



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart**
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 15-21)

Suggested Articles:

📖 **To Err is Human; to Forgive...?**
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 29-35)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Why Should We Forgive?

The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ. But as Clarence Jordan remarked, "We'll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says." Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? Why should Christians forgive?

Prayer

O God, slow to chide and swift to bless, we worship you today as God of justice and of mercy. Help us, your children, to model that vital tension in our own lives. Forgive us our failings, we pray, both those things we have failed to do and those things we have failed to refrain from doing. And forgive us, O Most Gracious Lord, when we have failed to forgive those who have failed us, as your son, our savior, Jesus taught us to pray, we boldly say:

Our father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth,
As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
Forever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:13-14; 2:6-14; and 3:12-13

Reflection

Why should we forgive? Why be a doormat? The complaint is that forgiveness is an invention of weakness. Besides, it is unfair. Is it not true that when we ask people to forgive we ask them to suffer twice: the initial hurt, and then again as they wish the one hurting them well at their own expense?

Christians should forgive others for three reasons:

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of Christ.* For Christians the cross becomes the paradigm for living. Jesus preached, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Paul wrote, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). God is re-creating the world through Jesus Christ in the church. As Richard Hays puts it in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, "The church community is God's eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.... The church community is a sneak preview of God's ultimate redemption of the world."



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So Christians forgive, first and foremost, for the sake of Christ.

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of others.* God does not love us and forgive us because we repent; rather we repent because God loves us and forgives us. Paul noted, “God proves his love for us in that while we *still* were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The cross teaches us that reconciliation is the task of the victim. Of course, we are uncomfortable with the ethical implications of the theology of the cross. We who are wronged prefer that the villain make amends. Instead, the model of the cross portrays the injured party taking the initiative to restore the relationship. Wrongful injury becomes an opportunity to display the life-changing grace of God. Two additional words are necessary at this point. First, while forgiveness from the cross precedes repentance, redemption and reconciliation do *not* result until we accept God’s forgiveness and return his love. In other words, forgiveness is a necessary, but insufficient condition for reconciliation. Reconciliation is always conditioned upon the response of the forgiven. The same is true between persons. Second, no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation.
- ▶ *We should forgive for our sake also.* When Jesus, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35), vows that any one who refuses to forgive a debtor will meet with unspeakable torture, he drives home the point: among other reasons, we should forgive for our sake. Also, forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future.

Study Questions:

1. In the scripture reading from Colossians what reason to forgive does Paul provide?
2. Do you agree that “no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation”? How would this affect the way a Christian responds to wrongdoing?
3. Is the *order* of these three reasons important? Which should be most fundamental? L. Gregory Jones warns of what he calls “therapeutic forgiveness” because it locates the motivation to forgive in the benefits of forgiveness for the one who forgives. (See p. 86 of *Forgiveness*.) Does the view in this guide avoid reduction to “therapeutic forgiveness”?
4. Read the paragraph on p. 33 of *Forgiveness* that begins: “But there is another and more significant reason why forgiveness is rare in our experience. Forgiveness is uncommon in human experience not just because it is hard to do, but also because it is *impossible* to do.” If it is impossible for us to do, then how does the writer, Thomas Long, think anyone can be forgiven?

Departing Hymn: “Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive”

Why Should We Forgive?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (brief lecture)	Reflection (discuss all)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (all)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To clarify three Christian motivations to forgive others.
2. To understand the Christian obligation to forgive others.
3. To consider that while deep forgiveness may be *impossible* for us, we are invited to participate in God's forgiving activity.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive" in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share the story of Pope John Paul II forgiving his would-be assassin. This story, as told by Randall O'Brien on pp. 15-16 of *Forgiveness*, raises in a dramatic way the issue of why Christians should forgive.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for someone whom the person needs to forgive, and then ask the group to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide that begins "O God, slow to chide and swift to bless, ...".

Scripture Reading

Arrange for three members to read aloud Colossians 1:13-14, 2:6-14, and 3:12-13 from a modern translation. Or, print out these three passages so that one person can read them through without interruption.

Reflection

Ask for members' initial response to the Colossians passages. Detailed discussion of these passages should wait for Study Question 1.

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of Christ.* Ask members to read this paragraph silently and focus their response on Hays' comment. They might connect being "given a ministry of reconciliation" and "taking up their cross daily" with Hays' idea that "the *community* is a sneak preview of God's ultimate redemption." Notice that the "sneak preview" is the *community*, not individual Christians. The community is only a *preview*, and not itself the cause of ultimate redemption.
- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of others.* Our motive to forgive for the sake of others grows out of our own repentance, and our commitment to forgive as God has forgiven us. We model our stance toward wrongdoers upon the stance God took toward us "while we were yet sinners".
- ▶ *We should forgive for our sake also.* This paragraph mentions two appeals to self-interest: avoiding God's righteous anger if we mistreat others by refusing to forgive, and avoiding the continuing

pain caused by our angry attitude. In regard to the former, remind members of the parable in Matthew 18:23-35: a slave who has been forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents (about \$150,000 in wages) turns around and imprisons a fellow slave for owing him only 100 denarii (about \$40).

Study Questions

1. Paul says that we are to forgive others, just as Christ has forgiven us (3:13). Christ's forgiveness was a gracious rescue operation, motivated by love (1:13-14).
2. Members may find it difficult to accept that we have an *obligation* to offer forgiveness to those who wrong us. We have this obligation, not because of our self-interest, but as committed followers of Jesus Christ.
3. The *list* is very important. If we forgive others only for self-interested reasons, we are doing it for therapeutic reasons. When we add the first two reasons (for the sake of Christ and others), we begin to depart from the therapeutic model. What would we do if there were a conflict among the reasons: our self-interest leading us to withhold forgiveness, but the first reasons moving us toward forgiveness? In such cases, the *order* is also important. The first reasons must have priority over self-interest, or we will be therapeutic forgivers, forgiving others only when it is to our advantage.
4. In the next few paragraphs Thomas Long says that we are called to *participate* in God's forgiveness as a gift. As we move to respond to offense with forgiveness, God gives us power to continue. Members may have stories of difficult forgiveness to share, either confirming Long's reading of scripture or questioning it.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.