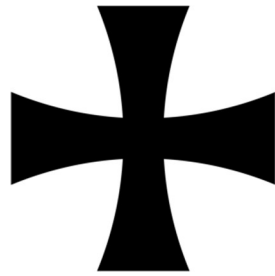


# Called to Forgiveness



## Understanding Forgiveness

*For man, it is impossible to forgive, but “all things are possible with God.” (Mk 10:27)*

**Forgiveness:** The release, on the part of the offended party, of any expectation that a debt will be repaid or that an offender will receive punishment for an offense. The removal of an inappropriate offense does not condone the behavior or suggest approval for the offense.

- Forgiveness is a choice of the will; it is not a feeling. At times, forgiving someone that hurts us, may be the most difficult thing we will ever do.
- We can choose to forgive, even if we don't feel like forgiving.

*Forgiveness is NOT:*

Forgiveness is not weakness.

Forgiveness is not a feeling.

Forgiveness is not an excuse for the actions of those that hurt us.

Forgiveness doesn't cancel out the objective requirements of justice.<sup>1</sup>

Forgiveness is doesn't mean we cannot be angry.

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*We are Called to Forgive*

Forgiveness for our sins comes from the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. He redeemed us through the shedding of his blood and as a result, we have access to the Father if we repent of our sins.

*Eph 1:7* In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins.

*Are we to forgive everyone, even those that refuse to say they are sorry for what they have done?*

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 14

1. We are not called to go beyond what God himself does when it comes to forgiveness. Many Christians believe that they are obliged to forgive even those who are not sorry for their offenses. On the surface this sounds like the Christian thing to do, but it is not correct. God himself doesn't do it. He forgives only those who repent of their sins.
  - a. **2 Corinthians 7:10** "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation." **1 John 1:9** says, "If we confess our sins, he . . . will forgive our sins."

- Our Lord obviously has not forgiven everyone unless they repent of their sins. God, for example, will not forgive the souls in hell for the simple reason that they did not ask for forgiveness.
- Are we required to do more than God does when it comes to forgiveness? Jesus seems to answer for us in the following:

**Lk 17:3-4** Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and ***if he repents, forgive him***; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

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*Note: Forgiving those that do not ask for forgiveness is a meritorious act of mercy. For example, if someone steals my backpack and laptop, I can petition the Lord to forgive them and declare that I am giving the laptop to the person who stole it and for the Lord not to hold it against them. (Recall the beautiful scene in *Le Misérables* where the bishop "gives" the stolen silver to Jean Valjean after Jean is caught with the stolen goods.)*

Jesus said:

**Lk 23:34** Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.

- Forgiveness, on our part, regardless of the offender's position, will allow our hearts to remain at peace and find healing, even if we are not required to forgive those who don't seek forgiveness.
- It is also not wrong to ask God for justice against those that have committed grave injustices. But we must let God, not us, decide the punishment.

## *We are Called to Love*

2. We must distinguish between our calling to *forgive* those who are sorry and ask for forgiveness and our call to *love* everyone without exception, including those who have wronged us *and are not sorry that they did*. Sometimes these two concepts are conflated.
  - St. Thomas Aquinas tells us love is “willing the good of the other” selflessly (see also *1 Cor. 13:5*). Or “putting the needs of the other before our needs.”
  - This is why we are called to “love our enemies.” (not “like” our enemies)
    - *Mt 5:44* But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . .
  - Love is also an act of the will. It is not a feeling nor an option. We choose to love.
    - *Jn 15:12-13* This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.
    - *Rom 12:17-21* Repay no one evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¶ If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. ¶ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ¶ No, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Definition of evil: is the absence of a good that should be there.

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### *Are we to forgive and forget the sins of those that have hurts us?*

3. God says, “I am he who blots out your transgression for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (*Isa. 25:23*). When God forgives, he forgets. So, if we must forgive, we must forget as well, right?

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¶ 12:18: Mk 9:50; Rom 14:19.

¶ 12:19: Lev 19:18; Deut 32:35; Heb 10:30.

¶ 12:20: Prov 25:21–22; Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27.

- First of all, forgiveness must be properly understood. There is no such thing as “divine amnesia.” “I will not remember” is an anthropomorphic way of saying God will not hold sins against us that have been forgiven.

## *We are Called to Examine Ourselves*

We must first acknowledge that we, too, are broken and sinful individuals. It is easy to see what others have done to us without first considering what responsibility we have, to be the person we are called to be.

**Mt 7:1-5** “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You *hypocrite*, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

Many of us have sinned gravely against God and deserve eternal punishment as a result.

**Rom 1:28-32** And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of *wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.* Though they know God’s decree that *those who do such things deserve to die*, they not only do them but approve those who practice them. (see also *1 Cor 6:9ff, Gal 5:19*)

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But God has been merciful to us and will forgive us when we turn away from our sins. He desires that we be merciful and forgive others also.

**Mt 18:21-22** Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

## *Forgiveness and Anger*

**Mt 6:14–15** For if you forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your sins.

- We often think of forgiving people in terms of not being angry with them and of having warm, positive feelings toward them, even though we still may feel angry.
- It seems like our forgiveness before God is conditional on our willingness to forgive others. A person with a feelings-based understanding of forgiveness could conclude that he isn't forgiven by God until he has rosy feelings for the offender. This way leads to despair.
- But the feelings-based view of forgiveness is wrong because we don't have full control of our feelings. We can influence our feelings, but there is no way for us to flip a switch that makes the anger vanish and be replaced by rosy feelings.
- We are not responsible for what we cannot control. Since we have only indirect influence on our feelings, we are responsible for how we strive to *manage* them but not for *having* them.

## *Anger and Sin*

Anger isn't sinful in itself. In **Eph 4:26**, Paul tells us, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” This passage speaks of our responsibility to manage our feelings. Paul is telling us not to nurture our anger, but to let it pass.

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- Anger is part of our human nature and plays a useful function, such as protecting the things that need protection. Even Jesus got angry (**Mk 3:5**).
  - Thomas Aquinas notes that “evil may be found in anger, when one is angry, more or less than right reason demands. But if one is angry in accordance with right reason, one's anger is deserving of praise.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-II:158:1

## *Anger and Forgiveness*

- If humans didn't practice forgiveness, we would seek retribution on all past offenses and society would fall apart.
- Society depends on a substantial amount of forgiveness, of "letting things slide" in order to function.
- Individuals who don't display the necessary level of forgiveness end up isolating themselves from others.
- We need to partition our anger, to not act on it. This is part of what is involved in forgiving a person. It means a willingness to let go of the anger we have for others, even if it's going to take time before the feeling goes away. This is what we seek when we ask others to forgive us: that they be willing to let the anger go.

## *Forgiveness is . . .*

- Jesus calls us to be like God, showing mercy "that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (*Mt. 5:45*).
- So how does God forgive?
  - *1 Tim. 2:4* "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"
  - *2 Pet. 3:9* the Lord is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."
- We should have the same attitude. We should will the good of every soul, even the most evil ones. No matter who they are or what they've done, we need to will their ultimate good, which is salvation through repentance.

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### What if they don't repent?

One may hope that they were not culpable for their actions and so can be saved. Maybe they were affected by mental disorder, intense pressure, ignorance, indoctrination, or *something* that affected their judgment so that they weren't responsible for their actions at the time they committed them.

But what if they were culpable for their actions?

We may hope that they are brought around to repentance. But to be brought to repentance often requires suffering the consequences of one's sins.



## APPENDIX A

Everything that we have lost, because of another's sinful act will be returned to us in the next life. St. Thomas Aquinas said that we would be perfectly happy in heaven and if that which we have lost here on earth is necessary for our happiness in heaven, then it will be there for us.

**Mt 18:34–35** And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers,<sup>h</sup> till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

**Mk 11:25** And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

**Eph 4:31-32** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you

**Col 3:12-13** Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

**1 Thes 5:18** Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

**1 Jn 5:16-17** If anyone sees his brother committing what is not a deadly sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not deadly. There is sin which is deadly; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not deadly.

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<sup>h</sup> Greek *torturers*.