

# How to Forgive (contd)

Forgiveness part 6  
Philemon 8-18 12-12-10

This message answers common questions about forgiveness and provides seven practical principles that will help you forgive.

Excerpt:

Paul appeals to the preciousness of the relationship. When someone refuses to forgive that is like a relationship abortion. People abort their babies because they do not believe the baby is worth the trouble. And people abort relationships for the same reason – they do not see that relationship as being worth the trouble.

Excerpt 2:

Think about it - who are the happiest people you know? Are they the recluses who have shut themselves off from close friendships so they will never get hurt again? No – they are the people who love like Christ loves and get hurt routinely by those they love. Loving the people Christ loves because Christ loves them is the pathway to the greatest joy. Protecting yourself from being hurt is the pathway to nothing but darkness.

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Philemon 1:1-25 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. 6 I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. 7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. 8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul--an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful

both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back--not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. 22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

## Introduction

### Beware of Satan's scheming

If you were the devil and you wanted to destroy Agape Bible Church, what would be the most effective strategy? What sort of a scheme would work best? I can tell you the one he used on the church in Corinth - unforgiveness. Satan knows he cannot destroy a church just by sin – that will not work because of forgiveness and redemption. The only way to really destroy a church is to con them into refusing to forgive one another. So he tried that in Corinth, but Paul did not fall for it.

**2 Corinthians 2:10 ...I have forgiven ... 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.**

Paul saw right through what Satan was trying to pull and he destroyed Satan's whole plan by forgiving the sinner.

So Satan lost that battle, but he did not give up the strategy. It remains one of Satan's most effective schemes. And so we have spent several weeks trying to learn from God's Word how to keep ourselves from being outwitted by the enemy in this matter of forgiveness.

Winning this war is not easy, because Satan attacks from a lot of different angles. He knows how to entrap people in anger and vengeance. One of the main ways is by getting you to condemn yourself and doubt God's forgiveness. He is called the accuser of the brethren (Rev.12:10). He works night and day to make you doubt what the Bible says and convince you that you are still guilty and that God is still unhappy with you. He does that so you will feel distant from God. He does it to make you timid, rather than bold in prayer. He works at getting you to base your beliefs on your feelings rather than God's Word. And most of all he does it to make God look bad. He distorts your conception of God's nature so you will not feel loved and forgiven by Him, and then you will not be as loving and forgiving toward others.

That is what Satan is trying to pull in this church. But we are not unaware of his schemes. We know what our enemy is up to, and we have taken a few weeks away from our study of the Sermon on the Mount to study how to defeat those schemes and become a gracious, forgiving people. We looked at three principles last time and today I would like to go through four more – but before we start with that, let's remind ourselves of what forgiveness is.

### Gracious forgetting

### **Gracious**

Maybe the simplest way to define forgiveness is this: It is a gracious forgetting. One of the Greek words for forgiveness is *charizomai* which means “gift.” It is the same Greek word used for spiritual gifts. That word points to attitude.

### **Eager and heartfelt**

The sin damages the warmth and closeness of the relationship, and forgiveness is a gracious, free, generous, eager, speedy granting of renewed closeness. That is why Jesus said it has to be **from the heart**.

**Matthew 18:35 This [torture] is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.**

### **Free**

So forgiveness is heartfelt and gracious and free - with no strings attached. By definition, then, it must cost the other person nothing. If you think you are being forgiving by letting the person off cheap, you are mistaken. It is not letting them off cheap; it is letting them off free.

If you make the person go for an afternoon feeling terrible before you forgive, that is not forgiveness. And if your flesh screams, “No - he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven” then you say, “Of course he doesn’t; that is the point!” If he deserved it, you would not be giving forgiveness; you would be dispensing justice. So if you have held a grudge for a while, you cannot even really forgive the whole debt because part of it has been paid. You have missed the opportunity to forgive completely, and now the best you can do is forgive what is left of the debt. So for forgiveness to be forgiveness it must be free and gracious.

### **Pursuing the guilty party**

In fact, if you have a heart like God’s heart you will actively *pursue* reconciliation. Isn’t that what God did for us?

**Romans 5:8 While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

He pursued us, and the only way He finally got us was by overcoming our resistance. You would think it would be the offending party who would pursue forgiveness, and the offended party who would resist. But in our case it was the other way around. You and I are saved not because we sinned, got to feeling bad, and pursued reconciliation with God. We were saved because after we sinned we hardened our hearts, but then God pursued us, and we resisted, and he continued to pursue until He finally won our hearts. And He calls us to do exactly the same thing. It does not matter if you are the offending party or the offended party – either way God says you are the one who must pursue reconciliation (Mt.5:23-24, 18:15).

### **“Forgetting”**

So forgiveness is gracious. But what about that other part of the definition? It is a gracious *forgetting*. Is that a Biblical idea - forgive and forget? Actually – not really. God does not promise to forget our sins, but He does say that He will not remember them against us.

**Ezekiel 18:21 if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. 22 None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him.**

Forgetting and not remembering are two different things. God could never forget anything, because He is all-knowing – He knows everything. When He forgives He is still aware that you sinned; the promise is that He will not remember that sin against you. He will not call it to mind and allow it to be a factor in His dealings with you or His feelings toward you. So when I say forgiveness is a gracious forgetting, what I really mean is it is a gracious non-remembering. When I say, “gracious forgetting,” I do not mean forgetting in the sense of inability to recall; I mean forgetting in the sense of unwillingness to bring it up against the person in your thoughts.

When you forgive you make a decision not to call that offense to mind against that person anymore. You say, “It is now in the past. I don’t want you to walk around feeling bad and grieving any longer I don’t want this sin to be a factor in how we relate to each other any longer. I am just going to absorb the loss and put it behind us and never bring it up against you ever again – in my mind or in my words or attitudes.”

Now, what happens if you do that and then wake up the next morning and all you can think about is the sin they committed against you? Does that mean you have not truly forgiven? No, it just means you are being tempted to renege on your forgiveness. Forgiveness is the pledge not to bring it up again against the person ever again. Vengeance is when you do bring it up against them again. So when you are tempted to think about what they did to you, you are simply being tempted with the sin of vengeance and unforgiveness. And you handle that the same way you handle any sin in the thought life – you replace ungodly thoughts with godly ones. If you are tempted with thoughts of unforgiveness toward your husband, what should you do with those thoughts? The same thing you would want your husband to do if he is tempted with thoughts of lust; Or your children to do if they are tempted with thoughts about lying to you or stealing something. Replace ungodly thoughts with godly ones. True forgiveness does not mean all temptations toward anger or revenge cease. In fact, the more you forgive, the more Satan will ramp up the temptations.

So the fact that you are still dealing with temptations to renege on your forgiveness does not mean your forgiveness was not real. Nor does the continued existence of pain. One counselor once told me that I will know when I have truly forgiven when I can think of that person without feeling pain. That is not in the Bible. Since when does forgiveness eliminate pain? It may very well *increase* the pain. When you forgive a debt you absorb the loss. So the fact that it still hurts does not mean you have failed to truly forgive. It just means sin hurts.

That is why, as we found last week, humility is so important in forgiveness. When your heart is proud and driven by self-importance, the chief priority is avoidance of pain. But humility says, “I value the restoration of our relationship more than I value the avoidance of pain.”

## 4) Consider God’s love for the person

The book of Philemon is about a runaway slave named Onesimus. He was a non-Christian slave owned by Philemon, who was a Christian. But when Onesimus ran away he ran right into Paul, and the next thing you know Onesimus becomes a Christian. So he repents, and now he is ready to go back to his owner. The problem is, if Philemon follows the pattern of the culture he lived in, he would be tempted to be very harsh with his runaway slave. So Paul sends the slave back to Philemon with a letter urging Philemon to forgive, and that letter is the book of Philemon. He begins with a warm greeting, and then gets down to business in verse 8.

### Paul’s appeal to love

**Philemon 1:8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.**

Duty requires us to forgive. But it cannot be done out of mere duty. It is like love or compassion – if the emotions are not there then it does not exist. There is no such thing as a cold, detached

forgiveness. Forgiveness says, "I want you to be close to me again." And so only love can forgive. So Paul says, "I want you to love Onesimus as a brother, and for that love to move your heart to forgiveness."

Now that is tough, because Onesimus had wronged Philemon in a huge way. To replace him would cost from five hundred to two thousand days' wages. From two to seven years' wages. Let's just put it in the middle – 4.5 years' wages. If you make \$30,000 in a year that would be over \$130,000. Plus it sounds from the book like Onesimus stole from him to boot. So imagine you have an employee who just disappears one day leaving you high and dry, and steals your \$130,000 motor home and some things out of your house. Now it is a long time later - What would Paul have to say to get you to soften your heart toward that person?

### **Based on Paul's love for Onesimus**

Here is how he does it: Paul appeals to his own love for Onesimus.

### **Philemon 1:12 I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you.**

That is a statement about how much Paul loves Onesimus. "Sending him back to you is like ripping out my own heart."

**16 ...He is very dear to me ... 17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.**

How do you take an angry heart and make it soft and eager to forgive? Paul's strategy for getting Philemon to love Onesimus is to appeal to how much Paul loves Onesimus.

### ***Think of Christ's love for the person who hurt you***

Now, why is that in the Bible? How is that supposed to help God's people down through the ages? Is this book teaching principles that apply only to one particular man in one circumstance in history? No. Paul is an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. His affections are placed here as a motivation because they represent the affections of the Lord Himself. Just as Paul's love for Onesimus should soften Philemon's heart, so Christ's love for the person who hurt you should soften your heart.

So spend time thinking about the compassion, mercy, and forgiveness that person has received from God. Thinking about how much you have been forgiven will make you *willing* to forgive; thinking about how much God loves that person will make you *eager* to forgive.

We would do well, whenever we read in Scripture or hear a sermon about how much God loves us, to apply it to that brother or sister you find so hard to love. Spend at least as much time thinking about how much God loves them as you do about how much God loves you. And talk to God about that. In your prayers talk to Him about the depths of the love He feels for that person.

### ***Don't throw a fellow slave into prison***

In the parable in Matthew 18, the unforgiving servant chokes his fellow servant and throws him in prison. That was actually illegal at that time. It was against the law to arrest someone who worked for the king because of a debt.

So it is illegal to arrest a fellow servant, and it is just downright dumb to be unmerciful to the king's son or daughter. That kind of cruelty really makes the Father very unhappy. That is the point of the choking. When you first read the parable you might wonder if the choking scene is really necessary. Why does Jesus put that in the story? He put it in there so we can see how ugly we look in the mirror of this parable when we are unmerciful. When someone sins against you and repents and you withhold forgiveness, Jesus is saying, "Look at what you're doing. You are like an unmerciful

servant who rings the neck of a fellow servant right after you have received mercy for your sin.” You are choking that poor person! You are slamming him into prison. You are being cruel.”

### ***No merciful for the non-merciful***

Think of the person who is at the bottom of your list right now. He did something that upset you, and so now he just is not someone you want to be in the room with. If you are allowing your heart to harden toward that person you are being merciless. And that is scary because...

**James 2:13 ...judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful...**

In Matthew 5:7 Jesus said **Blessed are the merciful**, but the other half of that is in Matthew.18 - “Unblessed are the unmerciful.”

## **5) Consider the value of harmonious relationships**

### **The relationship is worth restoring**

**Philemon 1:15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.**

Paul appeals to the preciousness of the relationship. When someone refuses to forgive that is like a relationship abortion. People abort their babies because they do not believe the baby is worth the trouble. And people abort relationships for the same reason – they do not see that relationship as being worth the trouble. When someone sins against you, two things happen. They take two valuable things from you. One of them cannot be restored – the other can. The part that cannot be restored is the pain or loss you have suffered. If someone hurts your feelings, there is nothing they can do to go back and undo that pain you went through. It is like getting hit by an uninsured driver who is broke. No matter how unjust it is, you are just simply not going to get what you are owed. You can forgive the debt or you can live in anxiety about it, but that is it – they cannot ever pay it.

So that part can never be restored. But there is a valuable thing they took from you that actually can be restored. And that is a harmonious relationship with the person. If they repent, that can be restored. The car that they smashed up is your relationship with that person. And you have the resources to repair the car yourself. Getting the money from them is not possible, but getting the car fixed at your own expense is possible.

And immediately the angry, offended heart says, “No, thanks! I don’t want to restore a harmonious relationship with that person. Closeness with him is NOT a valuable thing to me. I would prefer to just leave the car smashed to pieces.”

Why? Why would someone prefer to leave a relationship in pieces rather than restore a joyful, harmonious relationship? Isn’t a joyful, harmonious relationship always more enjoyable and fulfilling than a broken, hostile one? Yes, but we resist it because restoring the relationship will not only benefit us – it would also benefit them. And when you are mad at someone for hurting you, you want them to suffer – even if it means you have to suffer too.

So the question is, is the closeness of this relationship valuable? Is it worth salvaging? You have this smashed up car; you have the ability to fix it; the question is – Is it valuable enough to be worth what it will cost you to fix it? The answer is yes. That relationship is exceedingly valuable – for a couple reasons.

### **Valuable because it is the pathway to joy**

It is valuable because relationships with people are the avenue for the greatest joy in life. They are also the source of great pain and sorrow – no question about that; but if you love with the kind of love God commands, then the joy will be greater, far greater than the sorrow and it will be more than worth it. Jesus said in John.15:11 that our joy will be made full when we love one another.

Think about it - who are the happiest people you know? Are they the recluses who have shut themselves off from close friendships so they will never get hurt again? No – they are the people who love like Christ loves and get hurt routinely by those they love. Loving the people Christ loves because Christ loves them is the pathway to the greatest joy. Protecting yourself from being hurt is the pathway to nothing but darkness.

### **Valuable because God loves harmonious relationships among His children**

That is one thing that makes relationships valuable, but it is not the most important thing. Far more important is the simple fact that the relationship is important to God. It should be valuable to you because it is valuable to Christ.

#### ***You are siblings***

In the last point I said we need to consider God’s love for that person. When you do that, ask yourself why God loves that person – and why He also loves you. Why does God love you as a son or daughter? Because you are in Christ. And if the other person is a Christian, that is the same reason God loves them. We are siblings. Paul says, “Philemon, forgive him because he is a **dear brother**” (v.15).

#### ***You are parts of the same body***

We are all members of the same body. Think about your own body. If one part has a weakness, do not the other parts make allowances? If you sprain your right leg, does your left leg kick it and demand that it get its act together? No. Your body limps, and your left leg bears all the weight for as long as it takes. Your hands wrap it with ice, and your whole body makes sacrifices and accommodates the weak member – changing whatever plans you may have had to go skiing – all without meting out any punishment on the weak foot.

### **Unbelievers**

Of course all this assumes the person is a believer. What about unbelievers? That is a hard question. Scripture does not really speak specifically about forgiving unbelievers.<sup>1</sup> We are to love our enemies and pray for them and be kind to them and never take revenge on them – but all that is included in patience. Forgiveness goes further than patience. Forgiveness restores intimacy. Are we to restore intimacy with unbelievers? According to 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 we are not even supposed to have intimate relationships with unbelievers.

Now, obviously if you are married to an unbeliever, that is different. You should strive as much as possible to have a good marriage. So all I can say about forgiving unbelievers is this – whatever degree of closeness is appropriate for a particular relationship – go ahead and allow that to be restored if they repent of a sin against you. But true fellowship can only be experienced among believers, and so the great emphasis in Scripture is on forgiving one another in the Church.

### **That is how they know we are His**

That is how the world knows we are His disciples. Jesus said they will know we are His disciples by the way we love one another (Jn.13:35). What is it about our love that is so unique and astonishing to the world? Is it because we enjoy hanging out and having meals together? No – they do those kinds

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<sup>1</sup> One possible exception might be Matthew 6:14, which speaks of “forgiving the men.” The phrase “the men” is used elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount to refer to all people, including unbelievers (e.g. Mt.5:13,16).

of things with their friends too. What is unique to us are those times when normal human love would stop, but our love persists because our love for one another is driven by God's love for His people. And eagerness to completely forgive any size offense is an example of that supernatural nature of our love.

So part of what enables us to forgive is knowing how much God delights in harmonious relationships among His children.

### **Psalm 133:1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!**

It is like the ceremonial oil that is so pleasing to God in its fragrance.

### **The insanity of unforgiveness – embracing a knife**

Harmonious relationships are tremendously valuable. And we all know that – we all know it is far more pleasant to be on good terms with someone than to be at war. So why are we so reluctant to forgive? Why is it so hard? Why on earth would our soul want to cling to the anger? It is one of the most bizarre and mysterious tendencies of the human soul. Your soul wraps itself around anger like the embrace of a lover. But the thing being embraced is a ball of razor blades. The more we cling to it the more we lacerate our own souls. It is painful and miserable and it gives us an unhappy life, and the alternative is peace and happiness and joy and yet we refuse to let go. The memory of the offense is so painful to us, and yet we voluntarily handcuff ourselves it. Unforgiveness imprisons you to the past. And Ephesians 4:27 says it gives the Devil a foothold in your life. Holding on to anger actually opens up access to demonic and satanic influence in your life. And the result is you start to become like the person you are refusing to forgive. The very things you so hate in them start to take root in your own heart. Why are we so reluctant to let go of something that is doing us nothing but harm? That is the insanity of anger. When God commands us to forgive, it is not a burdensome, oppressive command. He is simply saying, "Let go your grip on the ball of razor blades, and instead embrace the priceless treasure of a joyful, harmonious love relationship."

## **6) Consider the Cross**

Now at this point you might be thinking, "The reason I am reluctant is because of justice. I cannot stand this injustice!" No doubt Philemon is having thoughts like that, and so Paul addresses that in verse 18.

**Philemon 1:18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back**

You want justice? You need for the debt to be paid? Fine – charge it to me. Then he throws this in:

**19 ...not to mention that you owe me your very self.**

I love how Paul throws these little remarks in. Earlier he said, "I could command this and remind you that it is your duty and you have no choice but to forgive...but I will not mention that." And now, "I could remind you that you owe me your very self, but I will not bring that up." Philemon owes his life to Paul and so Paul says, "If you have to take your pound of flesh out of someone, take it out of me." Of course he knows his dear friend and son in the faith is not going to do that. How could he? What Philemon owes Paul is far greater than what Onesimus owes Philemon. Onesimus' debt was a financial one; Philemon's was a spiritual one. Onesimus' debt was temporal, Philemon's was eternal. So Paul knows Philemon would much sooner just absorb the loss than require Paul to pay anything.



When someone hurts you, offends you, owes you something – just remember this: you owe such unpayable debts to others who have generously, graciously, freely, faithfully, and lovingly benefited you with eternal, spiritual blessings. Like that person who led you to the Lord. Or the people who have prayed for you and labored in the study of God's Word so they could teach you and who have taken the time to encourage you and build you up and counsel you or reprove you or strengthen you. You owe them a far greater debt, and they are not requiring you to repay them – and you would be unable to do so if they did. Paul appeals to Philemon's debt to him and calls in a favor, so to speak. And if the Pauls in your life are not calling in the favor to get you to be willing to forgive a brother – Jesus Christ is. All those spiritual debts are really debts to the Lord who used those people as tools to bless you, right? And so you might not have a Paul telling you, "Whatever they owe you, put it on my account. Charge it to me and I will pay it back. And don't forget you owe me your very self." You might not have a Paul in your life saying that, but you do have the Lord Jesus Christ saying that. Someone hurts you, and they repent, Jesus says, "Let it go. And if you need your pound of flesh, charge it to My account. I'll pay it. I'll reimburse you for the loss you absorb when you forgive. Oh, and by the way - don't forget you owe me your very life." Isn't that the argument in Philippians 2?

**Philippians 2:1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.**

If you have ever received any good gift from Jesus – if you ever once have received any favor from Him, any compassion, any tenderness, any grace, any forgiveness, then consider others more important than yourself and love them for Jesus' sake. And for the sake of the saints. Paul says that will "**make my joy complete.**" Forgive in order to bring joy to the rest of the church, and especially to the heart of God. So whatever that person owes you – charge it to Christ. Just subtract it from the debt you owe Christ.

Remember what we said about the basis for forgiveness? The world thinks the basis for forgiveness is the goodness and large-heartedness of the one forgiving. But when someone does something really horrible to you, and your eyes are opened to how evil sin really is, appealing to what is in your own heart will not cut it. It is at that point we need to remember that the basis for forgiveness is the Cross. The reason you can forgive that person is not because the sin was small and it is not because your heart is big; the reason you can forgive is because the price was paid. If the person is repentant, then punishment has already been meted out. The Lord Jesus Christ suffered one hundred percent of the penalty for that sin on the cross. When we refuse to forgive we are saying the price Jesus paid was not enough. It might have been enough to satisfy a holy God, but the punishment was not enough to satisfy your standards. That is blasphemy.

### **Trust God with justice**

If the person repents we can forgive anything on the basis of the Cross. But what if they are not repentant? Well, if they are unrepentant then they deserve to be punished. Vengeance is called for. But who is best equipped to carry that out?

**Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

When revenge is called for, God can be trusted to carry it out. He will do a lot better job than you will. But if you do it, you crowd out God's vengeance – that is why we are told to leave room for His wrath. If the person is unrepentant, God will take care of justice. If he is repentant then justice was carried out on the Cross, and nothing more needs to be done.

### **Trust God to teach them a lesson**

“But isn't it true that sometimes even a repentant sinner should suffer some consequences for sin even if they are repentant? Don't we need that to learn righteousness? If something is not done, it could happen again. He needs to be taught a lesson. If I just forgive, then he will not take it seriously. If he just gets away with this with no consequence, he will never learn. He will never change. I will have to suffer this again and again all my life. I've got to put my foot down and do something about this.” And that kind of thinking is egged on by the world. They say, “If you just forgive over and over, you are an enabler.”

Is that true? Does the person need some consequences in order to learn? Maybe. Maybe not. Can we agree on that? Isn't it true that sometimes punishing a person has a good outcome, and other times it does not? Sometimes patience works best and other times punishment works best. So in this case, how do you know for sure which it is? You don't. You cannot. But God does. God knows which one will work best.

Not only that, but if punishment is what is called for, God is a lot better at it than you, right? He is much more powerful, and much more capable of inflicting the degree of pain that will be required to do the trick.

There is no question that God knows best what is needed, and God is the one who is most capable of doing what is needed – the only question is, can He be trusted to do it? God has promised to do what is best, the only question is, can He be trusted to follow through on what He promised? According to Hebrews 12:11 God's discipline produces **a harvest of righteousness ... for those who have been trained by it**. Discipline is the Father's job – not the siblings' job.

Where does the Bible say, “Wives, punish your husbands so they will learn their lesson”? There are a lot of passages in Scripture about dealing with sin, but not a single one of them tells us to punish a repentant brother or sister. When we refuse to forgive or decide we need to teach the person a lesson we are usurping God's authority. We are taking the sword of judgment out of His hand and saying, “Give me that – You can't be trusted with it. You're too lenient, to unjust – I need to take over.”

### **Forgiveness accuses (It's not OK)**

Sometimes people are hesitant to forgive because it feels like it would be an endorsement of the sin. They would be saying, “What you did was OK.” Think of the conversation that typically takes place when you hurt someone. If the person is a forgiving person, what do they usually say when you say, “I'm sorry”? “It's OK.” “I'm sorry” – “That's OK.” There are many people who feel they cannot forgive, because in their mind saying, “I forgive you” is the same as saying, “What you did is OK.” They think forgiveness is an endorsement of what was done. Or a minimizing of it.

But “I forgive you” does not mean what they did was OK. In fact just the opposite. When you tell someone, “I forgive you” you are actually accusing that person of sin. If what they did is OK, there is nothing to forgive. “I forgive you” means “What you did was evil, and you owe me a debt – you owe it to me to feel bad about it and to make things right, and I am now canceling that debt.” So do not think you are endorsing their sin when you forgive. Just the opposite – you are saying it is something that needs forgiveness, which means it is sin.

### ***Forgiving God?***

That is why, by the way, it is absurd to speak about forgiving God. Sometimes Christian counselors who are influenced by psychology will tell you that if you are mad at God or disappointed

with God you need to forgive Him. But the idea of forgiving God implies at least two blasphemous ideas. First it implies that God did something wrong. And second it implies that not only did He do something wrong, but He is accountable to us. You have got to have some kind of a God-complex to imagine that you are in a position to pass judgment on God. If you have feelings like that, the solution is not for you to forgive God; it is for you to come to know the true God. If you think God has done something wrong, or that He is accountable to you, the god you believe in is a false god (a demon) and you have absolutely no idea who the true God is.

We do not ever say, "I forgive you" to God because "I forgive you" means, "What you did was sin, and now that you have repented I am putting it in the past." That is not something you say to God. But it is something we say to each other. And when we say it we are not saying, "What you did was OK," but rather, "What you did was sin."

So, should you say, "It's OK"? Only if you mean "Things are OK between me and you now." The sin was not OK, but things are OK between you and me now because I forgive that sin.

## 7) Consider the sovereign purposes of God in the sinner's actions

One more principle. This one is fascinating. Look back again at verse .15.

**Philemon 1:15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.**

Paul says, "Think about the reason this all happened." What was the reason? What was the reason for Philemon's loss? Paul says the reason was so that Onesimus could become a believer. Was that Onesimus' reason? Did unbelieving Onesimus wake up one day and think, "I think I'll run away and steal some things from my master and go to Rome and run into the Apostle Paul and be confronted with the gospel and then become a Christian and then come back and know Philemon as a brother in Christ"? No, that was not Onesimus' reason for running away. So why does Paul say that was the reason? Because even though it was not Onesimus' reason; it was God's reason.

Never forget – when people sin against you they have a bad reason for doing so. But God has a good reason. God is allowing them to sin against you, and His reason for allowing that and for bringing this hardship into your life is only good. And the good that He is doing is far greater than the evil that the person is doing. God could have prevented this sin from happening against you, but He went ahead and let it happen for some very good reason. And the blessing that will bring into your life will dwarf the damage done by the sin in the long run. Isn't that what enabled Joseph to forgive his brothers (**You meant it for evil but God meant it for good – Gn.50:20**)?

## Conclusion

So if you struggle to forgive, be prepared by keeping your heart soft through patience until they repent, and then when they do repent,

1. Realize forgiveness is not optional
2. Put away anger
3. Increase your enjoyment of God's forgiveness of your sins
4. Consider God's love for the person who hurt you
5. Consider the value of a harmonious relationship
6. Look to the cross for Justice
7. Realize that God allowed this sin to happen against you for His good purposes.

So, what did Philemon do? Obviously his response to this letter is not mentioned in the letter. But I think we can be confident that Philemon forgave, just as Paul assumed he would. I cannot imagine the Church would have included this book in Scripture as a testimony to the godliness of Philemon if he had refused to forgive. And do you want to hear something interesting? Forty years later a man by the name of Ignatius sent a letter to the pastor of the church in Ephesus, and guess what that pastor's name was? Onesimus. It is entirely possible this is the same Onesimus that Philemon forgave. Instead of casting him aside for his sin, he is restored, becomes a leader in the church, and ends up being the pastor of one of the most important churches in Asia Minor. Our God is a gracious, patient, forgiving, redeeming, restoring God. Let's follow in His steps.

**Benediction: 1 Peter 1:22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.**

## Summary

Satan tries to get us to doubt God's forgiveness so we will not forgive. Forgiveness is a gracious forgetting. Consider God's love for the person (do not be merciless to those He loves), the value of the relationship, look to the cross for justice, and consider God's sovereign purposes.

## Q&A Questions

- 1) When do you start teaching children about forgiveness from the heart?
- 2) If you forgive but still don't trust the person, isn't that remembering his sin against him?
- 3) Is it okay to want God to take vengeance on someone who hurt you? Should you want "burning coals" to be heaped upon him?
- 4) What if you want to forgive but the emotions aren't there? Is it disingenuous to tell the person you forgive him?
- 5) If you are quick to forgive over and over, how do you avoid being a doormat?
- 6) What about forgiving non-Christian family members?
- 7) How can you use the book "The Love Dare" for forgiveness?