

Should Believers Forgive the Unrepentant?

INTRODUCTION

A. A substantial assertion – Some believers have claimed (in pulpits, books, magazines, and Internet websites) that we need to forgive sinners BEFORE they admit guilt, show evidence of regret, apologize, or even request forgiveness.

B. The supporting arguments

1. The Scriptural argument – Often asserted is that believers should follow Jesus' example as revealed in His words during His crucifixion: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Lk 23:34)

2. The psychological arguments – Admonitions to forgive the unrepentant are frequently accompanied by the idea that forgiveness should be granted for one's own benefit – in order to feel better. It's been said: "Forgive others – not because they deserve forgiveness but because you deserve peace." A psychologist in the August 24, 2024, issue of *Psychology* ("India's First Mental Health Magazine") phrased it this way: "It's important to remember that forgiving someone isn't about them, but rather about healing yourself.... Forgiveness's main purpose is not really about the act itself. It's more about not allowing someone's wrongdoings to prevent you from living your fullest life." From the non-professional side of things, a Sunday school teacher once asked, "Why should we forgive our enemies?" One boy raised his hand and said, "Because it messes with their heads!"

I. The Bible passage – Five facts need to be remembered in connection with what Jesus said while on the cross.

A. Jesus, the one sinned against, didn't forgive. He asked His heavenly Father to forgive. So the analogy with our forgiving others is not exactly comparable. God (not we) would be the One to forgive those who sin against us.

B. The forgiveness was for a sin of unbelievers, not believers. Those who refer to Luke 23:34 to say we should forgive people even before they repent don't usually apply this to all people (not just the unsaved).

C. Jesus asked forgiveness just once – and for a group. Was it the soldiers and Pilate, the Jewish leaders, or others who were mocking Jesus? More likely it was God's chosen earthly nation (Israel) whom He had in mind.

D. Jesus' request to His Father was for ignorant people. "They know not what they do," Jesus said. How are believers today supposed to know the extent of knowledge someone has who has sinned against them?

E. His incarnation was not meant to be imitated. Many preachers emphasize the idea that believers are to copy Jesus' life. In fact, an American minister and author (Charles Monroe Sheldon) wrote a book entitled *In His Steps* (published in 1897) to promote that idea. However, God's instructions to the Church do not contain such an admonition or rule. Jesus' life was unique (never getting married, living under the Law of Moses and only in Israel, dying on a cross, etc.).

II. The rest of Scripture

A. No repentance, no forgiveness.

1. God does not forgive the unrepentant. Scripture never records God forgiving (saving) an individual who never sincerely repented of (changed his or her mind about) sin. Even if it did happen, evidently God did not think we needed to know – especially as a potential basis or example for doing it ourselves. Likewise

2. Believers are not told to forgive the unrepentant. Likewise, the Bible never suggests (as some today do) that we should forgive in order to get a sinner to repent. Such a questionable motive is foreign to Scripture. In fact, Jesus' instructions about handling those who sin (Mt 18:15-17) clearly expect the guilty party to admit the guilt.

B. God actually brings to repentance those He forgives (Rom 2:4). We believers are unable to accomplish that.

C. The truly repentant are to be forgiven (not rebuffed) – even seven times a day according to Jesus' words (Lk 17:3-4). When forgiveness is appropriate, we should graciously and unhesitatingly give it.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The fact that God does not forgive everyone should make us think twice before we forgive.

B. The Bible does not give commands or motivation for us to forgive the unrepentant, nor does it forbid it.

C. A practical reason to not forgive everyone is that inappropriate forgiveness may lead the forgiven one to think the sin was not so bad – and so lead to more sin. A farmer once confided in a friend of his that he was having trouble forgiving his neighbor. "Why?" the friend asked. The farmer replied, "Every time I forgive him, he borrows something else and never returns it!"

D. Despite what some psychologists may say, even the world around us tends to not forgive people before there is evidence of true sorrow and repentance (e.g., parole boards usually wait to see remorse in the criminal).