



What is forgiveness? Take a minute and write down a brief definition of forgiveness. Next, I want to give you a short True or False quiz.

1. Much of what Christians have been taught they should do in forgiving people can lead to bitterness.
2. Christians should drop some matters rather than insisting that they be discussed with the other party.
3. A very influential author argued that it is legitimate to forgive God. True or False, it is legitimate to forgive God?
4. God punishes Christians for their sins even though they are forgiven.
5. A person could forgive a spouse, yet still seek a divorce.
6. People unwilling or unable to forgive, should be afraid of God.¹

I began with forgiveness because I am convinced that forgiveness is the key to understanding Genesis chapters 42-44. At first glance, it would seem that the months of agony that Joseph inflicted on his brothers and father were some kind of twisted form of revenge. He accused them of being spies, he put Simeon in prison and swore to them not to return until they brought their youngest brother Benjamin back to Egypt as proof that they were not spies. Why did Joseph inflict such distress upon them all? Why did he play this game of cat and mouse that lasted for many months and took three separate trips from Canaan to Egypt to accomplish? Why did he not reveal himself when he first saw his brothers?

Joseph is one of those rare characters in Scripture about whom it is difficult to say anything bad. Some claim that he exhibited youthful pride in telling his dreams to his father and brothers in chapter 37. I don't but that and think he was merely telling his family about these powerful dreams without boasting about it. Others claim that Joseph wanted his brothers to feel some of the pain of imprisonment and servitude that he experienced by their hands. They might fall short of calling it revenge but at the very least they would say that it was a lesson in justice. I don't buy into that belief either. Though Joseph was genuinely shocked to see his ten brothers bow

down to him, and he no doubt had to think fast on his feet, I believe the remainder of this story was a well developed plan to bring about full forgiveness and restoration with his brothers.

No one would question the need for forgiveness and restoration between Joseph and his brothers. They had plotted to kill him and then changed their mind and sold him into slavery, which probably meant certain death. Then they had covered their crime with layers of lies that had lasted for over twenty years. These brothers were never fond of Joseph, the “favorite” little brother but the evil they perpetrated against him would be incredibly hard to forgive. Yet I told you a few weeks ago that Joseph had begun practicing forgiveness for these grievous offenses. The evidence for his is found in Gen. 41:51. “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” I believe that Joseph had worked through the pain of the sins committed against him by his brothers. It seems as if God had allowed him to work through the bitterness and “forget about his troubles.” But here is the key question—had he forgiven his brothers? That may seem like an obvious question to you because he had ‘forgotten his troubles.’ If he was no longer troubled by his past, if he wasn’t still carrying bitterness and anger with him, then it seems obvious that he indeed had forgiven his brothers, right? No, I don’t believe that Joseph had forgiven his brothers and the reason I can say this is because forgiveness is not the same thing as getting over one’s anger and bitterness. Moreover, forgiveness requires repentance from the other person before it can be given.

Through this long series of play acting and feigned anger, Joseph was trying to discern whether or not his brothers were actually repentant after all of those years. Joseph had not seen them in 22 years and the last time he saw them they had murder in their eyes. Joseph would have wondered if they had ever had any regrets for what they did. By forcing them through these difficult circumstances, Joseph would have been able to discern if they were genuinely repentant. If they were, then he could offer forgiveness and begin the process of reconciliation. But if they were not repentant, he could not forgive them nor be reconciled to them. Either way, he had already dealt with his own bitterness and anger toward them. He had “forgotten about his trouble.” Remarkably, Joseph’s first thought when seeing his brothers was to move toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

But here is what we often fail to understand. We associate our emotions about forgiveness with the act of forgiveness when in reality they are two separate things. If someone has sinned against us, we are always commanded to not hold anger or bitterness toward them but we are not commanded to forgive everyone because forgiveness is dependent upon the repentance of the person who offended you.

But this idea may be new to many of you and might throw you for a loop. I know it did the same to me when I first was exposed to this truth. First, let’s establish how God forgives us. Does God forgive us if we do not repent? No, repentance is a prerequisite for God’s forgiveness because our repentance demonstrates that we know that we have sinned against God, that we have offended an infinitely holy God and we now have Godly sorrow toward our sin. Several Scriptures bear this out.

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15)

I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (Luke 13:3)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret. (2 Cor. 7:10)

Therefore we can conclude that God will not forgive us unless we repent. In the same way, we cannot forgive another person unless they repent. Our forgiveness toward others is modeled after Christ's forgiveness toward us. This is shown in Luke 17:4-5. *"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."* The apostles said to the Lord, *"Increase our faith!"*

When we read this we usually focus on the number of times that we are supposed to offer forgiveness. Offering forgiveness seven times in one day was a mind-blowing number to the disciples. This is why they cried out to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" We get fixated on the generous amount of forgiveness and we tend to miss the necessity of repentance that is also part of the process. Each of those seven times the offender came to the person and repented of their sin before the forgiveness was granted. Therefore, we are to forgive others in the same way that God forgives us—which means that repentance is required.

This is going to be troubling for many of you, so please stay with me while we work through this together. Next, I want to explain what the word forgiveness in the New Testament. Unlike our word forgive or forgiveness in English, there is not one Greek word for forgiveness. There are actually three different Greek words that are translated as forgive. And the interesting thing is that each of these three words that are translated as forgive can also be translated as different words. For example, the most common word for forgive *aphiemi*. It is variously translated as forgive, leave, release a burden, cancel a debt, send away and divorce. That's quite a shocker right there—that the most common word for forgiveness is also translated as divorce.² Furthermore, the most common word for divorce can also mean to forgive.³ Let me show you how the most common word for forgiveness is used in another verse.

In Matthew 4:19-20 Jesus said, *"Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men."* At once they left their nets and followed him. In this verse, *aphiemi* is translated as left. Peter and Andrew left their nest to follow Jesus. We could also say that they divorced their nets or that they were released from their nets but that sounds rather odd so the translators preferred the English word left—they left their nets.

Remember, there are three different words for forgiveness and each of those three words can mean something slightly different than to forgive. That may seem a little confusing but actually it helps us to understand what the New Testament means by forgiveness. All of these other translations—leave, release a burden, cancel a debt and divorce—can help us understand forgiveness. When you forgive another person, you are releasing them from the guilt of their

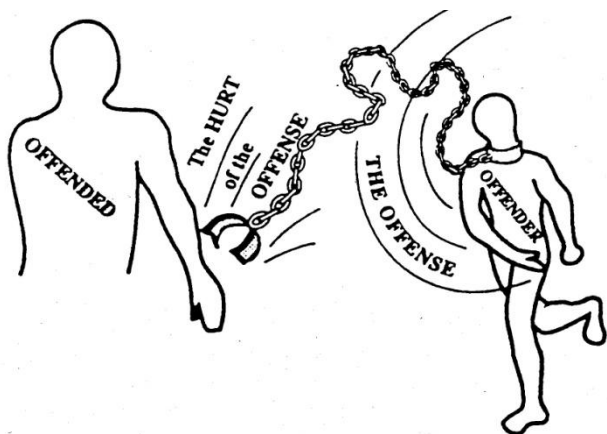
offense, you are cancelling their debt of shame—in a sense, you are divorcing their guilt from their heart and mind.

Out of all of these aspects of forgiveness, notice one very important thing—none of these have anything to do with the emotions of the one offering forgiveness. Nowhere in the New Testament does forgiveness mean that we let go of our bitterness and anger. But isn't this how we normally define forgiveness? In fact, forgiveness is often defined exclusively in terms of letting go of our anger toward the one who offended us. Furthermore, any lingering bad feelings we may have toward this other person is usually indicative of the fact that we have not forgiven them or so we have been told. This is how churches and Christians almost always understand and communicate forgiveness. In fact, it is exactly how I have understood and communicated forgiveness.

Let me give you an example from the life of Kelsey Grammer the TV actor. When she was about nineteen years old, Grammer's sister was kidnapped, raped and brutally murdered. He was extremely close with his sister and this has haunted the actor for decades. Recently, the man who murdered his sister was up for parole and Grammer wrote an impassioned letter to the parole board which included the following sentiments.

*I am a man of faith and my faith teaches me that I must forgive. And so I do. I forgive this man for what he has done. Forgiveness allows me to live my life. It allows me to love my children and my wife and the days I have left with them.*⁴

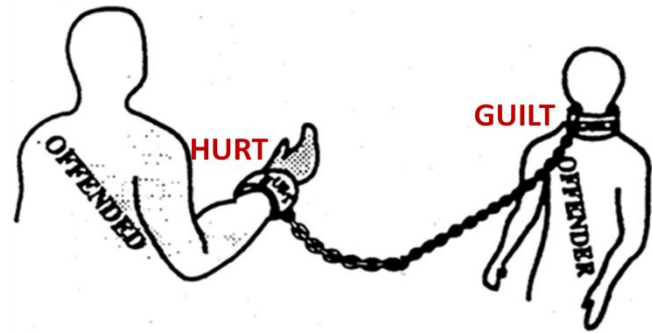
Can you relate to his feelings? His sense of forgiveness is all about letting go of the bitterness and hatred toward the killer. This is implied in his words about loving his family because intense bitterness would be a hindrance to living the rest of his life. This is an admirable decision to make and I am certain that it has been the right thing for Grammer and his family to have done, but it must be clear that this is not the same thing as forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a feeling but rather a transaction between two parties but unless the offender comes in a repentant attitude, it is not possible to have a transaction for forgiveness. You simply cannot release the burden of guilt when the other person does not want to be released.



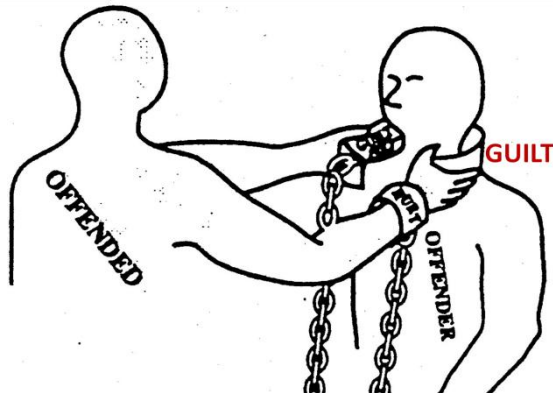
accompanied by painful emotions.

Let me describe this using some diagrams. Some of you have seen these before but I am going to change them in a small but vital way. The first diagram shows what happens when someone sins against us. The offender sins against us and thereby causes us some kind of offense. If it is a small offense, we can overlook it and it won't be a big deal. We'll talk more about small offenses later. But if it is a fairly serious offense, the offended person will inevitably feel some kind of hurt, which is almost always

The second diagram shows how the offense can be like an unbreakable chain holding us to the person who offended us. Now from this point forward we must proceed carefully. We need to cleanly separate the emotional hurt and the possible resulting anger and bitterness from the guilt of the offender. As I said a moment ago, forgiveness is not a feeling but rather a transaction between two parties. You are commanded by God to let go of your bitterness and anger toward others. We are commanded to love our enemies and pray for our enemies. These are all separate commands that are not related to the transaction of forgiveness. Working through this hurt and pain must happen whether or not you ever forgive the other person. Releasing the anger and bitterness is for the offended person. If the one who caused the offense is not repentant, then they certainly do not care whether or not you carry these negative feelings. This is what Kelsey Grammer was referring to when he wrote about going on with his life and “forgiving” the killer. What he means is that he has worked through his anger toward the man.



The pain, hurt and anger is dealt with through the cross. Either the person will come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, or already has, in which case their sins are already covered by the blood of Christ, or else their sins will be “paid” by the offender by being eternally separated from Christ. Either way, justice has or will be satisfied and it is never our job to avenge a wrong or take justice into our own hands. It’s important to note that we have a right to expect justice in serious offenses but it is equally important to know that justice will be done by God in heaven whether or not it is accomplished on the earth.



If the offender finally comes to the realization that he or she has committed the sin against you and decides to come to you in repentance and Godly sorrow, then it is your responsibility to release them from the chains of their own guilt from their sin. By this point, your feelings of anger and bitterness have been largely resolved and only the other person’s guilt remains. Part of your responsibility is to be ready at any time to offer forgiveness to the repentant person. If you are not ready to forgive chances are that you will not

forgive when the person comes to you. In fact, it is right to not only be ready to forgive but to help the other person come to the point of repentance. I think this is exactly what Joseph was doing through all of his pretending and forcing his brothers into difficult circumstances. He was testing their hearts to see if they were genuinely sorrowful and ready to repent of their sins.

One Greek lexicon describes forgiveness this way.

It is extremely important to note that the focus in the meanings of ἀφήμι, ἄφεσις, and ἀπολύω (the Greek words in the NT that are translated as forgiveness) is upon the guilt of

the wrongdoer and not upon the wrongdoing itself. The event of wrongdoing is not undone, but the guilt resulting from such an event is pardoned. To forgive, therefore, means essentially to remove the guilt resulting from wrongdoing.⁵

There are two important points from this definition. The first is that forgiveness is NOT for the offended person but for the offender. Working through the hurt and pain is for the benefit of the one offended but forgiveness is for the benefit of the offender. In this case, forgiveness is a genuine act of love toward the other person. What you are doing is applying the gospel to the other person's guilt. The guilt part of forgiveness is also dealt with through the cross. Since Christ forgave us of an infinite debt against him, then we are obligated to release others from their tiny debt against us.

This is illustrated so beautifully in the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18. The servant owed the king ten thousand talents, which represented an insurmountable debt that could never be repaid in a hundred lifetimes. When he begged the king for mercy, which is a form of repentance—admission of guilt and request for some form of release—the king forgave the entire debt. That same servant went out and attacked a man who owed him a paltry sum, even though this other man also begged for mercy. This parable applies directly to our relationship with Christ. The debt of sin that we owed to the Lord was insurmountable and could never be repaid, but when we repent and ask for forgiveness, the Lord releases us from the burden of our debt. To use language from before, the debt of sin is “divorced” from us and “sent away” from us. The transaction is between two parties—the Lord and us. In the same way, we ought to forgive others when they repent. If we do not forgive them, this is proof that we have not been forgiven, which probably means that we were not genuinely repentant.

The second thing to notice is that the wrongdoing remains despite forgiveness. This means that the consequences of sin can oftentimes still remain. Furthermore, it means that forgiveness is not pretending that nothing happened. Too often Christians have been taught to forgive as if their forgiveness wiped away the actual offense.

In case you think this idea of unconditional forgiveness is unique or uncommon, here are several quotes from well known people. (If you need them, I have several more quotes from men who share this belief in conditional forgiveness.⁶) Ken Sande is the founder and president of Peacemaker Ministries which is dedicated to Biblical reconciliation. He writes, “Granting forgiveness is conditional on the repentance of the offender and takes place between you and that person . . . When there has been a serious offense, it would not be appropriate to [make the promises of forgiveness] until the offender has repented.”⁷

Jay Adams, who is considered the founder of the Biblical counseling movement agrees.

What shall we say then? It is clear that forgiveness—promising another never to bring up his offense again to use it against him—is conditioned on the offenders willingness to confess it as sin and to seek forgiveness. You are not obligated to forgive an unrepentant sinner, but you are obligated to try to bring him to repentance. All the while you must entertain a genuine hope and willingness to forgive the other and a desire to be reconciled to him or her. Because this biblical teaching runs counter to much teaching in the modern

church, it is important to understand it. Such forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably conditioned on repentance and faith.⁸

John Murray, who was taught by J. Gresham Machen, the man I mentioned last week who broke away from Princeton University due to its extreme liberalism shares the same principles as the others.

Forgiveness is a definite act performed by us on the fulfillment of certain conditions....
Forgiveness is something actively administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven. We greatly impoverish ourselves and impair the relations that we should sustain to our brethren when we fail to appreciate what is involved in forgiveness.⁹

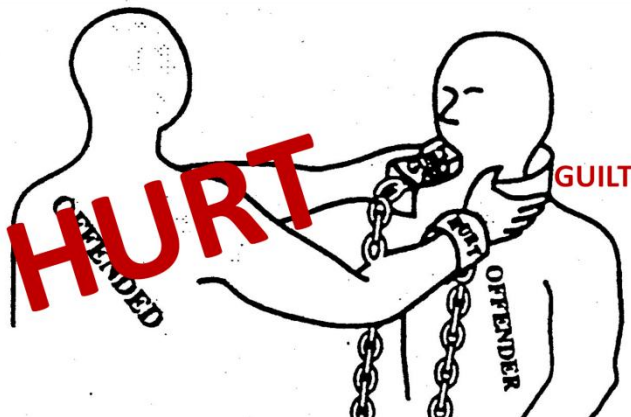
Finally, John Piper chimes in on the same topic.

In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person. Jesus said in Luke 17:3-4 "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.¹⁰

We will continue this topic next week, but first let me show you why it is so important to separate the transaction of forgiveness from our emotional attachment to the offense. In Genesis 42:21ff we read.²¹ *They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us."*

²² *Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood."* ²³ *They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.*

Joseph had worked through his emotional pain. He had "forgotten about his trouble and his father's household" but the brothers had obviously not forgotten about it. They had been silently tormented by it for the past 22 years and now they were convinced that their current trials were a direct result of their sins. Notice the repetition of the word distress. Joseph was distressed and now the brothers are distressed. They were being crushed by the weight of their own sin and I believe that Joseph wanted to offer forgiveness to them because he knew that they were distressed and guilt-ridden. But he could not yet offer to forgive them because they were not ready. Yes, they were guilty, but guilt is not the same thing as repentance.



The beauty of this story is that we are allowed to see the repentant spirit of the brothers develop over these three chapters and that is what we will look at more closely next week. But in the meantime, take another look at this diagram. Chances are that a great many of us are one of these two people—either we have sinned against someone else or we have been sinned against. If you are the guilty party, are you

moving to a place of Godly sorrow and repentance? If you are the offended party, are you ready to send away the guilt of the other person if they do repent. Furthermore, chances are also good that the offended parties still carry hurt and anger with them. What do you plan to do with that hurt? For some people, this hurt keeps them alive. They feed off of the hurt and live to extract revenge on others. Justice is in the cross. The guilt, the anger and the injustice are not meant for you to carry unless you are carrying them to the cross. We get the privilege of now experiencing this through our observance of the Lord's Supper.

Rich Maurer
November 7, 2010

¹ Answer s: T, T, F, F, T, T. Original quiz and answers found here: <http://www.chrisbrauns.com/a-new-forgiveness-quiz/answers-for-a-new-forgiveness-quiz/>. I am indebted to Pastor Chris Brauns for most of these quotes and for helping me to understand Scripture's teaching on conditional forgiveness.

² ἀφίημι Divorce—1 Cor. 7:11; Forgive—Matt 18:21 (Most common word for forgive)

³ ἀπολύω Divorce—Mat 1:19; Forgive—Luke 6:37 (Most common word for divorce)

⁴ Source: <http://images.eonline.com/static/news/pdf/GrammerLetter.pdf>

⁵ Louw, Johannes P. ; Nida, Eugene Albert: *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York : United Bible societies, 1996, c1989, S. 1:502

⁶ "This is a question that many Christians have never thought through. I think that Christians who have themselves harbored unjustified bitternesses and have been unforgiving in places and in ways that they should have been forgiving, often when they are confronted with and gripped by the radical teaching of Christ on forgiveness, out of sorrow for their own sin, read Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in such a way that they understand it to mean that forgiveness is an automatic obligation in every circumstance, irrespective of the repentance of the other party. And, again, I think that that is a mistake. I believe that forgiveness always has in view reconciliation, and reconciliation is always two-sided. So if there is not a repentance corresponding to a forgiveness, then very often there is an impossibility of reconciliation. I think that whatever we think about forgiveness, forgiveness is a component to what is a larger picture, and the larger picture is reconciliation. And reconciliation is necessarily two-sided. Consequently, I think it is important for us to talk about both forgiveness and readiness to forgive. There may be circumstances where a reconciliation is impossible, but a readiness to reconcile can still be present with a believer. Consequently, I would want to make that distinction when I was counseling a believer who was in a circumstance where there was not a present possibility of reconciliation of the relationship. Instead of telling them that they need to forgive or they will become bitter, I think I would rather say that you need to be ready to forgive and not to be captured by your bitterness." (*A Roundtable Discussion on Forgiveness: Derek Thomas Interviews Ligon Duncan and Justin Taylor*, available from [http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming_Issues/Forgiveness_Roundtable/354/.](http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming_Issues/Forgiveness_Roundtable/354/))

"Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. The Word of God says, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him" (Luke 17:3,4). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first "repent," that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him. But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbor ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong. That would be to condone the offence, and therefore I should fail to uphold the requirements of righteousness, and this the believer is ever to do. Does God ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for Scripture declares, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). One thing more. If one has injured me and repented not, while I cannot forgive him and treat him as though he had not offended, nevertheless, not only must I hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also pray for him. Here is the value

of Christ's perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him." (A.W. Pink, *The Word of Forgiveness*, Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Volume 9, Number 29, July 15 to July 21, 2007.)

"It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional . . . There are times when it is necessary to confront an offender. In such cases, unconditional forgiveness is not an option. These generally involve more serious sins- – not petty or picayune complaints, but soul-threatening sins or transgressions that endanger the fellowship of saints." (John MacArthur, *Forgiveness: The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 122-128.)

⁷ Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004; reprint, 3rd), 79-99.

⁸ Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY: 1994), 37.

⁹ John Murray, "A Lesson in Forgiveness," in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 191.

¹⁰ John Piper, *As We Forgive Our Debtors: What Does Forgiveness Look Like* (Desiring God Ministries, 1994, http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/868_As_We_Forgive_Our_Debtors/).