

Clarifying the Obligation to Forgive Those Who Sin Against Us¹

By Ashby Camp

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Christians often are told that they need to forgive those who have sinned against them even when the offender steadfastly denies that he did anything wrong and thus denies any need for forgiveness. In such situations, I think it is crucial to distinguish between actual forgiveness and a *willingness and desire* to forgive. Failing to do so creates confusion.

God is the epitome of love, mercy, and forgiveness, and yet he does not forgive the impenitent, those who refuse to humble themselves and seek his forgiveness. It is only those who in faith repent and are baptized who receive forgiveness. (On the link between repentance and salvation, see, e.g., Lk. 5:32, 13:3, 15:10, 24:45-47; Acts 2:37-39, 3:19, 5:31, 17:30, 20:21, 26:19-20; Rom. 2:4-5; Heb. 6:1; Jas. 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 3:9.) Why is that? It certainly is not because God is reluctant to forgive. He gave his one and only Son on a cross because he so loved the world (Jn. 3:16), and he wants all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3-4). So why does he not forgive the impenitent?

I suggest that "forgiving the impenitent" is an inherent contradiction, a logical impossibility like making a square circle. Forgiveness by its nature is a response to a desire to be forgiven; that is its implied and understood predicate. It cannot be forced on someone who does not want it. It makes no more sense to speak of forgiving someone who does not want it than to speak of answering someone who has no questions or to speak of selling something to someone who has no interest in buying. Whereas forgiveness brings healing and reconciliation, one-sided declarations of forgiveness of the impenitent leave the parties estranged.

Disciples must, like God, stand ready and eager to forgive all who have wronged them, bearing no grudge or animosity toward them, but as with God, they cannot forgive in the proper sense until the wrongdoer seeks it. That is why Jesus says in Lk. 17:3-4, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,*⁴ *and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.*" And that is why in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Mat. 18:23-35 the refusal to forgive is in the face of one begging for forgiveness. Why do we think we can forgive the impenitent when God does not?²

Nothing about this weakens or changes our responsibility as Christians to deal with our side of forgiveness when we have been wronged. We must stand ready to forgive, having turned loose whatever anger, resentment, and desires for revenge the wrong may have engendered.

¹ This is a slightly modified version of the "Excursus on Forgiveness" in my notes on Colossians. I have turned it into a separate document in the hope it will make it easier for people to find it.

² In Mk. 11:25a ("And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone"), a desire or request for forgiveness by the offending party is understood or assumed. If Lk. 23:34a ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing") is original, then, as Peter Gurry remarked (in comments section of ['Father Forgive Them' – The Variant in Luke 23:34a](#)), "the saying probably is meant to be read as 'Father, offer them forgiveness,' that is, forgive them if they repent." See also, Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 145.

Those attitudes will only consume us. We are not holding a grudge or harboring resentment while we wait for the wrongdoer to repent. Rather, our heart is ready to forgive, freed from the burden of the offense, whether the wrongdoer ever seeks our forgiveness. If he does, it is our joy to bestow it and be reconciled. If he does not, we are at peace with his being in God's hands.

In this regard, I recommend Chris Brauns's book *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). As observed by John Piper, whom Brauns quotes in an appendix (p. 211):

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Mat. 18:17), we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.