

Must the Offender Repent Before I Forgive Him?

The following is an outline of scriptures and discussion addressing the question of whether or not repentance of the offender is a condition for forgiveness. The presence of the Holy Spirit assists and guides you in the forgiveness process.

Our refusal to forgive can prevent us from being forgiven by God.

“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15).

There is a difference in sin and not agreeing or liking someone’s behavior.

Has the other party actually “sinned” or not just done something that you didn’t like? Examine the circumstances carefully. Note what scripture they have violated and pray for the offender and the situation.

“Again I say, don’t get involved in foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights. A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people” (2 Timothy 2:23-24).

“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results” (James 5:16).

We are told to confront or admonish a believer who has sinned against us.

“So watch yourselves. If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time asks forgiveness, you must forgive” (Luke 17:3-4). The word “rebuke” means to admonish or confront.

“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17). Note: This is the procedure for confronting a sinning brother, not someone whose behavior you feel needs modifying in some way or someone who merely irritates or annoys you. When addressing minor differences see Proverbs 19:11, “Sensible people control their temper; they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.” This does not discount accountability or the decision to terminate a relationship if behavior is abusive or toxic.

Doesn't Luke 17:3-4 tell us that there must be repentance before we forgive?

Let's take a closer look at the Luke 17:3-4 verse referenced above. This verse reads: "So watch yourselves. If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time asks forgiveness, you must forgive."

This verse is the only verse regarding forgiveness that uses this language. Jesus in this passage addresses the standard doctrines of Jewish piety in that day, reproof, repentance with restitution then forgiveness. The Jewish teachers who considered themselves legal experts would question the genuineness and validity of a person's repentance and believed that forgiving three times was sufficient. Jesus here offers the disciples a theoretical case given these doctrines. He tells them if a person does repent repeatedly, they must forgive regardless whether they believe the repentance is genuine or not. This is different than requiring repentance as a condition for forgiveness.

To put this verse in perspective, if we read the verses prior, Luke 17:1-2 we see that Jesus tells the disciples to take care not to cause others to stumble. We are to forgive anyone who says they are repentant without question. This verse should be interpreted within the context of all other passages on forgiveness referenced in the handout which do not mention repentance. This does not mean that we continue to allow ourselves to be offended as we discussed in class. Genuine repentance requires ongoing change in attitude and behavior. We set boundaries accordingly if the offending behavior continues.

Whenever we confront someone, we are to do so with a forgiving spirit and Christian love.

"Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church" (Ephesians 4:15).

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

"Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and will learn the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).

"Take note of those who refuse to obey what we say in this letter. Stay away from them so they will be ashamed. Don't think of them as enemies, but warn them as you would a brother or sister" (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15).

"If anyone claims, 'I am living in the light,' but hates a fellow believer, that person is still living in darkness. Anyone who loves a fellow believer is living in the light and does not cause others to

stumble. But anyone who hates a fellow believer is still living and walking in darkness. Such a person does not know the way to go, having been blinded by the darkness” (1 John 2:9-11).

“Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer (some versions say “anyone”) is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself” (Galatians 6:1-3).

Scriptures on forgiveness without the condition of repentance:

A relationship will always be damaged unless repentance takes place. But is repentance a condition for human forgiveness? Sometimes the other party is not aware of their offense, does not admit wrong or refuses to repent.

“Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

“Then Peter came to him and asked, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’ ‘No, not seven times,’ Jesus replied, ‘but seventy times seven!’ (Matthew 18:21-22)

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37).

“Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others” (Colossians 3:13).

We are to forgive anyone we are holding a grudge against.

“But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too” (Mark 11:25).

Paul says this to the Corinthians regarding a man who had caused trouble and hurt: “I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me. Most of you opposed him, and that was punishment enough. Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement. So I urge you to now reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).

In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus models how to pray for forgiveness.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus’ prayer does not mention a required response from the party who sins against us: “And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” (Luke 11:4; Matthew 6:12). Jesus told one of his disciples who asked him to teach them how to pray. The Greek word used in this verse is “panti” and it literally means “everyone”.

Immediately after this prayer Jesus says: “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6: 14-15). Again, there is no mention of repentance as a condition for forgiveness.

Two examples of forgiveness without the offender’s repentance:

Stephen as he was being stoned to death:

“As they stoned him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ He fell to his knees, shouting, ‘Lord, don’t charge them with this sin!’ And with that, he died” (Acts 7:59-60).

Christ on the cross:

While on the cross, Christ asked God to forgive the Romans who were crucifying him: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing’” (Luke 23:34).

“Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

God knows our heart and knows whether or not we have repented. If repentance of the offender is required for forgiveness, how do we know if true repentance has taken place? If the offender initially acts repentant and you forgive and later you discover that he or she did not change behavior or truly repent, do you retract your forgiveness? Since we are not God, we have difficulty knowing if repentance has really occurred.

We are told to love our enemies, bless them and pray for those who hurt us.

“But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you” (Luke 6:27).

We are not God. God’s forgiveness requires repentance.

“If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness” (1 John 1:8-9).

“Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19, Peter’s sermon in the temple).

God is omnipotent and is able to know our hearts.

God knows our every thought, desire and the secrets of our heart (Luke 16:15; Psalms 44:21). “The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

The issue with our humanness and human forgiveness of others based on repentance:

We have no way of knowing the offender’s thoughts or motives. Someone may verbalize repentance but remorse alone is not repentance. Remorse is defined as deep regret or guilt. This can offer if one is caught or confronted. True repentance requires contrition and a consistent change in behavior and attitude over time. Asking for forgiveness does not always equal repentance. Repentance is not always obvious at the point of forgiveness based on a person’s promise to change.

Questions that reflect the logistical issues with conditional forgiveness:

1. How does one know the offender has truly repented based on his or her expression of repentance?
2. If the offender says he has repented and we forgive but his subsequent behavior does not reflect this, do we retract our forgiveness?
3. If the offender later demonstrates repentance, do we forgive, ready to retract again if he or she falters or again refuses to change?
4. Is it our job as imperfect mortals to attempt to mind-read the hearts of offenders as only God can in order to determine if forgiveness is warranted?
5. What is the offender is unaware of the offense?

These questions point out the difficulty with conditional forgiveness. We have all sinned and fallen short of God’s will. When we sin, we offend God. Therefore in this manner, we are all offenders. Paul tells us “For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (Romans 3:23) It would be a difficult and exhausting job to forgive only when the offender is repentant. This would require judgment and discernment that is beyond our capability as flawed mortals--only God has that capability.

Scriptures are from the New Living Translation.