

## Attachment 9

### Forgiveness

#### 1. Introduction

“Forgiveness is one of the foundational acts of Christian practice and theology.”<sup>234</sup> Jesus taught that those unwilling to forgive would face the same fate as the “unforgiving servant” (Matt. 18:21-35). Jesus repeated the same idea when He taught the disciples to pray, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). John Calvin wrote, “Those who refuse to forget the injuries which have been done to them, devote themselves willingly and deliberately to destruction, and knowingly prevent God from forgiving them.”<sup>235</sup>

Forgiveness is clearly important to God. However, forgiveness is not necessarily easily offered. Whether due to a misunderstanding of the Bible’s teaching, or sinful rebellion, forgiveness can be elusive. In addition, when the offense is particularly destructive to a person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual health, the wickedness compounds this difficulty.

Abuse may have traumatic consequences, resulting in a long and difficult process of healing. The abuser may be responsible for injuries that continue to plague the survivor. The emotional trauma caused by verbal abuse may have long-term physical effects. Those who suffer from spiritual abuse may struggle to disassociate the emotional and physical abuse from their understanding of the nature of God.

These effects of abuse must not be minimized. The survivor need not be held responsible, nor rushed to simply forgive and “get over it.” The effects are normal, emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences of abuse. When counseling victims and survivors, an accurate understanding of the meaning, means, and goal of forgiveness is necessary to prevent further harm to the hurting member of the flock. Helping guide victims of evil atrocities committed against their soul and body (inner and outer man) toward biblical forgiveness is a necessary, yet sensitive, *process*.

#### 2. What Does It Mean to Forgive?

A definition of forgiveness is, “A decision to release someone from suffering punishment or penalty for his sin.”<sup>236</sup> Diane Langberg says forgiveness is, “to lay aside, let go, put away, yield up, pardon.” She writes the reason there is a need to forgive is that, “something awful

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<sup>234</sup> Bridget Illian, “Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 6 (December 2010): 444–50.

<sup>235</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 1, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (website), <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.lv.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 207.

has been done” to one of God’s image-bearers.<sup>237</sup> The abusive actions are sin, and sin isolates man from God and from his neighbor. Sin is punishable by death in the heavenly courts (Rom. 6:23). Sin is not something to be minimized or denied, rather brought into the light and confessed before God and the offended party.

Dr. Robert Burns discusses forgiveness in two ways, legal and relational.<sup>238</sup> Regarding the legal aspect, Burns explains that law breaking deserves a penalty. Jesus, the only holy and righteous Son of God, willingly paid that penalty by His death on the cross. His sacrifice made forgiveness possible (Luke 24:47). The process of forgiving includes the lawbreaker confessing, repenting, and receiving God’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness precedes reconciliation and/or restoration (Acts 2:22-41); however, *forgiveness does not always indicate reconciliation and/or restoration*. By forgiving an abuser, a survivor lays aside bitterness, anger, and malice and they depend on the Lord for justice according to His righteousness (Eph. 4:31-32; Ps. 72:2). Yet the consequences of an abuser’s sin remain. When a survivor forgives their oppressor, they do not release the abuser from accountability in the courts of God or man.

### **3. How Can a Survivor Forgive Their Abuser?**

Burns explains, “We cannot be ready to deal with the ‘relational’ side of forgiveness until we have come before God and worked through the legal side.”<sup>239</sup> Survivors may struggle to forgive. A great evil has been perpetrated, and the counselor must acknowledge the horrendous damage. Langberg writes, “When you push others to ‘just forgive,’ as if somehow it was something that could be done quickly or easily, without a consideration of the consequences of that sin, we have adopted a superficial view of sin.”<sup>240</sup> The fact that forgiveness is necessary is due to the great wickedness that took place. Recognition of the difficulty is required.

The cross is where survivors taste and see God’s goodness and kindness in His forgiving work. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith Larger Catechism* discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, Question 194 asks, “What do we pray for in the fifth petition?” In answer, the *WCF* says,

*In the fifth petition, (which is, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,) acknowledging, that we and all others are guilty both of original and actual sin, and thereby become debtors to the justice of God; and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt: we pray for ourselves and others, that God of his free grace would, through the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and applied by faith, acquit us both*

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<sup>237</sup> Diane M. Langberg, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997) 173.

<sup>238</sup> Bob Burns and Brissett, *The Adult Child of Divorce* (Nashville, TN: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1991) 139-140.

<sup>239</sup> Burns and Brissett, *The Adult Child of Divorce*, 139-144.

<sup>240</sup> Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 172.

*from the guilt and punishment of sin, accept us in his Beloved; continue his favor and grace to us; pardon our daily failings, and fill us with peace and joy, in giving us daily more and more assurance of forgiveness; which we are the rather emboldened to ask, and encouraged to expect, when we have this testimony in ourselves, that we from the heart forgive others their offenses.*

The Holy Spirit works in the heart of a survivor to apply God’s forgiving work in their own life. As the *WCF* emphasizes, the ability to forgive others grows out of an appreciation of God pardoning personal sin. The parable of the “unforgiving servant” (Matt. 18:32) teaches, in part, that recognizing God’s forgiveness is an important first step toward forgiving. When a survivor accepts God’s forgiveness, they position themselves to begin the process of forgiving.

#### **4. What Is the Goal of Forgiveness?**

In a non-abusive relationship, it is right to “rebuke” the offender. Luke 17:3 says, “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Confrontation is meant to bring the offender to repentance and to restore a damaged relationship with both the Lord and those offended. Matthew 18:15-20 provides the steps for this process. Greater pastoral care is required for helping survivors forgive those who have abused them. Confrontation of an abuser must be understood in the context of Jesus’s teaching in other passages.<sup>241</sup>

If genuine repentance has not occurred, it may be unwise to encourage a survivor to go to their abuser. It may also be unwise to ever encourage a victim to go to an abuser one-on-one. In Matthew, Jesus teaches that confronting the unrepentant is like throwing pearls before swine.

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6).

Confronting the unrepentant is worthless and may even be dangerous (they will “trample them underfoot”). Jesus also says the offender may “turn to attack you,” so the survivor may suffer further trauma at the hands of the abuser.

Beach writes, “It is sometimes argued that forgiveness coupled with repentance clears the way for all or most of the debris caused by the sin or sins in question and full reconciliation (most of the time) is the requisite step to follow...”<sup>242</sup> Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same. This simplistic view of the destruction caused by abuse will often result in further abuse and manipulation.

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<sup>241</sup> See also Section Five: “The Misuse of Spiritual Authority” in this report.

<sup>242</sup> J. Mark Beach, “Forgiving like God?: Some Reflections on the Idea of Conditional Forgiveness,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 26 (2015): 151-96.

Scripture is clear: the offending party, *not* the offended, is responsible for repentance (Luke 17:3). The abuser is responsible to turn from their abuse. Repentance and a renewed relationship with the Lord is the goal. Scripture is also clear regarding reconciliation; it is “conditional” on true repentance (Luke 17:3, Col. 1:21-23). Repentance that is obvious, genuine, and demonstrable over time is necessary for restoration.

When counseling a survivor of abuse, the process of forgiveness must be handled pastorally. Recognizing the extensive damage done to the target of abuse will encourage the counselor to patiently prepare the survivor to forgive.

Because of the damage the abuser caused in the relationship, repentance must be evident and long-lasting for trust to be re-established. Counselors should allow survivors to set the pace for reconciliation, having multiple witnesses to significant evidence of a changed heart that has not only put off sinful behavior, but has also been renewed in the mind and put on the opposite, God-glorifying behaviors (Eph. 4:28).