveness? What does the passage in Micah tell us about God's character? How can this be a source of encouragement to us (as people who need to be forgiven)? How can this be an example for us to follow (as people who need to forgive others)?
- What is your reaction to the association of "forgiveness" with "fear of God"? We tend to associate the word "fear" with "negative" concepts, such as anger and judgment. But in this context, "fear of God" includes an attitude of wholehearted respect and honor. (The *opposite* - lack of fear - would be associated with attitudes such as contempt and disrespect for God.) Considering the seriousness of your sin (which caused Jesus to die), and the judgment you deserve, how should God's willingness to forgive you influence your attitude toward him? [Note in the Micah passage, that even God's enemies, when they see his wonders, will turn to God "in fear."]

- When Jesus mentioned the "blood of the covenant," what was he referring to? How serious is our sin? Why was it necessary for his blood to be shed? If we reject his blood, what must happen? Every time you take part in a communion service, let it be a reminder to you, of what Jesus' blood did for you.
 - [You may want to read the book of Hebrews, regarding the need for blood. The Old Testament sacrifices were intended to be a temporary "covering" for sin (until Jesus came), as well as a means for teaching us about the significance of what Jesus did on the cross. (Some of the sacrifices that required blood can be read about in the first part of Leviticus.)]
 - How (in what ways) did the Lord forgive us? How important is it for us to follow his example? What other "Christian character traits" are associated with forgiveness (in the Colossians and Ephesians passages)? [Note that some "non-Christian character traits" are also mentioned in the Ephesians passage. These are incompatible with forgiveness.] What can we learn from Jesus' forgiveness on the cross, that can be an example for us, to help us as we respond to the wrongs others do to us? [1 Peter 2:21-24 illustrates some other things we can learn, from his example on the cross.]
 - Jesus tells us that we must love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). In what ways do the examples in this section illustrate how we should do this? [One thing to consider: When Jesus died, we were his enemies (Romans 5:10). He did the same thing for *us* (who were *his* enemies), that he now commands us to do for *our enemies*.]
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Forgiveness Is Associated With...

Forgiveness as INDIVIDUALS

1. Repentance (changing the way we think and act) - Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3.
2. Conversion - turning from darkness/Satan to light/God - Acts 26:18 (v. 15-18).
3. Confession of sin - 1 John 1:9 (v. 8-10). [This verse focuses on the confession of sins we have committed against *God*, but technically, every sin we commit against *people* is also a sin against God.]
4. Trust/faith in Jesus - Acts 10:43 (v. 39-43).
5. Love - Luke 7:47-48 (v. 36-48).
6. A willingness to forgive others. [This will be examined in the next section. For now, you can look at what the "Lord's prayer" says - Matthew 6:12, 14-15.]

Forgiveness on the NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Humility, prayer, seeking God, turning from sin - 2 Chronicles 7:14 (v. 13-14). [Note that there are many similarities between the requirements for *national* forgiveness, and what we must do on an *individual* level.]

Things to think about:

- Examine the above verses. In what ways are the various concepts (attitudes or characteristics) related to forgiveness? How important are they?
- How many of these various attitudes or characteristics are described as *prerequisites* for being forgiven? Can forgiveness exist if they are absent from our lives (that is, if we are *not* repentant, *not* trusting Jesus, etc.)?
- Note: The above passages focus on *our* responsibility. Other passages in the Bible focus on God's role in salvation. He "calls" us, he "makes us alive," he "builds us up," etc. We may have difficulty understanding how passages that focus on God's role in salvation relate to the others which focus on our own obligations. But in Scripture, these two groups of passages complement each other. Because of this, they will go together, not contradicting each other. There will *never* be an instance in which God does *his* part (calls us, makes us alive, etc.) and the person will continuously refuse to do his part (repent, trust, love, etc.).

Our difficulties in understanding these issues are due to the following:

1. Our understanding is, by nature, limited (*not* infinite).
2. Sin has affected every part of us - including the way we understand things.

Remember that the starting point for genuine wisdom is the fear of God! (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7)
Until this attitude becomes ours, even the best of our wisdom is superficial.

How Important Is It for Us to Forgive Others?

What Does the Bible Say?

1. The Lord's prayer: Forgive us... as we also forgive others - Matthew 6:12 (v. 9-13); Luke 11:4 (v. 2-4).
2. What it means: If you *do* forgive, you will be forgiven; if you *don't*, you won't - Matthew 6:14-15.
 - a. Illustrated by a parable - Matthew 18:35 (v.23-35).
3. The forgiveness "measured out" to us will be like the forgiveness we "measure out" to others - Luke 6:37 (v. 37-38).
4. Don't even pray [don't focus on "religious activities"] until you have forgiven anyone you may hold something against. Then your Father in heaven will be able to forgive you - Mark 11:25.
5. How should we forgive others? [Follow God's / Jesus' example, examined in a previous study.]
6. How often should we forgive them?
 - a. "77 times" - Matthew 18:21 (v. 21-35). [Or "70 times 7," depending on one's interpretation of the New Testament Greek phrase.]
 - b. "7 times a day" - Luke 17:3-4 (v. 1-4).
 - c. Basically, these passages mean "keep on doing it."

Things to Think About:

- From *God's* perspective, he saves us for the sake of his own glory and grace. It is not because of our works or actions that he does this. (Read Ephesians 2:1-10.) But when he saves us, he also changes our hearts, resulting in a changed life. The person who has a changed life will *want* to learn to do what pleases God! This shows us that what *God* does and what *we* do cannot be separated.

However, from *our* perspective, our attitude toward others (which indicates the condition of our hearts) *parallels* what will happen to us at the coming Day of Justice. This fact shows us that we are responsible for our actions.

- The two greatest commands involve love toward God and love toward "neighbor" (which includes our enemies). In what ways does our forgiveness of others demonstrate obedience to these two commands?
- To what extent do you forgive others? (Are there people you are unwilling to forgive? Or if you claim you have forgiven them, does your life show it?) What do these verses say about you? Do you need to make changes in your life? (If so, do so *now*.)
- Every time you say, or think about, the "Lord's Prayer," let it remind you about your need to forgive others. Reflect on whether or not there is anyone you need to forgive, and (if there is) do so. (Also deal with any other sins you may have concealed in your heart.) Then you will be able to reflect on this prayer - as well as give praise and thanks to God - with a clean heart and conscience!

Conclusion

What does the Bible say about those who are forgiven?

1. They are the recipients of God's blessings - Psalm 32:1 (v. 1-2); Romans 4:7 (v. 7-8)!

Things to think about:

- What are some of the blessings mentioned within the context of the verses given above?
- What are some of the other blessings mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, which belong to us, once we have been forgiven from our sins? Do these blessings belong to you? If not, what must you do?

Thinking deeper:

- There may be instances in which we have sinned against someone, but when we ask the person to forgive us, he is unwilling to do so. There may be other instances in which someone has sinned against us, and needs to ask *us* to forgive *him*, but for whatever reason, he is unwilling to do so. (He might not care about dealing with his sin... but it is possible that he might truly believe that he did nothing wrong. Or, in some instances, you might think he sinned, when he really didn't.)

We cannot control another person's actions. But we must make sure that our own attitudes and actions are correct. In what ways can we maintain a godly attitude, when others are unwilling either to forgive, or to ask for forgiveness? How can we continue to show "love for neighbor" (Matthew 22:39) when they do not show it to us? (Do not forget that the person who *only* loves those who love him back, is no different than an unbeliever - Matthew 5:43-48. Regardless of the other person's response, we must follow Jesus.)

What About "Forgiving Oneself"?

(Questions to explore AFTER studying the topic of forgiveness.)

- Sometimes a person may commit a sin that leaves him so embarrassed or ashamed, that he says he will never be able to "forgive himself." Have you ever said something like this (and really meant it)? What do the verses in this study teach us about such sins?
- Can anyone commit a sin that is not fully known by God? How does he (God) respond to such sins? (Is he willing to forgive them?) Are we to follow his example - in other words, is there anyone (*including ourselves*) who God forgives, who we *shouldn't* also forgive?
- When a person has such an attitude, it is very likely that the real issue is something other than forgiveness. [What hinders you from forgiving? It is not God!] What attitudes of the heart might be reflected by the unwillingness of a person to forgive himself? Are these attitudes any different from those that exist when one is unwilling to forgive other people?
- What is the relationship between pride and humility, and a person's willingness (or unwillingness) to forgive others? to forgive himself?
- If there are sins that you have committed sometime in the past, and you are still carrying the guilt around with you - like heavy weight tied on your back - take care of the matter today. Jesus has offered to remove that burden of guilt, so there is no reason for you to continue hanging onto it. It may be beneficial for you to study Psalm 51: Think about David's response to the sins he committed, and apply what you learn to your own situation.