Understanding the Six Types of Forgiveness
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“Forgiveness,” C. S. Lewis once observed, “is a beautiful word, until you have something to forgive.”

Reading C. S. Lewis quote reminds me a story about a Sunday school teacher. In the middle of the lesson one Sunday, two boys in the back of the room were arguing. The teacher stopped the class and asked what the problem was. One of the boys replied that on the way to Sunday school the other had hit him.

This is a great opportunity to teach them about forgiveness, the teacher thought. He called the two boys to the front of the class and emphasized how much God wants us to forgive each other. Then the teacher asked the all-important question.

“Brian, will you forgive Luke?”

“Sure,” Brian said. He then hauled off and punched Luke in the stomach.

“Wait a minute,” the teacher yelled, grabbing Brian by the arm. “I asked you to forgive Luke, not hit him.”

“I will forgive him,” Brian protested, “but I had to get even with him first.”

As C. S. Lewis said — forgiveness is a beautiful word until…

SCRIPTURES MOST OFTEN QUOTED ON FORGIVENESS

- Luke 17:3-4 (3) “Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. (4) And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.” (NASB)

- Matthew 18:21-35 (21) Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (22) Jesus *said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (23) “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. (24) “When he had begun to settle {them,} one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. (25) “But since he did not have {the means} to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. (26) "So the slave fell {to the ground} and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' (27) "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.
"But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and {began} to choke {him,} saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'  (29) "So his fellow slave fell {to the ground} and {began} to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'  (30) "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.  (31) "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.  (32) "Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.  (33) 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'"  

- Ephesians 4:32: Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

- Colossians 3:13-14  (13) bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.  (14) Beyond all these things {put on} love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

- Matthew 6:14: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

- Matthew 9:1-8:  (1) Getting into a boat, Jesus crossed over {the sea} and came to His own city.  (2) And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven."  (3) And some of the scribes said to themselves, "This {fellow} blasphemes."  (4) And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?  (5) "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk'?  (6) "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--then He *said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home."  (7) And he got up and went home.  (8) But when the crowds saw {this,} they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

- Mark 11:25: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.

- Luke 6:37: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned."
• Luke 11:4: 'And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'

• John 20:23: "If you forgive the sins of any, {their sins} have been forgiven them; if you retain the {sins} of any, they have been retained."

• Luke 23:34: But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

**BIBLE VERSUS NEEDED IN UNDERSTANDING FORGIVENESS:**

• 1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

• 1 John 2:1: My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

**SUPPOSED CONTRADICTIONS**

God’s forgiveness of believers as taught in 1 John 1:9 is **conditional.** It is dependent upon confession of sins. In contrast, and in apparent contradiction, in 1 John 2:1 we have an Advocate, Jesus Christ, who intercedes for us unconditionally, every time we sin, providing judicial forgiveness that is **unconditional.**

By studying this apparent contradiction and the biblical context, we discover that God grants two kinds of forgiveness to believers: repetitive judicial forgiveness, and repetitive fellowship forgiveness (**dependent upon confession of sins**).

**CONDITIONAL VERSUS UNCONDITIONAL**

Jesus says, “Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). Notice that the forgiveness in this verse is **conditional**—you are to grant forgiveness to those who offend you if and when they repent.

In contrast (and in apparent contradiction), in Mark 11:25 believers are to forgive unconditionally. Jesus says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions” (Mark 11:25 NASB). Or, in modern English, “When you are praying, and you remember that you are angry with another person about something, then forgive that person. Forgive them so that your Father in heaven will also forgive your sins.” (Mark 11:25, ERV).
Just as in the biblical teaching of God’s forgiveness of believers, in the teaching of forgiveness of others we see apparent contradictions. In one scripture passage, our forgiveness is to be conditional (dependent upon repentance by our offender), and in another passage our forgiveness is to be unconditional (repentance by the one who has offended us is not required).

What a striking parallel! Could it be that there are two kinds of forgiveness that believers grant? Could it be that these two kinds of forgiveness we can grant are similar to the two kinds of forgiveness that God grants us after we have been justified?”

We have seen that different conditions (conditional and unconditional) distinguish the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 from that of Luke 17:3. But we can also find other differences between these two teachings on forgiveness.

**DIFFERENT COMMUNICATIONS, DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS**

In Mark 11:24, we see that the subject is prayer. Then in Mark 11:25, Jesus continues to teach about prayer. We notice that the forgiving of Mark 11:25 is accomplished while praying, and we can assume that it is accomplished by praying. In contrast, instead of being accomplished through prayer, the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 is accomplished by speaking to the offender—by responding to his repentance with the words, “Yes, I forgive you.”

Considering again the difference in the means of communication (prayer to God versus words spoken to an offender), the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is a vertical transaction—between the offended person and God, and the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 is a horizontal transaction—between the offender and the one he offended.

**OFFENDER’S PRESENCE NOT REQUIRED**

Further, in Mark 11:25, where is the offender? And where is the repentance in Mark 11:25 that would make the offender eligible for the forgiveness of Luke 17:3? Neither the presence nor the repentance of the offender is required for the forgiveness of Mark 11:25. Instead, a believer is praying, perhaps with no one near him. The offender may be far away, and he may be unrepentant. But Jesus says, “Forgive.” The forgiveness of Mark 11:25 must be different from the forgiveness of Luke 17:3.

**OFFENDER NOT FORGIVEN**

If you will read again the two translations of Mark 11:25 that were given above, neither one says “forgive him.” This is because the word “him” is not in the Greek New Testament. Since we are instructed to “pray and release” (literal translation),
instead of being told to “pray and release him,” it seems logical to believe that the omission of him by the Holy Spirit is to help us see that the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is a different kind of forgiveness than the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 in which the offender himself is forgiven.

EXAMINING THE DIFFERENCES

Summarizing the arguments presented above, the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is different from the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 because:

- The conditions are different—unconditional forgiveness versus conditional forgiveness (dependent upon repentance).

- The communications are different—prayer to God versus words spoken to the offender.

- The direction of the release is different—vertical release to God versus horizontal release granted to the offender.

- Neither the presence nor the repentance of the offender is required for the forgiveness of Mark 11:25.

- Literally translated, Mark 11:25 says “forgive,” not “forgive him.”

Thus, Mark 11:25 teaches a kind of forgiveness in which we must, if we want to be obedient to God, pray and unconditionally forgive (even if the offender never repents) whenever we have anything against anyone. Because this kind of forgiveness is upward in direction, from man to God, we call it vertical forgiveness.

TO FORGIVE MEANS TO RELEASE

If, in obedience to Jesus, I pray and forgive when the offender is neither in my presence nor repentant, what kind of forgiveness is this? Well, to forgive means “to release” someone from something or “to let off.” Since to forgive has the basic meaning to release or to let off, doesn’t it seem logical that, in this forgiveness that is accomplished through prayer, we are releasing something or someone to God?

RELEASE THE PENALTY OF THE OFFENSE

But in vertical forgiveness, what are we releasing? Since Mark 11:25 says “forgive” rather than “forgive him,” could it be that Mark 11:25 teaches unconditional forgiveness of the penalty of the offense and Luke 17:3 teaches conditional forgiveness of the offender? To gain an understanding of vertical forgiveness, first we must consider the moral basis for this kind of forgiveness.
FORGIVE? OR GET EVEN?

An offended person might feel as if he has the “right” to “get even” with an offender, and he might even erroneously think that he has such a right. However, the Scriptures teach that it is God’s prerogative—not man's—to judge sin and to punish the wicked, because all sin is against God.

As David said, “Against You, You only, have I sinned ... “ (Ps. 51:4). And as we read in Romans, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

Have you ever thought about what it really means to get even with someone who has offended you? The one who has offended us is guilty before God. If you get even with your offender, then you are guilty, too. Therefore, getting even means becoming equally guilty.

A CONTRACT WITH GOD

Since God is the one who has the right to judge sin and to punish the wicked, and since He has forgiven our sins, it is reasonable for God to say, “I am the one who has the right to judge sin, and I am the one who will judge righteously. Release to Me whatever penalty you might want to inflict on the one who has offended you.”

Thus, the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is an act of obedience, accomplished through prayer, in which a believer unconditionally releases to God his (the offended believer’s) supposed right to get even. It is as if a believer were thinking that he would like to get even with someone who had offended him. Then, knowing that he does not have a right to get even, (in obedience to the teaching of Mark 11:25) he prays and unconditionally releases his supposed right to get even.

But how can an offended believer pray and release something to God that already belongs to Him? No one can forgive sins but God. The right to judge, to punish, and to judicially forgive all belong to God.

When in obedience to Mark 11:25 an offended believer prays and releases his supposed right to get even, he is acknowledging that it is God, not himself, who has the right to judge, punish, and judicially forgive. He is releasing to God the penalty of the offense that he (the offended believer) might want to inflict on the offender. He is pledging that he will not pursue vindictiveness.

Vertical forgiveness is an act of the will—a commitment or a binding verbal contract—made through prayer, in which the offended believer commits himself
to avoid vindictiveness in action or word, or even in wishful thought. Having disarmed himself through the act of vertical forgiveness, he can treat the offender only in ways that are consistent with agape love.

The offended believer, seeking to please God and show God that he loves Him, prays and releases (to God) his supposed right to get even. This means that the offended believer can henceforth treat the offender only in ways that are in accordance with agape love.

**A CONTRACT BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS**

But what about the forgiveness of Luke 17:3? “Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). This kind of forgiveness has to be different from the vertical forgiveness of Mark 11:25, because the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is unconditional, whereas the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 is conditional. The forgiveness of Luke 17:3 is dependent upon the offender’s repentance.

After a believer has prayed and unconditionally released the penalty of his offender’s offense to God, in what sense does the offender need the conditional forgiveness of Luke 17:3? What is left to forgive? What does this forgiveness accomplish?

Since vertical forgiveness releases the offender from the penalty that the offender might want to inflict, the conditional forgiveness of Luke 17:3 must pertain in some way or other to release from alienation of the offender from the one he offended.

To distinguish the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 (in which the offender is to be forgiven if and when he repents) from vertical forgiveness (in which believers unconditionally release to God their supposed right to get even), we call the forgiveness of Luke 17:3 *horizontal forgiveness*. This terminology reflects the fact that both the repentance and the granting of forgiveness are the work of humans.

**LIMITATIONS OF HORIZONTAL FORGIVENESS**

Since the purpose of horizontal forgiveness is to release an offender from alienation caused by his offense, it is logical that granting horizontal forgiveness to a repentant offender does not necessarily establish fellowship where none existed prior to the offense. Granting horizontal forgiveness to a repentant car thief does not necessarily make him my friend.

Less apparent is the fact that granting horizontal forgiveness to a repentant offender does not always, and sometimes cannot, reestablish fellowship to the level that existed prior to his offense. Some offenses damage relationships so
seriously that it is impossible to reestablish fellowship to the degree that existed prior to the offense.

**STRIKING PARALLELS**

Notice the striking parallel between God's forgiveness of believers and man's forgiveness of others. God, in His gracious provision for continuing positional righteousness, releases (forgives) believers from the penalty of their sins unconditionally as Jesus pleads for sinning believers on the basis of His shed blood (Heb. 7:24-25; 10:12,14; 1 John 2:1). In the same way that God forgives us unconditionally, time after time and day after day, God requires that we pray and release to Him **unconditionally**, time after time and day after day, our supposed right to get even (Mark 11:25).

Notice another striking parallel. As believers who have been justified, we are restored to fellowship with God conditionally. We are restored to fellowship with God conditionally. We are restored to fellowship with Him **when** we confess our sins (1 John 1:9). In like manner, Luke 17:3 teaches that we are to grant horizontal forgiveness **conditionally** to those who offend us. We are to release them from the alienation that their offenses caused **when** they repent.

**OFFENDER NOT FORGIVEN**

The problem disappears if the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 is correctly understood. In Mark 11:25, as a volitional act of prayer, a believer unconditionally releases (to God) his supposed right to get even. Or stated another way, he releases to God the penalty that he might want to inflict on the offender. Therefore, the forgiveness of Mark 11:25 has nothing to do with the offender (**except as it keeps the offended person's fist out of the offender's face**). Instead, it is a verbal contract that the offended believer makes with God.

**UNFORGIVEN UNTIL HE REPENTS**

Thus it becomes evident that the offender remains unforgiven until he repents (Luke 17:3). After praying and unconditionally releasing his supposed right to get even, the offended believer can say anything or do anything that is good for the offender. He can take any action to bring the offender to repentance, as long as it is in accordance with agape love.

**DON'T DEMAND PROOF**

Luke 17:4 shouts loudly that the offender's **past** failures **cannot** be used as a basis for refusing to grant horizontal forgiveness. Just as insistently, this verse demands that the offended person **must not** make the offender prove, by his performance over a period of time, that he is really repentant.
But if we shouldn’t judge the offender’s alleged repentance on the basis of his past performance, and if we shouldn’t withhold granting horizontal forgiveness until the offender can prove that he is really repentant, must we grant horizontal forgiveness on the basis of mere physical movement toward us together with alleged repentance?

In Luke 17:4, the Greek word translated “turn” in some versions (“return” in other versions) can be used to convey a variety of meanings, from a mere physical turning to a real change of heart (repentance). The question is: Which meaning does it have here?

It would be easier to support an argument that “turning” refers to nothing more than physical movement—a physical returning for the purpose of saying that he repents. For the sake of argument, let's take the “easier to prove” interpretation. Let's assume that “turn to you” (or “return to you”) refers to a physical returning of the offender.

If an offender “turns to you” (“returns to you”) saying that he repents, his physical action of returning to you for the purpose of alleging repentance implies a supposed repentance, and his words verbally express the same thing. Also notice that in Luke 17:3 the subject is repentance and forgiveness, and then in 17:4 a “what if” situation is presented.

Therefore, to “turn” in Luke 17:4 must imply supposed repentance because: (1) the physical act of his returning is for the purpose of alleging repentance; (2) in the context, Luke 17:3, the subject is repentance; and (3) the “what if” situation of Luke 17:4 continues the discussion of repentance.

**DON’T FORGET RESTITUTION**

Zacchaeus said to Jesus, “If I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold” (Luke 19:8). “Take heed” that your granting of horizontal forgiveness is in the best (spiritual) interests of the offender. If an offender is really repentant, he will be willing to make restitution.

Loving an offender who has financially defrauded you may include requiring a plan for repayment (restitution) before granting horizontal forgiveness. To grant horizontal forgiveness to an offender who is not willing to make restitution may release the pressure that God wants to keep on him so that he will really repent. Determine whether or not restitution is appropriate before you grant horizontal forgiveness.

The power of the forgiveness of sins is in Jesus’ death on the cross. But this power is effective only for those who place their trust in His death on the cross by receiving Him as their Lord and Savior (John 1:12; Mark 6:12; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:37-38; 16:31).
Let’s consider the logic of God’s plan for releasing (freeing) sinners from the penalty of sins:

- God declares that all have sinned (Romans 3:23).
- God also declares that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).
- By context, the death in Romans 6:23 is spiritual death—eternal separation from God.
- Therefore, since all are sinners, and the wages of sin is death, all must die spiritually—all must be separated from God for eternity.
- That is, all must die spiritually (be eternally separated from God) unless a substitute can be found who can die for all (1 Peter 3:18).

Thus, forgiveness of sins is dependent upon having someone die for the sins of humanity. What are the requirements for this person? He must be sinless, or he would have to die for his own sins. In addition, this person must have sufficient value to pay for the sins of all humanity. Therefore, this someone must be infinite in value. This someone must be God. However, since God has life within Himself and cannot die, this person must also be man—a sinless man.

Jesus is God, but He also became the God-man as He took upon Himself a human body at the incarnation (John 1:1, 14; 10:30; Philippians 2:6-8). Because Jesus—God the Son—is infinite in value, took upon Himself a human body, and lived a sinless life on earth, He was able to die for all. And He did (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). The idea of “for” is “in the place of.” He who was sinless died on the cross, our sins being placed on Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

**FIVE MYTHS ABOUT FORGIVENESS**

1. **The Myth of Forgive and Forget.**

A huge misunderstanding that fuels many other myths about forgiveness is the notion that we are to “forgive and forget.” The concept comes from two major passages of Scripture: Psalm 25 and Jeremiah 31. In Psalm 25:6-7, the psalmist asks God not to remember the sins of his youth but instead to remember His mercy and love. In Jeremiah 31:34, God says,

“I will forgive their wickedness and will re-member their, sins no more.”

Christians are told to be like God, who does not remember sin but forgives wickedness.

This would be a great principle to follow were it not for one fact: God does remember sin. We are told that one day we will all appear before God and receive our rewards based on “the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (see 2 Cor. 5:10). God remembers sin and righteousness, and He uses the data to determine our due.
When the writers of Scripture say God has taken away our sins “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12) God will “hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19), also “Oh what a joy for those whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight” (Psalms 32:1), they are using metaphors, not making statements of fact about God’s loss of memory. A metaphor is like an impressionistic painting. It is overstated and dramatic, full of life, but not intended to be taken as a precise, literal representation of the scene painted.

Forgiveness does not require God to forget our actions. Romans 4:7-8 (which quotes Psalms 32:1-2) has helped me understand God’s forgiveness and forgetting more clearly: “Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. Yes, what joy for those whose sin is no longer counted against them by the Lord (Jesus).” Our sin has been nailed to the cross of Jesus. When we receive God’s forgiveness, we no longer have to fear the eternal consequences of our sin. In effect God casts our sin into the depths of the sea … and then posts a sign that says ‘No Fishing.’

When we try to forget the wrongs we have suffered, we lose our perspective on our personal history. In many cases, we are trying to create a less distressing and disappointing past. Because we are terrified that we cannot face the past without being overwhelmed by pain, we never taste the wonder of God’s forgiveness — both of our own sin and of the sins of those who have harmed us.

The effort to erase the past fuels a spirit of independence and denial. I spoke to one man who seemed enormously proud of the fact that he had risen above his alcoholic father and promiscuous mother. I asked him if he ever felt overwhelmed by the sadness of his family history. He responded, “I’ve forgiven them. I don’t look behind me. I just press on like Paul to the goal of godliness.”

For him, forgiveness meant cutting his losses, ignoring the pain of the past, and keeping busy enough to outpace the sadness. Yet this kind of detachment dulls the senses and distorts perspective. His zeal to forget blinded him to the baggage he carried from the past and strengthened his determination to remain emotionally distant, rigid, and dogmatic. His family paid a terrible price for his “forgetting.”

2. The Myth of Releasing Anger.

For most believers, the proof of forgiveness is the absence of anger. It is assumed that if you still feel a stab of betrayal when you see the friend who told lies about you, then you haven’t forgiven him. If you still seethe when you remember how someone used you for his own wicked pleasure, then you haven’t forgiven him. The proof, so it seems, is in the emotional pudding — strong emotions are evidence that you have failed to forgive.
Many attempt to put their injuries behind them through a dramatic, climactic, once-and-for-all deliverance from anger. They assume that forgiving involves a sudden, marked change from being filled with bitterness and hatred to feeling untroubled peace. Those who hold this view refer to forgiveness as a finished event (“It took years before I forgave my father”) rather than an ongoing work of the Spirit of God.

Some people do experience one climactic moment when a transition from bitterness to forgiveness takes place. The problem comes when they assume that the struggle to forgive is then over and the tumultuous feelings resolved.

It is naïve to believe that forgiving another, whether for a single failure or for a lifetime of harm, is ever entirely finished. In truth, the more fully we face the harm we have suffered, the more deeply -we must forgive. Forgiving another is an ongoing process, rather -than a once-and-for-all event.

The “once forgiven, always forgiven” approach often leads to enormous pressure to keep bad feelings at bay. One woman told me that she held a grudge against her husband for nearly a year after she discovered he was having an affair. During an emotional church service, she responded to the pastor’s invitation to come forward and leave any anger or bitterness at the altar. In a moment of cleansing absolution, she poured her heart out before the Lord, asking for forgiveness for her hardened heart. She wept. She felt released.

A week later, she told me that she no longer felt angry with her husband. Nor did she experience pangs of hurt when he approached her sexually. I rejoiced with her, but I felt a tinge of doubt when she claimed to be entirely free of anger. Sure enough, several weeks after the release of her bitterness, she saw her husband talking to another woman at church. The woman stood close to him and stroked his arm with an intimate familiarity. The wife was furious, but she handled her anger by chastising herself for being so suspicious. She questioned how she could forgive and then succumb to anger so quickly. “What have I failed to do?” she asked.

Are feelings of anger or hurt contrary to forgiveness? Listen to the heart of God: “Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him” (Jer. 31:20).

Sin hurts God, and it draws a passionate response from Him. God speaks of His hurt and anger over the sin of His children in deeply personal terms. Our natural response to deep personal pain may be to deaden our hearts to the sorrow. God’s way is different. God says He will remember the one who hurt Him, no matter how deep the anguish.

God is active in His expression of holy anger. Hurt and anger are not the final
proof of a lack of forgiveness. In fact, an absence of strong feelings implies a lack of the heart’s involvement.

When bitterness is released, there seems to be a propensity to toss holy anger out with it. True, anger can be full of sinful demands. But anger can also be a loving response to someone who has violated the beauty of God’s glory and the humanness of others. Anger can reflect -a passion that desires to destroy the cancerous arrogance that will eventually sap beauty and life from the offender’s soul.

If we forsake holy anger — the passionate desire to destroy that which compromises what God intended — we are apt to detach ourselves from the battle on the grounds that we are exhibiting an unforgiving spirit. We will be less likely to deal with the “plank” in our own eyes or “the speck of sawdust” in the eye of the one who hurt us (Matt. 7:3).

We must retain a zeal for righteousness and a hatred for sin while we live in a world that tears at our integrity and wearies the strongest of pilgrims.

3. The Myth of Not Desiring Revenge.

Most people assume that revenge is bad, that the desire for revenge is a base, primitive emotion that has no place in Christian society.

Unfortunately, we are all apt to dress the concept of forgiveness in garments that are too refined and delicate to handle the battle of life. Many Christians view the desire for revenge as incompatible with love and forgiveness. Revenge seems to come from an ugly, bitter heart. But is that necessarily the case?

Revenge involves a desire for justice. It is the intense wish to see ugliness destroyed, wrongs righted, and God’s glory restored. Anyone who strays outside the parameters of love and acts to destroy God’s order is a weed that might diminish the beauty or destroy the fruitfulness of His “garden.” Consequently, vengeance is merely the pulling of the weed to keep the garden lovely and fruitful. A commitment to God’s glory is the heart of true biblical revenge.

A true and deep hunger for vengeance energizes our commitment to destroy sin — both in ourselves and in others. Godly vengeance is not vindictive punishment taken out of season; it is energized love that does good in order to overcome evil.

Lewis Smedes says it well:

“You find freedom to forgive when you let yourself feel the pain you want to forgive them for... There is no real forgiving unless there is first relentless exposure and honest judgment. When we forgive evil we do not excuse it, we do not tolerate it, we do not smother it.
We look the evil full in the face, call it what it is, let its horror
shock and stun and enrage us and only then do we forgive it.”  

Though we are not to seek vengeance on our own, we can joyfully anticipate the
Day of the Lord, when vengeance will be righteously unleashed. We will look at
specific ways of conquering evil without seeking revenge in the steps of
forgiveness.

4. The Myth of Excusing the Wrong.

Forgiveness is not excusing or trivializing the wrong.  Forgiveness has the power
to free the one who was wronged from the pain, anger, and hate that results from
the wrong.  Hurts I believe are really bitter attitudes kept alive by our
unwillingness to forgive from the heart.  For someone to say, “I’m hurt” is really to
say, “I’m bitter and unforgiving!”  Until our hearts are purified through accepting
responsibility for our sin and/or sinful reactions, and through forgiving those who
hurt us, our motives will be impure, coloring everything we do, and the choices
we make.


Have you heard this before?  “What kind of Christian are you?  I thought
you were supposed to forgive!  I’m sorry for what I did, but you don’t
seem to be very forgiving.”

Many people believe that the person with the forgiving heart turns the other
cheek. He accepts emotional and even physical harm without complaint or
confrontation. This view is often encouraged by manipulative people, who take
great delight in using this grave misunderstanding of forgiveness to shame,
attack, and control the naïve.

This approach to forgiveness assumes that the offender will ultimately be won
over by unconditional love, which is defined as a patient, non-demanding
acceptance of the other. It does not hold the other accountable for his behavior.
The argument is offered that we are to carry the load one more mile, and give up
not only our shirts but offer our coats as well.

We are to “turn the other cheek,” but radical sacrifice is not the same as fear-
based service offered to avoid guilt or attack. Forgiving does involve costly
sacrifice, but it is not a weak, look-the-other-way pretense that all is well.
Forgiveness involves a courageous commitment to “overcome evil with good”
(Rom. 12:2 1). And the good that is done is an assault against the inner cancer of
arrogance and independence that, left unchecked, will eat away at the offender’s
soul.

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1 Smedes, Lewis, “Forgive and Forget” (Harper San Francisco, 1984) p. 36
Overlooking harm in order to achieve a sentimental but non-substantive

Let me again for a moment outline the six kinds of forgiveness in Scripture:

SIX KINDS OF FORGIVENESS

- **Initial Judicial Forgiveness**: In response to saving faith, God releases each trusting sinner from the *penalty* of all sins he has committed *up to* the moment of his saving faith and justification *(a one-time occurrence for each believer)*. (Romans 4:5; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

- **Initial Fellowship Forgiveness**: In response to saving faith, God *also* releases each trusting sinner from *alienation of fellowship* caused by sins he has committed *up to* the moment of his saving faith and justification. (Colossians 1:20-22; 1 John 1:3b; Hebrews 4:16).

- **Repetitive Judicial Forgiveness**: God unconditionally releases *(dependent only on His faithfulness)* each believer from the *penalty* of each sin he commits *after* the moment of his saving faith and justification *(upon the occasion of each sin)*. (Hebrews 10:12, 14; 1 John 2:1; Hebrews 7:24, 25).

- **Repetitive Fellowship Forgiveness**: God releases each believer from alienation of fellowship caused by sins he commits after his saving faith and justification, in response to his obedience in both confession of his personal sins and in using vertical forgiveness *(unconditionally releasing to God the penalty of each offense of another against himself)*. (1 John 1:9).

In addition to the four kinds of forgiveness that God grants, the Scriptures teach two more kinds of forgiveness. Believers are to obey God by using both kinds:

- **Vertical Forgiveness**: God commands each believer to pray and unconditionally release to Him the *penalty* of each offense of another person *(believer or unbeliever)* against him *(the offended believer)* whenever he is offended by *anyone* *(even if the offender never repents)*. Vertical forgiveness is for the good of the one who has been offended—it *releases him* from pain, anger, or resentment caused by the offense. Vertical forgiveness is God-given power that enables the believer to free himself from the offense of the offender. (Matthew 6:14-15; Mark 11:25; Matthew 18:34-35; Ephesians 4:31-32).

- Vertical Example: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. (Mark 11:25)."
**Horizontal Forgiveness:** In response to repentance by an offender (unless present performance, such as refusal to make restitution, denies the reality of his repentance), God commands the offended person to forgive. That is, he is to release the offense to his offender, thereby also releasing the offender from alienation caused by his offense. Horizontal forgiveness is primarily for the good of the offender. It helps him as he obeys God, doing what he can to get right with the one he has offended. It helps release the offender from the burden of his offense as he tries to get right with both God and man. (Luke 17:3-4).

Horizontal example: Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

In Matthew 18, Jesus discusses two types of offenses: personal offenses and corporate offenses. In that chapter Peter asks, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus answers Peter’s question with the parable about the unforgiving slave, illustrating the unlimited, unilateral, and unconditional nature of forgiveness on the personal level.

But how are we to respond to the sinning church member (corporate level) whose lifestyle is the talk of the community? In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus discusses a procedure for restoring those who have fallen into sin – a procedure that demands repentance.

While I can forgive a person who never admits that he has hurt me, I probably can never be reconciled with him. Why? Relationships are built on common ground.

The prophet Amos asked the question, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). Obviously, it’s possible to maintain relationships with people who disagree with us on some issues. You may like Mexican food while your friend prefers Italian. In many churches premillenarians and amillenarians coexist peacefully, along with the majority who has no idea what those words mean. Yet, on important issues, there must be common agreement for a relationship to thrive, and there’s no more important issue than how another person treats us. If we feel we’ve been severely wronged, and the other party maintains innocence, then there’s a rupture in the relationship.

That truth applies also to our relationship with God. Failure to acknowledge our sin, even as Christians, breaks our relationship with our heavenly Father. In fact, I’m that very relationship Amos had in mind when he wrote, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” The prophet was asking the Israelites a rhetorical question: How can you expect God’s blessing when you won’t admit your sin? Confession of our sin is necessary to maintain our relationship with God (1 John 1:9).
FORGIVENESS: THE WEAPON OF WISDOM

What about the one who committed the wrong? What are his or her responsibilities, if any? Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a German theologian who was imprisoned in a Nazi death camp for his opposition to Hitler’s regime) gave us the phrase “cheap grace.” “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” 2

Dr. Reverend Richard Lord, a pastor from Ft. Worth, Texas, has worked extensively with crime victims and issues of forgiveness and recovery, writes: Repentance involves four aspects which guard against cheap grace: remorse, repentance, restitution, and regeneration.3

- Remorse—acknowledges that harm has been done: “I’m sorry.”
- Repentance—goes beyond remorse and moves to making a fundamental change in how the offender lives and operates: “I won’t do that again
- Restitution—represents an effort to restore what was hurt, wounded, or broken and assumes responsibility for the harm that was done: “I will make up for the harm that I caused.”
- Regeneration—seeks renewal of his or her life and shows the “fruits of repentance” that the harm will not be repeated.

But what about the offender who has no interest in remorse, repentance, restitution, or regeneration? When this happens, Marie Fortune (founder of the Seattle-based Center for Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence) suggests that the four aspects of seeking forgiveness become the responsibility of the wider community—church, family, and friends.

These people can step in and be the ones who acknowledge the wrong done and say, “We’re sorry you were hurt and want to help do something about it.”4 This is not taking the responsibility for the offender or the offense, but rather serves as a means of acknowledging the wrong when the offender is unwilling or unable.

The truth is that someone always has to pay because an offense always creates an obligation that must be satisfied. The Bible is very clear: “So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if herepents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

Repentance is our offender’s responsibility; forgiveness is our responsibility. The bottom line: While I can forgive a person who never admits he has hurt me, I probably can never be reconciled with him. Why? Relationships are built on common ground. The prophet Amos asked the question, “Can two people walk

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together without agreeing on the direction? (Amos 3:3).

In Christ’s service,

Jerry