

Must We Forgive Others Before God Will Forgive Us?

INTRODUCTION

A. The prominence of forgiveness – It's important in Scripture and in our lives. The subject of forgiveness is found over 100 times in Scripture (the word “forgive” occurring 56x, “forgiven” 42x, “forgave” 9x, “forgiveness” 7x, “forgiving” 4x, and “remission” 10x). That's not nearly as often as the ideas of faith, holiness, life, love, or truth – but it's still prominent – and it's a key element in salvation from sins.

B. The problem of forgiveness – Many people have been confused by some statements in the Gospels that make God's forgiveness conditional (dependent on) human forgiveness. The question for us today is whether or not humans are supposed to live under that conditional situation. To put it another way, the problem for those today who have believed in Jesus Christ for salvation from sin is this: Which comes first – God's forgiveness or ours? Does God today wait for humans to forgive one another before He forgives them?

I. The source of the problem

A. The Lord's Prayer – The so-called “**Lord's Prayer**” may be the most frequently quoted portion of Scripture – by unbelievers and believers alike. Almost all groups of professing Christians – Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestants, and cults alike – recite it in church and/or in their homes, in fox holes, at scenes of fatal accidents and deathbeds, and even at funerals.

Recently my wife and I were watching a TV movie that was a true story about a missing boy not far from Atlanta, GA. He wandered off from home just as the family was packing their SUV for a vacation. Among others who came to console the parents and help look for the boy was a local pastor. If the movie portrayed him accurately, this pastor evidently did not know the Bible well enough and thus was at a loss for what to say. He tried to calm the anxious dad by reciting to him (you guessed it) “The Lord's Prayer,” which, as everyone knows, mentions “daily bread” but has nothing to do with missing children or other crises in our daily lives.

It is found in two of the Gospels (Matthew and Luke). The shorter version is in Matthew: “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Mt 6:12). Jesus immediately clarified this idea by saying “If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (“trespasses” being used as a synonym for “sins” – Mt 6:14). Luke records it slightly differently: “forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.” (Lk 11:4) – likely on a different occasion.

B. Elsewhere in the Gospels – In three other situations Jesus more or less repeated the same idea of conditional forgiveness. “His lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.” (Mt 18:34-35) Similarly, “When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” (Mk 11:25-26) Then, the shortest of all: “Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.” (Lk 6:37)

II. The solution of the problem

A. Facts about the prayer

1. The name – It should be noted that the name or label “Lord's Prayer” can be misleading. Yes, Jesus said the words, but He didn't pray them. They were to be a guide for His disciples in their praying.

2. The nature – It is not actually a prayer at all. Jesus prefaced what's called “The Lord's Prayer” with these words: “After **this manner** therefore pray ye.” (Mt 6:9 emphasis added). Jesus didn't say “Use these words when you pray.” The words “this manner” indicate clearly that what Jesus gave His disciples was a pattern for prayer, not a prayer itself. It was, if you will, an outline or list of subjects for prayer. Interestingly, He did not include what should be one of the most prominent parts of believers' prayer today – that of thanksgiving. Jesus did not intend for the words themselves to be repeated today (often mindlessly) in churches or cemeteries or times of crisis – or anywhere else.

3. The rationale – The Greek word rendered “as” (Mt 6:12) can be – and, in context, should be – rendered “since.” The disciples were to pray for forgiveness **based on** (“since”) the fact that they had forgiven others who had wronged them – **NOT in the way** or manner (“as”) they forgive others. This truth can be seen from the way it's stated in Luke (“forgive us our sins; **for** we also forgive” – Lk 11:4).

4. The silence – The “Lord’s Prayer” is never recited, recommended, recorded, or even just referred to elsewhere in the New Testament as having been used by first-century believers. It was not nearly as popular (if used at all) by them. That, alone, should be a cautionary (ir not red) flag to anyone today before continuing to repeat it on any special occasion or in regular, repeated use – in church buildings or outside.

B. Facts about forgiveness

1. The contrast – Too many leaders in Christendom miss the contrast between Jesus’ words in the Gospels and what God directed to be written in the New Testament Epistles for believers. As far as forgiveness is concerned, this is the key fact to remember: Paul said essentially the exact opposite as regards the sequence and reason for forgiveness as did Jesus – and he said it twice: “forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake HATH FORGIVEN you” (Eph 4:32 emphasis added) and “forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ FORGAVE you, so also do ye.” (Col 3:13 emphasis added) 1 John 2:12 echoes the same thought: “I write unto you, little children, because your sins are (lit., “have been”) forgiven you for His name’s sake.” Note that God’s forgiveness of believers is in the past tense (not the future). In other words, under grace we’re to forgive others because God has already forgiven us – rather than forgive in order to get God to forgive us.

2. The context – So, is this a contradiction in the Bible? No, of course not. Neither Jesus nor Paul was wrong. They were addressing different people in different times (ages).

3. God’s change – God has changed things in His dealings with mankind at various times in human history. Jesus’ life on earth occurred near the end of the dispensation of the Law – under which God gave conditional promises to His chosen earthly people, Israel. Under the dispensation of grace (the Church age) – which began after Jesus’ death and resurrection – things are dramatically different; among the many changes God revealed to and recorded by the Apostle Paul, UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS has replaced the conditional forgiveness of the (“Lord’s Prayer.” At Calvary – before their birth, sin, belief, or forgiveness of others – God fully forgave the sins of those who would later (in this dispensation) believe in Jesus. Clearly, this was **NOT** dependent on our forgiving others first.

CONCLUSIONS

A. “Christ died for our sins” (1Co 15:3) – ALL of them. When He died, all our sins were future. His work on the Cross dealt with them ALL – all believers’ sins. None of them need to be confessed or forgiven during our lives.

B. We don’t pray for forgiveness. In essence, asking for forgiveness insults God, since He already forgave us. God is not looking for admission (confession) of our sin – but for appreciation for the grace He has already shown. We live in “the age of grace” – grace far greater than that which God had shown to mankind previously (Jn 1:16-17; 2 Cor 4:15; 1Ti 1:14; Tit 2:11).

C. Believers forgive others because God has forgiven us. We as believers should be so thankful to God that we HAVE BEEN forgiven – and so sorrowful for our sins – that we eagerly tell others how to be forgiven, and we readily forgive others who repent of the wrongs they do to us.