

## How Does Forgiveness Affect Our Relationships?

Some Christians believe that you should forgive others of any offense or sin they commit regardless of their attitude towards their own sin. Should other people's sin affect our relationship with them? Is forgiveness required of Christians towards others regardless of the circumstance? Is this what scripture teaches us? Let's consider some of the scriptures about forgiveness to understand more clearly.

How did God treat his people with regard to sin? When his people sinned God said He would shut up heaven so there was no rain, or command locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among his people. (2 Chron. 7:13) But when his people humbled themselves and prayed and sought God and turned from their wicked ways, He said He would hear from heaven, and would forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:14) So God was forgiving, but it was dependant on his people turning to him and turning from sin. This example of God's forgiveness is throughout scripture.

God punished Israel by sending them into captivity, but God promised through his prophet Jeremiah that a new covenant would be made with Israel in which he would "forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more." (Jer. 31:34, NKJV quoted throughout) God is faithful to forgive us when we repent of our sins. God sets us the example of forgiveness when there is repentance. In the end the unrepentant sinner will be destroyed in the lake of fire, the second death. (Rev. 20:14-15; Rev. 21:8)

Did Jesus teach something different from his Father, the God of Israel? He taught his disciples to pray to our Father and ask "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". And he said in Matt. 6:14-15, "if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The example of God with Israel is that he forgave when they repented, but is there different instruction for us. Are we to forgive others even if they take no responsibility for their sins and do not repent?

Peter wondered about this and asked Jesus, "Lord, how often should my brother sin against me, and I forgive him, up to seven times?" Jesus responded to Peter saying, "I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. This interaction does not indicate if we are to forgive regardless of whether repentance is involved, but only that we should always be willing.

Jesus then told the parable of the unforgiving servant where a king went to settle accounts with his servants, and one was unable to pay his huge debt owed. The master commanded that he be sold with his wife, children and all that he possessed so payment could be made. The servant begged for patience and said he would repay all. His master, who was moved with compassion, released him and forgave him all his debt.

But the servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small amount, and he "took him by the throat and said, 'Pay me what you owe!'" The fellow servant begged for patience and said he would pay all. But the servant would not allow it; instead he threw him in prison till he could pay all. The fellow servants told the master what this man had done, and the master said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? His master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My

heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” (Matt.18:21-35)

This parable shows an individual clearly sorry for his debt and willing to pay the penalty yet seeking mercy. Therefore one would conclude that we should show mercy and forgiveness to those who have sinned against us and are repentant, regardless of how many times they may sin against us. When the attitude of an individual is one of repentance and seeking mercy, we should treat others how we would want to be treated, with mercy and forgiveness.

Luke’s account of this teaching is in Luke 17:1-4. He says, “It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come...take heed to your selves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you saying, ‘I repent’, you shall forgive him.”

Within the body of Christ, our forgiveness of others is significant. Jesus said in John 20:22-23, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We are given the same opportunity that Jesus had as it says in Mark 2:10, “that you may know that the son of man has power on earth to forgive sins.” It seems Jesus is saying we also can forgive the sins of others. Perhaps that is why God states so emphatically that we must forgive the sins of those who come to us in repentance, because God forgives when we repent, and we are to become like Him.

What if your brother is unrepentant though? Should you still forgive? Jesus taught in Matt. 18 that if your brother sins against you, first you should go to him alone regarding the offense. If he hears you, you have gained your brother, but if he refuses to hear, you are to go to him with a witness, and if he still refuses to hear you are to take it for the whole congregation to hear. If he still refuses to hear, you are to treat him like a heathen or tax collector. This doesn’t sound like forgiveness, but an action against your brother that separates him to some extent from you. However, take note, this passage is talking about sin, not hurt feelings or people getting offended by someone.

Paul gave the example of the one who was sinning in 1 Cor.5:1-5, and corrected the congregation for putting up with sin. He instructed, “when you are gathered together...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Later in 2 Cor.2:6 he said, “the punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow.” So Paul taught the church that punishment of an unrepentant sinning brother was appropriate, but also at some point forgiveness and comfort. It’s reasonable to presume this man had now repented.

Paul’s further instruction was that they should not keep company with a brother who is “sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.” Those who are outside the church who are sinning in this way you cannot avoid “since then you would need to go out of the world.” (1 Cor.5:10) In other words, sinning people are all around us, and unavoidable, but God is their judge. However, in the church you are to “put away from yourselves the evil person.” (1 Cor. 5:9-13) These examples, again, show repentance of sin is involved in our fellowship with the brethren. Notice the seriousness of offenses Paul lists. This is not about separating over petty offenses or disagreement in doctrine.

It seems forgiveness of someone outside the church is really between that individual and God as He will judge them. However, even with those outside the church, the parable of the unforgiving servant is our example. Are we merciful and forgiving when someone who owes us is seeking our mercy?

There is also the example of Jesus' dying words when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus sought the Father's forgiveness on those who were sinning. Perhaps we should pray the same for those outside the church who sin against us...ask our Father to forgive them. We know that, in due time, all who are repentant will be forgiven because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Paul also says, "Repay no one evil for evil...do not avenge yourselves, but give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay', says the Lord. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:17, 19, 21) And Jesus exhorts, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." (Matt. 5:44) So, while we may not forgive those in the world who sin against us, we are to still treat them with love and leave the rest to God.

John says "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) He also says, "...these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 John 2:1) We always have forgiveness of our sins if we turn to God in repentance. That is as long as we are forgiving our brethren when they repent of their offenses against us. We must forgive to be forgiven. But all scripture shows that forgiveness is dependent upon repentance. The teaching of some Christians that you must forgive others regardless of their attitude toward you and their sin is simply not scriptural nor are you "more righteous" if you do so. How can we be more righteous than God, who requires repentance for forgiveness?