

70x7

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Forgiveness seems to be one of those things in the Bible that everyone agrees on. There are far too many scriptures to quote or even cite here, but a word study of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, shows that the Christian is supposed to be forgiving — no question. But, what does forgiving really mean?

There are some questions that arise in my mind as I ponder forgiveness:

- What offenses need forgiving?
- Should we only forgive those who ask for it?
- Does forgiveness imply that punishments for wrongdoings are eliminated?
- Who benefits from forgiveness, the sinner or the one sinned against?

First we need to understand what forgiveness is. We need a basic definition for a starting point. Let's read the text from which our title came, Matthew 18:21,22, "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven."

The word "forgive" is Strong's #863 and means, *to send forth*. Vine's says the word forgive here means primarily, *to send forth, send away*, and it denotes, besides its other meanings, *to remit or forgive*.

So it's not too hard to see how this word would translate into English as forgive. When we forgive someone from our heart, it is like we send the wrongdoing, or sin, away. We don't see it anymore. And that is exactly how God forgives. In essence he sends our past sins away. But then how do we define our word "forgive?"

Dictionary.com has several definitions. The ones that pertain to our topic are: *To grant pardon for, or remission of (an offense, debt, etc.); absolve. To grant pardon to (a person). To cease to feel resentment against.*

Now we have two more words that need to be defined, pardon and absolve. Note the differences in the following definitions — these will be important as we continue.

"Absolve" means, *to free from guilt or blame for their consequences.*

"Pardon" means, *a release from the penalty of an offense; a remission of penalty, to release (a person) from liability for an offense.* Dictionary.com also says this about pardon: *absolution from guilt is **not** implied, merely a remission of the penalty.*

These definitions will be important to us as we move along here so hang on to those in your mind for later.

- What offenses need forgiving?

My first reaction to this question would have been, ALL offenses. But I don't think that's quite true. I like this quote from the late author Lewis B. Smedes, a professor of theology and ethics: "People we want to notice us ignore us; professors we adore forget our names two years after graduation; pastors we love never invite us into their special circle; and the boss does not even invite us to his daughter's wedding. These are all hurts, but they are not the kind that need forgiving. Such bits and pieces of suffering require tolerance, magnanimity, indulgence, humility — but not forgiving."

That makes sense to me. Let me give you a personal example. I have a problem. I get upset when someone cuts me off on the freeway or when someone gets right up on my bumper. But I have been working on it. In my prayers I would ask for the power to forgive that person. It finally dawned on me that this was not a forgiveness issue. This was a "David" issue! I finally realized that I need to love my neighbor as myself, and work on tolerance and temperance. I need to work on me and try not to get angry so quickly.

I've found a couple of things helpful. When someone cuts me off I say to myself, "this is Satan's world, they do things differently here." Or, when someone is riding my bumper I think to myself, "Satan loves it when I get angry about such a trivial thing." I have found that when I remember to do that, I feel much better. The irritation leaves me more quickly. I remember the scripture that says it's the little foxes that spoil the vines. (Song of Solomon 2:15) I certainly don't need an apology from the other driver(s).

Professor Smedes continues his quote. "The kind of hurts that need forgiving are both deep and moral. They are deep because they slice the fiber that holds us together in a human relationship. They are moral because they are wrongful, unfair, intolerable. We cannot indulge them or ignore them: we cannot shrug them off."

Brother Russell agrees in Reprint #4978. "In trivial affairs he is to have so much sympathy and love that he will take no notice of the little wrongs. ... The transgressions to which our Lord refers are not trivial affairs, not evil surmisings or imaginings, not fancied insults, but positive wrongs done us." Positive wrongs? We understand his message. In other words he is saying, *don't sweat the small stuff*. But the things that are positively wrong need forgiveness.

- Should we only forgive those who ask for it?

This is a tough question because the scriptures seem to take both sides. Let's see if we can sort it out. Again in Matthew 18:21,22 we read, "Then came Peter to

him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven." Notice here that Jesus did not say to Peter that if your brother asks for forgiveness then forgive him.

The problem is that immediately following Jesus' reply he gives us the parable of the two debtors, which clearly shows that the servant was not forgiven his debt until he begged for patience. We also have the companion text to Matthew 18:21 in Luke 17:3,4, which say, "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."

Now, you will note, the servant did not ask for forgiveness per se, but when he changed his mind on the matter, or repented, the implication seems to be that this was as good as asking for forgiveness. So, when someone has sinned against you and he comes to you saying that he has repented, but does not use the actual words, "please forgive me," the advice in these texts is to continue to forgive that one as many times as he sins and then repents of that sin.

We also notice a change in the way God presents this concept of forgiveness. There are some indicators in the Old Testament that show that God forgave only a limited number of times and then he punished. Job 33:27-29 read this way (Tanakh Version), "I have sinned; I have perverted what is right; But I was not paid back for it. He redeemed him from passing into the pit; He will enjoy the light. Truly God does all these things two or three times to a man, to bring him back from the pit, that he may bask in the light of life." The implication is that on the fourth time God did not bring him back from the pit and the offender no longer got to bask in the light of life.

The first two chapters of Amos talk about three transgressions of various nations surrounding Israel, as well as Judah and Israel. With each one God did not revoke punishment on the fourth time. The inference being that he did revoke the punishment the first three times. Amos 2:6 reads, again in the Tanakh version, "Thus saith the LORD: for three transgressions of Israel, For four, I will not revoke it."

So, how do we make sense of this in the 70x7 statement in Matthew? As I went through the various scriptures that contained the word forgive, I noticed that almost every time, forgiveness is contingent on either asking for it or repentance from the wrongdoing. I had always thought that I should forgive someone whether they apologized, asked forgiveness, repented, or not. So I decided to dig a little deeper.

Let's examine Amos 2:4-6 (KJV), "Thus says the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked: But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem. Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes."

Brother Russell comments on this text in Reprint #2665. "The teaching of the Jewish rabbis on the subject of forgiveness was, that if the wrong-doer repented of his evil words or actions and came to the aggrieved person acknowledging his wrong and asking forgiveness he should be granted forgiveness as often as three times. They based their teaching on this subject on the statements of Job 33:29 margin, and Amos 2:4."

God forgave them three times without them having to ask. He did not punish them until the fourth transgression. Clearly, God sometimes had a limit on how many times he forgave before he punished. And, sometimes God did not require repentance or a plea for forgiveness at all.

Just because God punished Israel does NOT mean that he didn't forgive them! I had been looking at this the wrong way. I had assumed that because God punished them on the fourth offense, it meant that he did not forgive them.

We punish our children when they disobey too. We punish them to discipline them, not to alert them that they are not forgiven. Whether we spank them, put them in time out, or remove privileges, we still love them and forgive them, and it hurts us to see them suffer. Why, then, do we do it? So they will grow up knowing right from wrong, safe from unsafe, and other lessons. This is how God treats his much-loved Israel and his New Creation, because he loves both. Even the whole world will learn from the sin they are experiencing now.

\*\*\*God continues to love and forgive his people Israel even though he punishes them. Israel experienced God's disciplines for 1845 years but God did not forget them. He forgives them. He will fight for them as he did in days of old, and he has a blessed assignment in store for them in the kingdom!

And we have answered our third question:

- Does forgiveness imply that punishments for wrongdoings are eliminated?

Evidently not.

Now, just as I had done in the books of Job and Amos, I had been looking at Matthew 18:21,22 and Luke 17:3,4 kind of backwards. Now they appear to me as primarily a message to the one who has offended based on context and other scriptures. I believe that the focus of the lesson is that when a brother sins against a brother he needs to ask for forgiveness and the offended brother should forgive. The lesson is not that we should only forgive when asked.

But what if the offending brother does not ask for forgiveness? Let's think about Matthew 18:21,22 once again. Jesus had just given the principles on how to deal with that very situation! Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 18:15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother."

There is a provision set up for the situation when the offending brother does not ask for forgiveness. In this situation the onus falls on the offended one to approach the offender to try and work things out. Even though he was wronged, he needs to approach the offending brother and tell him his fault or tell him how he has sinned against the offended brother.

Br. Russell's thoughts on this, again in Reprint #2665: "Our Lord's teaching on the subject was, in many respects, the reverse of this, and required the offended one to go to the offender to make inquiry respecting the matter, and to show him his fault. This would require great humility on the part of the one who felt himself aggrieved, for it is much easier to resent and avoid the injurer, than to go to him according to the rule that our Lord has laid down."

The LORD is gracious and he loves Israel. He said in Amos 3:2, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." And in 9:11,12, we read, "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this."

That is the kingdom! That is when God will bless all the families of the earth. That is the time when, "ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you." —Zechariah 8:23

That will be the time when God shall overlook the previous ignorance in Israel and the whole world. Brethren, I don't believe that it says anywhere in the Bible that a person has to repent or ask forgiveness to be resurrected into the kingdom. In fact, the kingdom work will be to teach everyone how and why they need to come to repentance for their previous sinful ways. God will forgive and bless everyone who has ever lived without them having to ask. We know that. Should

we then insist that someone ask our forgiveness before we forgive them and bless them? That is not required by God and therefore it should not be a requirement for us. We are trying our best to be God-like and Christ-like.

Jesus suffered and died on the cross so that everyone who has ever lived shall come forth in the resurrection and learn righteousness. He did not require that they ask his forgiveness before he died. When Stephen was being stoned, "he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." (Acts 7:59) Clearly, he forgave those men who hated him. He did not wait for an apology.

(A side note: At a Chicago Youth Seminar I had a study with the teenagers on the subject of forgiveness. One of the conclusions that **they** came to was that, as Christians, we should always be in the **frame of mind to forgive**. In other words, we should not wait until something major happens and a Brother or Sister needs our forgiveness. We should be working on growing in the graces and fruits of the Spirit. Then, when something happens and someone needs our forgiveness we will already have grown in love, peace, gentleness and temperance so that we will find it easier to forgive them whether they ask for it or not. ☺ Out of the mouths of babes!)

Psalm 86:5, "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee." He is always ready to forgive. Shouldn't this be our attitude as well? Always ready to forgive our brethren when they have sinned against us? Of course it should be, whether they ask for it or not. They call upon the LORD just as we do.

- Who benefits from forgiveness, the one who offended or the one who was offended?

I was amazed at how many articles and suggestions there are regarding this subject. Let's see if we can notice something in these short quotes:

Lewis B. Smedes: "Forgiveness brings fairness to the forgiver. It is the hurting person who most feels the burden of unfairness; but he only condemns himself to more unfairness if he refuses to forgive. Is it fair to be stuck to a painful past? Is it fair to be walloped again and again by the old familiar hurt? Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind ... Forgiving turns off the videotape of pained memory. Forgiveness sets you free. Forgiveness is the only way to stop the cycle of unfair pain turning in your memory. Why forgive? Forgiving is the only way back to fairness."

Another by Smedes: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

Dr. Katherine Piderman, Mayo Clinic staff chaplain: "These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness and even vengeance — but if you don't practice forgiveness, you may be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy."

From Medical News Today: "A new study from Duke University Medical Center demonstrates that among people who have chronic back pain, those who have forgiven others experience lower levels of pain and less associated psychological problems like anger and depression than those who have not forgiven."

Dr. Fred Luskin is a researcher on forgiveness, based at Stanford University. He holds workshops on forgiveness that last four to five weeks. He says, "We can teach people to forgive and that will improve their well-being."

Christian Science writer Rosemary Thornton and associates: "Forgiveness is for you and not the other party. Wish your enemy well ... When you make yourself able to return blessing for hatred, you'll know that you're well on the path to wholeness."

There are many more of these, but I will stop here and ask if you see a pattern. Here is what I noticed: In every one of these quotes, forgiveness is for the benefit of the one giving it — not the one receiving it. It's like they are trying to teach you that forgiveness is a good thing, but since humans are so self-centered they're going to tell you that forgiveness is for you, not the other guy. If you can't do it because it is the right thing to do, then do it because you will benefit from it somehow. Does that seem like a worldly way of looking at things? Does that square with the scriptures? What do the scriptures say?

Mark 11:26, "But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses."

Matthew 6:14, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

Yes, these two scriptures would seem to be along those lines of forgiving so that you can receive something good by forgiving. But let's look a little deeper.

Luke 6:27,28, "But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you."

So, the principle is: Love and bless those who curse you, mistreat you, persecute you. All of those are things that would probably require forgiveness.

Christians do benefit from having a forgiving heart, but is that our only reason for forgiving? Is it the main reason we forgive?

Leviticus 19:17,18 give us a principle — “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Clearly, this is talking about a situation where forgiveness is needed because he uses the words “avenge” and “bear any grudge.” You avenge someone and/or hold a grudge against them when they have done wrong against you.

Now, notice the words in verse 17, “and not suffer sin upon him.” The words, “and not suffer,” are from Strong’s #5375 and mean to lift up, to bear, carry, support, sustain. They are translated, “forgive” 17 times in the Old Testament. I think the passage might well read this way: *Don’t hate your brother. You can reprove him, but also lift him up, sustain him, forgive him. Do not avenge him or even bear a grudge against him, but love him as you love yourself.*

Is this principle in the New Testament? We read in 2 Corinthians 2:7,8 (Weymouth), “So that you may now take the opposite course, and forgive him rather and comfort him, for fear he should perhaps be driven to despair by his excess of grief. I beg you therefore fully to reinstate him in your love.”

So, if any have caused us sorrow, Paul says, forgive them and comfort them so that they are not driven to despair. In light of some of the other scriptures we read, this only makes sense. We should love our brethren, our neighbors, and even our enemies so much that we should be concerned for their welfare, even if they have hurt us, wronged us, caused us sorrow, or sinned against us in any way. One way we do this is by forgiving them.

I’m going to tell you a true story to emphasize my point. Many years ago I knew a man whose wife had been unfaithful to him. This man was not in the Truth nor did he consider himself necessarily a Christian. He was crushed when he found out about his wife’s two-year affair. The feelings of betrayal in this man were almost unbearable. These feelings turned to anger, an anger that consumed him. Divorce ensued and he moved on with his life. But the anger was still there. It grew until it bordered on hatred. It took many years, and finding God, to start turning him away from the anger. After many years he realized that he had forgiven her, and that even though it had been a tragic event, subsequently it had led him to the Lord. Although it had been a slow process, he finally realized that he felt so much better about his ex-wife, and his life.

As the years went by it dawned on him that he had never told her that he had forgiven her. This weighed on him a little at first but more and more as time went by. He also realized that he had not been perfect in the marriage either. He had spent many hours and days sport-fishing while she was left alone at home. He came to grips with the fact that she almost assuredly still felt the guilt of her sin and he somehow knew that he was the only person who could eliminate it.

One day he told her that he had forgiven her. Then he asked *her* for forgiveness. This stunned her. He explained that spending so much of his time fishing instead of being at home with her was wrong. By her reaction he knew a huge weight was being lifted off of her and that pleased him. He felt bad that it had taken so long. He also felt that a huge burden had lifted from him. By blessing the one who had offended him, he was blessed beyond measure. But that was not his motivation. It had not even entered his mind. He truly wanted to help her with any residual guilt that she may have had.

You see, the total act of forgiving was not complete for this man until the guilty party had truly been cleared and the attempt had been made to lift her guilt from her. What a wonderful lesson for that man!

Brethren, I know this story is true because it is my story. I shared it with you not to boast or gain your sympathy, but to make the point that forgiveness has a lot to do with (agape) loving the guilty party and trying to lift them up, so that they won't be driven to despair by their excess of grief.

I will conclude this section with a question for you to ponder: When God forgives mankind and brings them back in the resurrection — is that forgiveness for God's benefit or for mankind's?

So, did we answer our questions? Let's see:

What offenses need forgiving? According to Br. Russell and others, it is the major offenses — not the trivial hurts in life — that need forgiveness. I think this bears out in the scriptures. Joseph's brethren needed forgiveness for a major offense. David needed forgiving for a major offense. But, there are not too many lessons about forgiving minor offenses in the scriptures, those things in life that we all incur due to misunderstandings. Although asking for forgiveness for them is always appropriate.

Should we only forgive those who ask for it? Matthew 18 tells us to go to the offending party if they don't ask for our forgiveness or repent. And, God will forgive all the sins of this age, and resurrect everyone, regardless of whether they asked for forgiveness or not. I would say that the answer is an emphatic, NO! Of course, on the flip side, we must certainly forgive when we are asked.

Does forgiveness imply that punishments for wrongdoings are eliminated? No. God has punished Israel multiple times and he always forgives them and he still loves them. He will continue to do so. The fallacy can be that when a person or nation is punished it means that God has not forgiven them. Not true, as we see from myriad examples in the scriptures. Punishment is for disciplinary reasons to help the offender learn righteousness — not to discourage or destroy.

Remember the definitions we gave at the start.

Absolve means to free from guilt or blame.

Pardon means a release from the penalty of an offense. Absolution from guilt is **not** implied, merely a remission of the penalty.

So we see that God does not pardon Israel nor the world of mankind. The wages of sin is death and all that it implies. Mankind is still under that condemnation. However, God will absolve the world, including Israel, in the kingdom. They will start afresh, with a clean slate, “for the former things are passed away.”  
—Revelation 21:4

Who benefits from forgiveness, the offended one or the offender? Although worldly experts suggest that the one who has been offended receives the benefits when they forgive the offender, the scriptures say differently. Forgive him ... and comfort him, for fear *he* should perhaps be driven to despair by his excess of grief. One can't help but receive a blessing when they forgive, but that should not be their motivation.

70x7 — most agree that this means that we should forgive continually, not that we should stop after forgiving 490 times. But ultimately after God has blessed the entire world by resurrecting them into his Son's glorious kingdom, forgiven all their sins, and started them over with a clean slate, everyone who has ever lived will have to bow the knee to God and his ways. The ones who don't will have no more forgiveness of sins. After a thousand years of learning righteousness in the kingdom, if the sin and the sinner are inseparable, the sinner will go into second death. There will be no more forgiveness of sins for them.

The admonition is to forgive, “if ye have ought against any.” (Mark 11:25) Why is this so important? Because if you are faithful until death and receive that glorious crown of life, you will help judge the world in righteousness! (1 Corinthians 6:2) Can you imagine trying to judge someone in righteousness if you still have ought against, and have not yet forgiven?

Dear brethren, forgive and bless.