

Should We Forgive Those Who Don't Ask for Forgiveness?

As Christians, do we have to forgive everyone who sins against us? This is a good question—one perhaps asked by quite a few Christians. Does God only forgive those who ask Him for forgiveness. If this is true, shouldn't it follow that we would only have to forgive others who have asked us for forgiveness.

There are some people who argue that we only need to forgive those who ask for forgiveness. They possibly were deeply hurt in the past by someone who may or may not have been repentant. It's hard to think of forgiving someone for something genuinely evil where they have not sought forgiveness or even admitted to their wrongful actions. It's much easier for the offended person to appeal to the reality that God only forgives those who ask.

The trouble with that line of reasoning is that whether God forgives or not is God's prerogative. There is nothing that compels Him to "let us off the hook". He forgives and forgets because He chooses to forgive and forget. When we view ourselves as the 'God' figure in our relationship with someone who has sinned against us, we're missing something very important. The fact is that we are servants, and we are compelled to forgive other (equal) servants because of the mercy we ourselves have been shown. That's different from God's forgiveness. We are commanded to forgive. When God forgives, it is as a superior Being showing mercy to an inferior being; when we forgive it is as servant to servant. The connection between God forgiving us and us forgiving each other is a little more nuanced than some would like to admit.

That being said, how can there be true reconciliation in relationships if the offending party doesn't admit wrong? Does our forgiveness really mean anything if the offender doesn't believe they need forgiveness in the first place?

All things considered, I believe that Christ is calling us to an "attitude" of forgiveness. He's calling us to be ready to forgive in a moment. He is calling us to treat people with love and mercy, with humility and compassion. He is calling us to remember that, if someone has sinned against us, we should be quick to identify with them ('because maybe we have sinned this way too...'). When we realize that we could have just as easily been the one offending as the one offended, we become less likely to hold grudges against other people.

In order to justify holding on to feelings of hurt and bitterness, some people might say: “I don’t need to forgive you because you haven’t asked me for forgiveness”. However, Christ calls us to identify with the offender and to be ready to be fully reconciled. It’s the posture of the heart more than a specific action in that case, but it will make all the difference in the world in the way you think about, relate to, and pray for the person who has offended you.

Jesus desires that we have a heart that is ready and willing to be wounded again and again for the sake of love and for the sake of modeling the heart of God.

Matthew 18:15-18: “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Verse 19: Again I say to you, where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

Matthew 18:21-22: Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven”.

I think the difference between the sinner of verses 15-20 and the sinner of verses 21-22 is simply that the former refuses to repent, while the latter is genuinely repentant, and seeking to change. Each specific case will need to be dealt with according to wisdom. Some sins must be treated differently than others, and some sins have more lasting consequences.

But in all things, we are called to be ready and willing to forgive, hopeful of fully reconciled relationships through repentance and forgiveness. I believe that’s the bottom line.

The position that says we forgive only those who ask us could indicate that what we really want to know is: ‘Who can I get away with not forgiving?’ That’s the wrong question. The right question is: “How can I respond to the matchless and limitless forgiveness I’ve received from God?” We don’t just forgive others for their sake—we

forgive them for our sake so we can root out of our lives the hurt and bitterness they have caused us.

While dying on the tree Christ said:

Luke 23:34 “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And they divided His garments and cast lots.

Even though they didn’t ask for forgiveness He was willing to forgive.

Being imperfect people, we need to ask for forgiveness quite often. If we want to receive that forgiveness, we need to follow Christ’s admonition in Matthew 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”.

There are some who hold a grudge against someone, five, ten even fifty years; not forgiving them for a trespass. They should know those who don’t forgive others their trespasses will not be forgiven.

The New Testament says we are to love even our enemies. How can we love our enemies if we are not willing to forgive them...even if they don’t ask for forgiveness?