

The
FORGIVENESS
of **GOD**



Mart DeHaan



introduction

The Forgiveness of God

To be human is to second-guess ourselves. Even the most confident among us struggle with guilt and doubt. Many of us go through life hoping we'll be forgiven by God. Some of us assume we've been too bad to be forgiven. Almost all of us have trouble from time to time forgiving ourselves.

How can we be sure we have not made ourselves

unforgivable in the eyes of God? How can we forgive ourselves for our worst moments? The answer is not found in our ability to forget, or in our ability to forgive ourselves. The answer is found in the love of Jesus, who took the pain and punishment we deserve. Our prayer is that in the pages of this brief booklet you will find genuine freedom of conscience that motivates you to share the extravagant forgiveness of God with others.

Mart DeHaan

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one

The Need for Forgiveness

As a **gifted** art student on scholarship, Tracy didn't have time for an unwanted pregnancy. Desperately seeking help, she visited a women's health center. The very next morning, she succumbed to the coercive sales tactics of a woman she thought was a counselor and returned to the clinic for a second visit. When she left that day, she was no longer pregnant. Eventually she and her boyfriend got married and started a family. But a vague, relentless sense of guilt

had taken root in her that fateful day. And she couldn't get rid of it.

↪ **Charles Colson** and **Tracy Knoth** are the only examples here whose real names we have used. "**Kevin**" is a friend of the editor and is still in prison. "**Lexie**" works here at Our Daily Bread Ministries. And "**Justin**" is all of us.

Kevin didn't need anyone to tell him he needed forgiveness. An online sting had sent him to prison for crimes he thought no one could forgive. Now, living on the inside, he could expect only the hatred and derision of other prisoners. Alone with his regrets, he had years to endure his personal mountain of guilt. Even if he made parole, where could he go? His arrest and conviction were big news. Everyone would look at him as "that guy."

It was just a little thing—certainly nothing that would send her to prison. Yet after all these years, Lexie couldn't forget. She'd seen a magazine in a bookstore, and on impulse she'd slipped it into her backpack. No one saw her. She had stolen something just for the sheer thrill of doing so. And she had gotten away with it. But not really. Now, decades later, it was far too late to make restitution—and *it still bothered her!* Could Lexie be forgiven?

Everyone respected Justin. A natural leader, he got things done in church, at work, and in the community. Selected to direct his parish's charitable giving program, he enjoyed the recognition that came from helping the less fortunate. But he often shook his head at the mistakes people made to get themselves into such dire situations. *These people are pretty blessed to have me around to help*

them, Justin thought to himself. He couldn't help feeling just a little bit superior. After all, wasn't he?

After serving time for his role in the Watergate scandal, Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, took a Christian publishing group on a tour of a prison. During the visit, Colson addressed the inmates. Gesturing toward his guests he said, "The only difference between them and you is that they haven't been caught."

Our personal stories may seem drastically different from each other, but we are all far more similar than we care to admit. We all sin. Some sins are hidden. Other sins are thrust into the glaring light of public scrutiny and condemnation. Some misdeeds don't seem like a big deal. Still others don't *seem* to qualify as real "sins," yet they do immense damage. The truth is, each one of us is in desperate need of forgiveness. [➤] But where can we find it?

➤ James reminds us, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (2:10). Once we cross the line of wrongdoing, all that remains is a need for mercy.

When King David had a sexual affair with the wife of a war hero in his army, he soon scrambled to cover it up. Failing in that effort, he slipped into panic mode and arranged the murder of her husband (2 SAMUEL 11). Was this conniving, adulterous murderer who betrayed his God, his army, and his nation capable of being forgiven? Consider these words, penned by David himself: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing*

love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me (PSALM 51:1-3).

God's mercy was bigger than David's sin (SEE 2 SAMUEL 12:13FF), and his story is a timeless reminder that a repentant person can find inexhaustible mercy in the forgiveness of God. But how far will God go in showing mercy? For instance, would He forgive a serial killer? Wouldn't such forgiveness revictimize the families and friends of those murdered?

As sensitive as those considerations are, there is a more important truth here: The grace and forgiveness of God are bigger and more powerful than *any* sin.

The Effects of Guilt

When we sin and refuse to come to Christ for forgiveness, our guilt may express itself in a number of different ways. Before David repented of his terrible sins of adultery and murder, he experienced physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish. In Psalm 32:3–4 he described how his guilt affected him: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long [emotional]. For day and night your hand was heavy on me [spiritual]; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer [physical]."

Unresolved guilt can affect us *physically*. It may manifest itself in listlessness, illnesses real or imagined, headaches, stomach disorders, vague pains, and exhaustion. Justin and Lexie show us two ways of responding to this, both of which will exact a toll on us.

If we try to run from our guilt by immersing ourselves in work or turning to sin in reckless abandon, we will pay a price.

For reasons he may not even understand yet, Justin throws himself into his work in an effort to cover up his own perceived inadequacy. Eventually he will pay a price. His body can't keep up the relentless pace his "perfect" life demands of him.

Lexie responded in a different way. By crossing a clear line of sin with that one act of shoplifting, she found it much easier to crossing more and more lines. Two drunk-driving arrests and several failed relationships later, she finally returned to God with her whole heart.

Psychologists and counselors see the *emotional effects* of guilt, including depression, anger, self-pity, feelings of inadequacy, and a denial of responsibility. Worst of all, unresolved guilt will have a *spiritual effect* on us. We will sense an alienation from God, struggle with our prayer life, lose our desire to read the Bible and to be with other believers, and lose our joy.

A lack of forgiveness will *impact our relationships*. We'll become irritable, blame others, withdraw from friendships, alternately offer profuse apologies or refuse to accept compliments, and be unable to relax. We'll



Unresolved guilt can affect us physically. If we try to run from our guilt... we will pay a price.

find fewer and fewer people are close to us—and God designed us for relationship with others.

David's entire life was affected by his guilt. It touched him physically, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. But he cried out to God, found the assurance of forgiveness, and was restored to wholeness. Would David have been more honorable not to seek God's forgiveness? Would he have been more respectful of his victim's survivors to refuse any mercy? Would self-condemnation or suicide have been a more noble course of action? Only if there is no life beyond the grave. Only if the rest of us were not sinners. Only if a forgiven person has nothing to offer. But God loves us even at our worst and longs to restore us! He still has great plans for our lives.



two

Have We Been Too Bad To Be Forgiven?

What if we can't forgive ourselves? What about the shame and self-contempt that drains the life out of us? If we believe our emotions, we may feel we have gone too far. Our self-contempt seems so deserved.

That's what Kevin struggled with. As he began to understand the enormity of his sin, his personal anguish tortured him. But he found genuine, surprising hope as he grasped the overwhelming truth that God can forgive sins we can't forget.

Does this forgiveness come automatically to everyone all the time? What about Tracy, who can never undo what

she did? Or Lexie, who can no longer make restitution for a simple theft years ago? What about Justin, who seems oblivious to his serious problem with self-righteousness?

God's offer of forgiveness extends to every sin we could commit, but it comes with conditions. He stands ready to forgive any brokenhearted sinner, but He does not *automatically* forgive, nor is He obligated to do so. His forgiveness doesn't mean we won't have natural or legal consequences. It doesn't mean we can flippantly say, "I'm sorry," while wallowing in the same selfish behavior. Yet the forgiveness God gives to us is a fresh-flowing river infinitely greater than any of our personal failures—no matter how far we've fallen.

Our minds have trouble with the seeming tension between God's love and His anger and the balance between His mercy and His justice. Christ had to suffer personally to justify us in the eyes of God. His sacrifice for our sins made the way for the forgiveness that overpowers and eradicates our guilt. Through the wisdom of His love, God has provided a way of satisfying the demands of His law while still offering forgiveness to even the worst of sinners.

God's love and His anger

In 1741 Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Its language and tone are dated, but the message merits consideration today. Edwards pleaded, "Oh sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is

provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it and ready every moment to singe it."

An amazing thing happened as Edwards warned of God's anger. Terrified people woke from their sin and saw their desperate need for God's forgiveness. There is unmistakable good in God's anger. His wrath shows us that He cares too much to ignore the harm we are doing to ourselves and to each other. God's anger is one of His greatest gifts to us!

Woven into the greatest love story the world has ever known is the unfolding drama of a God who loves us enough to hate evil. He cares enough to be angry with religious people who trivialize their own sin while separating themselves from those who need mercy the most. He cares enough to be angry with us when we reduce sin to petty legalisms¹ while ignoring the desperate needs of others. He loves us enough to grieve when we persist in self-destructive choices.

↗ A human tendency is to have **a system of rules** that arbitrarily decides what is right and wrong. Whoever has the most stringent list of rules appears to be closest to God, but is actually far from Him. Such dead religion differs dramatically from the "pure and faultless" religion James says cares for "orphans and widows in their distress" (JAMES 1:27).

God's mercy and His anger

The demand for justice is deeply rooted. Kevin went to prison because society is rightly troubled by crime.

Victims deserve protection, and something in us demands that perpetrators face punishment. In the Old Testament, God established the principle of eye-for-eye, life-for-life justice within a setting of due process so that justice would be served (DEUTERONOMY 19:21).

How then can this same God pardon sinners? How can justice be satisfied except by punishment of the guilty party? Who else can be held responsible for our sin? There is only one other possibility. Other than ourselves, the only one who can be held responsible is the One who gave us the freedom to sin.

God revealed Himself in Jesus (COLOSSIANS 1:15). In Him we find the balance between holy love and holy anger. He loved us enough to warn of impending judgment, telling us, "Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (JOHN 3:36). Yet in that same verse Jesus showed us hope, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." In perhaps His most well-known statement, He assured us that His love is equal to His anger: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (JOHN 3:16–17). Jesus came to save us from our sin—and from His own wrath.

Christ also had these words of caution: "Do not be afraid



In [Jesus] we find the balance between holy love and holy anger. Jesus came to save us from our sin—and from His own wrath.

of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (MATTHEW 10:28). The truth about God's love and anger is not found in one or the other. His love complements His anger in perfect balance. Because of His immense love, He made a way to show mercy to us.

But is it even possible for Him to pay for our damages? According to Scripture, that's exactly what happened. At great cost to Himself, He made a way for the price to be paid. Looking back, we can see what God did when He set up the system of blood sacrifice for ancient Israel. He was showing them the cost of sin and giving them a picture of what He would do in the future. God said, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (LEVITICUS 17:11).[▶]

▶ *The letter to the Hebrews outlines how the blood of bulls and goats was insufficient to take away our sins. It was merely a foreshadowing of the once-for-all, perfect sacrifice of Christ*

(SEE HEBREWS 9:7-15).

Like parents who give their growing children freedom to make their own choices, God gives us the freedom to choose between right and wrong. When Lexie's parents gave her the freedom to go shopping with friends, their permission provided her with the opportunity to make wrong choices. When she chose to shoplift, she may have gotten a "free" magazine but she also acquired the need to repent and seek forgiveness.

Were her parents wrong to give Lexie freedom? Let's

consider a larger question. Was God wrong to give us moral capacity and freedom of choice? Certainly not. That freedom allows His beloved creatures to choose to love Him in return. If they had no choice but to love, that would not be true love. Genuine love can never be coerced.

God is holy in all He is and does. One day we will fully understand His wisdom in letting us discover the cost of sin and the consequences of our willful disobedience.

The payment for our sin came at His expense. In an unparalleled act of self-sacrifice, God built a bridge of mercy and justice over the chasm of sin that separated us from Him. As Roman executioners drove nails into the hands and feet of Jesus, the Father suffered as no human father has ever suffered. When it was finished, God accepted the sacrifice of His Son as full payment for our sin. In humiliating agony, Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (MATTHEW 27:46). As the apostle Paul said, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 CORINTHIANS 5:21). Justice was satisfied.

Three days later, Christ conquered death. He rose from the dead. The miracle of resurrection showed God's acceptance of His sacrifice and laid the foundation for our justification. 📖

📖 *The word **justified** is a legal term used in ancient law courts to describe the status of a person who had paid the full penalty for his crime and was restored to his place in society. In essence, God says to the person who trusts Christ, "Your sins have been paid for. My Son died for you. Therefore, in Him you stand righteous before Me."*

In his letter to the Romans, Paul outlined how our salvation works. God is *just* (righteous) to *justify* (declare righteous) all who come to Christ in faith. He wrote:

No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (ROMANS 3:20–26)

God's forgiveness eradicates our guilt

Because of the unlimited scope of Christ's death on the cross, we have received forgiveness not only for past sins but for all sins, including present and future. After all, when Christ was crucified, all *our* sins were in the future.

Once-for-all. When we trust Christ as Savior, we gain

immunity from eternal punishment. The issue is settled. Our case is closed and God will not open the file of our guilt again. The court of heaven will not judge those whose sins have been punished in Christ.

The wonderful truth of justification is that God by His own authority acquits us. He declares righteous those who appeal to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as payment for their sin. Does this mean we are no longer accountable for our wrongs? No. We are still subject to natural and legal consequences. We risk our reputation, health, and relationships by careless living. But our restored relationship with our Creator is forever. We can still lose rewards and a “well done” at the judgment seat¹ of Christ, where our Lord will hold us accountable as His children. But those of us who have trusted Christ will never be condemned for our sin.



We are still subject to natural and legal consequences. But those of us who have trusted Christ will never be condemned for our sin.

↗ *Paul provides a glimpse of this future judgment of Christians. “The fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames” (1 CORINTHIANS 3:13–15).*

Paul wrote: “Since we have been justified through faith,

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (ROMANS 5:1–2).

Complete. The forgiveness God offers is comprehensive. It is complete and final—not just until the next inevitable sin. This is why in another letter Paul could quote Psalm 32:1–2 when he wrote: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are *forgiven*, whose sins are *covered*. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will *never count against them*" (ROMANS 4:7–8).

Three important terms in this verse show the completeness of God's mercy.

Forgiven. The word translated "forgiven" means "to lift off, to carry away." That is what happens to our guilt when God forgives us.

When Tracy came to the awful realization that she could not undo her offense against life itself, she cried out in desperation to God for forgiveness only He could provide. And He gave it freely! The huge weight of guilt lifted from her spirit. She felt God's healing presence and an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude.

Covered. When we trust Christ, our sins are removed forever. The Greek word here means "to cover over completely, to obliterate." They are completely removed. God's promise to Israel applies to all who trust Christ: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (ISAIAH 43:25).

Never count against them. God charges our sins to Christ and charges to our account the righteousness of

Christ. He will not hold our sins against us. This is the astonishing truth that enables Kevin not merely to endure his prison sentence, but to thrive behind bars, living in the joy of God's complete acceptance.



three

Forgiveness Defined

In the Bible, *forgiveness* consistently means “to loose” or “to remove” a barrier to relationship. But different kinds of barriers and relationships may be in view.

1 God’s legal forgiveness. This is God’s once-for-all removal of all legal barriers to heaven. With the granting of this forgiveness, God acts as Judge to declare our sins paid in full. From this moment on, Christ is our Advocate. ▀ Along with His Father, He gives us legal immunity from any accusation that could separate us from

the love of God (SEE ROMANS 8:28–39). We need to remember, however, that though universally available, this forgiveness is not universally applied. It is given only to those who personalize God's mercy. Forgiveness is not effective until it is accepted.

↪ *John the disciple wrote: "If anybody does sin, we have an **advocate** with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 JOHN 2:1–2).*

2 God's family forgiveness. This forgiveness occurs after we have been legally pardoned and born into the family of heaven. By His mercy, God removes the relational barriers to our closeness with Him. In this forgiveness, He acts not as a Judge but as our heavenly Father.

In one of his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul gave instructions on how believers in Christ should approach the Lord's Supper. He told his readers to be particularly reflective regarding their walk with God, and warns that some Christians were sick or had even died because of their disobedience. "If we were more discerning with regard to ourselves," he wrote, "we would not come under such judgment" (1 CORINTHIANS 11:31).



This forgiveness is not universally applied. It is given only to those who personalize God's mercy. It is not effective until it is accepted.

When we disobey God and do not correct ourselves, He gets our attention with painful circumstances precisely because we are His children (see HEBREWS 12:4–11). The discomfort of this discipline comes from a Father who loves to forget our sins when we honestly confess them and agree to place ourselves back under the control of His Spirit.

This kind of forgiveness is similar to what healthy families experience. If a son takes the family car without permission and then lies about it, his parents aren't doing him a favor by acting as if it didn't happen. Before driving privileges can be restored, the son must own up to his wrong and be forgiven. His status within the family is never in jeopardy (legal forgiveness), but the basis for trust has been damaged and family forgiveness is needed. This is the forgiveness in view in John's statement to fellow members of the family of God: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 JOHN 1:9).



*If we confess
our sins, he is
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unrighteousness"*

(1 JOHN 1:9)

3 **People-to-people forgiveness.** Our forgiveness of one another is to be patterned after the way God forgives us. From His example, we learn that while our

love for others needs to be *unconditional*, there is a place for *conditional forgiveness*. Whether we can consider an offense a dead issue will be determined by whether the offending party is willing to own up to the wrong. Christlike love may make it necessary to withhold forgiveness until the one who has done the harm admits responsibility for it.



four

Examples of the Forgiven

The story of the Bible is the story of God making a way to rescue His creation from their sin and restore relationship with Him. Time and time again, God's people hurt each other and hurt Him. Yet God forgave them every time they turned to Him. The first human beings were also the first humans to sin—and the first to experience God's forgiveness. Given the freedom to choose to obey God, Adam and Eve opted for rebellion. Yet God pursued them and made a way for the human race to experience redemption (GENESIS 3). Here are just a few more examples of God's forgiveness.

Moses murdered an Egyptian in anger. Yet God used

him to rescue His enslaved people. Aaron made a golden calf and helped the people participate in idolatry, yet Aaron was later appointed head of the priesthood (EXODUS 32; LEVITICUS 8).

Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, turned to the Lord of Israel and became part of Jesus' family tree (JOSHUA 2; MATTHEW 1:5).

After decades of opposing God in the worst ways imaginable, Israel's most immoral king, Manasseh, repented. He found forgiveness and was even restored to his kingdom after having been a captive (2 CHRONICLES 33:1–20).

Matthew, a tax collector with a bad reputation, became Christ's disciple (MATTHEW 9:9–13). A repentant criminal who was crucified with Jesus cried out to Him and was welcomed into paradise (LUKE 23:40–43). Peter denied Christ three times[■] at the hour of Jesus' deepest need, yet he became a pillar in the church (JOHN 21:15–19). When the Pharisees trapped a woman in adultery, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and forgave her sins (JOHN 8:1–11). A greedy tax collector named Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus and came down to receive forgiveness (LUKE 19:1–10). Paul, the killer of Christians and self-confessed "chief of sinners," is a prime example of the grace of God (ACTS 9; 1 TIMOTHY 1:15).

↪ *Each of the 4 gospels tells of Peter's denial (MATTHEW 26:73–75; MARK 14:66–72; LUKE 22:59–62; AND JOHN 18:26–27). Luke records how Jesus looked straight at Peter. In John 21, Jesus gently recommissioned Peter by the seaside, just as He had originally called him at the start of His ministry.*

Luke gives us one of the most powerful accounts of the love and forgiveness of God. A woman with a bad

reputation was washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. The Pharisee in whose home Jesus was a guest found such behavior scandalous and objected that Jesus would let such a woman even touch Him (SEE LUKE 7:36–39). So Jesus said, *“Simon, I have something to tell you.”*

“Tell me, Teacher,” he said.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

The Lord then explained how she who had sinned greatly was forgiven much, and so she loved much. But those who had not sinned as much loved less.

Then Jesus told her, *“Your sins are forgiven”* (LUKE 7:40–48).

Common questions

It's normal to have persisting questions about the forgiveness of God. We can't ignore relational and emotional issues that stubbornly refuse to be put to rest.

“What if I don't feel forgiven?” Most of us struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. Long after we have confessed our sins to God, we are apt to feel unforgiven. We might fear we have been rejected by God.

Tracy, who struggled to forgive herself, understands this. *“It's pride that keeps us from forgiving ourselves,”* she said. *“We're telling God that His grace isn't powerful*

enough. Somehow, we have to do something else to earn His forgiveness. That's pretty insulting to God when you think about it."

When feelings of guilt hound us—and they will—we need to remind ourselves that our forgiveness does not depend on how we feel. Forgiven people can feel like they are hanging by a thread over the fires of hell. Forgiven people can be oppressed by the accuser of our souls, Satan, who stirs up old emotions. Suddenly we are oppressed by anxiety and despair. But our emotions are not telling us the truth about the forgiveness of God. Forgiveness is something *God* does. It is not rooted in our own emotions. It doesn't depend on whether we forgive ourselves. Forgiveness is what God does when He marks "canceled" over our debt of sin. We are forgiven when He declares us legally acquitted, regardless of how we might be feeling at the moment.

"Isn't forgiveness something between us and God alone?"

Yes, forgiveness is personal. No one else can decide for us whether we are going to believe in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. But personal doesn't mean private. When we know the joy of forgiveness of sin we have every reason to go public. If we had found a cure for AIDS or cancer it would be criminal to keep the information quiet. Those who have experienced forgiveness must share their discovery with those still struggling.

"Why does the Bible say God will not forgive us if we don't forgive one another?" The answer is in the context. Jesus said, "If you forgive other people when they

sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (MATTHEW 6:14–15). By this statement, Jesus was not teaching lost people how to earn salvation. Rather, He was teaching His disciples how to stay in a healthy family relationship with the Father.

"Does this mean we should always forgive others unconditionally?" No. Like so many other principles of Scripture, there is a time to forgive and a time not to forgive. While we are always to love others unconditionally by seeking their good rather than their harm, Jesus teaches us to forgive people *when* they acknowledge their wrongs (SEE LUKE 17:1–10 AND MATTHEW 18:15–17). We do not love well when we allow our brothers or sisters to knowingly harm us without holding them accountable.

By comparing Luke 17:3–4[■] with other passages, we must conclude that Jesus was referring to an unwillingness to love those who have harmed us and an unwillingness to forgive those who have repented of the wrong they have done. What He will hold against us (in a family sense) is our determination to withhold from others the kindness and forgiveness that He has shown to us. This is a "family issue," and not a factor that determines our eternal destiny.

↪ *"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (LUKE 17:3–4).*

“But doesn’t God forgive us unconditionally?” When the apostle Paul told us to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (EPHESIANS 4:32), he made it clear that we are to pattern our forgiveness after God’s forgiveness of us. God does not forgive unconditionally. First He grants legal pardon to those who meet the condition of acknowledging their sin and believing in His Son. Then He extends family forgiveness to those sons and daughters who confess their sin and seek to be restored to the Father.

“If we have been forgiven by God, why won’t people let us forget the past?” Being forgiven by God does not release us from the natural consequences of our sins. Crimes against the state must be subjected to legal due process. Acts against individuals deserve restitution. The forgiveness of God does not qualify former embezzlers to be entrusted with other people’s money, just as it does not give us reason to entrust our kids to someone with a history of harming children. This is wisdom.



five

“Would God Forgive Me?”

Perhaps you're struggling with the concept of God's forgiveness. You can understand it intellectually but have trouble believing it for yourself. Let's return to Tracy's story. She found an emphatic response to her doubts.

It happened as she was returning home with her three boys from a pro-life rally in Washington, D.C. Her sons, ages 11, 9, and 7, all knew about her abortion. But at the rally they learned about the reality of abortion in ways they hadn't fully considered before. During the bus ride

home, her youngest son asked, "Is that what you really did, Mom?" She answered quietly, "Yes, it was."

Her second son said, "Wow, Mom, what if that had been one of us?"

It was then that her eldest son rocked her world. "But it was," he said.

A conversation that could have destroyed Tracy suddenly overflowed with God's powerful grace. "It was painful, yes," she says. "But that moment became so precious to me. My innocent children made the full reality of abortion known to me. But it was okay. I knew it was completely covered with His grace."

Not long after that bus ride, she made this entry in her journal:

The horrible revelation of the truth at that moment pierced straight through the mother's heart within me. An arrow full of the poison of guilt and condemnation. The full force of the ramifications of the decision I had made years earlier hit me. My great shame and failure was laid bare before my innocent children. I saw the pain in their eyes and felt it in the weight of the silence between us. But grace. The awesome power of the gift of God's grace. Out of my spirit came the reminder that I had been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. Not merely forgiven, but I had been made to be the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus.

That's the scope of God's love and grace. That's the power of His forgiveness. 🌿



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