

Lesson 11

Forgiveness and Repentance

I. Introduction

A. Recall C. S. Lewis: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”

1. His essay that begins with that sentence was written shortly after World War II, and he begins by posing the question of whether a Pole or a Jew could ever be expected to forgive the Gestapo.

2. “When you start with mathematics you do not begin with calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want ... to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.”

B. Forgiveness is a complicated issue. In fact, it is surprisingly complicated.

1. Most, if asked to identify the most complicated and difficult topics in the Bible, would likely not place forgiveness and repentance high on their list. But after studying for this lesson, I would place it quite high on my list!

2. The questions are difficult and the analysis is complicated. Worse, many of the treatments you will find of the subject are simplistic and superficial. This topic deserves and requires a deep level of study.

3. For all of the lessons in this series, I encourage you to download the notes and study the cited passages on your own, but I emphasize that advice particularly with today’s lesson. This is an important subject, and you need to make up your mind about it based on a careful study of God’s word.

C. It is important what we believe and practice on this issue.

1. Mark 11:26 tells us there is a severe consequence if we fail to forgive when we should: “But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

2. That verse might lead us to just ere on the side of caution and forgive everyone without regard to any other consideration, but as we will see that strategy would also have negative consequences.

a) One of the many articles I read in preparation for this lesson was one with the provocative title, “When forgiveness is a sin.”

b) That article was written in response to the murder by 14 year old Michael Carneal of three of his high school classmates. As the author put it, “The bodies of those three teenage girls were not yet cold before some of their school mates hung up a sign announcing ‘We forgive you, Mike!’”

c) The article then discussed what the author called “this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness” that “advances the amoral notion that no matter how much you hurt others, your fellow citizens will forgive you.”

d) So before we decide that just forgiving everyone for everything is the safest strategy, we need to consider the consequences of that strategy.

3. I think we will all agree that the best strategy is to determine what the Bible says on this subject and then do that.

II. Definitions

A. *What is forgiveness?*

1. The most common metaphor for forgiveness in the Bible is the cancellation of a debt.

a) Luke 11:4, for example, says that we should ask God “to forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us.”

b) Sin incurs a debt that must be canceled or paid, and forgiveness is the loving, voluntary cancellation of that debt.

(1) Luke 7:41-43 There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. 42 And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? 43 Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. Forgiveness is cancelling the debt and then tearing up the note so that it can never be held against the person again.

2. Two primary Greek words are translated “forgive” in the New Testament.

a) The first is *aphiemi*, which means to send away or to dismiss.

b) The second is *charizomai*, which means to do someone a favor or to be gracious.

c) These two words combine to support our definition that forgiveness in the Bible is the loving, voluntary cancellation of that debt.

d) Why loving? While it is true that forgiveness in a general sense can be given for many different motives, the forgiveness given to a Christian by God and the forgiveness a Christian gives to others must be given with the motivation of love.

B. What is the opposite of forgiveness?

1. Some would say vengeance, and yet it is very possible for forgiveness to be withheld absent revenge.

a) Indeed, those who have harmed us may be dead, and thus beyond our ability to seek vengeance had we that desire.

b) Perhaps, some might argue, the opposite of forgiveness is a desire that the offender perish – and yet God, who does not forgive everyone, does not want anyone to perish. (2 Peter 3:9)

2. Some would say that hate is the opposite of forgiveness.

a) This is a common view, and you often hear that it is unloving to withhold forgiveness, and yet what does the Bible say?

(1) John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

b) The same verse that talks about the greatest gift of love says that (a) that love was given to the entire world, and yet (b) some who received that love would not be forgiven but instead would perish.

c) In short, God loves those he does not forgive – and so how could hate be the opposite of forgiveness?

3. What then is the opposite of forgiveness?

a) John 20:23 “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

b) If forgiveness is the cancellation of a debt, then its opposite is the maintenance of that debt. The debt is either forgiven or retained.

c) And if God loves the world, and if his forgiveness is the loving, cancellation of a debt, then his lack of forgiveness is the loving, maintenance of that debt.

d) And so if in our study we determine that, like God, there are some for whom we should withhold our forgiveness, then, like God, our lack of forgiveness for that person should be a loving, maintenance of their debt.

III. What is our starting point in studying forgiveness and repentance?

A. As Christians, we must love our enemies and pray for our enemies.

1. It is our duty to pray for those who sin against us, but for what should we pray?

a) Matthew 5:44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you

2. We should pause for a moment to notice that while we are explicitly told to love our enemies and we are explicitly told to pray for them and do them good, nowhere in the Bible are we ever explicitly told to forgive our enemies.

B. As Christians, we must leave vengeance to God and to the government, his minister.

1. Romans 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

2. Romans 13:4 For he [the earthly ruler] is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

C. We must not be filled with pride.

1. Pride often stands in the way of repentance and forgiveness.

2. Think for a moment about the Father in the parable of the prodigal son.

a) These events would not have occurred in a vacuum. The entire village would have known that the younger son had left home with his inheritance and was now returning home with nothing.

b) As the young son walked home dirty, penniless, and in disgrace, the villagers would have heaped scorn and ridicule upon him, if only to preserve the father's honor and show their own disapproval of the son's behavior.

c) And yet what does the father do? He runs to meet the younger son to spare him that long, shameful walk home. Given the normal garb, the father would have had to pull up the skirt of his robe to run, which would

have been very undignified for one in his position, and yet he races down that road like a teenager to welcome his son home.

d) And how do you suppose the villagers would have reacted to that scene?

e) They would have heaped their ridicule on the father as he ran to meet his errant son. What a fool! Running to meet and welcome home a worthless son like that! By leaving his home and running down that road, the father was taking on himself the scorn and ridicule that otherwise would have fallen on his son.

f) The father intentionally leaves the comfort and security of his home and takes upon himself the shame and humiliation that was due to the prodigal.

D. We must follow God as our perfect model for how we should forgive.

1. We must forgive as God forgave us.

a) Ephesians 4:32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

2. Does this mean that we forgive others in the manner that God forgave us or because God forgave us?

a) I don't think we have to choose one or the other. We forgive because we ourselves have been forgiven, but we also in our forgiveness should follow the perfect model that God has provided.

b) In the parable of Matthew 18, the ungrateful servant was condemned for not forgiving as he had been forgiven and for not forgiving because he had been forgiven.

(1) Matthew 18:32-33 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: 33 Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

E. So how then does God forgive?

1. God longs to forgive. He is ready, eager, and quick to forgive.

a) Psalm 86:5 For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive.

b) Nehemiah 9:17 But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.

2. God offers forgiveness to all but does not forgive all. He loves all but does not forgive all.

a) John 3:16-17 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

3. God seeks out the sinner.

a) Luke 19:10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

b) Matthew 18:15 is just as explicit when it comes to our duty: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, **go** and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

4. God is not willing that any should perish. He wants to forgive everyone.

a) 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

5. God does not forgive absent repentance.

a) Again note 2 Peter 3:9. Repentance is cast as the opposite of perishing.

b) Acts 17:30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent.

c) Acts 2:38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

6. God is good, forbearing, and longsuffering to those who do not repent.

a) Romans 2:4 Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

b) This must be our attitude as well. Rather than being sullen, or bitter, or vengeful, we must be good, forbearing, and longsuffering toward those who have sinned against us.

IV. Examples of forgiveness (or lack thereof) in the Bible

A. There are many examples in the Old Testament.

1. Israel & Judah often repented and were forgiven by God.
2. Nineveh repented at the teaching of Jonah and was forgiven by God.
3. Many other nations did not repent and were not forgiven.
4. Esau forgave Jacob in Genesis 33.
5. Joseph forgave his brothers in Genesis 50.

B. Paul and Alexander the coppersmith

1. 2 Timothy 4:14-15 Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: 15 Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words.
2. Note that not only had Paul not forgiven Alexander, but he specifically remembered and mentioned his personal offense and he expressed his desire that God would reward him according to what he had done.
3. Paul had a similar reaction to the false, slanderous apostles that were plaguing the church in Corinth and seeking to undo all of the work he had done there. (2 Corinthians 11:12-15)

C. Rome and the early church

1. The church suffered severe persecution at the hands of Rome. The book of Revelation was written to provide comfort and assurance of victory to those who were suffering that persecution. The entire book is written as a response to the question in 6:10.

a) Revelation 6:10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

2. The answer the church was given was not that they should forgive Rome, but rather that they should sit back and watch as the Lord Jesus judged Rome. The church wanted to know when their blood would be avenged, and Jesus told them it would happen soon.

D. The Prodigal Son in Luke 15

1. This parable gives us an example of forgiveness we should follow along with an example of a lack of forgiveness that we must never follow.
2. We must not be like the elder brother.

a) After his brother repented, he refused to forgive but rather stood off by himself and sulked and fumed.

3. Our attitude should be that of the Father.

a) He watched and waited, longing for the son to return. And when he saw him coming, he ran to meet him. And when his son repented, he forgave him with great joy.

E. Luke 17:3-4

1. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. 4 And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

F. Matthew 18:15-35

1. Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

G. Jesus' Prayer From the Cross

1. You can't study the topic of forgiveness without very quickly coming face to face with Jesus' statement on the subject from the cross.

a) Luke 23:34 Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.

b) This statement is usually described as Jesus forgiving those who crucified him without any repentance on their part, but indeed while they were engaged in the very act itself.

c) But is that an accurate description of what Jesus said? No. Jesus did not forgive anyone from the cross (other than perhaps the thief – but we have dealt with that issue in another lesson), but rather he prayed that God the father would do so. This raises several questions.

2. Question #1: Why did Jesus ask God to forgive them? Why didn't he forgive them himself?

a) The phrase "Father, forgive them," had never been used by Christ before as far as we know.

b) We know from Matthew 9:6 that Jesus had power on earth to forgive sins, so why did he not forgive them if that were his desire?

c) Some point to John 12:32 and say that at this time Jesus had been “lifted up from the earth” and so was no longer in a position to forgive.

d) But I think the better view is that Jesus’ prayer was looking toward the gospel that he was at that very moment bringing into being – and that brings us to the second question.

3. Question #2: Were they forgiven, and if so, when?

a) We know that those who crucified Christ were not forgiven when Jesus uttered that prayer. How? Because God later held that sin against them, and such would not have occurred had they been forgiven.

(1) Acts 2:23 Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

(2) Acts 3:14-15 But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; 15 And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.

b) So when were they forgiven by God? When was Jesus’ prayer answered? Those who crucified Christ were forgiven by God when they repented and were baptized.

(1) Acts 2:38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

(2) Acts 3:19 Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

c) And what about those who crucified Christ and never repented of the evil deed? They perished.

(1) Acts 3:23 And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

V. Forgiveness and Repentance

A. The question we will now consider is often posed as follows: “If someone who sins against me never repents of that sin, do I have to forgive him?”

1. When we ask the question that way it betrays that we have gone wrong right from the start.

a) Why? Because we are to forgive as God forgives us, and God does not forgive us because he has to.

b) And when we fail to repent, God is not happy because now he doesn't have to forgive us.

c) The Father of the prodigal son did not turn to the elder brother and say, “Oh, no! Your brother repented! Now I have to forgive him!” Instead, he ran to meet him.

d) Christians should never seek an excuse not to forgive someone. Instead, if we must withhold forgiveness it should sadden us. We should always be ready and longing to forgive.

2. A better question to ask might be: If someone never repents, must I refrain from forgiving them? That question is much closer to the example of God.

a) God does not forgive begrudgingly. He longs to forgive people. God is not sorry when someone repents and he then “has” to forgive them. He does not want anyone to perish.

b) Indeed, the angels rejoice when someone repents.

(1) Luke 15:10 Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

B. As we consider this question, we should keep in mind certain distinctions.

1. Much of the confused commentary on this issue has failed to make some or all of these distinctions. Some of the distinctions are vital, others less so, but all should be considered.

2. Distinction #1: There is a difference between our forgiveness by God and our forgiveness of others.

a) While our forgiveness by God should be the model for our forgiveness of others, there remain unfathomable differences between the two.

b) God is holy and sin cannot enter into his presence. God can read the thoughts and intents of the heart. He sent his son to pay the cost for our forgiveness.

c) As we study the topic of forgiveness, we must have the attitude of Joseph when he forgave his brothers, and ask “for am I in the place of God?”

3. Distinction #2: There is a difference between conditional versus unconditional forgiveness.

a) This distinction is the basis for the question we are considering.

b) We know that not all forgiveness is unconditional because God has placed conditions on his forgiveness of man.

c) The issue is whether our forgiveness of others is similarly conditional or is instead always or perhaps only sometimes unconditional.

4. Distinction #3: There is a difference between a sin against man and a sin against God.

a) All sin is a sin against God, but not every sin that a man commits is against a particular individual.

b) This distinction leads to a question: Can there be a sin against man when there is no sin against God? And that questions leads to our next distinction.

5. Distinction #4: There is a difference between sins and annoyances.

a) One commentator applied Luke 17 to the friend who forgets our birthday and the spouse who forgets the dry cleaning.

(1) But these things aren't sins! There is nothing to forgive!

(2) If such things offend us or upset us, then our problem is not a misunderstanding about forgiveness but is rather self-centeredness and a lack of spiritual maturity.

(3) “Jesus isn't saying, ‘If your brother irritates you, or upsets you, or ignores you, or disagrees with you, you are to follow this procedure.’ This procedure deals with sin. Another Christian word covers irritations: forbearance. We are to bear with one another. We are to put up with things that irritate us and forgive them without saying anything to the person involved.”

b) For an actual sin, we rebuke and follow the procedure of Luke 17. For an annoyance, we overlook it and get over it.

c) And you know what? The ease of forbearing an annoyance from someone is directly proportional to our love toward that person!

(1) 1 Peter 4:8 And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.

(2) Proverbs 10:12 Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.

(3) Proverbs 17:9 He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends.

(4) 1 Corinthians 13:5 tells us that love is not easily provoked.

d) I think the more Christ-like we become, the less irritated we get with people who annoy us.

(1) “But where love is lacking, every word is viewed with suspicion, every action is liable to misunderstanding, and conflicts abound – to Satan’s perverse delight.”

e) Are there any annoyance verses?

(1) Colossians 3:13-15 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. 14 And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.

f) But when the offense is more than just an annoyance but rather is a sin that could separate that person from God then we do that person no favor by overlooking that which God will not overlook. That is anything but loving, but rather may simply be our own desire to avoid the very confrontation that Jesus commands in Luke 17 – “Rebuke him!”

6. Distinction #5: There is a difference between being the sinner and being the sinnee.

a) If as a Christian we have been sinned against, then there are certain procedures laid out in scripture that we must follow as described elsewhere in these notes.

b) But if as a Christian we have sinned against another, then once again there are certain things we must do. We must repent and seek forgiveness; we must respond appropriately when our brother comes to us and brings the matter to our attention.

c) And each side needs to keep in mind that the great offense in the mind of one party may not be recognized as such by the other party. What is your reaction when someone says “I forgive you” yet you have done nothing to require forgiveness? Doesn’t this often lead to a bigger battle? This type of misunderstanding may be due to the callousness of the alleged offender or to the narcissistic paranoia of the one allegedly offended.

7. Distinction #6: There is a difference between forgiving and being willing to forgive.

a) Similarly there is a difference between withholding forgiveness and having an unforgiving spirit.

b) Again, God is our model. He desires to forgive everyone, and he is ready and eager to do so – and yet not all are forgiven.

c) It is certainly possible and most likely common for men to withhold forgiveness because they have no desire to forgive, but that is not the model of scripture.

8. Distinction #7: There is a difference between forgiving someone who is still living versus forgiving someone who is dead.

a) Many of the headline grabbing acts of forgiveness involve statements of forgiveness of the dead, such as, for example, the Virginia Tech gunman or the Amish mass murderer.

b) At this point, the offender is beyond our ability to direct either toward or away from God. That person’s eternal destiny is set. Repentance is no longer an option to either God or man, although as with the rich man and Lazarus there may be a great desire to repent.

c) If the person is dead and died in an unrepentant state outside of Christ, then that person is lost.

d) Could we in such a situation really hold a grudge against such a person who is suffering a penalty we would never wish upon anyone?

e) If God does not desire that any perish, then that must be our attitude as well – and we must be sorrowful when they do perish. We should feel sadness rather than bitterness.

f) Whatever we do, we should not by our actions or words give the world the false impression that God will forgive that person outside of Christ.

g) With regard to the recent headlines, perhaps rather than rushing to forgive the deceased offender as many did we could take the opportunity to remind everyone that murderers will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:21)

9. Distinction #8: There is a difference between forgiving someone you know and forgiving a stranger.

a) Again, I am reminded of recent headlines in which murderers are forgiven by people who did not know them and thankfully never met them – and possibly were never personally injured by them.

b) It is certainly possible for a stranger to sin against us, and in fact we see such events against others every night on the news.

c) But the procedures we see in scripture are directed to brothers, and the goal is reconciliation. There can be no reconciliation absent a preexisting relationship.

10. Distinction #9: There is a difference between forgiveness by a Christian to another Christian versus forgiveness by a Christian to a non-Christian.

a) Should we ever forgive someone whom God has not forgiven?

(1) Either the answer to that question is yes, or we should never forgive a non-Christian who sins against us and against God.

b) Some might argue that our forgiveness should extend to Christians only because those are the only ones to whom God extends forgiveness.

(1) Indeed, the passage in Luke 17:3-4 refers to a “brother” who sins against us.

(2) As one commentator observed, “the New Testament has little to say directly or specifically about human forgiveness to those outside the Christian community.”

c) Others (including myself) argue that we should forgive the sin as it relates to us, and leave to God to handle the sin as it relates to God.

(1) This path seems the better approach if there is repentance.

(a) It presents a model of the gospel to the unbeliever and perhaps leads them to obtain forgiveness from God.

(b) We should pray and perhaps even suggest that their repentance to us should lead to repentance to God, against whom they remain at enmity.

(2) If we grant forgiveness absent repentance then it might have the opposite effect.

(a) One famous atheist said on his death bed: "God will forgive me; that is His business."

(b) If they have not repented to us, what is the hope they will repent to God? And if we forgive them absent repentance, what sort of gospel are we proclaiming to that person?

(c) And what Biblical example are we following when we purport to forgive an openly rebellious sinner who gives every impression of continuing in that rebellion?

(d) Was the church ever told to forgive their Roman persecutors? Did Paul forgive the false apostles who were slandering him all over Corinth?

d) Whatever we do, we need to remember throughout that the offender in question is in rebellion against God, our Father, and we need to be careful how we respond to their offense against us.

(1) If we in our forgiveness of them leave them with the false impression that God has forgiven them in their condition outside of Christ then our so-called loving forgiveness may very well be instrumental in ushering them along the road to Hell!

(2) Our goal with someone outside the church is to get them inside the church, and whatever we do in response to their offense against us should be in pursuit of that goal.

11. Distinction #10: There is a difference between forgiveness based on love versus forgiveness based on other motives.

a) Sometimes we may forgive just to do more harm to our opponent!

(1) "There is no revenge so complete as forgiveness."

(2) "Always forgive your enemies--nothing annoys them so much."

b) Sometimes we forgive, not because we love the offender, but because we want the offender to just go away!

(1) “I worry about fast forgivers. They tend to forgive quickly in order to avoid their pain. Or they forgive fast in order to get an advantage over the people they forgive. And their instant forgiving only makes things worse.”

c) Sometimes we may forgive just to avoid a confrontation.

(1) And yet Luke 17:3-4 requires a “rebuke” and Matthew 18:15 requires us to “go” and tell our brother “his fault.”

(2) Those commands for confrontation are just as much commands as the command that we forgive.

d) God forgives because he loves, and he withholds forgiveness because he loves. Whatever we do, our motive should be love – love of God, love of his people, and love of those who are outside of Christ and need to obey the gospel.

C. Arguments Supporting the Proposition that Repentance is Required

1. We are to forgive as God forgives; we are to forgive as we ourselves have been forgiven – and we are not forgiven absent repentance.

a) If we dispense unconditional forgiveness, then what sort of gospel are we proclaiming?

b) Are we really called to say “No matter what you have done to me and no matter how you feel about it now, I forgive you”? Where is there any support for such an attitude in the Bible?

2. We are to follow the model given by Jesus in Luke 17:3-4 and that model requires repentance.

a) Indeed, the forgiveness and repentance are both preceded by a rebuke.

(1) If we are to rebuke first, then how can we forgive without condition? What is the purpose of the rebuke?

(2) When we rebuke, we do not sulk and fume. We do not become bitter and resentful.

(3) We do not seek vengeance. We, as one author put it, “let go, and let God.”

(4) “There are times when the only way to show true love is by rebuking the one who is wrong. You are not showing love if you pat them on the back and try to make them feel they are all right.”

b) The command in Luke 17 is specific, and perhaps the most specific command by Christ on this subject.

3. What God does is good, and God withholds forgiveness absent repentance. When we do the same thing, it is also good.

a) If a Christian sins against us and against God, then what is the consequence if we forgive that person prior to their repentance?

(1) What happens is that we find ourselves in a situation where we have forgiven the person but God has not. And what that means is that we cannot bring up that person’s sin against them (because we have forgiven them) and so we are unable to urge that person to repent.

(2) Our early forgiveness hinders our ability to help that person become right with God.

(3) In short, forgiveness before repentance puts the cart before the horse.

b) Forgiveness absent repentance can do much more harm than good.

(1) Don’t we know of situations in our own lives when the best thing we could do for someone was not to forgive them?

(2) The phrase “tough love” has been used to describe loving actions that on the surface appear harsh and unloving.

(3) Isn’t forgiveness sometimes the easy way out for us at the ultimate expense of the offender?

(4) Sin has consequences, and we do no one any favors when we ignore those consequences. Those consequences are intended to teach others and prevent a repetition of the sin by the offender.

(5) When we refuse to forgive the unrepentant, we may lead them to experience Godly sorrow.

(a) 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow worketh

repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

4. Some argue that it is not even possible to forgive absent repentance.

a) Guy N. Woods in response to the question, “Is it our duty to forgive those who sin against us when they neither ask for nor want forgiveness?” stated:

(1) “It is not only not our duty so to do, it is an utter impossibility.”

(2) He argues that forgiveness necessarily involves the restoration of a peaceful relationship following an interruption of that peace by an offense, and “unless the offender wants this relationship, it is impossible for the offended to effect it, however much he might desire it and seek it.”

b) He continues:

(1) “To this the rely is often made, ‘Well, we must always be ready and willing to forgive,’ as indeed we must; but, this is not forgiveness and ought not to be confused with it. It is our duty to love all men, even our enemies, and to pray for their wellbeing; but, we can forgive them only when they repent.”

c) So can there be forgiveness that is not followed by a restoration of the former relationship?

(1) We must believe the answer is yes if we believe in unconditional forgiveness because it takes both parties to effect a restoration of that former relationship.

(2) The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation.

(a) Matthew 18:15 “You have won your brother.”

d) But just because reconciliation (the goal of forgiveness) is bilateral does not mean that forgiveness cannot be unilateral. I think this argument confuses the two concepts.

5. Why is there a procedure to take problems before the church if we are to forgive without regard to repentance?

a) If forgiveness is unconditional then the entire process of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18 would be impossible.

(1) How can unconditional forgiveness be applied along with a procedure in which a brother is confronted and then only won if he hears you?

b) Why is there a command in Luke 17 that we rebuke the offender and a command in Matthew 18 that we go and tell the offender his fault if repentance is not required?

(1) The goal of the confrontation is to convince the offender to repent so that you can forgive them and the relationship can be restored.

(2) And doesn't that precisely follow the Biblical model of our own forgiveness by God?

(a) 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that the Bible was given for our reproof – there is the divine rebuke!

(b) Why the divine rebuke? So that we will repent and the relationship with God will be restored.

c) If we are to forgive absent repentance, then how can any procedure be inserted between the sin and the forgiveness? Shouldn't the forgiveness be immediate?

(1) If we delay in offering unconditional forgiveness, then what is the basis for that delay? And is the delay itself a sin?

(2) And what about a continuing sin or repeated sins? When do we grant our unconditional forgiveness? In the middle of the sin or at the end, and how do we know when it ends?

(a) In Luke 17:3-4, the sin is repeated, but each instance is followed by repentance.

(3) And if forgiveness is unconditional and I sin against someone, then why should I bother to go that person and seek forgiveness? Why not just rather assume that unconditional forgiveness has been granted?

d) In short, unconditional forgiveness is unworkable, and it does not seem to me that those who advocate it have really thought through all of its consequences (or at least if they have thought then all through they have not explained their reasoning).

6. Human government is set up by God and is instructed by God not to offer unconditional forgiveness but rather to execute wrath on those that do evil.

a) Romans 13:1-4 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

7. Unless we take the position that a Christian is commanded to forgive any and everyone without any conditions, then there must be a line dividing those we must forgive from those we must not forgive – and in the Bible that line is repentance.

a) If there is a line, then where could we draw that line other than at repentance? What other line is given in scripture and is in accord with how God forgives? What other line would make sense? What other line would even be workable?

b) Some might argue that our forgiveness of brothers in Christ should be unconditional while our forgiveness of those outside Christ should be conditional – but Luke 17 deals with brothers! The example of conditional forgiveness in that chapter dealt with those in the Christian community.

D. Arguments Often Raised in Support of the View that Repentance is Not Required

1. God does not forgive absent repentance. But some might suggest that perhaps God expects us to forgive everyone nevertheless. Why might he impose such a requirement?

a) Perhaps because God knows the heart and we do not.

(1) And there is a sense in which this difference between God and man is important to this topic, but it is not with forgiveness but rather with repentance.

(2) Luke 17:3-4 teaches that we should not question whether repentance is genuine but rather should leave that to God.

(3) “Whether the offender is sincere or not, we are not bound to judge; it is better to treat him as sincere, and throw the responsibility on him, than to sit in judgment on him and presume to decide on his motives.”

b) Perhaps because He paid the cost for our forgiveness and so it is His, not ours, to give or withhold.

(1) But what God does is good, and God does not forgive when there is no repentance. How then could it be good for us to forgive without regard to repentance? Whose example are we following?

2. Some verses on forgiveness say nothing about repentance but rather seemingly suggest that our forgiveness of others should be unconditional.

a) The following verses are generally cited:

(1) Mark 11:25-26 And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. 26 But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

(2) Luke 11:4 And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.

(3) Matthew 18:35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

b) Yet this is not the only passage that deals with forgiveness. Just as we must look at all the Bible has to say on the subject of salvation, so too we must look at all the Bible has to say about our forgiveness of others.

c) We should interpret general statements in light of specific statements on the same subject, and the most specific statement by Jesus on this topic requires a rebuke and repentance.

d) When interpreted in light of Luke 17, the forgiveness that is lacking in these verses would seem to be a forgiveness that was wrongly withheld from a repentant offender.

e) If it does not mean this, then did Paul violate these verses in his dealing with the false slanderous apostles at Corinth, and did the church violate these verses when they asked God to avenge their blood against Rome?

3. We must always be willing to forgive, and if we are willing to forgive then we will forgive.

a) Why? God is always willing to forgive yet he does not always forgive. Why can't a Christian also be always willing to forgive yet not always forgive?

4. Forgiveness of others is healthy for us. It allows us to get over the feelings of bitterness and resentment we might otherwise have.

a) This is a popular argument in our “me first” society. Here is what some have said on this point:

(1) “In the long run, it’s not a question of whether they deserve to be forgiven. You’re not forgiving them for their sake. You’re doing it for yourself. For your own health and well-being, forgiveness is simply the most energy-efficient option. It frees you from the incredibly toxic, debilitating drain of holding a grudge. Don’t let these people live rent free in your head. If they hurt you before, why let them keep doing it year after year in your mind? It’s not worth it but it takes heart effort to stop it. You can muster that heart power to forgive them as a way of looking out for yourself. It’s one thing you can be totally selfish about.”

(2) “It really doesn’t matter if the person who hurt you deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.”

b) But the Bible does not view forgiveness as an end in itself or as a therapeutic technique intended only for the benefit of the one doing the forgiving.

c) The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation, both of ourselves to the offender and of the offender to God.

(1) Matthew 18:15 – “thou hast gained thy brother.”

(2) 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

5. The offender wins if we do not forgive them.

a) Is that true with God? Do sinners “win” when God does not forgive them?

b) The offender may win if we ruin our physical and spiritual health due to bitterness and vengeance, but as we have seen those need not follow a refusal to grant forgiveness.

6. It is loving to forgive and we must always be loving.

a) God is the ultimate standard of love, yet he does not forgive unconditionally.

b) John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

7. When we forgive unconditionally we are seen as different and that action provides a powerful message to the world.

a) I'll agree that we are seen as different when we forgive unconditionally, but I disagree that it is always good to be seen as different. Being different from the world is a good thing only if that difference stems from our obedience to God.

b) And I'll agree it sends a powerful message – but is it a right message?

c) If we follow God's word, then we will be in no danger of blending in with this world.

d) Further, in today's world where condition-free forgiveness shows up on posters while the news cameras are still filming the pools of blood from the latest atrocities, perhaps the best way we could be different would be to withhold forgiveness absent repentance.

e) A different yet scriptural response in the face of the Virginia Tech or Amish murders might have been to say, "He is in God's hands now, and I trust God to do what is right. I do not know the perpetrator's personal circumstances or mental state. If God forgives him, then so do I if he has sinned me in any way by that action, but if God does not forgive him, then I must not forgive him either."

f) That message will make us very different in a world where forgiveness has become cheap and easy!