

If You Don't Forgive Others, God Won't Forgive You

There are times in each of our lives where we might be holding unforgiveness towards someone else. If you take that statement at face value — “If you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you” — it would mean if you were to die with unforgiveness in your heart, then I suppose you would be separated from God forever, wouldn't you? At the very least, we would be in big trouble even in this life if God looks at us and sees unforgiven sins.

Not surprisingly, this teaching creates a lot of anxiety among Christians. Forgiveness is not easy. All of us have been hurt by others; some of us severely. We do people a disservice by heartlessly pounding on them to forgive those that have injured them, and it can be even more heartless when we use Bible verses to pound them with. How much greater is the damage when our teaching causes people to feel that God rejects them because they have been unable to forgive others for inexcusable actions.

However, we still need to make good sense of the Bible's teaching on forgiveness, because the difficult verses in question come from Jesus Himself. Jesus says at the end of His model prayer (that we've called “The Lord's Prayer”),

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive you your transgressions.
Matthew 6:14-15

If we read those words alone, then it seems like game, set, and match. How could we come to any other conclusion than to believe that our forgiveness totally depends on our forgiveness of others? However, we must never forget that verses must never be interpreted on their own out of context, but must always be interpreted in light of the whole Word of God.

Jesus did say those words, but let me remind you again of the need to consider when Jesus was speaking, to whom He was speaking, and what he was doing. Those are things you have to remember whenever you interpret the Scriptures. Not everything Jesus said is to be applied to you personally, because everything changed at the cross.

Take a fresh look at the scriptures

When Christ died, the Old Covenant was made obsolete, and the New Covenant was brought into existence. The night before He died, Jesus took cup and passed it, saying,

This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. Luke 22:20

Covenants in the ancient world were almost always inaugurated by the blood sacrifice of an animal. That practice was similar to a contract today being put in force through signing on the dotted line. Jesus was indicating beforehand that His death would bring into reality the long-promised New Covenant. This New Covenant is both different and superior to the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses:

But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by a much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. Hebrews 8:6-7

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When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. Hebrews 8:13

When Jesus taught, He was speaking according to the law to people living under the law. Whenever you read the words of Jesus recorded in the gospels, you must keep this in mind. When Jesus taught, "You must forgive in order to be forgiven," He was magnifying the demands of the law in order to provoke people to understand their need for Him as Savior. But when He died, was buried, and rose again, the New Covenant was inaugurated by His death, and things changed.

New Testament writings a different order of reasoning.

First, the New Testament teaches us that we are forgiven already:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace. Ephesians 1:7

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions. Colossians 2:13

Then, on the basis of the forgiveness we have already received, the New Testament urges us to forgive others — but notice the change in order:

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

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Colossians 3:12-13

Do you see the distinction there? Before the cross, the Bible says you forgive to be forgiven. But after the cross, the Scripture teaches that we forgive because we have been forgiven.

Clarify your thinking

The idea that if you don't forgive others God won't forgive you is an Old Covenant teaching, even though we hear it from the lips of Jesus. It was prior to the cross, which is where the law ended/ was fulfilled. Why did the Lord teach it? Because He often held up the law to raise the awareness of sin in the people's hearts, so that it would pave the way for

them to recognize their need for a Savior. By His death, burial and resurrection, He accomplished the work, and the good news is now preached in His name.

Today, to tell someone that if you don't forgive others God won't forgive you is not applicable in the New Covenant. The truth is, we forgive others **because** we have been forgiven. Forgiveness is often difficult, if not impossible for us on our own. We need supernatural power to find forgiveness in our hearts. The best source of that power is a heart that has been changed by first receiving the amazing grace and forgiveness of Christ.

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