

THE COMMANDMENT TO FORGIVE

(by Kelly Coghlan)

I. As a Christian, God does not give you an option when it comes to forgiving someone who has wronged you. The commandments regarding this subject are clearer than most any other commandments in the Bible. We are not allowed the luxury of bearing "any grudge," remaining "angry" (for longer than a day), becoming bitter, or discussing the person with a malicious, slanderous, or bitter slant or attitude. Forgiveness entails, "remembering no more," forgiving "from the heart," and allowing no "root of bitterness" to begin. You are to do all that you possibly can to initiate and restore any broken relationship (irrespective of who was at fault). Forgiveness does not mean that one has to pretend that what was wrong was right (wrong acts are still wrong acts), but it means that one must embrace and love the person no matter what wrong they have done. As Christians, we are to hate sin, yes, but we are to love people—as Jesus did and as he commanded. To have the power to love and forgive, we must first ourselves be right with God. Our own reconciliation to God is the foundation for all interpersonal forgiveness.

A. **THE COMMANDMENT TO LOVE:** Conflict with people is inevitable in life. God knows this. Yet, He commands us to love and forgive. To understand the commandment of forgiveness, one must first understand the commandment to "love." We are commanded to love (and not just love "me, mine, we four and no more;" but to actively love others, and especially fellow Believers):

1. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Leviticus 19:16-18; Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39. Most people show more love and compassion to their pets than they do to people, yet the Bible says nothing about loving your pets (only to avoid being cruel to animals--Proverbs 12:10). Love is reserved for people.
2. "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29-37. [Jesus answers with a story that concluded: Your "neighbor" is a non-family member; sometimes someone you have never met before; sometimes of another race or religion; maybe even an enemy].
3. "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.... For if you [only] love those who love you, what reward have you?... And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others?" Matthew 5:46. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...." Luke 6:27-28.
4. "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...." Philippians 2:3-5.
5. "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor." 1 Corinthians 10:24.
6. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:34. "This is My commandment,

that you love one another, just as I have loved you...." John 15: 12. "This I command you, that you love one another." John 15:17.

7. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Matthew 7:12.
8. "The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother, is in the darkness until now. The one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes." 1 John 2:9-11.
9. "If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." 1 John 4:20.
10. "And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He commanded us." 1 John 3:23. Apparently, loving one another is of equal importance with believing in His name as it is all included in a single "commandment" (singular; not plural).

B. THE DEFINITION OF LOVE: The definition of love that we are commanded to carry out is as follows: "Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered...." 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.

C. THE COMMANDMENT TO FORGIVE: The very definition of "love," includes the element of forgiving since love "does not take into account a wrong suffered," but the Bible goes further and specifically requires you to actively forgive and restore all relationships (and goes even further by stating that if you do not follow this commandment, you prevent the forgiveness of your own sins--which may effect your very salvation since salvation is dependant upon receiving forgiveness from God). This is one of the only commandments in the Bible that implies this harshest of penalties if not followed. Forgiveness does not only entail a verbal response (i.e., as in "I forgive you"), but requires a complete attitudinal response from the heart with outward actions of supporting the fact that forgiveness has occurred.

1. "And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." Mark 11:25-26.
2. "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." Matthew 6:14-15. If you do not forgive people, God will not forgive you.

3. "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Matthew 5:23. So, it is useless to even go to church until you are "first reconciled to your brother." You are to go directly to the person and talk it out until you are "reconciled;" then, and only then, may you go back to the church to present your offering. Here we see that God puts people-to-people relationships ahead of tithing and ahead of any other form of sacrifice or service that we can perform for God. God doesn't even want us in church unless our relationships with people are first straightened out.
4. "...If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "I repent," forgive him." Luke 17:3-4. Here we see that it is O-K to "rebuke" a person for their sin (i.e., you can give them a piece of your mind and tell them they were wrong), but if they are sorry and apologize, you are commanded to forgive them immediately, on the same day.
5. "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private." Matthew 18:15. Go directly to the person "in private;" not to a third-party. If he does not listen to you, then take someone else with you and go directly back to him again.
6. "You shall not go about as a slanderer [making slanted or untrue statements to third-parties] among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the Lord. You shall not hate your fellow-countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." Leviticus 19:16-18. It is O-K to "reprove" (correct and admonish) the person for the wrong done, but you must then let it go and are not allowed to "bear any grudge."
7. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Ephesians 4:31-32.
8. "Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against any one..." Colossians 3:12-13. Forgiveness entails an attitude of compassion, kindness, and gentleness toward the offender; not merely uttering the words, "I forgive you."
9. "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Fret not yourself, it leads only to evildoing." Psalm 37:8. Anger harbored will only lead to evil occurring in your own life.
10. "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is

good for one another and for all men." 1 Thessalonians 5:15.

11. "Pursue after peace with all men...See to it...that no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by it many be defiled." Hebrews 12:14-15. A "root of bitterness" is to be avoided at all costs because it will cause you to attract "trouble" like a magnet upon your own life, and upon the lives of "many" others (not just the one with whom you are angry). Ultimately, those around you will be defiled (harmed, spoiled, blemished) by the bitterness that has changed you into an ugly person.
12. "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity." Ephesians 4:26-27. We are only allowed to be angry for one day and no more. Any longer than that and it gives "the devil an opportunity" to begin working on you, and a "root of bitterness" will spring up, and many will be defiled by it (not just the person with whom you are angry).
13. "...lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Hebrews 3:13. When the sin of unforgiveness begins building up in your life, you begin to become hardened as a person. It will eventually effect your entire life.
14. The definition of forgiveness that we are commanded to carry out is the same definition of forgiveness that God employs when dealing with our sins. God's definition of forgiveness is as follows: "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." Jeremiah 31:34. "As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us." Psalm 103:12. And this is exactly the same manner in which we have to forgive people. We must treat them the same as if their sin did not occur (we "remember no more" their sin), and we cannot continue to harbor it in our heart.
15. "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone...If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Romans 12:17-21.

II. If one willfully does not follow the Bible's commandments regarding forgiveness, then one "sins willfully" and is "regarding wickedness in their heart," and thus they voluntarily take themselves out from under the protection of God, and the "Lord will not hear" them. One opens themselves up to "adversity," painful "discipline," and the "anger" of God.

1. "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin." James 4:17.
2. "He that despises his neighbor sins." Proverbs 14:21.

3. "The one who practices sin is of the devil...No one who is born of God practices sin...Any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." 1 John 3:8-10. How many days of unforgiveness must go by until it becomes a "practice"?
4. "And why do you call Me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?" Luke 6:46.
5. "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." John 14:15.
6. "The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." 1 John 2:4
7. "For if we go on sinning willfully [i.e., not following God's commands regarding forgiveness] after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." [written to Christians]. Hebrews 10:26.
8. "For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having know it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and "A sow after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."" 2 Peter 2:20-21.
9. "[T]he Lord is with you when you are with Him...but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you." 2 Chronicles 15:2.
10. "For those whom the Lord loves, He disciplines." Hebrews 12:5.
11. "And your sins have hid His face from you, so that He does not hear." Isaiah 59:2.
12. "If I regard wickedness [sin] in my heart, The Lord will not hear." Psalm 66:18.
13. "Adversity pursues sinners." Proverbs 13:21.
14. "And the lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." Matthew 18:34-35. Few other parables are as strong as is this one with regard to what lengths God will go in order to bring someone to the place where they realize that they must forgive another person. This implies that God the Father will hand a person "over to the torturers" [implying adversity in the person's life] until they forgive the person who has wronged them. It is clear that for forgiveness to be effective, it must come "from your heart."

Reconciliation to God is the foundation for all interpersonal forgiveness.