

# Should Christians Forgive?

Recently, there was a terrible case here in Britain of a five-year old boy who was kidnapped and raped by a teenager. Now that is wicked enough, but the teenager had only been released a few days earlier by a judge at his previous trial, for raping a seven-year old boy.

The judge, apparently, had been influenced by the parents of the seven year old who claimed to be Christians, who had forgiven the rapist and asked that their forgiveness be taken into account. They had told the judge: “We are committed Christians and forgive so we hope that the court will adopt a corrective rather than a punitive approach to sentencing.” The resulting tragedy was caused by a misunderstanding of a Christian’s responsibility to forgive, and it is quite common to hear such pronouncements of “forgiveness” after court hearings – even involving murder!

So, what is a Christian’s responsibility, when we are offended against? Should we always forgive? Does our forgiveness take away the penalty for sin? Was the judge right to take their ‘forgiveness’ into account? Lets see what the Bible has to say!

The problem is that many who claim to be Christians do not spend enough time with their noses in the Bible! Isaiah 28:9-10, “Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept. Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little.”

This is talking about serious Bible study – deep contemplative research into the whole Bible, not just a passing acquaintance with some New Testament scriptures, for then, we may go seriously astray. So, lets see how such mistakes are made!

Mark 11:25 “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.”

At first superficial glance that seems quite clear. There are many similar scriptures in the New Testament which tell us we must forgive, if we hope to be forgiven –eg Ephesians 4:32, “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

But it is not quite as simple as that, because to fully understand any biblical subject we need to take all the relevant scriptures into account.

There is another principle related to forgiveness, which Jesus expounded in Matthew 5:23-24.

“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” The offender plainly has the responsibility to seek reconciliation with the one he has offended!

We see this illustrated by Christ in Matthew 18. In verse 21 the Apostle Peter came to Jesus with a question. “Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” The answer was verse 22, “Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

Once again, taken out of context that seems explicit, but, just a few verses earlier, Jesus had explained - verses 15-17, “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” That hardly sounds like forgiveness !

The forgiveness referred to in verses 21-22 must be sanctioned and permitted by the *successful conclusion* of the biblical process of reconciliation in verses 15-17.

That is, the offender must recognize his fault, admit his error, and repent. Without that repentance he remains personally un-forgiven by the one he has offended, who is correct to distance himself from the offender.

Jesus goes on to illustrate our need to have mercy if we wish to receive mercy, in the parable which directly follows – verses 23-35.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘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?’ And 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.”

Notice here that both servants do recognize and accept their fault, before asking for mercy – their forgiveness would not come without repentance – (verses 26, 29).

Jesus makes this requirement very clear in Luke 17: 3-4. This statement cannot be clearer and reveals the mistake those parents made after the trial: “Take heed to yourselves. 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 in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.”

Christ tells both parties to attempt reconciliation so that the offender can be rebuked and given his chance to repent. With sincere repentance, we are to forgive, so that bitterness and resentment can be removed. Such emotions are a curse, which can consume our health, as the Bible reveals elsewhere.

Human forgiveness then, is to be strictly analogous, or equal to our forgiveness by God, as the Lord’s Prayer tells us in Matthew 6:12. “And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.”

We well know that we need to repent before God will forgive us. Acts 2:38, “Then Peter said to them, “**Repent**, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

So we see that in like manner our debtors – those who sin against us, must repent before we can forgive them. Confusion and guilt arise when those who do not understand this, demand that Christians *do what God does not do* – pardon everyone for everything!

An article in the Daily Telegraph some time ago illustrates this. It carried the headline : “Vicar Who Can’t Forgive Steps Down from Pulpit”. The vicar’s daughter, Jenny, was killed by Mohammed Sidique Khan in the London Bombings that left 50 people dead. He said, “Forgiving another human being for violating your child is almost beyond human capabilities. It is very difficult for me to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist and lead people in words of peace and reconciliation and forgiveness when I feel very far from that myself.”

This vicar did not recognize that reconciliation was impossible because the murderous bomber never repented. The Bible does not demand his forgiveness of the bomber.

God does not forgive everyone. He forgives just a special few who have accepted the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf, having shown God by their actions that they regret their sin, and have turned from doing it, and claimed forgiveness in Jesus Christ’s name. The majority of mankind remains un-forgiven.

Psalm 86:5. “For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.” Like God we should be full of mercy to those who call upon us. But what of the offender refuses to repent? Its straightforward if a brother asks our forgiveness, but what about that bomber?

The word ‘charity’ enters here. We can learn something of the attitude we should have then, from Romans 9:9-13. “For this is the word of promise: “At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

Actually, God does not dwell in time as we do. He knew how the nation descended from Esau would behave in the future – they would retain the faults of Esau’s character. The word ‘hated’ here is the Greek word ‘miseo’ which means that God preferred one over another – He would love Esau less and bestow fewer blessings on him in comparison to Jacob and his descendents, the nations of Israel, because of Jacob’s righteous character. That gives us a good clue as to how we should behave towards the unrepentant offender. Like God towards Esau, we are not bound to be as free or familiar as we would be if he repented. Just like God sends rain upon both the just and the unjust we must still love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44 “But I say to you, 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.”) ... by refusing to hate them, seek revenge against them or despise them, though like God, we may not love them like the righteous. Remember Matthew 18:17.

These are Jesus Christ’s words. As we know, Christ loves all men, including the heathen and tried to reach even the publicans with the gospel. We strive to convert all men to Christ by our efforts, but murderers and bombers forfeit our friendship and familiarity. By cooling our relationship with our debtors we give them an opportunity to recognize their need to repent of their wrong-doing, which is in itself an act of love.

Romans 12:18-20 adds extra guidance - “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “ If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”

With the help of God’s Holy Spirit we can put aside our anger and leave it to God to dispense justice. He has given over to the State the responsibility to punish the wicked according to the law: Romans 13: 1-4. “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” Even if the conditions are fulfilled for us to forgive, the State must still provide the penalty for sin. God alone knows if the sinner was truly repentant – and only He can truly finally remit sin. Isaiah 43:25, “I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.”

If we individuals had the ability to forgive sin willy- nilly, justice would suffer, and sin would triumph, with no visible penalty. That was what caused the second rape by the teenager that the judge let go free. We have learned though, that as we seek perfection, we must allow love and mercy to overcome our baser human nature. Galatians 5:22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.”

In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-24, the father loved his foolish son even before he knew he was repentant, though that son never regained equality with his brother. Verses 30-31, “But as soon as

this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’  
“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and *all* that I have is yours.”

So we see that there is a distinction between forgiveness and the relinquishing of resentment. The father’s love enabled him to overcome bitterness and anger at his son’s gross foolishness, and love can help us remove these negative emotions even in the face of un-repentance. Colossians 3:13-14, “bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”

We have seen that God forgives the repentant few, but in the sense of relinquishing resentment He has mercy towards all. God never feels bitterness or ill will against anyone. Love can conquer all – Luke 23:34,36, “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’” And they divided His garments and cast lots. 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine.” Many who called for Christ’s crucifixion later recognized their sin. Acts 2:36-37, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” and also verse 41, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” They repented and were forgiven, and the rest will need to repent finally before their sin is remitted.

However, in horrific cases such as that which I mentioned at the start, it was foolish for the father to say he and his wife had forgiven, without any evidence of remorse or repentance, and his request to the Judge should have been ignored, for it brought about the rape of another child. The judge should not have been influenced to leniency and should have handed out the punitive prison sentence the law permits. He failed in his duty.

God says that sin should be rebuked. 1 Timothy 5:20, “Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.” Of course this here refers to God’s ministers, but even some converted Christians take offence at that. Maybe they are unaware of this instruction.

We can learn more about this from the case of incest in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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.”

The man was put out by the whole church, and the story carries on in 2 Corinthians 2:5-10.

“But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with *too much sorrow*. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ.” The church was to forgive him, that is, to restore him to fellowship, for the man had repented (verse 7). That forgiveness did not remit the guilt or offence against God however, for that judgment remains in God’s hands to finally decide.

In conclusion then, we have seen that there are in the Bible laid down *conditions* for forgiveness, and these can only be achieved through the acceptance of the sacrifice of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and sincere heart-felt repentance, which God alone can judge. We however, can only believe, when an offender claims to be repentant, and should forgive. Without any sign of repentance we cannot forgive and reconciliation is not possible, but we can still extend love and mercy with the help of God’s Holy Spirit.

Thankfully, for us, with those conditions fulfilled, we can be truly forgiven!

Psalm 103: 10-12 “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”