

# UNPACKING FORGIVENESS

CHRIS BRAUNS

# THE FORGIVENESS QUIZ

All answers are true or false. These are preliminary questions which will be unpacked in-depth as the series moves forward.

## QUESTION #1:

Where deep wounds are concerned, forgiveness can be unpacked in a moment.

## QUESTION #2:

Personal happiness and joy can legitimately motivate people to live out what the Bible teaches about forgiveness.

## QUESTION #3:

Most Christian pastors and counselors agree about what forgiveness is and how it should take place.

## QUESTION #4:

Forgiveness occurs properly only when certain conditions are met.

## QUESTION #5:

Jesus said little about how people should resolve interpersonal conflict.

## QUESTION #6:

A willingness to forgive is a test of whether or not a person will go to heaven when he or she dies.

## QUESTION #7:

Christians can get to the bottom of all of their disagreements.

QUESTION #8:

There are times when it is wrong to forgive.

## **RECAP:**

QUESTION #1: Where deep wounds are concerned, forgiveness can be unpacked in a moment. – **FALSE**

There are two goals of unpacking forgiveness:

1. To understand biblical truth about forgiveness and the application of that truth to complex problems in life.
2. To unload the burdens we carry because of wounds that we have received from others, and have given to others.

The good news is that although unpacking forgiveness is a process, with God's help it is one that you can work through.

### **THE KEY IS TO GET STARTED.**

QUESTION #2: Personal happiness and joy can legitimately motivate people to live out what the Bible teaches about forgiveness. – **TRUE**

Too many people dread learning about forgiveness. They fear they will learn what they ought to do and what they ought to do will make them miserable.

**IF YOU HAVE THE WRONG ATTITUDE STARTING OUT, THEN LEARNING THE BIBLICAL METHOD OF FORGIVENESS WILL SEEM LIKE DIFFICULT DRUDGERY.**

QUESTION #3: Most Christian pastors and counselors agree about what forgiveness is and how it should take place. – **FALSE**

In reality, pastors and counselors disagree profoundly about forgiveness. There is no real consensus as the teachings range across a wide spectrum. The point is that we should be like the Bereans (Ac 17:11), and understand what the Word says about forgiveness because:

**YOUR CONVICTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS WILL SHAPE HOW YOU RESPOND WHEN IT'S TIME TO FORGIVE.**

QUESTION #4: Forgiveness occurs properly only when certain conditions are met. – **TRUE**

God does not forgive all. His forgiveness is conditional (1 Jn 1:9). And because we are commanded to follow His example, our forgiveness must also be conditional (Lk 17:3-4).

**COMPLETE FORGIVENESS CAN ONLY TAKE PLACE WHEN THERE IS REPENTANCE.**

QUESTION #5: Jesus said little about how people should resolve interpersonal conflict. – **FALSE**

Jesus said a great deal about conflict resolution. Matthew 18 is one such passage among many others.

**JESUS WAS VERY CLEAR AND SAID A LOT ABOUT HOW WE WORK THROUGH BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS.**

QUESTION #6: A willingness to forgive is a test of whether or not a person will go to heaven when he or she dies. – **TRUE**

A willingness to forgive is closely connected to how we can be sure we are going to heaven (Matt 6:14-15).

1. Jesus mentions forgiveness 4 times in two verses.
2. Jesus is putting on the table the threat of eternal judgment or hell.

**REMEMBER, JESUS HIMSELF SAID THAT IF (CONDITIONAL) WE LOVE HIM, WE WILL KEEP (DEFINITELY) HIS COMMANDMENTS.**

QUESTION #7: Christians can get to the bottom of all of their disagreements. – **FALSE**

If you've been involved in a church body long enough, you know that this is true. Some things just will not get resolved no matter how hard you try to resolve them.

**THERE ARE TIMES WHEN CHRISTIANS SIMPLY CANNOT REACH AGREEMENT. DON'T FORCE YOUR WAY THROUGH AN IMPASSE.**

QUESTION #8: There are times when it is wrong to forgive. – **TRUE**

1. Some argue that it is never wrong to forgive. But this cannot be the case. God does not forgive the unrepentant. It would be wrong for Him to do so because it would go against His own justice and holiness.
2. Others argue that God may not forgive, but people must always forgive. Unconditional forgiveness diminishes the justice of God and compromises the integrity of true forgiveness. It also shows that we are not following God's example and instruction (see #4).

**CHRISTIANS MUST ALWAYS HAVE A WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE, BUT THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT FORGIVENESS ALWAYS TAKES PLACE.**

## LESSON 1, PART 1: HOW TO BEGIN UNPACKING

*Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. – Matt 11:28-30, ESV*

*Wherefore if anyone is weary, if any is in prison, if anyone is in captivity, if anyone is in the wilderness, let him come to the blessed Jesus, who is as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Delay not, arise and come away. – Jonathan Edwards*

- The baggage of broken relationships can be every bit as fatiguing as the religious system of the Pharisees. – Matt 23

### 1. HOW TO UNPACK

- a. Fix your eyes on the majestic loveliness of the One who extends an invitation to those who are weary and heavy burdened. – Isa 9:2-7
- b. Realize that not only does Jesus always know the right thing to do, He can always do it. Nothing in heaven or hell could ever thwart His purposes. – Rom 8:31-39

### 2. HOW TO ACCEPT JESUS' INVITATION IN MATTHEW 11

- a. Understand that taking His yoke does not mean rest in the sense of doing nothing. It means rest in the sense of working **with Him**.

- b. As we follow Jesus and learn from Him, the Holy Spirit graciously operates in our lives. This is how we who are weak can move forward – not in our strength, but in His. – Php 2:12-16
- c. How do we work in such a way that God gives us strength and grace? The means of grace. These include:
  - i. Reading and studying His Word
  - ii. Disciplined prayer
  - iii. Consistent fellowship with other believers
  - iv. Reverent and awe-filled worship
  - v. Listening to sound biblical preaching

## **LESSON 1, PART 2: MOTIVATION TO BEGIN UNPACKING**

*If you are wise, you are wise for yourself. If you scoff, you alone will bear it. – Prov 9:12*

*We pursue God because, and only because, He has first put an urge within that spurs us to the pursuit.*

### **1. WHY MOTIVATION IS ESSENTIAL AND NECESSARY**

- a. Many accept Jesus' invitation in a preliminary way, but do not continue on in the decision.
- b. Forgiveness requires much effort and determination.
- c. There are two main reasons why forgiveness requires so much of us:
  - i. Forgiveness is an emotionally charged topic.
    - 1. Everyone reacts differently to different situations.



2. Without the right motivation to move forward, some will prefer to avoid dealing with it.
- ii. Forgiveness is intellectually demanding.
  1. How we live out forgiveness must rest on what we believe theologically.
    - a. Soteriology (Doctrine of Salvation): How does God forgive?
    - b. Ecclesiology (Doctrine of the Church): How is forgiveness handled in the local assembly?
    - c. Eschatology (Doctrine of End Times): What happens to people who are not forgiven? To people who won't forgive?

## 2. WHY BE MOTIVATED?

- a. So that you can know and experience maximum joy.
  - i. All people pursue joy or happiness.
    1. Eccl 2:1-11; 9:7-10
- b. It glorifies God when we seek to work through broken relationships, because it is right and best to do so.
  - i. God's central passion is for His glory.
    1. Isa 42:5-8; 48:9-11
    2. 1 Cor 10:23-33
- c. The good news is that we do not have to choose between the two because we truly cannot have one without the other.
- d. The question is: Do you desire more than a grudge or baggage?
  - i. Rahab did. – Josh 2 cf. Heb 11:31

- e. You will not learn in an instant that following Christ is both right and best. But it is critical to grasp and carry out.

## LESSON 2: DEFINING FORGIVENESS

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. – Psalm 130:3-4, ESV*

*The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. – Simon Wiesenthal*

- If we are going to unpack forgiveness, then we need to know what forgiveness is. Go looking for a definition of forgiveness and you will find a wide range of opinions.
- Getting one's mind around forgiveness is especially difficult when it is in the context of having been deeply wounded.

### 1. THE KEY PRINCIPLE

- a. The goal is to make sure that a definition of forgiveness squares with biblical teaching.
- b. Here is where we begin: God expects believers to forgive others in the way that He forgave them.
  - i. Matt 6:5-15
  - ii. Eph 4:31-32
  - iii. Col 3:12-14

### 2. HOW GOD FORGIVES

- a. We all need God's forgiveness because everyone has offended God.
  - i. Gen 3:1-7
  - ii. Rom 5:12-14
  - iii. Rom 6:20-23

- b. God's forgiveness is gracious, but not free.
  - i. Eph 2:1-10
  - ii. 1 Jn 4:7-12
- c. God's forgiveness is conditional. Only those who repent and believe are saved.
  - i. Ac 20:17-21
- d. God's forgiveness is a commitment.
  - i. ἀφίημι (aphiemi, Gk. forgiveness) – To release from legal or moral obligation or consequence.
  - ii. When God forgives, He commits or promises that He will no longer hold the sin against the person being forgiven.
    - 1. δικαίωσις (dikaiosis, Gk. justification) – a legal declaration that we are no longer condemned for our sin.
- e. Forgiveness lays the groundwork for and begins the process of reconciliation.
  - i. God's forgiveness does not mean simply the elimination of guilt.

**PEOPLE ARE MISTAKEN IF THEY THINK OF CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS PRIMARILY AS ABSOLUTION FROM GUILT; THE PURPOSE OF FORGIVENESS IS THE RESTORATION OF COMMUNION, THE RECONCILIATION OF BROKENNESS. - L. GREGORY JONES**

- ii. God's forgiveness is inextricably linked to reconciliation. No one is forgiven by God without being reconciled to God. – 2 Cor 5:17-21
- f. Forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.

- i. 2 Sam 12:1-15; 13:1-22, 23-33
- ii. The reality of consequences raises a question: if God truly forgives, if He no longer holds the sin against the forgiven, then why are there still consequences?
- iii. The answer is that God disciplines His own not for the purpose of punishing them but for His glory and for their joy in the future.
  - 1. Heb 12:3-17
  - 2. God allows us to face the consequences of sin for our own ultimate good, that we may eventually share more fully in his holiness and reap an abundant harvest of righteousness and peace.
- iv. Discipline is the loving correction of a parent. Penalty is the price required for the offense.

### **3. A DEFINITION FOR FORGIVENESS**

**A COMMITMENT BY THE ONE TRUE GOD TO PARDON GRACIOUSLY THOSE WHO REPENT AND BELIEVE SO THAT THEY ARE RECONCILED TO HIM, ALTHOUGH THIS COMMITMENT DOES NOT ELIMINATE ALL CONSEQUENCES.**

## LESSON 3: DEFINING FORGIVENESS FOR CHRISTIANS

*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,  
as God in Christ forgave you. – Eph 4:32, ESV*

*The quality of mercy is not strained  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,  
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes  
-Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice", Act IV, Scene 1*

### I. HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS FORGIVE INTERPERSONALLY?

- a. The previous lesson established that the key to understanding how people should forgive one another is to begin with this principle: God expects Christians to forgive in the same way that he forgives them.
- b. Here is a running definition for Christians:

**A COMMITMENT BY THE OFFENDED TO PARDON GRACIOUSLY THE  
REPENTANT FROM MORAL LIABILITY AND TO BE RECONCILED TO  
THAT PERSON, ALTHOUGH NOT ALL CONSEQUENCES ARE  
NECESSARILY ELIMINATED.**

- c. Christians should forgive graciously. Biblical forgiveness is a freely offered gift motivated by love. In biblical forgiveness, the forgiving person pays the price of forgiveness.
  - i. Eph 4:25-32
  - ii. Col 3:12-17

- d. The gracious offer of forgiveness is unconditional. Christians should always have a disposition of grace towards those who offend them.
  - i. Lk 23:32-38
- e. Forgiveness is also a commitment. It is a promise to pardon another.
  - i. I will not dwell on this incident.
  - ii. I will not bring this incident up again and use it against you.
  - iii. I will not talk to others about this incident.
  - iv. I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.
- f. However, Christian forgiveness is a commitment to the repentant.
  - i. Lk 17:1-4
- g. Forgiveness is inextricably linked to reconciliation.
  - i. The assumption today is that you can forgive someone but not be reconciled to them.
- h. Forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.
  - i. Consequences are important for the sake of justice. A willingness to accept sinful behavior is actually good evidence that the offender is truly repentant.

## **2. A WORD ON RECONCILIATION AND CONSEQUENCES**

- a. Does everyone need to pursue reconciliation with the people they forgive, no matter the offense?
  - i. Remember, forgiveness does not mean the elimination of all consequences.
  - ii. A Christian victim must be willing to forgive a repentant offender (regardless of degree) graciously.

1. Whatever someone has done to offend you pales in comparison to what you yourself have done to offend a holy God.
- iii. If one party is unsaved and is regenerated, or both parties are Christians, there is always the hope of heaven. In heaven all relationships will be completely and perfectly restored.

**CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT THE RESTORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS.**



## LESSON 4: MORE THAN A FEELING

*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – Col 1:13-14*

*Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

### **I. THERAPEUTIC FORGIVENESS VS. BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS**

- a. Therapeutic forgiveness distorts people's understanding of true forgiveness.
  - i. If we say that we must forgive everyone unconditionally, then we cheapen what happens when a repentant person receives forgiveness. – Lk 17:3-4
- b. Therapeutic forgiveness attempts to redefine how people understand God's forgiveness.
  - i. Some insist that when God forgives, it does not necessarily mean that the relationship is restored.
  - ii. Forgiveness is no longer about the pardon of moral responsibility.
  - iii. If a person can be forgiven and yet still go to hell, then forgiveness does not mean what the Bible says it does. – Ac 2:38
- c. Therapeutic forgiveness suggests that some people may even need to forgive God.
  - i. When forgiveness is defined as automatically ceasing to feel resentment or bitterness, it is inevitable that some will believe it is legitimate

to resolve this anger by “forgiving” God. –  
Rom 9:19-21

- ii. “Forgiving” God implies blame.
  - iii. While it is true that it is difficult to understand suffering, the reason that we suffer is because humanity has rebelled against God. – Rom 8:18-25
  - iv. Although God is sovereign and in control of all things, He is not morally at fault for evil.
- d. Therapeutic forgiveness results in cheap grace and a reluctance to identify and name evil.
- i. Many today suppose they are Christians even though they have not genuinely repented and believed.
  - ii. Two things happen when cheap grace is offered.
    - 1. People think they are Christians when they actually are not.
    - 2. Believers fail to think discerningly about what is right and what is wrong.
  - iii. When evil is not named, it soon flourishes. – 1 Cor 5
- e. Therapeutic forgiveness discourages healing in Christian community.
- i. When forgiveness is viewed primarily as something that happens privately and individually, the importance of reconciliation is undermined. – Matt 5:23-24
  - ii. Therapeutic forgiveness makes it too easy to distance yourself from those who have offended you rather than going through the oftentimes difficult work of reconciliation.

- iii. Members of the body of Christ ought to be distinguished by our self-sacrificing love for one another, not by our ability to start over with a clean slate and a different set of people.  
– Jn 13:34-35
- f. Therapeutic forgiveness may make individuals feel licensed to avoid dealing with their own sin.
  - i. Feelings, rather than truth, become the standard. This approach fails to recognize that on many occasions people are wrong in how they feel.
    - 1. Prov 16:2
    - 2. Jer 17:9
  - ii. Working through forgiveness biblically will force us to wrestle with the truth rather than only with feelings. We may find that we were wrong for being offended in the first place.
- g. Therapeutic forgiveness does not prepare us as Christians for the persecution and evil that we may face.
  - i. There is evil in the world that is beyond comprehension. Yet it is real, and if forgiveness is really to be unpacked, then our understanding of it must interact with evil and persecution. – Matt 5:38-48

## LESSON 5: THE WAY UP IS DOWN

*But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. – Isa 66:2b*

*No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. – Charles Spurgeon*

- Forgiveness is about the resolution of conflicts, and certainly it is unwise to live with conflict.
  - Prov 21:19
  - Prov 17:1
- And yet despite our longing for harmony, it eludes us. We don't like conflict, and yet we have so much of it.

### 1. Jesus on Conflict

- a. Too much unresolved conflict is why we need to know Matthew 18 well.
- b. There is no Christian community if there is always a struggle as to who will be the greatest.
- c. If we really understand His words, we will have fewer conflicts in the first place. And when we do have differences, we will resolve them far more effectively.

### 2. Be Humble – Mt 18:1-4

- a. Jesus' point is not that children are pure. Innocence was not the attribute Jesus had in mind when He told us to be childlike. Rather, Jesus was pointing out two qualities of children that we should all strive to emulate.

- i. In the Ancient Near East, children understood that they were to be unseen and not heard.
  - ii. They were also dependent upon their parents.
- b. Jesus' first point in instructing about forgiveness and conflict resolution was to tell His disciples to be humble. Dependent children picture a biblical definition of humility.
  - i. Biblical humility is seeing self in proper relationship to our relationship to our Heavenly Father – completely dependent on Him.

### 3. The Way Up is Down

- a. Jesus does not forbid the pursuit of greatness or honor. He redefines it. – Mk 10:43-45
- b. True humility as the legitimate path to greatness is also taught elsewhere in the Bible.
  - i. Prov 15:33; 18:12; 22:4; 29:23

### 4. How Humility Helps

- a. True humility nips conflict in the bud. In one way or another, selfish pride causes all quarrels and fights.
  - i. Jam 4:1-10
  - ii. Matt 7:1-5
- b. If we are truly humble, then when we do have conflicts, they will be resolved far more quickly.

### 5. You Can't Be Humble Through Sheer Determination

- a. It's easy to understand conceptually, but difficult to live out.
- b. Pride is not limited to arrogance or cockiness. Pride is any way of putting self into the central focus.
  - i. Are you overly critical? Discernment is a good thing but can be taken too far.
    - 1. Php 1:9-11

## 2. Rom 12:1-2

- ii. Are you insecure? You're probably too focused on self.
  - iii. Are you overly sensitive? You may imagine criticisms that have not been given.
  - iv. Do you presume upon others? This is an indication of self-righteousness.
  - v. Are you impatient with others? You might be self-serving.
  - vi. Do you worry too much? You might be self-reliant.
- c. The reason we struggle with pride is because we are wrapped in ourselves, so trying harder to be humble through sheer force of will won't make you humble.
- d. The only way to grow in humility is to meditate on the beauty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. – Isa 6:1-7; 40:12-15

## LESSON 6, PART I: UNPACK WITH GREAT URGENCY

*But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. – Matt 18:6*

*Tell me, how are we going to face the Day of Judgment? The sun is witness that it has gone down on our anger not one day, but many a long year. – St. Jerome in a letter written to his estranged aunt*

### 1. HEAR A WARNING FROM JESUS - MATT 18:5-10

- a. The word translated “temptation” (v. 7) is σκανδάλων (skandalon), a Greek word from which we get the English word “scandal”. It means “an action or circumstance that leads one to act contrary to a proper course of action or set of beliefs.”
  - i. Jesus warns against anything that might cause another person to walk away from the faith.
- b. The word translated “despise” (v. 10) is καταφρονήσητε (kataphronesete), meaning “to think less of or to consider unworthy of concern.”
  - i. When we participate in scandals that cause others to sin, we despise them.
- c. The word translated “woe” (v. 7) is οὐαὶ (ouai) meaning, “a state of intense hardship or distress.”
  - i. It is disastrous to cause another to sin.
- d. We should take radical and decisive action rather than cause another to stumble. One who is truly a

believer will do their level best not to cause this kind of damage in the body of Christ.

- e. Jesus warns that if any disciple is willing to participate in conflicts that cause others to stumble, they should consider the possibility that hell awaits them. – Matt 5:23-25

## **2. APPLYING JESUS' POINT - MATT 18:12-14**

- a. Compare the importance of whatever scandal you are involved in to the possibility of God's judgment.
  - i. How big of a deal is your offense when you consider creating a scandal may result in God's judgment?
- b. Wisdom gives us patience. – Prov 19:11
- c. Love covers sins. – 1 Pet 4:8
- d. Urgently pursue those who have wandered away, for your actions may be the cause of celebration in heaven.

## **LESSON 6, PART 2: SHOULD I JUST GET OVER IT?**

*Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. – Prov 19:11*

*It is noteworthy that all these [Old Testament] episodes of forgiveness turn on matters of life and death...It seems that writers of the stories that make up the Bible felt no need to attend to the smaller crises of life. – David J. Reimer*

### **1. TO DROP OR NOT TO DROP?**

- a. We do not need to formally resolve every conflict that takes place. Some offenses need to be dropped.



i. Prov 17:1; 19:11; 12:16; 20:3

ii. 1 Pet 4:8

## **2. DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS**

a. Before confronting, ask, "Have I examined myself yet?" – Matt 7:1-6

i. Before we make an evaluation of someone else's life, we should first examine our own lives.

ii. We are inclined to point out minor problems in the lives of others while we overlook major flaws in ourselves.

iii. The first thing you should do when you are offended is prayerfully evaluate yourself. – Prov 16:2

b. Before confronting, ask, "How sure am I that I am right?"

i. Almost always, a conflict between two parties is complicated. Even if you are genuinely offended, right and wrong may not always be immediately clear. – 1 Pet 4:8

ii. If there is truly sin in the life of the other person, it will probably come up again.

iii. However, if you always – or almost always – think you are right, you have a pride problem.

c. Before confronting, ask, "How important is this?"

i. If the source of your conflict is not that important in the long run or the big scope, then drop the matter. Don't start a quarrel over it.

ii. If you think that everything is important, you have a sensitivity problem.

- d. Before confronting, ask, "Does this person show a pattern of this kind of behavior?"
  - i. One of the first questions you should ask is if the behavior is typical of that person. If it seems out of character, then perhaps you should let the matter go.
  - ii. If the person is developing a pattern, then maybe you should talk to them about it.
- e. Before confronting, ask, "What do wise people counsel me to do?" – Prov 15:22
  - i. Don't use wise counsel as an excuse to gossip to someone else.
- f. Before confronting, ask, "What else is going on in the other person's world?"
  - i. Think about the circumstances that have been going on in the other person's life. This requires engaging in godly relationships and fellowship.
  - ii. Think about the circumstances that have been going on in your own life. You may be more sensitive than normal. – Prov 19:11

### **3. WHAT DROPPING IT DOES NOT MEAN**

- a. It does not mean talking to everyone else about it. If you decide to drop it, do not say another word about it.
- b. If someone comes to you complaining about how they have been treated, ask them if they have dealt with their offender yet. If not, send them away. – Prov 20:19; 26:20
- c. If someone has gone to the offender but it is unresolved, offer to go on the next visit, following Matt 18.

## LESSON 7: HOW SHOULD I GO ABOUT IT?

*So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. – Matt 5:23-24*

### 1. MATT 18:15-20

- a. The immediate application of these verses would take place in the local church.
- b. However, these verses do not just apply to church discipline alone. They apply to other relationships as well.

### 2. COURSE OF ACTION

- a. Go
  - i. Once you have decided that the matter should not be dropped and have examined yourself carefully (Matt 7:1-5), go and take care of the matter.
  - ii. Each situation should be evaluated individually.
  - iii. Connect with the other person as soon as possible. This applies to both parties (see Matt 5 above).
  - iv. Our responsibility to admonish is not limited to personal offense.
    - 1. Luke 17:3-4
    - 2. Gal 6:1-5
    - 3. Prov 27:5-6
  - v. Many deal with conflict in one of two dysfunctional ways:

1. Blow up completely and have a shouting match with the offender.
  2. Avoid it entirely.
- vi. Keep the Circle Small
1. There is always tremendous temptation to talk to others. This is understandable for we naturally seek to defend ourselves.
    - a. Prayer
    - b. Different perspective
  2. But we must make every effort to avoid unnecessarily involving others. (Matt 18:15a)
  3. Failure to follow Jesus' instruction in this area often causes terrible damage.
    - a. Prov 16:28
    - b. Prov 26:20
    - c. Prov 18:8
    - d. Prov 25:9-10
  4. A failure to keep conflicts private often provides the fuel that keeps a quarrel going.
  5. This should also be kept in mind when listening to others. Ask if the offended has gone to the offender yet, and do not accept excuses. The Word is clear as to what we should do.
- vii. Be Gracious
1. Be willing to grant forgiveness as a gift and not demand that the other person first pay a price. Do not expect someone to earn forgiveness from you.
    - a. Eph 4:32

2. Christians are expected to absorb personally the cost of the offense.
- viii. No Revenge, Not Even a Little
  1. Nearly all of us want those who have injured us to pay in some manner. Resist the temptation to hurt the person who has hurt you, even if it is “only” through a harsh word or hard attitude.
    - a. Rom 12:17-21
- ix. Listen First, Be Prepared to Ask Forgiveness Yourself
  1. Forgiveness is seldom one-sided or simple.
  2. You should expect to learn about some mistakes that you yourself may have made. You cannot make the issue only about the other person.
- x. Take the Other Person at Their Word
  1. Do not try to determine the motives of another person’s heart.
    - a. 1 Cor 13:7
- xi. Choose the Time and Place Carefully
  1. Prov 27:14
- xii. Choose Your Words Carefully
  1. Your choice of words will make all the difference.
- xiii. Be Patient and Have Modest Expectations
  1. The person you approach may not have given the incident another thought. They may not even be aware that you are offended.

2. Give the person time to prayerfully process your concerns and talk with you again.
3. Prepare yourself that the person may not be willing to admit fault. Remember that you have obeyed Christ. Jesus did not promise that the other party would always be repentant.

**B. IF NECESSARY, TAKE ONE OR TWO OTHERS ALONG**

- i. Matthew 18:16
- ii. Identify wise people who can think clearly about offenses.
- iii. Explain truthfully to them what the offense is and anything that has transpired since.
- iv. Submit yourself to the more objective counsel of this third party and ask them to go with you.
- v. One or two others means one or two others. Involving more people than necessary will prematurely escalate the conflict.
- vi. The task of the third party is to determine whether the matter needs to be pursued further.
- vii. If the third party decides you should go:
  1. Go humbly.
  2. Go urgently.
  3. Listen first.
    - a. Prov 18:17
  4. Do not assume that you know all the facts.
    - a. Prov 27:14

### **C. IF APPROPRIATE, PURSUE CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

- i. If that person is not a part of the same local assembly, you may need to accept that the conflict may never be resolved.
- ii. Matt 18:17-21
- iii. If the offender still will not repent, church membership should be revoked and they can no longer be a part of your church family.
  - 1. This does not mean that the church cannot ever reach out to that person.
  - 2. This does not mean they should be shunned or that contact should be refused.
  - 3. On the contrary, the church should pray for repentance and be willing and ready to welcome them back into the church.
- iv. This is always a painful and difficult action, but there is comfort in Matt 18:18-20.
  - 1. When a local church solemnly determines that one must be removed from membership, that decision carries with it the approval and endorsement of God.
  - 2. The point in context is that the Spirit will work in and through His ordained process of church discipline in a special way.
- v. Ultimately, the purpose of church discipline is restoration, not condemnation.

**NOTHING CAN BE MORE CRUEL THAN THE TENDERNESS THAT  
CONSIGNS ANOTHER TO HIS SIN. NOTHING CAN BE MORE  
COMPASSIONATE THAN THE SEVERE REBUKE THAT CALLS A BROTHER  
BACK FROM THE PATH OF SIN. - DIETRICH BONHOEFFER**



## LESSON 8: WHAT IF I WON'T FORGIVE?

*...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. – Matt 6:12, 14-15*

*Formerly you never forgave anyone. You judged people without mercy. And you praised people with equal lack of moderation. And now an understanding mildness has become the basis of our uncategorical judgments. – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

### I. CONSIDER TWO RELATED QUESTIONS

- a. What should be said to the person who says, “I just cannot forgive?”
- b. What should be said to the person who says, “I will not forgive?”
- c. On the one hand, these two questions are quite different.
  - i. If you won’t forgive, that is a matter of the will.
  - ii. If you can’t forgive, that is a matter of ability.
- d. But both questions are alike in that they probe how far forgiveness should go.
  - i. The implication of the first question is that there are times when forgiveness can be limited by the seriousness of the offense.
  - ii. The implication of the second question is that some offenses are so serious that they do not deserve to be forgiven.

- iii. The point, however, is that people who are unable or unwilling to forgive should be warned in the most serious way possible, for Jesus taught that if we are either unable or unwilling to offer forgiveness, we should question the reality of our salvation.

## **2. JESUS ON THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS**

- a. Matt 18:21-35
- b. The point is not that we ought to forgive someone up to 490 times. So if you are keeping a tally of how many times you have forgiven someone, stop. Jesus' plan is that we ought to forgive an unlimited number of times.
- c. The Christian who will not forgive is like the person who will not forgive a few-thousand-dollar debt when he has himself been forgiven billions.

## **3. WHAT SHOULD BE SAID TO THOSE WHO WON'T FORGIVE?**

- a. Matt 6:14-15; 7:1-5
- b. Jesus was not teaching that we must forgive others in order to be saved. Rather, He was teaching that people who have genuinely received grace are characterized by a willingness to give grace to others.

## LESSON 9: HOW TO DEAL WITH THE UNREPENTANT, PART I

*They cried out with a loud voice, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? – Revelation 6:10*

### 1. THE QUESTION

- a. What should be done in the case of an unrepentant offender?
- b. Rom 12:17-21

### 2. PRINCIPLE #1: RESOLVE NOT TO TAKE REVENGE (17A, 19, 21)

- a. Revenge is not an option, no matter how horrible the offense.
- b. There is a “garden variety” revenge that many cultivate regularly.
  - i. Small acts of revenge seem right, but each act of revenge is wrong; it is sin.

### 3. PRINCIPLE #2: PROACTIVELY SHOW LOVE (17B-18, 20)

- a. Love should show itself in our lives even when we are wronged. Christlike love actively seeks and offers peace.
- b. Matt 5:38-42; 22:37-40
- c. We should use all of our mental energy to love those who harm us and to live at peace with them.
- d. Kindness to our enemies may be the means God uses to bring them to repentance.

## LESSON 9: HOW TO DEAL WITH THE UNREPENTANT, PART 2

*Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware for yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. – 2 Timothy 4:14-15*

*...it is only when God's wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one's enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts. – Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter to Eberhard Bethge*

### **4. PRINCIPLE #3: DON'T FORGIVE THE UNREPENTANT, BUT LEAVE ROOM FOR THE WRATH OF GOD (19)**

- a. We leave it to God because we trust Him that He will appropriately accomplish justice when and how He deems so. – Deut 32:35, 43
- b. Those who have been unrepentant should understand that offenders do face Hell.
- c. The reality of Hell is why we should not take revenge upon those who have offended us. God's justice will be infinitely more severe than anything we might administer.
- d. It is true that Christians must not be overcome by hatred. Yet, Christians must also warn an onlooking world about the justice of God.
- e. Christians should most explicitly point people to the cross when evil is darkest.
  - i. Heb 9:27

## 5. OBJECTIONS

- a. Won't conditional forgiveness lead to bitterness?
  - i. We are created with a standard of justice written on our hearts. When we forgive someone who is not repentant, we are acting in a way that is unjust.
  - ii. When we recognize that the unrepentant will face the vengeance of God, at that point we will feel true love and compassion for them.
- b. Isn't this just a matter of how we use words?
  - i. No. Being in a posture of readiness to forgive while still loving your enemy/offender proactively is not the same as performing the action of forgiveness itself. The first is leading them to repentance, while the second occurs when they do repent.

## LESSON 10: HOW CAN I CONQUER BITTERNESS?

*Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! – Psalm 37:1*

*The assurance of God's ultimate justice (then) frees radical love (now). – John N. Day*

1. Know How to Beat Bitterness – Psalm 73
  - a. First wait for God's justice, and trust His providence.
    - i. The nature of bitterness is to complain. – 73:3-9, 13
    - ii. It is not wrong to notice that we have been treated unjustly. The question is, how should we deal with being treated unjustly? Those who process it wrongly will become bitter.
      1. Gen 27:36-38; 28:6-9
      2. Heb 12:15-17
    - iii. If bitterness is a wrong response to injustice or perceived injustice, then the first step in beating bitterness is to recognize that when we have been treated unjustly, we are particularly vulnerable to bitterness.
    - iv. The essence of bitterness is sin.
    - v. The turning point is Psalm 73 happened when Asaph stopped thinking about himself and the injustice of evil people having an "easier" life and started centering on God. – Psalm 73:17-27

1. Evil people will not get away with it. God is just. He always acts in accordance with what is right.
2. Prov 24:19-20

**KEEPING THE EXTINCTION OF [EVILDOERS'] LAMP IN VIEW WILL  
EXTINGUISH BURNING ENVY. - BRUCE WALTKE**

3. By teaching that we ought to forgive automatically, regardless of repentance, we distance our pain from the justice of God.
4. Confidence in the justice of God is connected to a firm grasp of God's providence.
5. It is not simply that God will see that people face justice. Along with that, God is so great that He is sovereign over the evil that people do. This means that ultimately He works out evil intentions against His people to accomplish the best for His people and His purpose.
- vi. We think of bitterness in emotional categories. But bitterness begins between our ears. It is a mental skid that, left unchecked, quickly ruins our ability to think clearly. Bitter people will not listen. – Psalm 73:22
- vii. Those who are battling bitterness tend to avoid using the word bitterness. Instead they talk about how badly they have been hurt. Based on the depth of their hurt, they talk about what they can or cannot do.

1. They begin to place faith in the barriers they have erected rather than in the God who is just.
  2. They begin to arrange their own protection instead of resting in the protection of their God.
2. Listen to Wise People
  - a. Bitterness causes you to lose your ability to think objectively about the situation.
    - i. Prov 19:20
3. Pursue God's Blessing for Yourself and Those Close to You
  - a. Bitterness harms everyone involved. – Psalm 73:15
  - b. Bitter people betray the people closest to them.
4. Call It What It Is
  - a. Bitterness is sin. Sin is never justifiable, regardless of unfairness or offense.
  - b. If you choose to live with bitterness it is because you have invited it to be your houseguest.