

Misunderstandings About Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Because of interpersonal problems, many local churches are ineffective. Some are completely divided. While the body of Christ should be a testimony of love and unity, believers often are unwilling to forgive and be reconciled with each other. This is in direct violation of Jesus' statement that the way the world would recognize His disciples is by their love for one another.

You are probably aware of relatives, friends, and church members whose relationships are strained. Marriages among those who regularly attend church end in divorce with increasing frequency. Husbands and wives are unwilling to forgive and reconcile. Even leaders within churches sometimes refuse to be reconciled with one another, claiming "irreconcilable" differences.

The lack of reconciliation has devastated many churches and mission groups. Why? There are a number of reasons. One reason is pride (*Luke 17:3-10*). Another reason is lack of understanding of forgiveness (for example, a misinterpretation of *Hebrews 10:17*). A third reason is lack of repentance. Yet another reason is failure to develop a biblical plan or procedure on how to reconcile (*as illustrated in the parable of the prodigal son, and his plan for seeking his father's forgiveness, from Luke 15:18-21*).

The Scriptures teach us that believers are to be "...diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace..." (*Ephesians 4:3*). Instead, many seem to focus on the differences among believers. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not optional for dealing with relationships God's way — the Lord clearly commands us to forgive (*Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 17:3-10*), reconcile (*Matthew 5:23-24*), and live at peace with others, as far as it depends on us (*Mark 9:50; Romans 12:18; 14:19*).

This series of articles focuses on misunderstandings about forgiveness and reconciliation. In this article, we will be distinguishing between forgiving another and forgetting (erasing from memory) what the person did.

What is forgiveness?

The word "forgiveness" means setting aside, sending away (the guilt), remission of the penalty. God's forgiveness is an outpouring of abundant grace and mercy that provides pardon to the guilty. Although God's forgiveness does not necessarily release the offender from the physical or material consequences of his sin, it provides full release from the guilt of the wrongdoing.

Those who are saved have been released from the penalty for their sins and are reconciled to God because the Lord Jesus Christ has paid their penalty by His sacrifice on the cross (*Romans 5:8-10; Ephesians 1:7*). This, however, does not ensure freedom from guilt for ongoing sins in a believer's life. God is faithful and just to forgive (release from guilt) the believer's sins when he confesses them to God (*1 John 1:9*). This sets aside the barrier to the believer's fellowship with God.

These truths have many implications for us since God tells us in *Ephesians 4:32* that we are to forgive others just as He has forgiven us. Sadly, there are many misunderstandings about forgiveness in the body of Christ today. Consequently, many are not reconciled to others, and as a result, are living in defeat.

Misunderstanding #1 — When I forgive, I must forget.

This thinking may come from a misunderstanding of the statement in Scripture, "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." (*Hebrews 10:17*). For example, David requested of the Lord "not to remember" (literally, "not to mention") the previous sins of his youth (*Psalms 25:7*).

In looking at *Hebrews 10:17* (which is quoted from *Jeremiah 31:34*), it is important to note that the word "to remember" is an accounting term. Scripture uses the term "not to remember" as meaning "not to mention or bring to mind" or "not to keep an account, or to reckon." In other words, it can also

accurately be read “not to tally up,” as in the debit column, as a charge or accusation of debts owed). So when God chooses not to recount a sin against us, He no longer charges the guilt of the sin *against* us. He may still bring up the previous sin to us, but not for accusation. We are told that, when the Lord brings up our sins, it is for our instruction (*based on I Corinthians 10:1-11*).

While God forgives, He does not forget (erase His memory) since He is omniscient (all-knowing), the Almighty God, and final Judge, who will bring every act and every careless word to judgment whether good or evil (*Ecclesiastes 12:14*). If the Lord truly removed from His memory the sins He forgave us, He would no longer be omniscient, since part of His knowledge would be gone. In addition, a great portion of the Scriptures would be missing, since the sins of individuals would not be given to us, even for our learning. Therefore, since God’s character and His Word give assurance that He does forgive completely, removal of the sin from memory is not required in order to forgive completely.

A wonderful illustration is given in *Isaiah 38:17*. There, God tells us that He casts our sins behind His back. The word “back” connotes the small (hinder part) of the back. If you were to make your hand into a fist and place it in the small of your back, it is impossible to see your fist. This does not mean that the sins have disappeared; they are merely removed from sight. In the same way, when God forgives you, He puts your sins out of His sight (so to speak); however, when it is good for you or others, God will remind you of your sin. When the Lord reminds us of the sins we have previously committed, it is part of His gracious work, so that we can remember not to commit the same sins repeatedly.

Nowhere does Scripture require you to have a blank memory about your own sins or sins committed against you. In fact, the memory of certain sins (even though these sins have been forgiven by God) is important for your training in righteousness, to help you not repeat them (*for example, notice God’s record and David’s remembrance of his sins in II Samuel 12:13-23*). This is tremendous hope, because you can forgive, even though you may not be able to erase from memory that the other person sinned against you. However, if you continue to dwell on what the other person did (*for example, thinking about how “unfair” his/her actions were, how “insensitive” he/she was, etc.*), it may be a signal to you that you may still be harboring grudges, and that you have not truly forgiven the other person.

When you forgive, you are to set aside the reminders of the other’s sins (*for example, a photograph that may tempt you to relive the circumstance and dwell on the wrong against you*), and are not to allow a barrier to remain between you any longer. The only reason for bringing up the forgiven sins is to help the forgiven person recognize a pattern of sin (*for example, when parents have to bring up a child’s sin for training through discipline*), and to encourage him/her to change. If you need to bring up the sin of the offender, you must not use it as an excuse to accuse him/her of the wrongs against you (*for example, you should not say “Look at what you did to me....”*). Instead, having forgiven the other, if you should bring up the other’s sin, you need to clearly state your loving concern for the other person (*for example, you should state something like “I am concerned that this is becoming a pattern of sin in your life, and out of my love for you I want to help you....”*).

Demonstrating forgiveness of another is one of the key evidences of our living as those responding in gratefulness to the Lord’s gracious forgiveness of us (*as illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving slave from Matthew 18:21-35*).

In the next few articles, we will address other misunderstandings, such as: “When I forgive, I must release the guilty person from all the consequences of his sin,” and “Even though God forgave me, I must also forgive myself.”