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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“AS WE FORGIVE”
Matthew 6:12, 14-15

♥ God’s love is unconditional.

The LORD God loves all humanity extravagantly, without reservation. He pours out his love willy-nilly upon innocent newborns and wicked, degraded, destructive sinners alike. Our good deeds cannot increase God’s love for us; neither can our bad deeds decrease it. {Ro 5:8; 8:7}

“God demonstrates his... love for us in this: While we were still sinners,” “hostile to God” and unable to “submit to [his will],” “Christ died for us.” God continues to love even those who reject his Son.

✚ God’s forgiveness is another matter: it *is* conditional. It has restrictions. It has qualifications.

I must not dishonor Holy God by misrepresenting him, so please hear me: the LORD Almighty never holds a grudge, never succumbs to resentment, and is eager to forgive. He is more than tolerant and better than fair: he {Ps 103:8, 10} **“is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”**

Nevertheless, his forgiveness does have conditions. When those conditions are not met, sin is not forgiven.

☐ In Matthew 6:12, 14-15 the Lord Jesus says: **“And forgive us our [sins], as we forgive [those who sin against us]. For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive**

you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Later, he will reteach the prayer with slightly different words: **“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us”** (Luke 11:4).

† Like it or not, God forgives us to the degree that we forgive others; but to the degree that we do not forgive others, God does not forgive us.

It is important to clarify what forgiveness does, and does not, require of us.

× Forgiveness never requires anyone to submit to abuse.

☑ By the time I was installed as the pastor of Faith Covenant Church in Essex, IA, one of the members had been abusing his wife for 50 years. He admitted that it was wrong, but insisted that she must “put up with it” as an act of Christian forgiveness.

It was a lie from the pit of hell. The call to forgiveness does not compel compliance with or participation in sin or abuse.

× Forgiveness does not require reconciliation.

📖 Reconciliation is restoring a broken relationship, creating harmony out of conflict, or turning enemies into friends. Reconciliation is the ideal. It is at the heart of our mission as Christ Followers, for {2 Co 5:18-19} **“God ...reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”**

Reconciliation depends on forgiveness. However, forgiveness does not depend on reconciliation.

≠ Reconciliation demands participation by both sides; forgiveness can be accomplished by one.

≠ Reconciliation demands that the offender change; forgiveness needs only the effort of the forgiver.

≠ Reconciliation demands mutual trust; forgiveness only requires trust in God.

≠ Reconciliation is frequently impossible. With God's help, forgiveness is always attainable.

☆ Forgiveness *does* require us to cancel the offender's debt of guilt and give up our claim to revenge.

Forgiveness is not ignoring a significant offense as though it never happened. Neither is it saying, "Apology accepted," while continuing to stew.

📖 True forgiveness is pardoning a wrong, cancelling a debt of guilt, giving up all claims to revenge. For this to happen we must 1) acknowledge that a harmful or disappointing offense has occurred; 2) absolve the offender; and 3) repeatedly let go of our angry feelings and bitter thoughts. This is what we commit ourselves to every time we pray, "**And forgive us our [sins], as we forgive [those who sin against us].**"

But *what if the offender does not deserve it?*

In Luke 6:36 Jesus commands, {Lk 6:36} "**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**" Forgiveness is an act of mercy. Mercy does not depend on the recipient's merit; just the opposite, mercy assumes that the offender is unworthy.

But *what if they repeat their sin?*

Peter asks, {Mt 18:21} "**Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven**

times?" He is being generous: the Rabbis teach the people to forgive three times, and no more.

Jesus answers: {Mt 18:22} "**I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times**" – or "**seventy times seven**" (the original can be translated either way). Then he tells the Parable of the Merciless Servant, which makes it clear that God does not want us to take these numbers literally; rather, we are to keep on forgiving and not keep score at all. For if we go through the motions of forgiving those who sin against us, yet keep a running tally up to some preset limit, we are not forgiving at all – we are merely postponing revenge.

But *what if they do not ask for forgiveness?*

As he is being crucified, Jesus prays: {Lk 23:34} "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**" Have any of his enemies requested forgiveness? No.

Someone might protest, "That is different. My enemy knows what s/he is doing!"

Perhaps; but is it not true that we rarely perceive all the practical outcomes, moral weight, and theological weight of our sins? {Jer 17:9} "**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?**"

The priests and Pharisees who engineered Christ's murder were confident that they knew exactly what they were doing. So did the soldiers who carried it out. And still Jesus said, "**They do not know what they are doing.**"

I suggest that those who sin against us are not so different. They really **“do not know what they are doing”** – even when their sin is premeditated.

There is no getting around it. Matthew 6:12, 14-15 means precisely as it sounds: **“if [we] forgive others when they sin against [us], [our] heavenly Father will also forgive [us]. But if [we] do not forgive others their sins, [our] Father will not forgive [our] sins.”**

Is this a cause for alarm? Does this teaching make you anxious? *Are you afraid of divine condemnation* because you have not forgiven that one person who inflicted such deep wounds?

Anyone who refuses to forgive should be afraid. As James 2:12-13 warns: **“Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,”** (that is, the law of love) **“because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”**

☼ If, on the other hand, you are afraid because you want to forgive but have difficulty doing so – take heart! There is a sure-fire solution: Draw near to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

◆ Remember the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15? The younger son foolishly wallows in blatant immorality, while the older son acts responsibly and does the right thing. Yet in a surprising turn of events the gutter sinner is restored; in contrast, the “respectable” brother ends up broken and bitter.

What makes the difference?

At first the younger son goes as far away as he can, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, but in the end he

draws near to his father. Consequently, he is reconciled to his father and restored to sonship.

Meanwhile, the older brother is physically present; but inwardly he pulls away from his father. Hence, he is unable to celebrate, unable to reconcile with his brother, unable even to enjoy the wealth that is set aside for him.

His misery is entirely self-imposed. His father longs to be in fellowship with him and bless him, and says {Lk 15:31-32} **“My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”**

What happens next? There are two likely endings.

The older son can accept his father’s invitation and join the feast. If so, {Eph 2:14} **“the dividing wall of hostility”** that he has been constructing will be torn down. His relationship with his father will be healed. Though he is unable to forgive at his first reunion with the prodigal, his father’s love will gradually soften his heart. Forgiveness will become easier, and that will create possibilities for reconciliation with his brother.

Or the older son can persistently snub his father’s invitation and refuse to enter the house. If so, the barrier will only get taller. His relationship with his father will continue to deteriorate, and his heart will get harder. Forgiveness will be out of the question, and there will be no hope of reconciliation with his brother.

🔑 **The key is in drawing near to his father.**

If you cannot forgive someone who has sinned against you, draw near to God. Worship him. Pray to him. Feast upon his Word. Soak up his love.

The love of God will make the impossible, possible. You might even be surprised to find that you want to forgive that offender.

Matthew 6:12, 14-15: **“And forgive us our [sins], as we forgive [those who sin against us]. For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”**

This is the Word of the Lord.