

Is Conditional Forgiveness Biblical?

•Written by ITL Administrator•

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Conditional Forgiveness

Kevin Lewis

Associate Professor of Theology & Law

Biola University

The doctrine of unconditional forgiveness is popular in the modern evangelical church, but this soteriological formulation fails to consider some essential Scriptural data.

Below is an email inquiry I received from a student regarding this issue and my response to him.

Email Inquiry

Recently, I was reading Dr. Kenneth Bailey's Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (IVP press 2008). When commenting on Matthew 6:12-13, he writes,

"It is a common human assumption that the violator of the rights of others must ask for forgiveness before the wronged party can be expected to accept the apology and grant forgiveness...But Jesus here asks the person wronged to forgive the one responsible for the wrongdoing when when there is no confession of guilt... There is a voice from the cross that echoes across history to all saying 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' Neither Pilate nor the high priest nor the centurion offered any apology to Jesus, yet he prayed for divine forgiveness...(p.125)"

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Response to Inquiry:

Regarding Bailey's comments on Matthew 6:12, he errs by not considering the theological context of this statement and fails to consider any implied biblical conditions for forgiveness inherent in the statement. The text simply does not mean what he says it means. He is reading too much into the statement.

Bailey states, "Jesus here asks the person wronged to forgive the one responsible for the wrongdoing when there is no confession of guilt..."

Bailey errs. Here, Jesus is giving a model for prayer commensurate with the way His Kingdom works. Jesus teaches them to pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." This is a statement of the objective, "forgiveness," without a discussion of any express or implied conditions to accomplish the objective. It is also a statement of the proper attitude of the Christian, that is, that we must have a demeanor of being willing to forgive, just as God was willing to forgive us. Bailey's assertion that there is no "confession of guilt" or repentance is merely an unwarranted assumption.

Moreover, the use of "as" (Grk. *hos*) in the passage introduces a comparison between the way we forgive and the

way

God forgives. This comparative phraseology is employed elsewhere on the subject of forgiveness. For example, Ephesians 4:32 states that we should be "forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven" us. Here, the comparative "just as" (Grk.

kathos

) is employed and indicates our forgiveness is to be just like God's forgiveness of us, which flows from a loving disposition. So in the same manner that God forgives, we must forgive. We are to be "imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1). See also Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36 for exhortations to imitate God.

To ascertain whether the Scriptures describe any conditions for forgiveness, one must search elsewhere in the Scriptures for comment. This is the nature of systematic theology. We need to examine what the entire Bible says on a given topic, such as forgiveness. And the Bible contains ample support for the notion that there are conditions for forgiveness.

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First, regarding God and His forgiveness, it is undisputed in orthodox Christian theology that God does not forgive everyone. The doctrine of Hell is a sufficient proof of the lack of universal forgiveness by God.

Next, it is clear that God does not forgive without repentance. This doctrine is taught in a number of texts. For example, in Luke 13:3 Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” In Mark 1:15 John the Baptist commands that we must “repent and believe the Gospel.” The connection between repentance and forgiveness of sins (i.e. “salvation”) is seen throughout the Scriptures. For example, in Acts 2:38 repentance is directly connected as a condition for the remission of sins. For additional examples of this connection see Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 3:19; 8:22; 17:30-31; Romans 2:4-5; II Corinthians 7:10; II Tim. 2:25-26.

So since we are to be imitators of God and forgive in the same way God forgives, we would expect the Scriptures to be consistent, stating that the condition of repentance is required to be fulfilled before believers are required to forgive each other’s sins. It does.

Jesus stated in Luke 17:3, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” Here, the meaning is clear. The word “if” (Grk. *ean*) introduces the condition for a rebuke and for granting forgiveness. If (subjunctive) a person sins, we must (imperative) rebuke him, and if (subjunctive) he repents, we must (imperative) forgive him. This is as clear a statement as you will find on the subject. Forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance—and this is one of the same criteria that God requires before He forgives sin.

This principle of permitting believers to withhold forgiveness unless the condition of repentance is satisfied is also explicitly seen in Matthew 18:15-17. Compared with the Luke 17:3 text above, the situation is the same. If a brother sins, reprove him; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Here, the word “reprove” is used rather than “rebuke” and the word “listen” is employed rather than “repent,” but the meaning is virtually identical to Luke 17:3. What we see in Matthew 18 is an escalation of the issue and the result if the person fails to repent (i.e. “listen”). If the person fails to repent, we are to shun him in all appropriate ways (v. 17).

These passages in Luke and Matthew give us the connection between sin, rebuke, repentance and forgiveness. Other biblical texts that merely mention “forgiveness” as a concept or an objective do not necessarily proffer every aspect of the doctrine of forgiveness. As such, they must be read in light of the clear conditions expressed in other passages.

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Finally, I would make the case that it is harmful to a person to forgive him without requiring repentance. As seen above, the Bible is clear that sin requires a rebuke. Ignoring sin teaches sinners that sin does not bring consequences. This is harmful to their souls. Continuing to have the benefit of a righteous relationship with another and yet remain in sin against that person results in fostering a habituation of sinful inclinations in their soul, which God says brings about suffering and death.

Moreover, since the ultimate purpose of forgiveness is reconciliation, it is meaningless and harmful to forgive when no reconciliation may be had with the sinner. We cannot “walk together” in a biblical manner in righteous peace when the unrepentant sinner walks in unrighteousness. Necessarily, there is a conflict and a want of shalom. Their soul is headed in a different direction than the believer’s soul; they are walking away from God and we cannot have fellowship with darkness. God has no intimate fellowship with unrepentant people, and that is the model for Christians as well (See Matt. 18).

Regarding personal anger issues commonly raised by Christian psychologists, these types of psychologists unbiblically make unconditional forgiveness a part of therapy. By contrast, however, if a counselee will not forgive after the offending party has truly repented, the counselee sins, and this kind of unforgiveness may be one of the causes of his or her problems. But this is a separate issue from universal and unconditional forgiveness raised above.

Human beings in the image of God may be angry in appropriate ways (Eph.4:26, 31). There is a time to love and a time to hate (Ecclesiastes 3:8). The notion that Christians cannot ever hate, be angry, or lack forgiveness is an unbiblical concept. God Himself is eternally angry with sin, but He is certainly not a psychological basket case. He loves, hates, and is angry in appropriate ways. Our task as believers is to imitate this. Be angry with and hate sin appropriately (Rom. 12:9) and love what good appropriately. For example, righteous anger can evolve beyond the biblical limits to become malice, slander, and bitterness while, to give another example, an appropriate love of food can evolve beyond the biblical limits into gluttony.

Psychological problems arise from many issues other than lack of forgiveness. For example, a lack of trust in God that He has a particular instance of evil under His sovereign control can cause undue anxiety in one’s life. Also, if a counselee’s self worth is grounded in the shifting sand of how others treat him (i.e., badly) rather than being grounded in the fact that he is a divine image bearer and inherently valuable no matter how badly anyone treats him, he will likely fall into anxiety, depression, and other sorts of psychological maladies. Changing the biblical doctrine of forgiveness will not truly help a counselee. It only makes it worse.

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