

Biblical Reasons for Forgiveness

Selected Scriptures

Material from gty.org

Forgiveness is a very vital and a very essential and a very necessary component of life in the church because the church, even at its best, is a collision of sinners. We all understand that. We are guilty of saying the wrong thing, and behaving in wrong ways. We have all offended people. We have all caused people to stumble. We have all crossed the line of discretion into indiscretion and the way we deal with people and treat people. We have all showed preferential treatment at times. We have all been less than considerate to people in need. We have failed to give to folks what they need at the time they need it. There are many, many points at which sinners collide in the church. And because the church is a very intimate fellowship, only to be exceeded in its intimacy by family, we borrow that image, don't we?, the image of a family. We are seen as God's family and the intimacy then throws us together and we crash into each other and our weaknesses are made manifest and so we are guilty from time to time of offending.

It then becomes essential to the ongoing life of the church, the ongoing joy of believers that we be able to deal with those offenses with an attitude of forgiveness...of forgiveness. ***In the end, what finally destroys every relationship is an inability to forgive. It isn't the offense that destroys the relationship, it is the inability to forgive that destroys the relationship.*** Offenses will come. Even our Lord said that. Offenses will come. That's part

of living life in a fallen world and dealing even in the church with the people who have not yet been perfected. How we deal with those offenses is what determines the nature of our relationship. It is that way in a marriage. It is that way in a family. It is that way among friends. It is certainly that way in the church.

Not only is this matter of forgiveness essential to the cohesiveness of the church, as it is to the family and to marriage, not only is this the path to joy and satisfaction and fulfillment in the family and in the church, that is collectively, but the inability to forgive not only destroys relationship, it destroys the people who don't forgive. It is not only destructive of relationships, it is self-destructive. And Scripture makes it very, very clear that where there is a lack of forgiveness, there will develop bitterness and out of bitterness come hatred and couple with hatred comes anger and the end of hatred and anger and bitterness is the pursuit of vengeance. Retaliation is sought and retaliation is never satisfied and vengeance is never really appeased and consequently people live with the bitterness and it is deeper

and deeper as they live with it longer.

We live in a society that has made a virtue...or tried to make a virtue out of vindictiveness. **Three out of every four attorneys on the planet live in America.** They have to be here in order to take up all the litigation that comes from angry, bitter people wanting to get every piece of flesh they can get out of anybody who has stepped across the line, into the offense zone.

Even psychologists have said that forgiveness is not healthy. That's right. Forgiveness is not healthy. You don't need to carry around that offense. You need to get resolution and the best way to get resolution is to be vindictive. **In a popular book called Toxic Parentsthe author has a chapter entitled, "You don't have to forgive."** She says that children who have been offended

by the behavior of their parents must not forgive their parents, they must heap on their parents full blame for their present problems because their parents poisoned them by their toxicity. And so she suggests that the new cry should be, "I am the victim, it's not my fault, I'm not responsible, my parents did it to me."

Guilt for everything is pushed off on someone else and vengeance needs to be not only exalted but exhausted. However, the price of vengeance is extremely high..extremely high. An unforgiving attitude, a bitterness that runs deep, a desire for vengeance that comes out of vindictiveness or hate, or anger, will do several things.

1. it imprisons people in their past. This is the price of an unforgiving heart. It imprisons people in their past. As long as people will not forgive, as long as people will not put the past in the past, but continue to seek an unfulfilled level of vengeance, they are shackled to their past. They are shackled to that past event. The pain of that event is fed. It is not only kept alive, it is fed until it becomes larger and larger.

Another way to look at it is, if you don't forgive things that have happened in the past, you continue to pick at an open sore, you keep it from healing, you enlarge it, you sentence yourself to the future feeling worse than you felt in the past when it happened. You choose to love hate and hate dominates.

- 2 Unforgiveness then produces bitterness. It becomes an infection and it is malignant, it harasses, it creates distorted memories which create a distorted view of life. Anger becomes out of control. Emotions become unchecked. People entertain ideas about revenge, every conversation becomes a forum for slandering the people who have supposedly harmed you so profoundly. Every conversation becomes an opportunity for defamation, exaggeration and outright lies.

On the other hand, forgiveness frees a person from both of these categories of tragedy. Forgiveness frees you to enjoy all relationships and to live with peace and tranquility in your own heart. Forgiveness is a very freeing reality.

Now Scripture exalts forgiveness for these reasons and for the one greater reason and that is forgiveness honors God. And I'll get to that in a moment. But as far as I can tell, in the Bible there are at least 75 word pictures of forgiveness. Here are a few.

To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door and let the prisoner free.

To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, "Nothing Owed."

To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare the person, "Not Guilty."

To forgive is to shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be retrieved.

To forgive is to take out the garbage and dispose of it, leaving the house fresh and clean. To forgive is to loose the anchor and set the ship free to sail.

Again, a few more biblical pictures.

To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned and sentenced criminal.

To forgive is to loosen a stranglehold on a wrestling opponent.

To forgive is to sandblast a wall of graffiti leaving it brand new.

To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it can never be put together again.

These are biblical pictures of forgiveness, very instructive.

Forgiveness is a marvelous, virtuous, liberating, loving attitude and act. It makes sense to forgive. It is healthy. It is wholesome. It is sensible. It is freeing. It brings peace. It engenders love. That is

why **Proverbs 19:11 says, “A man’s foolishness is not to forgive. It is folly.”**

One person has analyzed forgiveness in an interesting sort of prosaic way. He writes this, *“Only the brave know how to forgive. It is the most refined and generous element of human virtue. Cowards have done good deeds and performed kind acts. Cowards have even fought and conquered. But cowards never forgive. It’s not in their nature, their hearts. The power to forgive flows only from a strength and a greatness of soul, conscious of its own humility and security and able to rise above all*

the little temptations of resenting every fruitless attempt to steal its happiness,” end quote.

That’s good human wisdom. There is certainly truth in that philosophical viewpoint. But we’re compelled to a deeper discussion than that. It’s wonderful that somebody in the world recognizes that forgiveness is the noblest of all virtues.

Forgiveness may be in the world, isolated to a very few, it may be a rare commodity. It may even be so bold and so brave that it only belongs to those who would be deemed as emotional heroes because it is so rare. But it must not be rare among believers. It is the most normal of all our behaviors as Christians because it is absolutely necessary in a collision of sinners that marks and defines the life of the church and the home.

So I want us to look at some compelling, biblical, theological, spiritual reasons why we are to forgive, for the sheer spiritual nobility of it and because it is a direct command from God to us.

But I want to start where you have to start.

1.forgiveness is the most godlike act a Christian can do. It is the most godlike act a Christian can do.

No act is more divine than forgiveness. Never are we more like God than when we forgive.

What do we mean by forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a verbally declared, personally given promise, a statement of undeserved, unearned love that affirms that though I have been offended, there is no anger, no hatred, no desire for vengeance, no bitterness, no retaliation. Why? Because there is no guilt, no blame held.

That's forgiveness. This is a characteristic that belongs to God. He is a God of forgiveness.

Obviously we could spend a lot of time talking about that particular attribute of God, His forgiveness. But let me just give you a few representations of it in Scripture.

Exodus 34:6

God discloses Himself to Moses. Verse 5, He descends in the cloud and the Lord passed by, in verse 6, in front of Moses and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness and truth who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin...who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin."

When God introduces Himself to Moses and makes this appearance to Moses, He defines Himself as a God who forgives by every definition of violation...iniquity, transgression and sin.

Psalms 32:1

“How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, how blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity.”

This is a blessing from God that He forgives, that He does not hold against us our sins.

Psalm 85 ,

“O Lord, You showed favor to Your land, You restored the captivity of Jacob, You forgave the iniquity of Your people. You covered all their sin. You withdrew all Your fury. You turned away from Your burning anger.”

Psalm 130 “

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear me, let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You.”

Perhaps one of the most beautiful statements regarding the forgiveness of God is in

Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.”

This is God’s forgiveness. And the sins were serious. If you read the rest of the chapter, he paints a vivid portrait of just how sick and just how sinful Israel was, and yet how ready His forgiveness is.

Isaiah 43: 25,

“I, even I,” God giving testimony to His own nature, “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake and I will not remember your sins.”

Wow! Wiping them out, obliterating them from the record and even from His own memory.

Isaiah 55:6, “Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him return to the Lord and He will have compassion on him and to our God for He will abundantly pardon.”

His testimony is part of the instruction of God that came to the prophets as they pronounced judgment at the same time they announced that where there was repentance, there was forgiveness.

Jeremiah 33:8, “I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me. I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. It will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them. They will fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it.”

This is the heart of God, the New Covenant, a couple chapters earlier than that, namely in

Jeremiah 31, celebrates the forgiveness of God with familiar words. “This is the Covenant...verse 33...that I will make with the house of Israel after those days. I’ll put My law within them and on their heart I will write it, I’ll be their God, they will be My people. They will not teach again each man his neighbor, each man his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord.’ They will all know Me from the

least of them to the greatest of them, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin. I will remember no more.”

This is the testimony of the Lord who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light at night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, the Lord of hosts is His name. The God of order. The God who controls the universe is the God who forgives.

When you come, of course, in to the New Testament, then the forgiveness of God becomes manifestly visible in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message of Christ is that God will forgive your sins. The cross is where that forgiveness is purchased. The rest of the New Testament then features the message of the gospel of forgiveness, preached through the book of Acts, defined through the epistles and consummated in the book of Revelation.

One of the great standout evidences of the forgiveness of God is **in the fifteenth chapter of Luke, a very familiar chapter to us, the story of the prodigal who sins greatly, picturing the sinner who sins greatly against God**, who upon returning is embraced in love and full forgiveness and this gives us a picture of the lavishness of God's forgiveness...the lavishness of it. This wretched, sinful, young man comes back, cannot do anything to purchase restitution or restoration, or reconciliation, but comes and can only ask for mercy. He receives everything. He receives the robe, the ring, the sandals, full sonship.

This is the nature of God. We see it in our Lord as He dies and says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And that very day, one of them was forgiven, who had mocked Him, a thief hanging beside Him.

Another one was forgiven who had overseen the crucifixion, the Centurion. Forgiveness extended further so that early in the book

of Acts, there were some of the priests who were so set against Him who were forgiven their sins, became a part of His Kingdom. This is godlike, to forgive.

You are never more like God than when you forgive.

That, of course, becomes a very evident message in the New Testament.

Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, love your enemies.” And love your enemies means you are forgiving them. “Pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven. You’re never more evidently like your Father than when you forgive.” It’s a call to be godlike.

The Apostle Paul in Ephesians, 4:32, “Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” There again, you forgive because God forgives. And you are to be...verse 1 of chapter 5...imitators of God.

Let me go over that again. Be forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you, therefore be imitators of God as beloved children. Same thing that Jesus said in Matthew 5:44 and 45, “Be like your Father, be forgiving. Walk in love just as Christ loved you.”

You, of course, display Godlike mercy when you forgive.

Colossians 3:13 repeats the same thing,

“Forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, forgive it, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

And, by the way, Paul wrote both Colossians and Philippians from a jail where he was unjustly and hatefully imprisoned. He was practicing the very virtue that he was calling on believers to enact.

So, the first reason to forgive is that you are never more like God than when you forgive. We'll come back to that point at a later point, and you will see how incongruous it is to accept consistent, constant forgiveness from God and withhold it from other people.

But let me give you a second reason for forgiveness. First of all, you're never more like God than when you forgive.

2, it is not murder only which is forbidden by the sixth commandment.

The sixth commandment says, "Do not murder," right? Back in Exodus chapter 20. Is that all it means, "don't murder," or does it mean something more than that? Let's go back again to the Sermon on the Mount,

Matthew chapter 5:21 ...Matthew chapter 5. There are two verses here that I want you to look at, verses 21 and 22.

Now in this particular section of this sermon, our Lord is attacking the limited, superficial interpretation of His commands that had developed in Judaism. And that's what He is referring to here. "You have heard that the ancients were told..." In other words, you've been taught a certain thing by ancient rabbis, the rabbis and scribes of old. You have heard what they have taught. You see the same thing sequentially, verse 27, "You have heard that it was said about adultery..." Verse 31, "It was said...and so-and-so...about divorce." Verse 33, "You have heard that the ancients were told about vows..." "You have heard...verse 38...about this matter of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Or verse 43, "You have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." This is what you have heard. You have been taught certain things about these issues.

In this case, you were told that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder and whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” Now the Jews had long been well-informed and very serious about the matter of murder...unless, of course, the victim was a prophet. They were sadly eager to murder the prophets. But apart from that, they understood the prevalence of crimes being a dishonor to God and one of those crimes was murder. They would even go so far as to affirm that if somebody commits a murder, they are liable to the court and they understood the Old Testament rendered capital punishment as the appropriate verdict to be pronounced on the head of a murderer. That’s what you’ve heard...that’s what you’ve heard.

I want to take it further. There’s more than just that. There is more intended by the sixth commandment than just murder. “I say to you,” and this is typical, “but I say to you,” verse 21, “But I say to you...” verse 28. Verse 32, “But I say to you...” Verse 34, “But I say to you...” Verse 39, “But I say to you...” Verse 44, “But I say to you...” In each of these cases, He starts out with what they had heard and He tells them there’s a lot more there than you have heard. “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good for nothing,’” that’s one way to translate that, “shall be guilty before the Supreme Court. And whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”

Jesus is saying, “Look, if you have hate in your heart, you’re a murderer in your heart and you’re guilty before God for the murder though you never actually commit it. Listen to

1 John 3:15, the Apostle John got the message. He wrote, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.”

Unforgiveness is a hate attitude. It is a representation of hatred. He sweeps away all their self-righteousness and unmasks their murderous attitudes. If you say, as the original says, to someone, “**Raca**,” that’s a transliteration of the word, it is simply introducing to us an attitude that is vicious. It’s a common epithet that really has no English equivalent. It’s sort of transliterated “Raca” this new NAS says, “You good for nothing.” I’m afraid that is a pretty mild interpretation of what that word meant. It’s a term of abuse, a term of derision, a term of contempt, a term of hatred, vicious term.

And so is “**you fool**.” A fool was synonymous with being godless because the fool said in his heart there is no God. You stupid fool, it’s like pronouncing a curse on someone. If you have that kind of attitude toward people, attitudes of abuse and derision, and contempt, you are guilty enough to go to fiery hell. You have to see that you need to forgive in the heart, as well as withhold the instrument of murder. You need to love and forgive or you’re in sin.

If you’re a Christian, you have the responsibility to forgive, to let loose all hate, all sense of vengeance. You need to release all of that attitude of abuse and derision and contempt and scorn and hatred toward another person. If that person is a Christian, then that person is literally Christ to you. How you treat that person is how you treat Christ. If that person is a non-Christian, he still bears the natural image of God and you do no good to your relationship to either a Christian or a non-Christian by that kind of non-forgiving hate and you certainly do no good to yourself by that attitude. The death penalty is not just for murderers, it is for haters.

You don’t mind honoring the image of God in yourself, how proud are you that you cannot see the image of God in someone else? You don’t mind recognizing the Christ that is in you. How terrible it

is within the family of God that you don't recognize the Christ that is in someone else. You are angry at someone else's sins. Are you equally angry at your own? Are you so proud that you cannot see your own sins, but only the sins of others? Hatred toward someone, an unwillingness to forgive someone, is to hold a murderous attitude in the heart.

Any lack of forgiveness is selfish. You need to deal with the pride in your own heart. This is seriousness enough to say that that's sin enough if unforgiven to catapult a person into the fires of hell. No offense against you, no matter what it is, no offense against you is worth hatred and unforgiveness.

Sometimes people want to debate that. "Well, are you supposed to forgive everybody if they don't ask?"

Yes...yes. You forgive immediately, you forgive instantaneously, you forgive totally, you forgive completely. Whether or not you will ever have reconciliation and what that relationship will be in the future is a matter of that person desiring that relationship to be what it should be. But forgiveness, that comes immediately.

Let me give you a third reason why it is so important to forgive, because

3 whoever has offended you has offended God more.

Ask yourself a question.

You say, "I was seriously offended, that person seriously offended me, they deeply offended me, they scarred me for life because of the way I was treated. Maybe it was my mother, my father, maybe it was somebody that dumped me, maybe it was a former spouse, whatever they offended me so profoundly, they have scarred me so deeply, the wounds are hard to get over.

Listen, if God who was far more offended by their sin than you and who is infinitely more holy than you forgives, don't tell me you can't forgive.

Are you saying that to offend you is more serious than to offend God? Is that the point?

“Oh I know God can forgive, but I can't.” Oh really, are you a higher court? Are you a more holy person?

Well obviously not. If God who is the most holy can forgive the greatest offense, can you the least holy forgive the least offense?
Any wrong ever done is, first of all, against God.

Look at Psalm 51...

Psalm 51. This Psalm is tied to David's sin with Bathsheba committing adultery and murder, and he is just devastated with guilt, condemnation. It's tearing him up.

A parallel Psalm is Psalm 32. He says it's effecting his physical body. His body is becoming weak...that's what sin will do and guilt will do, it effects you physiologically. His life juices are drying up. It's effecting the fluid that runs in his nervous system, it's effecting his blood flow, it's effecting his saliva.

And he looks at this sin that he's committed against Bathsheba, this sin that he's committed against Uriah, her husband, the sin that he's committed against his own family, his own children, his own nation,

but he looks past all of that and in verse 4 he says this, “**Against You, O God,**” mentioned in verse 1, “**Against You, You only I have sinned.**”

All sin must be seen primarily as an offense against God, against the most holy, against You I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight. All sin is against God.

The fact that it's against you or me is incidental. It's incidental. It's a minor detail. It's immaterial, don't take it personally, don't let it ruin your life, don't let it destroy your relationship, don't let it wound the church. That's ridiculous.

If God forgives, who is the most holy, and is supremely offended, cannot we who are the least holy and only minimally offended forgive? We who are so unholy as to be in constant need of forgiveness from others and from God, will we withhold that forgiveness that we so desperately need?

So we forgive and we forgive because God forbids anger, hatred, attitudes of vengeance. And we forgive because He has forgiven who is most holy and most offended. And we forgive because never are we more like the God we proclaim than when we forgive. And if you call yourself a Christian, you are a child of God. And if you are a child of God, then you understand that it is critically important that you manifest godlikeness.

4 It is only reasonable that those who are forgiven the greater sins, forgive the lesser sins.

It is only reasonable that those who have been forgiven on a greater scale be willing to render forgiveness on a lesser scale. And what I mean by that is take a look at what you've been forgiven. What has God forgiven you? What? All your sin, all

your iniquity, all your transgression from the moment you arrived in this world till the moment you exit, if you're His child, all is fully,

completely forgiven, all the past, all the present, all the future. The grandness of this forgiveness is stunning.

Turn to Matthew 18

and let's see an illustration that will lead us to the secondary point that if God can forgive us the greater, cannot we forgive the lesser? This is really an unforgettable story in Matthew 18. Peter is trying to find out how you're supposed to forgive people because he's living in this collision of believers, he's understanding that it's so easy to offend.

Peter comes, this is life, "Lord, how many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Peter patting himself on the back as best he could by bending his arm around there, because the rabbis said three times to forgive, and that's it. You forgive the first time, you forgive the second time, you forgive the third time, after that you don't give forgiveness.

Peter wanting to trump the rabbis and look like a hero doubled it and added one. "Lord, shall we forgive seven times?" Thinking he would probably get some kind of commendation. Jesus said to him, "I don't say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." Just took his number and multiplied it into infinity.

And one of the other gospels says, "Seventy times a day." You just keep forgiving. There's no end to it. You forgive as many times as there's an offense. That's how God forgives, isn't it? I would venture to say that certainly the Lord has forgiven me seventy times seven, seventy times a day, day after day, week after week, month after month after month of my life, your life.

And then he tells the story that makes the point. The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. This would be a king who had allotted segments of his kingdom to certain underlings, these are slaves at a very

high level and their responsibility is to collect the taxes and collect the income for the king from these various areas. He brings these in to settle the accounts and when he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. That's an unpayable amount. One person figured out that that would be...that would be equal to the entire gross national product for Israel in a year. Now this is just a massive amount of money.

This guy shows up and he has to give an account for this vast wealth which would have meant that whatever his responsibility was, it was a grand responsibility and this kind of money would only be accumulated over a long period of time. It's now time to settle the account.

Verse 25 says he didn't have the money to repay. Well what did you do with it? That's a massive amount of money, squandered and wasted. His lord commanded him to be sold, I'll get what I can out of him, along with his wife and children and all that he had and repayment to be made. All he could do was get what he could get. So it's like a...it's like a bankruptcy in which the guy has nothing and you get only what you can get. And what could they get? Well you could only get the slave price of these people and whatever possessions they had, I'll get what I can...that's all I can do. That would have been merciful.

Well the slave fell to the ground in verse 26 and prostrated himself before him and said, "Have patience with me and I'll repay you everything." Huh, how is that going to happen? That's not possible. "The lord of the slave felt compassion, released him, forgave him the debt." Wow! How wonderful, amazing.

Verse 28, "The slave went out, found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii," about three months wages, meager amount compared to what this guy had had. He found somebody who owed him a hundred denarii, he seized him and began to

choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground, began to plead with him," same exact words, "Have patience with me and I'll repay you.' He was unwilling, went and threw him in prison till he should pay back what was owed."

Debtor's prison where you go and you work for pennies for years. That's a very offensive behavior, isn't it to you? I mean, that's about as ugly as you can get. You've just been forgiven something equal to an unpayable fortune and you go strangle a guy for three months wages. That's repulsive.

Do you get the picture here? This is what you do when you don't forgive someone. So you don't mind receiving full forgiveness of an unpayable debt by a gracious God and you're going to go choke somebody until you get the pound of flesh out of them, throw them in a debtor's prison?

We deserve condemnation. We fall down before God and we receive complete forgiveness. Then what do we do? Go out and act in an unforgiving, ungracious, merciless, compassionless way toward other people when we have received what we have received? God has mercifully forgiven you, aren't you going to be able to forgive others? He's forgiven you the vast unpayable debt, are you going to demand more out of someone who offends you than God asked from you? No judgment comes to you, why would you render vengeance on someone else? Strong language and a strong call to forgiveness.