

FORGIVENESS

PART 1 - 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 (even words spoken against the Son) - 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). [Some translations use the word "cleanse."]

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 this, 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*. 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. Have you reached the same views that the religious leaders of Jesus' day had? Are you totally convinced that Jesus' power comes from the devil? If not, then you have not committed the "unforgivable sin."

There is an implied warning, however. We must be willing to let the Scriptures control our perspective on life, and to let it determine our values and actions. If we fail to do this, we are in danger of being deceived into viewing things "backwards"... and in danger of becoming guilty of this sin.

- 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" of blasphemy? 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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PART 2 - God / Jesus and forgiveness

The source of our forgiveness (for sins *we* committed against *God*)

1. God is the source of our 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).
 - c. God's forgiveness is in/through Jesus Christ - Ephesians 4:32.
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.)

The basis for our forgiveness of others (for sins *they* committed against *us*)

1. A command: Forgive the same way God forgave you.
 - 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: The way Jesus forgave those who killed him.
 - a. "Forgive them because they do not know what they are doing" - Luke 23:34.
 - b. Note: 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 "Forgiveness, Part 3" (things associated with forgiveness).

Things to think about:

- According to the book of Micah, how sinful was the nation of Israel? 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 concepts such as anger and judgment. But in this context, "fear of God" involves an attitude of wholehearted respect and honor. (The opposite - *lack* of fear - would be associated with attitudes such as contempt and disrespect for God.)

Your sin caused Jesus to die. Considering the seriousness of your sin and the judgment you deserve, how should God's willingness to forgive you influence your attitude toward him? (According to the Micah passage, even God's *enemies*, when they see his wonders, will turn to him "in fear" - verse 17. But they will do it with shame for what they have done.)

- 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 of what Jesus' blood did for you. (You may want to read the book of Hebrews, regarding the need for blood.)

In the Old Testament, some (not all) of the sacrifices required blood. (You can read about some of them in the first part of Leviticus.) Two of the purposes for these sacrifices were:

- 1) a temporary "covering" for sin, until Jesus came.
- 2) a means for teaching us about the significance of what Jesus did on the cross.

- In what ways did the Lord forgive us? How important is it for us to follow his example? In the Colossians and Ephesians passages, what other "Christian character traits" are associated with forgiveness? (Some "non-Christian character traits" are also mentioned in the Ephesians passage. These are *incompatible* with forgiveness.) What principles can we learn from Jesus' example of forgiveness on the cross, which would help us as we respond to the wrongs others do to us?
- 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 is this: When Jesus died, *we* were his enemies (Romans 5:10). When he forgave us, he did for *us* (his enemies) the same thing that he commands us to do for *others* (our enemies).

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PART 3 - Forgiveness is associated with...

Our emphasis in this section is on *human* activity (actions or attitudes) that are associated with *God's* forgiveness. As you reflect on these passages, ask yourself the question: Can we be forgiven, if we are unwilling to have these attitudes and actions in our lives?

Forgiveness of people as INDIVIDUALS

1. Repentance - changing the way we think and act - Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3
2. Conversion - turning from darkness to light and from Satan to God - Acts 26:18 (v. 15-18)
3. Confession of sin - 1 John 1:9 (v. 8-10) [This verse focuses on our confession of sins *we* have committed against *God* (though in many respects, *all* sin is 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 - Matthew 6:12, 14-15. [This issue will be examined further in the next section.]

Forgiveness on the NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Humility, prayer, seeking God, turning from sin - 2 Chronicles 7:14 (v. 13-14) [There are many similarities to what people must do on an *individual* level.]

Things to think about:

- Examine the above verses. In what ways are these various concepts (attitudes or characteristics) related to forgiveness? How important are they? Can God's forgiveness be experienced if these other attitudes or characteristics are *absent* from our lives - that is, if we are *not* repentant, *not* trusting Jesus, etc.?
- There is an interaction between God's sovereignty and our responsibility. 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 these passages about 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. Our difficulties in understanding these issues are due to the following:
 - > We are created beings. By nature, our understanding is limited (*not* infinite).
 - > We are sinners. Sin has affected every part of us; it has distorted the way we understand things.

God has given us the Scriptures, so that we can grow in our understanding of these issues. But read Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 1:7. What attitude is a *prerequisite* for having wisdom and knowledge? Until this attitude becomes ours, even the *best* of our wisdom will be superficial.

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PART 4 - How Important Is It for Us to Forgive Others?

(The Relationship Between God's Forgiveness of Us
And Our Forgiveness of Others)

The basic fact: What God does for us will parallel what we do for others

1. If you forgive other people, God will forgive you; if you don't, he won't - Matthew 6:14-15.
2. Further explanation:
 - a. The type of forgiveness we receive ("measured out" to us) will be comparable to the forgiveness we give ("measure out") to others - Luke 6:37 (v. 37-38).
 - b. Illustrated by the parable of the unmerciful servant - Matthew 18:35 (v.23-35).

Forgiveness and prayer

1. The Lord's prayer affirms this fact: Forgive us... *as we also* forgive others - Matthew 6:12 (v. 9-13); Luke 11:4 (v. 2-4).
2. Don't pray until you have forgiven anyone you may hold something against. Then your Father in heaven will be able to forgive you - Mark 11:25.

Some of the "technical details" about our forgiving of others

1. The method: How should we forgive people?
 - a. Follow God's / Jesus' example, as seen previously (in Part 2 of this study).
2. The frequency: How often should we forgive them?
 - a. "77 times" - Matthew 18:21-22 (v. 21-35). (Some interpret this as meaning "70 times 7.")
 - b. "7 times a day" - Luke 17:3-4 (v. 1-4).
 - c. The intent of these passages is: "Keep on doing it."

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

- The interaction between God's sovereignty and human responsibility: In Scripture, these two concepts parallel each other. What *God* does and what *we* do cannot be separated. This fact guarantees that our actions toward others will go along with God's actions toward us.
 - > From *God's* perspective, he saves us for the sake of his own glory and grace, not because of our works or actions. (See Ephesians 2:1-10.) But when he saves us, he also changes our hearts, which results in changed values and actions (Philippians 2:13). Because of this, the person who has a changed life will *want* to learn and do what pleases God!
 - > From the perspective of what *we* see and experience, the attitude we have toward *others* parallels what will happen to *us* at the coming Day of Justice, because *it indicates the condition of our heart*.

- The two greatest commands we must obey have to do with love for God (Matthew 22:37-38) and love for other people (Matthew 22:39 - our "neighbor," which includes our enemies, Luke 10:29-37). 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? 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, begin these changes *now*.)
- The "Lord's Prayer," should be a reminder to you about your need to forgive others. Consider whether or not there is anyone you need to forgive; and if there is, do it. (Also deal with any other sins you may be aware of.)
Only then will your prayer be accompanied by a clean heart and conscience. And you will be able to have *genuine* praise and thanks to God, for what he has done in your life.

Remember: *My* sins against *God* = "BIG"; *their* sins against *me* = "LITTLE."

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PART 5 - Conclusion

What happens to those who are forgiven?

1. They are the recipients of God's blessings - Psalm 32:1 (v. 1-2).
2. This is reaffirmed in the New Testament - 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 of our sins? Do these blessings belong to you? If not, what must you do?
- Have you been forgiven?
 - > If YES, then these verses apply to you.
 - > If NO, then what do you need to do in order to make them apply? (Do it!)

Thinking deeper:

- There may be instances in which the other person does not respond the way we would like.
 - > We may have sinned against someone; but when we ask the person to forgive us, he is unwilling to do so.
 - > Or, someone may have sinned against *us*, and needs to ask forgiveness of us; but for whatever reason, he is unwilling to do so.
(There are many possible reasons for this. He might not care about dealing with his sin; or he may truly believe that he did nothing wrong. But in some cases, we may have misinterpreted his actions and *mistakenly* think that he sinned, when he really didn't.)Regardless of what the other person does, what is *your* obligation?
- 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 people who love *only* those who love them back are no different than an unbeliever - Matthew 5:43-48.)

WHAT ABOUT "FORGIVING ONESELF"?

(Many of the topics learned in previous sections will be applicable here.)

1. 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?

(Some people may think that they have committed the sin of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," and that God won't forgive them; and so they conclude that they shouldn't forgive themselves. Yet this sin is of such a nature that the person who commits it will not consider it a sin. This specific sin does not apply, when examining the issue of "forgiving oneself.")

2. Concerning all other sins (besides "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," which cannot apply to this situation):

- Can anyone commit a sin that is *not* fully known by God? How does he (God) respond to such sins? Does Scripture tell us that we are to follow his example?
- Is there anyone (including ourselves) who *God* is willing to forgive, yet *we* shouldn't forgive?

3. When a person has an "unforgiving" attitude toward himself, it is very likely that the real issue is something other than forgiveness. (What hinders him 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 a person is unwilling to forgive *others*?

Consider this:

- Is there any relationship between *pride* and a person's *unwillingness* to forgive others? to forgive himself?
- Is there any relationship between *humility*, and a person's *willingness* to forgive others? to forgive himself?

4. Are there any "unforgivable" sins that you have committed in the past, and you are still carrying the guilt, like a 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.